

The Continuity of Life from "L' Allegro" to "Il Penseroso"

Kwon, Teck-Young

Critics have questioned whether they read Milton's companion poems, "L' Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," as balanced complements, dichotomies between mirth and melancholy or as a unified progression concluding the religious life of the pensive man. Maren-Sofie Røstvig views the chief difference of the two poems as its depiction of a happy man as a rural gentleman and his transformation into a solitary serene contemplator: "the poems then are complementary and not contradictory. Each is concerned with a special human type and with the kind of happy life preferred by each."¹⁾ According to him, one type is vigorous and extrovert, the other pensive, reflective and introvert. Since their personalities are directly opposed, they find happiness in settings and activities which are equally opposed. On the other hand, Samuel Johnson does not see both men as characters being kept sufficiently apart: "No mirth can, indeed, be found in his melancholy: but I am afraid that I always meet some melancholy in his mirth."²⁾ Surely, Johnson tries to feel a certain common emotional tendency which seems to be rare, rather than a distinctive contrast which is unmistakably there. Furthermore, the sense of alienation on which he focuses as the common could hardly be acceptable in my point of view: "Both Mirth and Melancholy are solitary, silent inhabitants of the breast, that neither receive nor transmit communication."³⁾ Nor E. M. W. Tillyard's review of the poem is greatly agreeable to me. He treats the poem as having grown out of Milton's essay, "First Academic Exercise or Prolusion." In this short essay, Milton contemplates the subject "Whether Day or Night is the more excellent," and advocates the superior excellence of Day. Guessing the time sequence between them with the following comment,—the First Prolusion "therefore comes well before any date the critics have assigned to 'L' Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'."⁴⁾ Tillyard declares that the only contrast between two poems is "that between day and

-
- 1) Maren-Sofie Røstvig(1970), "John Milton," in *John Milton: L' Allegro and Il Penseroso*, ed. Elaine B. Safer and Thomas L. Erskine(Ohio: A Bell & Howell Company), p.59.
 - 2) Samuel Johnson(1970), "Milton," in *John Milton: L' Allegro and Il Penseroso*, ed. Elaine B. Safer and Thomas L. Erskine(Ohio: A Bell & Howell Company), p.28.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, p.28.
 - 4) E. M. W. Tillyard(1938), "L' Allegro and Il Penseroso," in his *The Miltonic Setting*(London: Cambridge University Press), p.15.

night." This seems to me too narrow to be considered as a comprehensive understanding of the poems. If we look into them in detail, it is not hard for us to find out that each poem is not consistently a day poem, nor consistently a night poem. In this sense, J. B. Leishman's attack on Tillyard's interpretation is not surprising at all. Rejecting the idea of relating the poems to the "First Prolusion," he continues that: "if, then, there is a contrast between the two poems, it is not that between day and night, and if there is a debate, it is not on the respective merits of day and night."⁵⁾

The purpose of this paper is to show the integrated interpretation of two poems by searching for the buried resources hidden in Milton's poems. The two poems are not sufficiently apart, not in Dr. Johnson's way, but in the continuing process of life which is culminated when "the old experience attains the prophetic strain." Therefore I see these poems not as complementary balance, nor as contradictory dichotomy, but as a single utterance on the processing aspect of one life. The cheerful but restless youth transforms himself into the pensive but insightful experienced man. To restore my strength I would like to devote the ending of my statement of purpose to the brief comment on a concept of melancholy in Renaissance, quoted from Lawrence Babb's essay, "The Background of 'Il Penseroso'."⁶⁾

The Renaissance, then, held simultaneously two conceptions of melancholia. According to Galenic tradition, melancholia is a most ignominious and miserable condition of mind: according to the Aristotelian tradition, it is a most admirable and enviable condition....

The Galenic conception is the dominant conception in Renaissance medical works. The Aristotelian conception, however, is of much greater interest to the student of literature.

For my analysis, I prefer the Aristotelian conception of melancholy which as "a most admirable and enviable conception of mind," to the Galenic conception of it, "a most ignominious and miserable condition of mind."

"L'Allegro" is composed of 152 lines while "Il Penseroso" has 175 lines. Except their prologues of trimeter and tetrameter lines, they are written in octasyllabic couplets. Each poem opens its lines with the rejection of other. The rejection in "L'Allegro" has a strong and explicitly declared tone. Beginning with "loathed melancholy," "blackest," the voiceless sounds of consonant clusters are repeated on, until it closes with the sharp and rebellious sound, [k] of "Cimmerian"(1. 10). Sounds are tough and the rhythm is speedy. The images are vivid, colorful, and the proclaiming is bombastic. There seems to be no alternative choice in this voice. The man in "L'Allegro" is hasty and determined in his rejection, and it can be compared with the pensive man's soft and controlled voice. He is not at war with the cheerful man. He simply denies mirth because it is a "vain deluding

5) J. B. Leishman(1969), "L'Allegro and Il Penseroso in their Relation to Seventeenth-Century Poetry," in his *Milton's Minor Poems*(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), pp.120-159.

6) Lawrence Babb(1970), "The Background of 'Il Penseroso'," in *John Milton: L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*, ed. Elaine B. Safer and Thomas L. Erskine(Ohio: A Bell & Howell Company), p. 43.

joys / *Brood* of folly without father bred." A series of [b], [d] and [f] are peacefully harmonious, and the speed is moderated. Mirth is associated with the words, "vain," "toys" and "gaudy shapes." What the pensive man rejects is the "gaudy shapes," the superficiality. The word, "Cimmerian" in "L'Allegro" is paralleled with "Morpheus." The slumber-God, "Morpheus" is connected to "hovering dreams" of the precedent line, impressing us the vain-dream of Mirth. The metaphor, "dream" consistently preoccupies throughout the whole poems as one of the linking metaphors of two poems. If L'Allegro's rejection is extrospective, Il Penseroso's is introspective. It goes into the inside of the poet's mind as if he knew that his youth had passed as fast as the dreams of a single night. The pensive man's voice is based upon the experienced mind of a man who has gone through the transitoriness of the physical world and finds emptiness in Mirth.

From the eleventh line, both poems show the transition of mood: the cheerful man turns from bombastic hastiness to the soft, gentle, sweet, sensual invocation, while the pensive man turns from a moderate tone toward a distinctive, sincere, vigorous meditations. Their welcoming greetings are tentatively contrasted: the cheerful man's greeting, "Come thou Goddess fair and free" and the pensive man's welcoming words, "Hail thou Goddess, sage and holy." The word, "hail" is more vigorous than the plain word, "come." The adjectives "fair" and "free" describe the external figure of the physical element while "sage" and "holy" are words describing the spiritual qualities. The line by line parallel takes a crucial repose in the next few lines. In other words, in "Il Penseroso," there follow additional lines fully devoted to explaining why Melancholy is black, which is the main cause of the cheerful man's rejection.

Whose Sainly visage is too bright
To hit the Sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view,
O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue.

(Il. 13-16)

The poet puts an emphasis on the saintly light of melancholy. Melancholy is black not because of the absence of light, but because of its over brightness. The poet effectively compares the relationship between black and brightness to the constellation, Cassiopea who was the beautiful dark queen of Etiop. Here, it might be a valuable digressiosn to quote some lines from *Paradiet Lost*, in order to taste the echo of the irradiate darkness.

...thou Celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and Disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(Book III, Il. 51-53)

The mortal eyes easily miss the brightness of Melancholy as they hardly see the things in the effect of the Celestial Light shining inwardly.

Another interesting point is the comparison of the nature of birth: the Goddess of Mirth, Euphrosyne, is born of Bacchus and Venus, while the Goddess of Melancholy, Vesta, is the virgin daughter of Saturn. In *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, Michael Grant said that Vesta is "the Goddess of the hearth, mentioned in all libations and prayer."⁷ Compared with Vesta's divine nature, Euphrosyne symbolizes the pleasure without sincerity. For further comparison, one might take Milton's other poems, "Comus" and "Nativity Ode." In "Comus," Milton dramatizes a moral trial through an innocent sister, a symbol of Chastity, set in the persuasive temptation made by Comus filled up with a desire for sensuous pleasure. On the other hand, in "Nativity Ode," Milton celebrates and glorifies Christ's Nativity. Comus is born of Baccus and Circe while Christ is a virgin born. A possible analogy follows: as Vesta stands with Christ as a virgin born, so does Euphrosyne with Comus as a born of Baccus.

As the line goes by, an analogy between *Paradise Lost* and the discussing poems comes with the interrelations of the pagan Gods to Christian God. In "L'Allegro," Zephyr meets Aurora "on Beds of violets blue/ and fresh-blown Roses washt in dew"(ll. 21-22). In "Il Pensero," Vesta meets her father Saturn "in the secret shades of woody Ida's/ while yet there was no fear of Jove." The poet uses the word, "Beds" as a pun. The linking metaphor between two poems, "Beds" and "fear of Jove" implies sexuality, which is also echoed in *Paradise Lost*. Ida is a mountain of Olympus where Jove lives. The phrase, "no fear of Jove" reminds us of the line, "no fear of God" when Adam waits for God's voice in Paradise before the fall. Saturn, Jove's father, rules a golden age where all is free and easy; Jove usurps Saturn's place and rules an iron age, harsh and sinful. Surely, Jove cannot be placed for God. Nevertheless Paradise is there before they do not fear Jove and before they do not fear God. It may not be also going too far to consider the secret shades of woody Ida as the garden of Eden. In this way, the pagan Gods of mythology is interwoven for the effect of the holiness of Christian God.

Contrasted to this holy settings, L'Allegro's circumstances are preoccupied with sensuality. The series of [b] sound in the twenty-fourth line—buxom, blithe, and debonair—evokes the sweet levity. The image of the nymph is tricky and wanton. Her cheek is full of jest, wit and a mischievous dalliance. The speedy and staccato rhythms are excellently suitable for this milieu:

Quips and Cranks, and wanton Wiles,
Nods, and Becks, and Wreathed Smiles,

(ll. 27-28)

The walking attire of the nymph also reinforces the sensuality of the wanton love:

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe,

7) Michael Grant(1962), *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (London: The New English Library, Inc.), p.389.

And in thy right hand lead with thee,
 The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty:
 And if I give thee honor due,
 Mirth, admit me of thy crew
 To live with her, and live with thee,
 In unreprieved pleasures free:

(ll. 33-40)

The sense of "sweet Liberty" when she goes with a light fantastic toe sweeps L'Allegro's mind with a sexual freedom: "Mirth, admit me of the crew/ To live with her and live with thee"(ll. 38-39). Who is "her" and who is "thee?" The diction "crew" never implies the sincere meaning. These lines exactly parallel with the pensive Nun's "devout and pure" image in "Il Penseroso"(ll. 31-40). With the "sober step" and "musing gait," she, in her heavenly attire only communicates with the skies.

L'Allegro faces the cheerful morning. The song of morning lark moves speedily and rhythmically from down to upward—"the dappled dawn doth rise." A vivid visual image of a bird is wonderfully described here with its rapid and light wave, and yet with its unsmooth tone of "dappled" and "doth," from the similar but idiosyncratic combination of sounds, [d]-[p]-[d] and [d]-[ð]. The pastoral song of Spring Hill conveys the pleasure in Nature but with sexual implications.

While the Plowman near at hand,
 Whistles o'er the Furrow'd Land,
 And the Milkmaid singeth blithe,
 And the Mower whets his scythe,

(ll. 63-66)

He enjoys the present without any care of the future. "Meadow," "Brooks," "River" and the rural cottage—the beautiful scenery of the Holiday celebration goes on "Till the livelong daylight fail"(l. 99). While L'Allegro spends his youth in a May-day mood, Il Penseroso retires into "calm peace and Quiet" Leisure. When the night begins, the "Cherub contemplation" becomes more musical and more melancholy. If the metaphors of "L'Allegro" are those of "sweet Liberty" and sexual wantonness, the metaphors of "Il Penseroso" are those of prohibition and watchful mind like God's prohibition of The Apple Tree and warning against Temptation. King Tereus causes to the tragedy of philomet: Nightingale is a victim of sexual perversion. Except this, the metaphors of prohibition—Cynthia's Dragon Yoke, Curfew sound, the Bellman's song—are ultimately concluded with the image of the holy tower. In the holy Tower, the pensive man watches the Bear, constellation, in the night sky, or unfolds the spirit of great Hermes and Plato with the Lamp light. Plato is a great scholar and Hermes whose other name is Mercury is the spirit of the intellectual. The Pensive Man's contemplation involves the great tragedy of the divine tale of Troy or the soul of Orpheus' song. It is an interesting interpretation by Don Cameron Allen to

search Milton's narrative fragmentary (ll. 110-115), taken from Chaucer's unfinished story, "The Squire's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. Expecting the tale as the symbolic emphases, he says that "Milton was enchanted by the symbols of intellectual power: the horse conquered space, the Mirror made known the secrets of men; and the ring, those of nature."⁸ Chaucer's tale in "Il Penseroso" is contrasted to L'Allegro's night allusion (ll. 105-110), taken from Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Why does Milton contrast Chaucer and Shakespeare? The answer could be directed toward the different aspects of "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro." Chaucer's religious mind and Shakespeare's one night's mask festival in his comedy add to the richness to both pieces. The nature of delights in the one night festival in "L'Allegro" seems to be quite playful and joyful. The Knights and Barons try to win ladies' love by "the prize of wit or arms." The God of marriage, Hymen, takes the mask and plays the role while Mercury, as revealing of hidden truth, and Plato are reviewed in the holy tower of the pensive man. Goblin, Friar's lantern, feat and revelry—all images are simply one night's flickering fantasy, which is the vision of a youthful poet in the summer night's dream. Being free from cares, L'Allegro wants to be placed on the bed relaxing and listening to the delightful Lydian music, having his soul pierced in amoral notes "with many a winding bout of linked sweetness long drawn out/ With wanton heed and giddy cunning." The morally enervating condition reaches its climax when the melting voice untwists "all the chains that tie the hidden soul of harmony." Milton uses Orpheus parallel in contrast with the opposing settings. The story of the Orpheus legend tells us of Orpheus' tragic failure caused by his impatience. He pursues his lost wife, Eurydice into the underworld. Owing to the spell-bound singing, he is permitted to seek her out. Followed by Eurydice, he begins to retrace his steps towards the upper world, and forgets that Proserpina has laid down the condition that he must not look behind him. He stops and looks back. In that moment all his labour is wasted. In spite of this tragic implication, L'Allegro praises its delight which will immediately turn out to be sorrow. The unexperienced mind of the youth still does not penetrate the tragic consequence.

While L'Allegro soars toward the fantasy of a mid-summer night's dream, the pensive man encounters the "civil-suited" morning. Here is a comely cloud instead of L'Allegro's tricky and wanton nymph. After the wind blows on the rustling leaves, a beautiful cloud becomes a shower. It is not a gusty shower but "a minute-drops from off the Eaves." Even the shower has a quiet and meditative tendency. One cannot remember the sunshine after the morning shower without the notion of cleanness, healthy appetite, and fresh vitality. In the fresh wood, the nymphs are not frightened by the sound of the rude axe. They are not the nymphs of L'Allegro but the nymphs of Il Penseroso who love the smell of labour.

8) Don Cameron Allen (1954), "The Search for the Prophetic Strain," in his *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press), p.12.

There in close covert by some Brook,
 Where no profaner eye may look,
 Hide me from Day's garish eye,
 While the Bee with Honied thigh,
 That at her flow'ry work doth sing,
 And the Waters murmuring
 With such consort as they keep,
 Entice the dewy feather'd Sleep;
 And let some strange mysterious dream
 Wave at his Wings in Airy stream,
 Of lively portraiture display'd,
 Softly on my eyelids laid. (ll. 139-150)

Rejecting the worldly temptation, the pensive man pursues harmony, not from superficial gaiety but from laborious work. The song of the honey Bee and the murmuring water embody the active metaphor of production as well as the mysteries of Nature. The mystic experience is what the poet ultimately seeks out—"some strange mysterious dream of lively portraiture displayed." He is in favor of the spiritual experience and the unseen world instead of the physical world. The transitoriness of our physical world cannot transcend its momentary youth. The "mysterious dream" is the dream of Permanence. Thus he hears the sweet music sent by some spirit or the unseen Genius of the wood.

As those analyses show, "L'Allegro" is a poem about youth whose delight is on the momentary world, whereas "Il Penseroso" is a poem about the experienced man whose pleasure is on the permanent world. For me these two poems are not contradictory but sung as one process of life flowing continuously from the immature to the mature. The process moves from the Romantic vision of rural life to the inward pursuit for the disciplined life which is culminated by the pensive man's promise for a responsible life towards religion. Following "a dim religious light," walking along the inside of the church, and listening the organ music and the choir, he ascends step by step to see "all Heaven before his eyes." Here we can imagine the portrait of the later life of Milton, while waiting the great epic, *Paradise lost*.

And may at last my weary age
 Find out peaceful hermitage,
 The Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell,
 Where I may sit and rightly spell
 Of every Star that Heav'n doth shew,
 And every Herb that sips the dew;

(ll. 167-172)

Being full of the sense of duty, Milton who is blind would work on "till old experience do attain to something like prophetic strain," only guided by "a dim religious light."

The final attempt to analyze the poems will be the syntactic comparison of the last two

lines in each poem. In "L'Allegro," after suggesting the delight of Orpheus song, the poem ends up with the followings:

These delights if you canst give,
Mirth, with thee I mean to live.

(ll. 151-152)

As mentioned before, Orpheus' song would be only a momentary delight. It turns out be tragedy as it is more properly treated in "Il Penseroso." The condition which the poet invokes delight in "L'Allegro" is very negative in this sense. On the other hand, in "Il Penseroso" after the religious pursuit of one's life, the last lines show up with the more willful resolution:

These pleasure melancholy give,
And I with thee will choose to live.

(ll. 175-176)

There are unmistakable difference between the connotations of the two words, "delights" and "pleasure," and between the syntactic device of subjunctive mood, "If you canst give these delights, and imperative mood, "Melancholy give these pleasure." The word, "pleasure" seems to have more empathy in its proper meaning than the word, "delights." Similarly, the imperative mood is more positive in its certainty than the subjunctive mood. Between the two conclusions "I mean to live with thee" and "I will choose to live with thee," there are also this sort of different degree of willfulness or of certainty.

Two poems are in a progressive development within them. "L'Allegro begins with morning and ends up with night: "Il Penseroso" begins with night and ends up with morning. The Day and Night continuously flow, repeating themselves like morning, night and again morning. However, the vision of "Il Penseroso's Day-ending seems to be more superior to that of L'Allegro's Night-ending, in such sense that Day symbolizes light while Night darkness. Except for the Day-Night metaphor, there are a lot of organic metaphors to interweave two poems such as light and shade metaphor, mythological adaptations, Orpheus parallel, etc. The dream that L'Allegro dreams is a dream for mirth based on the changing world, whereas the dream that Il Penseroso dreams is for Heavenly pleasure based on the everlasting world. From an irresponsible sensual love song to a responsible labour-love song, from the external beauty to the spiritual vitality, everything moves from the lower level to the higher level.

As always Milton's poems do, the two poems have music through the lines supported by the effect from the carefully selected dictions. The music sounds subtle, rich and powerful, especially to the sensitive ears. In addition to this sublime and graceful music of the poems, each has more allusions, suggestions and implications,—a huge room of possibilities for interpretations,—than anyone could possibly go into. Milton's poems are too rich to be explored fully, only permitting one to peep into a small corner of the vast sea of meanings even if he armed with Greek mythology and Latin language sources.

Seeking for and digging into them, one would but face the untouched resources which could be never worn out and hunger which could never be satisfied enough. This might be one of the reasons why his poems are great. As a person, Milton has warm heart and deep sympathy for human feeling and as a poet he has a rigid control over this feeling so that he could make a perfect art. For this purpose, he gets through hard work and artistic discipline. Thus Milton does not allow us to make simple one-sided judgement of him like a "classic" or a "romantic" poet because he transcends those labels. His art is rather integration of those two conceptions. He is a poet whose spirit is romantic and yet whose artistic expression is classic. These two aspects are also reflected in the two poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." The former is somewhat like Romantic attitude toward life while the latter is classic, and in this case, the integration is achieved through the continuity from the immature to the mature.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Don Cameron(1954), "The Search for the Prophetic Strain." In his *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Grant, Michael(1962), *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*. London: the New English Library, Inc.
- Hughes, Merritt, ed. (1957), *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press.
- Leishman, J. B. (1969), "L'Allegro and Il Penseroso in their Relation to Seventeenth-Century," in his *Milton's Minor Poems*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Safer, Elaine Band Erskine, Thomas L. ed. (1970), *John Milton: L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*. Ohio: A Bell & Howell Company.
- Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Miltonic Setting*, London: Cambridge University Press.

경희대학교
문리과대학 영문과