

*REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST NIGHT
OF COMUS*

One of W. B. Yeats's last plays, *The Death of Cuchulain*, begins with 'a bare stage of any period', on to which enters 'a very old man looking like something out of mythology'. The old man, who is a surrogate for the author, opens the play with these words:

I have been asked to produce a play called *The Death of Cuchulain*. It is the last of a series of plays which has for theme his life and death. I have been selected because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of. I am so old that I have forgotten the name of my father and mother, unless indeed I am, as I affirm, the son of Talma, and he was so old that his friends and acquaintances still read Virgil and Homer. When they told me that I could have my own way, I wrote certain guiding principles on a bit of newspaper. I wanted an audience of fifty or a hundred, and if there are more, I beg them not to shuffle their feet or talk when the actors are speaking. I am sure that as I am producing a play for people I like, it is not probable, in this vile age, that they will be more in number than those who listened to the first performance of Milton's *Comus*. On the present occasion they must know the old epics and Mr Yeats' plays about them; such people, however poor, have libraries of their own. If there are more than a hundred I won't be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciologists all,

pickpockets and opinionated bitches. Why pickpockets? I will explain that, I will make it all quite clear.

The burden of the speech (it goes on for about as long again) is clear enough, the familiar Yeatsian preference for the 'dream of the noble and the beggarman' as against the world of 'Book Societies and the like'. What pulled me up, when I was looking at the play again recently, was the reference to the first night of *Comus*. Obviously this is not fortuitous; it takes its place with all those references in Yeats to a lofty art produced for the few who by birth and training are fit to receive it, all that talk of 'Duke Ercole, that bid/His mummers to the market-place', and the great gazebo, and the wondrous blade of the Japanese sword. It might be interesting, I thought, to conjure up the first night of *Comus*, to see it as Yeats might have seen it, and as we see it now.

I

Comus was not called *Comus* until the eighteenth century; Milton's own name for it was *A Maske, Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634: on Michaelmasse Night, before the Right Honourable John Earle of Bridgewater, Viscount Brackly, Lord Praesident of Wales, and one of His Majesties most honourable Privie Counsel*. And within that *cadre* it must be judged. This, of course, applies to all Milton's work. He was a highly social poet. His notion of poetry was not one of unbridled self-expression, but of personal utterance within recognized forms. These forms, though 'discovered, not devised', had something of the authority found in venerable objects in nature; they were, at the

very least, dignified and ancient buildings, whose making was the result of collaborative effort by the European literary community of whom he knew himself to be one. Every one of Milton's works, from his earliest efforts to his most mature masterpieces, is consciously aligned to a particular tradition within the over-arching tradition of European letters, and in each case he has studied the form he is using until he inhabits it naturally, at ease with its history and its nuances. By the same token he demands always to be judged by a jury of those who have made a similar effort. Thus the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, while offering a sketch of Classical tragedy which will at any rate suffice to fill in the gaps of the unlearned reader, adds pointedly that when it comes to his handling of the story ('the disposition of the fable') 'they only will best judge who are not unacquainted with Aeschulus, Sophocles, and Euripedes'. To take Milton's collected poetry in one's hand, and fairly claim to understand and be in a position to judge every poem, calls for a very comprehensive knowledge of European literature. The Victorian critic Mark Pattison remarked that 'an appreciation of Milton is the last reward of consummate scholarship', and has been a good deal laughed at for his pains, but what Pattison doubtless had in mind was not the mere spotting of every reference as if one were a walking dictionary, but the reading and meditation required to see each of Milton's poems in its appropriate landscape.

So we will try to see *Comus*. A masque is not a play, and does not grow from the same root. Drama is a narrative art, telling a story not by means of direct recounting but by representative action. A masque, though it has some tenuous narrative or situational thread, is much closer to ritual and celebration. Its origins are very

ancient, and take us into anthropology. The most satisfying general study of the subject, Enid Welsford's *The Court Masque* (1927), lays down the guide-line in its very first paragraph: 'Curiously enough, the Court masquerade, that very sophisticated amusement of Renaissance society, was more primitive than the drama of the rough Elizabethan playhouses.' The masque is a celebration, and everywhere shows the marks of its origins in that basic stratum where magic and religion meet, where the human being demonstrates his eternal need to signalize and memorialize the pivotal events of existence – change of season and harvest, death and rebirth, marriage, conflict. As soon as any society emerges out of the fog of prehistory we find it busy with these rituals. The refined seventeenth century court masque has many direct links with the festivals of some primitive settlement, and two in particular: the lavishing of resources, and the notion of salvation by touching. The first is too obvious to need much comment. Primitive agricultural peoples, who lack the resources to keep their animals alive during the winter, have to slaughter and eat them in the autumn, so even people who live flat on the subsistence level have a week or so in which they gorge themselves like bears preparing for the winter, and for the same reason. The masque, right up to its final blaze of magnificence in the early seventeenth century, retains this atmosphere of abundance. Considering that a masque was always a one-off performance, the amount of money and effort that went into the staging is nothing short of astounding. We can remind ourselves of this extravagance, this conspicuous consumption run amok, by a glance at the stage directions of a typical Whitehall masque, Carew's *Coelum Britannicum*, which was put on

only two years before *Comus* and numbered some of the same performers.

When this Antimasque was past, there began to arise out of the earth the top of a hill, which, by little and little, grew to be a huge mountain, that covered all the scene; the under-part of this was wild and craggy, and above somewhat more pleasant and flourishing; about the middle part of this mountain were seated the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland, all richly attired in regal habits, appropriated to the several nations, with crowns on their heads, and each of them bearing the the ancient arms of the kingdoms they represented. At a distance above these sat a young man in a white embroidered robe; upon his fair hair an olive garland, with wings at his shoulders, and holding in his hand a cornucopia filled with corn and fruits, representing the Genius of these kingdoms.

And again:

The dance being past, there appears in the further part of the heaven coming down a pleasant cloud, bright and transparent; which, coming softly downwards before the upper part of the mountain, embraceth the genius, but so as through it all his body is seen; and then rising again with a gentle motion, bears up the Genius of the three kingdoms, and being past the airy region, pierceth the heavens, and is no more seen; at that instant, the rock with the three kingdoms on it sinks, and is hidden in the earth. This strange spectacle gave great cause of

admiration, but especially how so huge a machine, and of that great height, could come from under the stage, which was but six foot high.

Another feature that links the court masque with its primitive ancestor is the notion of salvation by touching. Primitive societies, and perhaps all of us in the primitive reaches of our being, have a rooted belief in contagious holiness. When an animal is ritually slaughtered or hunted down, its blood is often flung out over the bystanders so that as many of them as possible may be touched by the blood (i.e., the life) of the beast on whom the survival of the people depends. And when the ritual culminates in a dance the dance winds through the village, in and out of people's houses, so that the greatest number of inhabitants may be touched by its powerful magic. The ceremonial hunter dons the skin and horns of the animal, to take over its sacredness by contact; and as with animals, so with plants. I was among the crowd in the streets of Oxford at six o'clock last May morning, and there among them was Jack-in-the-Green, with his framework of freshly leaved branches, moving among the thickest of the throng, touching them, sharing with them the sacred power of vegetation. In the masque this survives in the convention that ends the entertainment with a general dance: not just a dance in which the performers take themselves offstage, but a dance in which the performers and audience combine, in which the rehearsed and acted emblematic narrative becomes one with the general and spontaneous celebration, the audience become performers and the ritual gathers up everyone present.

The masque has yet one more mark of its celebratory origin, one that we who are reared in a modern bureaucratic

state will find hard to understand. Feudal society- and the heyday of the masque coincided with the final self-consuming blaze of feudalism – is already hieratic, structured, symbolic, already half-way to being like a lofty ceremonial entertainment in itself. The masque unites many arts in the celebrating of a person or persons of high estate, royal or noble; the performers are not usually professionals, but other members of the same aristocracy, offering their skill in singing, dancing and reciting poetry, in an act of homage between equals; the effect is to restate and confirm those values by the grace of which the aristocracy exists and performs its function, which is to govern.

In other words, the masque celebrates those virtues which, by a legal fiction, are supposed to be inherent in an aristocracy – a ruling caste that perpetuates itself by a mixture of heredity and training. This legal fiction is not, any more than another, believed in literally – everyone knows that an aristocracy includes within its ranks many who are stupid, weak or depraved, but it is enacted in the masque, and the one symbolic enactment matches the other. The king or nobleman, seated with his retinue about him in their descending order of function, is the apex of a structure that matches the structure he is watching, and when the masque culminates in a general dance the two structures blend into one, which in a sense they have been all along. We, who live in societies in which a democratically elected (if we are lucky) executive expresses its (se. our) will through an elaborate bureaucracy, can only understand this notion of power and authority if we go right back and take a bearing from Fustel de Coulanges in *The Ancient City*. 'Ancient law was not the work of a legislator; it was on the contrary imposed on the legislator. It had its birth in the family.' Similarly, the structure of laws in feudal Europe

was the expression of qualities that were supposed by a legal fiction to inhere in the feudal pyramid. So that a masque celebrating some event in the life of a great aristocrat was, by definition, a celebration and a demonstration of those qualities by which the aristocrat justified his power.

II

So much, by way of rough diagram, for the general nature of the masque. Now to the particular nature of *Comus*. John, Earl of Bridgewater, had been appointed President of the Council of Wales, and Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the border counties of England, in 1631. This was a formidable responsibility. The Council of Wales, about eighty in number, included men high in the service of Charles I and also English and Welsh gentlemen who held estates in that part of the world and could administer the law at local level. That Bridgewater was given this high office indicates that he was held in great esteem. It involved residence in Ludlow Castle, and the Earl, who normally resided at Ashridge in Buckinghamshire, took his time about making the move. Not until the summer of 1634 were he and his wife installed at Ludlow, and their three youngest children, left behind during the summer at Ashridge, joined them some months later. Milton's masque was presented on the evening of the day on which Bridgewater formally took office.

This was the basic situation for which Milton had to devise a framework. The story he hit upon was obvious enough, yet completely appropriate. By a pardonable foreshortening of time, he imagines that the three children, journeying from Ashridge to Ludlow, are arriving that very evening; that they undergo trials and dangers on the way, which they surmount by showing the aristocratic virtues of courage and self-command, and that at the culmination of the masque they

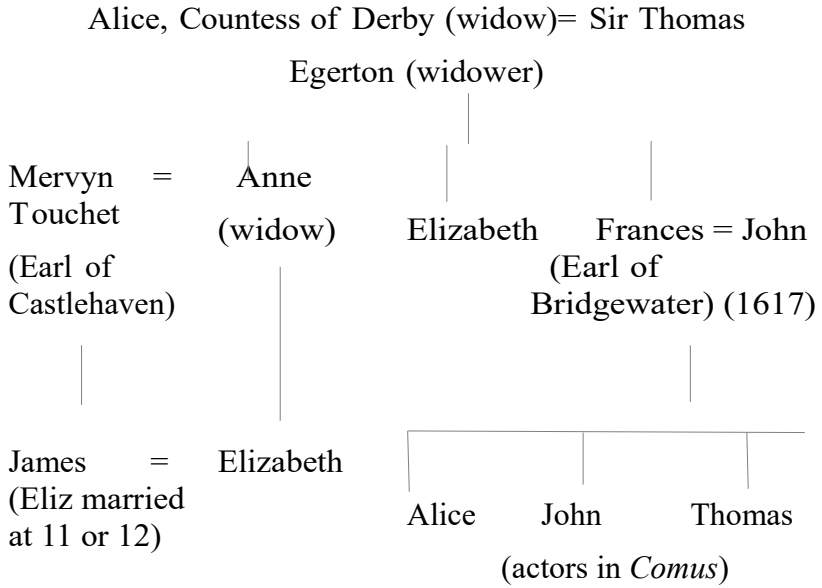
step out of the picture-frame and are presented as real children to their real father and mother. It is a charming plan, and Milton carries it out charmingly. *Comus* is, of course, lightweight by comparison with most of Milton's work. It has not the piercing beauty of 'Lycidas', let alone the volcanic power of *Paradise Lost* or the granite authority of *Samson Agonistes*. But it is a perfect example of Milton's lifelong ability to take an established genre and, without bending it into an unrecognizable shape, put his signature firmly on it. *Comus* has all the features of a masque, yet it is Milton's masque and no one else's. And of all extant masques it is the most literary. A large proportion of its energy is pumping through the language.

But now we shift focus again. In the background is the masque tradition; in the middle ground is the official occasion for which *Comus* was written. But in the foreground is a real family, living a real life with its attendant problems, and there are signs that in writing *Comus* Milton may have felt himself very closely meshed in with the situation. To get a grip on it, we must go back a couple of generations.

Many years earlier, in the days of Elizabeth I, Edmund Spenser dedicated one of his poems, *The Teares of the Muses*, to his young kinswoman and friend Alice, Lady Strange. Her husband, Ferdinando, Lord Strange, was a man of letters in his own right, and took besides a deep interest in the theatre, maintaining a company of actors, Lord Strange's Players. On the death of his father in 1593, Ferdinando Strange became Earl of Derby; and Alice retained the title of Countess of Derby throughout her subsequent widowhood, remarriage and second widowhood. The couple, who resided at their country house in Harefield, on the borders of Middlesex and Buckinghamshire, had three daughters. Ferdinando died, one year after succeeding to the title, and

in 1600 Alice married Sir Thomas Egerton, a man who had served the Derby family for some years as their legal adviser. In that same year, Alice's second daughter married Sir Thomas Egerton's son John: so that the children of that marriage were simultaneously the grandchildren and stepgrand-children of the senior couple.

Another of Alice's daughters, Anne, was widowed, and in 1624 this Anne married Mervyn Touchet, alias Lord Audley, the Earl of Castlehaven. Touchet/Audley was a widower with six children, of whom the eldest, James, in 1628 married Elizabeth, one of Anne's four children by her first marriage. A family tree will make all plain :



Once again the loose ends were neatly tucked in, and if any children resulted from this latter union, they would be both great-grandchildren and step-great-grandchildren to the redoubtable old lady at Harefield.

Sir John Egerton was a man of importance. He was created Earl of Bridgewater in 1617; still higher honour was destined for him, but for the present he and his family lived semi-privately at Ashridge, not far (some sixteen miles) from Harefield .

We have therefore to think of these two aristocratic households, within easy reach of each other, populated by one of those intricately interconnected families that abound in the English ruling class: everybody was everybody else's cousin, niece, uncle, step-grandson, etc., etc. John Egerton and his wife produced four sons and eleven daughters. Four children died in infancy, but eleven remained, and quickly grew up to the age at which they could form fresh alliances with nobility and wealth.

All this amounts to a formidable power-structure, but it was an intellectual and artistic structure as well. John Egerton's children were musical. To encourage their gifts he took on as music teacher to the household no less a musician than Henry Lawes; when, we do not know, but it was before 1627, because Lady Mary Egerton, who had been one of Lawes's charges, got married in that year. Through Lawes, the family had an open avenue to the world of music and drama. It was the heyday of the masque, and Lawes had been much involved in masques, with their equal demand on composer, poet, actor, scenic designer, painter, singer, instrumental performer. He not only wrote music for masques, but also performed in them. He had been seen in two masques by Ben Jonson, two by Aurelian Townshend, and one each by Shirley and Carew. In some of these masques he had acted alongside his young charges of the Egerton family. They had a friendly relationship – not merely master and pupils, but collaborators in dashing and stylish (if somewhat improvisatory) works of art.

All, then, was reasonably sunny on the Harefield-Ashridge side of the family. On the Castlehaven side there were deep shadows. Mervyn Touchet was a bad lot. His sexual tastes were decidedly seamy and he had no hesitation in gratifying them by the use of every kind of power, including violence. He compelled not only his wife but also her twelve-year-old daughter, bride of his own son, to take part in group sexual activities, of just about every imaginable kind, involving the servants and anyone else who happened to be on the scene, including a whore calling herself Blandida, who took up residence in his house for some six months. Finally the whole matter was dragged to light. In April 1631 the Earl of Castlehaven was tried, convicted of rape and sodomy, and forthwith executed.

Naturally these events were much talked of, and naturally also the effect on the families concerned was painful in the extreme. Each branch of the clan reacted in its own way. The Castlehaven family made an unavailing effort to get Touchet pardoned. The Bridgewater family maintained a dignified silence. Though John Egerton was a member of the Privy Council and therefore wielded exceptional influence, he seems to have made no attempt to intervene on Castlehaven's behalf. Evidently he accepted his kinsman's guilt. During the relevant period he is not on record as having attended any Privy Council meeting, nor was he present at Castlehaven's trial. Doubtless he was licking his wounds in private, the wounds to his family pride and aristocratic code of behaviour.

The Earl of Bridgewater and his wife could take refuge in silence. Not so the old lady at Harefield. On her, the effect of the Castlehaven revelations was one of deep grief and shock. She gathered her other three granddaughters by Anne into the protection of her household, but she would not take Elizabeth, the girl who had been involved in the scandal, nor would she take her own daughter, the girl's mother. The King had not yet pardoned them. In any case, the girl ought to go back to her husband and start life with him anew. One thing was certain: after such experiences, Elizabeth was no fit companion for the

children she, the Countess, was looking after. To Viscount Dorchester, His Majesty's Secretary of State, Alice wrote several letters in 1631, describing herself as one 'whose heart is almost wounded to death', and discussing with him the question of what should be done with Anne and Elizabeth Audley. The old Countess still had hopes of their reclamation, praying that 'neither my daughter nor she will ever offend either God or His Majesty again by their wicked courses, but redeem what is past, by their reformation and newness of life'.

But as for letting Elizabeth Audley join her sisters in the house at Harefield, that would not do at all: 'I am fearful lest there should be some sparks of my grandchild Audley's misbehaviour remaining, which might give ill example to the young ones which are with me.'

In November of that year, the King pardoned Anne Audley and her daughter Elizabeth. The old Countess at Harefield could take some comfort from that fact. But the shock had been grievous, and her family must have wanted to do what they could for her.

John Milton now enters the story. One summer evening, the Countess was presented with an entertainment by 'som Noble Persons of her Family'. These scions paid homage to the old dame in her seat of state by means of a procession interrupted by a speech from 'the Genius of the wood', and by two exquisite lyrics. Both lyrics and speech were by the young Milton, who printed them in his *Poems* of 1645. The verse is light and delicate in rhythm, agreeably sonorous with vowel-music, in every way fitting for a summer evening, a beautiful garden and a family celebration. The 'song' that concludes the entertainment shows that Milton could imitate Shakespeare while remaining his own man.

O're the smooth enameld green
Where no print of step hath been,
Follow me as I sing,

And touch the warbled string.
Under the shady roof
Of branching Elm Star-proof,
Follow me,
I will bring you where she sits,
Clad in splendor as befits
Her deity.
Such a rural Queen
All *Arcadia* hath not seen.

Nymphs and Shepherds dance no more
By sandy *Ladons* Lillied banks.
On old *Pyceus* or *Cyllene* hoar,
Trip no more in twilight ranks,
Though *Erymanth* your loss deplore,
A better soyl shall give ye thanks.
From the stony *Maenalus*,
Bring your Flocks, and live with us,
Here ye shall have greater grace,
To serve the Lady of this place.
Though *Syrinx* your *Pans* Mistres were,
Yet *Syrinx* well might wait on her.
Such a rural Queen
All *Arcadia* hath not seen.

We do not know the date of *Arcades*. Milton's modern biographer W. R. Parker assigns it on grounds of probability to 1630 or even 1629. Both dates put it well before the catastrophe of the Castlehaven scandal. I could

wish for the unearthing of some document that would put it a year or two later, after the storm had broken over that venerable head. The fullness of compliment, the assurance that she was unshakeably a 'rural queen', most fit to rule over the realms of pastoral, would take on a beauty, if they were intended as consolation and support, that as merely formal tribute they necessarily lack.

Still, whatever the date, *Arcades* was clearly the occasion of Milton's relationship with the family of John Egerton. Doubtless the intermediary was Henry Lawes. Since Milton's father was a connoisseur of music and something of a composer, it need not perplex us that Lawes knew the Milton family. It is also quite possible that John Milton's budding fame as a poet, a fame that took root first in Cambridge but might easily spread to a circle of acquaintances in London, had come to Lawes's ears independently. In any case, we may take it that Lawes invited Milton to collaborate on *Arcades*, and that Milton went to Harefield to see (or even take part in?) the entertainment. There he would meet and work with the 'noble Persons of her family' who were the actors and singers. Would the party include Anne and Elizabeth Audley? Or were they at this time immured in Castlehaven's lair, acting out his fantasies with Blandida and the rest of the crew?

The Countess of Derby died in January 1637. Whatever the trials of her life, it is a pleasant thought that she was the object of tributes by both Spenser and Milton. (If it could only be proved that somewhere along the line she was the subject of one of Shakespeare's sonnets, the triangle would be complete.) And in the year of her death Milton was once more drawn into the circle of her family. Lawes, needing to put on something much more elaborate than *Arcades* and to put it on in Ludlow Castle, remembered the beautifully polished verse Milton had turned in on the former occasion. He invited him once more to write something for the Egerton family and to share to that extent in its life. There would be consultations, rehearsals, and beyond all doubt a visit to Ludlow.

The circumstances, however, were different. Even if *Arcades* was well before the Castlehaven scandal, *Comus* was after it. Elizabeth Audley, who had been eleven years old when all this happened to her, was fifteen now. And her cousin and exact contemporary, Alice Egerton, was to be the main female performer in the masque Milton and Lawes were devising.

It is this, surely, that explains the emphasis Milton decided to put on the virtue of chastity. To most of us nowadays, his decision would not need to be explained. We think of him as the austere, not to say grim, poet of Puritanism, very suspicious of pleasure and self-indulgence of any kind. But the young Milton had not yet so decisively adopted this stance. He was, certainly, a serious and studious young man, and of blameless life. (In boyhood, he had been destined for Holy Orders, and he had not yet renounced that intention. He never did, indeed, formally renounce it; his view would be that the Church left him, rather than that he left the Church.) But as a poet he delighted in the rich sensuousness of the Renaissance, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. His favourite poets were the Latin elegiac love poets, who entertained no high opinion of chastity. He was a musician, a swordsman, a good dancer, handsome, attracted by female beauty. The Milton we see in our mind's eye wrote *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, not *Comus*.

The three young people he imagines making their adventurous journey, to be played by the fifteen-year-old girl and her brothers of eleven and nine, face dangers and temptations. But, out of the wide variety of dangers and temptations they might have met with, Milton specifically chose the sexual. It may be that he went a little too far for the tone of the occasion. Certainly the cuts in performance seem to have been, mostly, the removing of passages which would be too openly sexual to be spoken by a young lady in such a setting.

Any reader who knows 'the literature of Milton will see by now that I have been convinced by Barbara Breasted's article '*Comus* and the Castlehaven Scandal'. The text of *Comus* exists in three forms, each slightly different. There is

a manuscript at Trinity College, Cambridge; there is the 'Bridgewater manuscript', still in the possession of the family; and there is the printed version, first published by Lawes in 1637 and substantially repeated by Milton in the collection of 1645. What concerns us at the moment is that the Bridgewater manuscript is the shortest of these variants (908 lines against a printed 1023), which alone would point to its being the acting copy, and that these cuts seem to have been made for a reason. At this reason, Dr Breasted appears to me to guess convincingly.

In the story, the two brothers leave the lady alone in the wood while they go to explore. Comus and his followers have been whooping it up in the forest, but the enchanter suddenly senses the approach of someone very different, and interrupts the wild dance with

Break off, break off, I feel the different pace
Of some chast footing neer about this ground .
. . . Some Virgin sure
(For so I can Distinguish by mine Art)
Benighted in these woods. Now to my charms....

- *Milton Studies III*, ed. J. D. Simmons (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971).

His plan is to seduce the virgin and enrol her in his gang.
He and they hide, the Lady enters, and she speaks.

This way the noise was, if mine ear be true,
My best guide now, me thought it was the sound Of Riot,
and ill manag'd Merriment,
Such as the jocond Flute, or gamesom Pipe Stirs up among
the loose unleter'd Hinds,

When for their teeming Flocks, and granges full In wanton
dance they praise the bounteous *Pan*,

And thank the gods amiss. I should be loath

To meet the rudenesse, and swill'd insolence

Of such late Wassailers; yet O where els Shall I inform
my unacquainted feet

In the blind mazes of this tangl'd Wood?

My Brothers when they saw me wearied out With this
long way, resolving here to lodge

Under the spreading favour of these Pines Stept as they
se'd to the next Thicket side To bring me Berries, or such
cooling fruit

As the kind hospitable Woods provide.

They left me then, when the gray-hooded Eev'n Like a sad
Votarist in Palmers weed

Rose from the hindmost wheels of *Phoebus* wain.

But where they are, and why they came not back,

Is now the labour of my thoughts, 'tis likeliest

They had ingag'd their wandring steps too far, And
envious darknes, e're they could return,

Had stole them from me....

I cannot hallow to my Brothers, but

Such noise as I can make to be heard farthest

Ile venter, for my new enliv'nd spirits

Prompt me; and they perhaps are not far off.

She then sings the delicate lyric to 'Sweet Echoe'. Being a well-brought-up young lady, she cannot make her voice carry by shouting and yelling, but she can and will make it carry by singing. But of course any reader who knows *Comus* tolerably well will have realized that I have missed

out a large chunk of that speech; quoting it, in fact, as the Bridgewater manuscript has it. The full text runs:

And envious darknes, e're they could return, Had stole
them from me, els o theevis Night

Why shouldst thou, but for some fellonious end,

In thy dark lantern thus close up the Stars,

That nature hung in Heav'n, and fill'd their Lamps

With everlasting oil, to give due light

To the misled and lonely Travailer?

This is the place, as well as I may guess,

Whence eev'n now the tumult of loud Mirth Was rife, and
perfet in my list'ning ear,

Yet nought but single darknes do I find. What might this
be? A thousand fantasies Begin to throng into my memory

Of calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire, And airy
tongues, that syllable mens names

On Sands, and Shoars, and desert Wildernesses. These
thoughts may startle well, but not astound

The vertuous mind, that ever walks attended

By a strong siding champion Conscience

O welcom pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,

Thou hovering Angel girt with golden wings, And thou
unblemish't form of Chastity,

I see ye visibly, and now beleeve

That he, the Supreme good, t' whom all things ill

Are but as slavish officers of vengeance, Would send a
glistring Guardian if need were To keep my life and
honour unassail'd.

Was I deceiv'd, or did a sable cloud

Turn forth her silver lining on the night? I did not err,
there does a sable cloud

Turn forth her silver lining on the night, And casts a gleam
over this tufted Grove. I cannot hallow, etc.

This cut cannot have been made on grounds of literary quality. The writing is excellent, some of the best in the work, and it is also dramatically appropriate. Too appropriate, perhaps. The emotional temperature rises steeply: the girl is disturbed, feeling the vibration of the enchanter who is hiding nearby and lustfully watching her. Obviously whoever cut these lines was not so much out to improve the text as to cool it.

A similar cut occurs in lines 697-700. After Comus has presented himself to the Lady in the guise of a humble swain, and offered to lead her to a humble but safe habitation, she puts herself in his hands and we next see her not in a cottage but in 'a stately Palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness; soft Musick, Tables spred with all dainties'. The Lady, surrounded by Comus and his rabble, is powerless to rise from her enchanted chair. This is already quite strong symbolism; he has power over her body, and it is up to her mind to resist him. In the course of the exchange that follows, she says to him:

Hast thou betrai'd my credulous innocence
With visor'd falshood, and base forgery,
And wouldst thou seek again to trap me here
With lickerish baits fit to ensnare a brute?

The Bridgewater manuscript gives only the first of those four lines. Perhaps the other three laid too much emphasis on the precise nature of Comus's intentions. 'Lickerish', in particular, had the specific meaning of 'lecherous'. Somebody (we can only conjecture who)

decided that Lady Alice had better not speak so openly of what they were all thinking. For everyone present must have thought, as the action unfolded, of that real-life Comus, lurking in the dark forest of family history, who had had his way with just such a girl as this, a girl of the same age and the same family as she whom they were watching.

III

At this point, conjecture takes over; but the kind of conjecture that no imaginative person can help making. Dr Breasted, as a scholar should, confines her essay almost entirely to ascertaining the facts. But even she cannot resist, at one point, wading into the water of conjectural interpretations. 'By idealizing these last three unmarried Egerton children and their relationship with their parents,' she writes, 'Milton invites us to regard the masque as a ritual purification of the entire family.' This is cautious; the words 'invites us to regard' keep the question within the normal bounds of literary criticism; yet it conveys, to me at least, that Dr Breasted thinks of Milton, pacing the country lanes and meditating a theme for *Comus*, saying to himself, 'The Bridgewater family, eh? What that lot need is a good ritual purification.'

What, indeed, were Milton's feelings about the Castlehaven scandal? Did he breathe a sigh of relief when Mervyn Touchet went to the block, thinking that from now on England would be a cleaner place? Did he feel a deep pity for the old Countess at Harefield in her affliction? Or did the experience, on the contrary, sow the seeds of doubt and suspicion in his mind? Was Elizabeth Audley invited to Ludlow? After all, if the King had pardoned the girl, it would not be seemly for a member of the Privy Council to ostracize her. Did Milton meet her and, if he did, what did they find to say to each other? What thoughts went through their minds? (This seems to me better material for a historical novel about Milton than anything that went into Mr Graves's little anti-Miltonic

phantasmagoria, *Wife to Mr Milton*.)

Be all this as it may, in any attempt to reconstruct the life of Milton, *Comus* provides a vital hinge. Before it, Milton is a gifted schoolboy and undergraduate, already widely read, already conscious of superior powers and exceptional gifts; a child of the comfortable middle class, living (materially) a rather sheltered life within an approving and admiring family circle; his father, indeed, was worried about the son's decision to give his life to poetry, and some friction arose between them, alluded to with frankness in 'Ad Patrem'; but, on the whole, it had been a boyhood and youth devoted to learning, amassing information and ideas and enjoying the arts, within the security of a family circle. Ahead lay the black and stormy seas, the agonizing decisions, the lonely toil, the tragic disappointments and disillusion. But for this moment the sun shone warmly. Milton had emerged from his comfortable but rather limited *milieu*; he was mixing with people of importance, people who made momentous decisions, which to a young man is wonderfully interesting and stimulating; he was also mixing with people whose artistic sensibilities were as cultivated as his own – whereas at Cambridge, we may well conjecture, he had mixed chiefly with men who had plenty of reading but not much else. As a developing artist, young enough to be growing very fast, he must have felt warmed and encouraged by the knowledge that his prowess at his chosen art had won him a place in this larger, more magnificent, more important world.

Not that this kind of support was then, or is now, essential to the producing of great art. The greatest art can grow in loneliness and sorrow. But surely every artist needs one period in his life, even a short one, when he can feel that he is in the right place at the right time. The Milton of *Samson Agonistes* is a greater poet than the Milton of *Comus*. (The post-Romantic doctrine that poets do their best work in youth and then 'go off' was unknown to him as it was unknown to Shakespeare.) But the poet of *Samson* must often have thought back to the young man who wrote *Comus*, and thought of him as someone exceptionally

fortunate, a gifted and protected being on whom life had so far rained only gifts. 'He plays yet, like a young prentice the first day, and is not yet come to his task of melancholy.' To this young man, standing in the sunshine, the deep and tragic questions had not yet presented themselves: Whose hands are fit for power? How shall a nation govern itself? How far should conscience trim itself to a legitimate authority, and when does authority cease to be legitimate? All these questions met Milton head on before many more years had passed, and he did not flinch from them. The struggle cost him eyesight, health, leisure, friends, everything except life itself. For twenty years he was silent as a poet – he, who had spent his first three decades in preparation for the writing of poetry. When the Restoration came, and his hopes of a theocentric republican form of government were finally overthrown, we can only be glad that Restoration England was not the kind of place where, once a political faction is put down, its adherents are rounded up and shot in batches. Milton's life was evidently in the balance for some time, but it was spared, and as a result we have *Paradise Lost* and *Samson*. (There is a political moral here. A regime based on the slaughter-house loses a lot of art as well as a lot of everything else.)

IV

When the young Milton enjoyed the shelter of Ludlow Castle and the society it housed, he was assenting to, and co-operating with, an *ancien regime* that was fated not to last much longer. Indeed, he, with his wholehearted support of the Commonwealth, was to be one of the people who brought it down. That decision was a dark and tragic one, and what it cost Milton is not to be lightly conjectured, unless we have the arrogance to believe ourselves qualified to plumb the mind of a great poet with ease. And such thoughts naturally bring us round to Yeats again. When Yeats spoke of writing for people he liked and therefore having an audience about the size of that for the first night

of *Comus*, he was consciously aligning himself with the Milton who wrote for the Egertons. Not that Lady Gregory had that kind of importance or that kind of wealth: Coole Park was not a notable estate, even by Anglo-Irish standards; there was never much money there, and its closing years were a sad struggle, against hopeless odds, to keep it together.

At the time Yeats met Augusta Gregory, he was exhausted and ill from years of toil and frustration. She took him to Coole Park, nursed him back to health, and provided him with a home there as long as she ran the place. Further, she helped him by bringing him into the cottages of her tenants, and plugging him in to a source of tradition and folklore that Yeats, whose own background was mainly urban, would probably not have found for himself. He repaid her friendship in some of his finest work. It was a loyalty that never wavered; Yeats did not, like Milton, have to face the crisis of an ideological parting of the ways. To him, the social and political set-up which produced families like the Gregories was in line with his views on society generally. On the other hand, he had to endure the slow agony of watching everything he loved go down. After the Republican government took over, the social function of the landed gentry was no more; they could survive only with large independent resources, and these the Gregories did not have. Coole was poor soil, the house was quite an ordinary house, and the only feature of the estate that made it valuable, in material terms, was that Lady Gregory's husband had been a great planter; he had grown many trees, including some rare species, and when finally the estate had to be sold a government department bought it for the sake of the trees, and let the house fall down.

Yeats, of course, had seen it coming, had looked ahead to the time

When all those rooms and passages are gone;

When nettles wave above a shapeless mound / And
saplings root among the broken stone.

All this leaves problems that are still unsolved, problems of the social relationships of art. The modish view nowadays is that such a tradition as Yeats found, and cherished, among the Anglo-Irish country gentry is useless and worse; it isolates the artist and cuts him off from communion with the One True God - namely, Demos. This view is as unsatisfactory as modish views generally are, especially since most of the theorists who worship Demos most shrilly are essentially nurslings of bureaucracy who have no sympathy with the common man and wouldn't know how to talk to him. And yet, one has a certain sympathy with the young poet of middle-class background who tries to dress, talk and generally act like 'a worker' and is always looking for barricades. At least he feels, obscurely, that some need in our present culture is not being satisfied. He wants to be in touch with some source of power that he feels to be lacking in the bureaucratic structure of the modern state. Who can blame him? If Milton and Lawes were collaborating today, they would be putting on some colossal top-heavy production at Covent Garden, and the money would come from the Arts Council. Does anyone genuinely feel that this would be as good as the arrangement they actually had? And if Yeats's relationship with the Gregories was already obsolete in his time and more so in ours, where is the relationship with a trade union or a commune or a writers' workshop that is enabling a poet to do work of anything like that quality now?

Politics, and not only direct governmental politics, is the art of the possible. Living as we do amid a fury of egalitarianism, it would be useless to try to canvass any support for the idea that a poet's work could actually be *improved* by mixing on equal terms with a social class that admitted art into its way of life, one with enough leisure to cultivate the arts and take an interest in them. All we could hope to establish, and that grudgingly, would be that the poet might, in some circumstances, escape being fatally flawed by such contact. So it is probably for my own pleasure, rather than in the hope of convincing

anyone, that I quote the wise remarks of C. S. Lewis on the situation of the courtly poet (*Studies in Words* (1960), p. 23):

The court takes from the class below it talented individuals - like Chaucer, say - as its entertainers and assistants. We ordinarily think of Chaucer learning his courtesy at court. And no doubt he did; its manners were more graceful than those of his own family. But can we doubt that he also taught courtesy there? By expecting to find realised at court the paradigm of courtesy and nobility, by writing his poetry on the assumption that it was realised, such a man offers a critique - and an unconscious critique - of the court's actual *ethos*, which no one can resent. It is not flattery, but it flatters. As they say a woman becomes more beautiful when she is loved, a nobility by status will become more 'noble' under such treatment. Thus the Horaces, Chaucers, Racines, or Spensers substantially ennoble their patrons. But also, through them, many graces pass down from the aristocracy into the middle class. This two-way traffic generates a culture-group comprising the choicest member of two groups that differ in status. If this is snobbery, we must reckon snobbery among the greatest nurseries of civilisation. Without it, would there ever have been anything but wealth and power above and sycophancy or envy below?

Something of this ideal, albeit turned upside down, may underlie the modern young poet's emotional need to blend with the working class: the ideal of a culture-group that takes in the most gifted individuals from two contiguous areas. If so, it is another mark of that deep need to identify with, and draw strength from, something more vital, more organic, more instinctual than a merely bureaucratic structure. Indeed, everywhere I look I see this need. 'The Tip, Burnley, Lancashire', is the address of a group called 'The Welfare State', who describe themselves as 'Civic Magicians'. Their aim is to bring back a sense of ritual into our lives; they will supply

festivals to order; their manifesto draws on the kind of ideas made familiar in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, just as *The Waste Land* did half a century ago.

So the first night of *Comus* turns out to be a rich theme for meditation, as one suspected it would, even though it was an entertainment put on in one place for one night, celebrating an event in the history of one family, and for only as many people as could get into one large room. Some of the conditions were present, it seems, that go to make great art. And, in the cement warren of our bureaucracy, the search for those conditions goes on, because the need for something more living persists: for the personal relationship that enriches art, for the roots going down into the instinctual and primitive, for a victory of the men over the machines.