Preface

When Hamlet, observing an actor's imitation of grief, demands, "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" he poses a sharp question about the reciprocal relationship of fiction and life. As audience, we can easily dismiss the question. It seems to ask that we reply, "Nothing." However, when Hamlet turns the question upon himself and us ("What would he do, / Had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?"), we become less certain. If we dispose of the question a second time by consigning Hamlet himself to fiction, not only does Shakespeare's Prospero wait along the way to tell us that we are such dreams as fiction is made of, but Milton, outside of fiction, resolutely approaches to remind us that we and our Christian "fictions" are reality of the highest order. Unless we choose to become the dreams of Hell, he declares, we are the Platonic or "accommodative" shadow of substantial Heaven itself.

Milton pushes the frontiers of fiction beyond the circumference and at the same time into the very center of presumed Christian reality. He, as author in whom "the cause of God and his church was to be pleaded," and we, as audience who share the cause, are the subjects of the true poems we read and the fable of the true plays we enact. Together with some Italian Renaissance critics, Milton soars above the critical Aonian mount that explained and justified fiction as an imitation of intellectual and moral reality, a mimesis. Because his Christian subject is assumed to be true and because both author and audience are directly involved in it, his works open instead into a participative enactment, a *methexis*.¹

¹ Derived from Jane E. Harrison, *Themis* (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 35-44, 125-126, 328-329. The portion of an action that is newly "created" rather

Although the instrument for participation is of course lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetry, and although traditional devices of those genres are used with great literary self-consciousness, the subject of a work, its human creator and divine Creator, and its audience are all wholly real and wholly active.

These essays propose to extend the *methexis* to include literary discussion with the general reader. Such discussion makes a similar demand upon both the present author and the reader: for the time being, each must accept Milton's general extraliterary beliefs as "given," in order to participate fully in his literary action. It is admittedly an extraordinary demand. We usually suspend our literary disbelief only during the time we are absorbed in an excellent work of fiction. Using a critical shorthand, we may say that we "feel" its pathos and "see" its meaning, but we almost never admit any necessary connection between the literary experience and our beliefs (nor does the pronoun "we" imply the human race—only the supposed readers of the work). But Milton's subject is Renaissance Puritan Christianity, which he believes conveys divine truth. As Wittgenstein sometimes asserted that logic is a mirror of reality, so Milton would hold that his great Argument mirrors—and, in a sense, *is*—reality. His work is to be, not a Platonic imitation of an imitation, but the direct act of revelation. The reader's usual statement that in fiction he "sees" and "feels" will no longer be merely figurative. Instead, the audience will be led to the meditative or incarnative affirmation, "We realize": the awareness of God-with-us. If the devices of *methexis* are as important and rewarding in Milton as I believe them to be, we must surrender our extra-Miltonic theological and metaphysical beliefs as well as our purely literary disbelief during the time that we read him. We, too, can then "see" and "feel" truth—truth that is broadly relevant to God and man, to eternity and time; truth that is not only "about" us or "for" us but even "by" us, as we with Milton enact God's great poem. Such *methexis* in reading and discussion obviously carries no extraliterary imperatives. Even though we live in an ostensibly Christian culture,

than repeated continues the miraculous but never mysterious Eleusinian celebration: things invisible to mortal sight will be shown in an *epopteia* by the poet-hierophant.

methexis in no wise presses on us, as though it were Milton's, the personal question, "What would he do, / Had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?" One no more has to be a certified Miltonic Christian after reading Milton than a worshiper of the Delphic Apollo after reading Sophocles. However, if we are to receive the power of Milton's vast drama, we must at least take care to enter the right theater.

The total *methexis* asks that author and audience to the works, together with the rehearsals and judgments within the works themselves, share the expression both of divine truth in its many manifestations and of human experience in its manifold forms. The poet must be a voice for God, like Moses and David, as well as a humble, fallible servant, like the Adam of *Paradise Lost*, Book XII. The audience, too, must be "zealous servants" among the sons of God singing eternally in the brilliant morning light of Heaven as well as sons of Adam, abjectly mourning in themselves the dark Fall. Nature also will act as Chorus, groaning at the Fall and Crucifixion, rejoicing at the Creation and Incarnation.

Somewhat like the Eleusinian mysteries and certain Christian services of worship, the "saying" (*legomenon*) of poetry is a revealed and prophetic current of truth that becomes action. In "At a Solemn Music," verse and voice can pierce uncreated or dead matter, chaos or Lazarus, and cause it to vibrate in the cosmic hymn and dance. At the least, in such a "saying" subject, sayer, and listener are joined even more closely than they were when Demodocus sang to Odysseus of Odysseus, at King Alcinous' feast. In Christian lore, the subject is that which the listener and sayer have done or must do. More important, the poems will possess a direct "doing" (*dromenon*), for the fable must be enacted by the author and audience—not in sympathy or empathy with fictive characters, but immediately within themselves. The song of creation becomes part of the act of Creation. Finally, the new action or continuing meaning of divinity that illumines the human doing and saying can supply a "showing" of things invisible to mortal sight, making the poet a hierophant and the members of the audience direct initiates into holy mystery. It does not matter greatly whether we participate in the divine action at the infernal level, or on earth with its mixed pattern of choices, or in Heaven.

We will see different objects and enact different roles, but they will eventually come to be and to mean almost the same. As Milton says in another context, "All is . . . , / As ever in my great task-Master's eye" (Sonnet 7).

Such use of *methexis* almost demands the present tense. The eternal moment or the eternal return familiar in primitive ritual becomes a sophisticated eternal act. It also demands the archetype and type in meaning and action. Through typology we will be able to receive the full force of particularity, change, time, and history and at the same time recognize their connection with original creation, the unchanging standards of divine judgment, and the eternal disposition of life or death. The "double vision" asked of his audience by Milton has been symbolized in many ways, most of them suggested by Milton himself—a spiral, intersecting circles and orbits, the ingress and regress of vital forces, the tree of being, a ladder and ramp, and so forth. In these discussions, I suggest the image of a perpendicular. The vertical line is that of divinity—timeless, unchanging, harmonious, infinite. The horizontal line is that implying Hellish and human time, history, cacophony, and change. The lateral line, or flow, seems to those within it to occasion itself, but it is closed rather than infinite at each terminus and depends upon the vertical line for being and meaning. Man can therefore choose lateral "loss," persevere in his own being and meaning, or ascend to any point in the perpendicular, if he will recognize the relationship. Similarly, when God "stoops" to man, it is across no great spiritual distance, for the vertical line unites him to all parts of the horizontal line. If God is Hellenically above man as creator and judge, he is also Hebraically with man, both within history and in man's redemption from history.

In this dynamic, "monistic" relationship, in which matter is not divorced from spirit nor eternity from time, Milton again and again stages the *methexis* which in part constitutes that relationship.² If we as audience must fully share the Fall, we may also

² As Leo Spitzer, in *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony* (Baltimore, 1963), p. 25, represents the lovely doctrine of music formulated by Ambrose, there will be "a 'performance,' and 'incarnation' of that world harmony about which the Greeks had speculated; and the Church, which was represented in his hymns as echoing the music of the universe, served, actually, as the theater for the performance of these hymns."

fully share the energy of renewal. If men feel within themselves the loss of their conferred harmonious Paradise, they may nevertheless restore a reharmonized Paradise within. Sharing the total Christian experience, men can then discover that the morning song of Genesis and the new song of Revelations and all the vital life that both songs celebrate have always been their own. They will be "breathing instruments" of the great choric psalm that the whole world both is and celebrates.

Milton as Christian poet perhaps dared greatly in hoping to present, more than to represent; to express, not to report; to act, not to relate; to create with, not only to pattern after, divine agents; to do, not to mime. In a sense, that program becomes the great literary "Argument" of his works. As Michael Lloyd has said, to have the Christian vision insists that one preach it.³ And for Milton, we may add, to preach it or to receive it must also be to enact it.

In these discussions, I have followed Milton in calling his subjects *matter*. The devices of participation within the subject by author and audience I call *stance*. The first term permits a more general conception of Milton's received Christian and classic subjects, together with his own disposition of them in given literary modes, than would more limited terms indicating plot, rhetoric, trope, and so on. It also reflects his sense that a human poet is like the divine creative agency that worked upon chaotic "matter." In Milton, Christian and classic matter tends to compose both the full vertical and horizontal lines of the perpendicular. Action and being in time and eternity are their constituents. Stance, on the other hand, indicates point of view and change of setting, but in a way at once more narrow and more broad than our usual terms suggest. It contains significations of stand, stanza, strophe: physical and moral position, poetic paragraph, and choric place, words, and movement. It often indicates the static or progressive placing of author and audience in a poem—placement as much spiritual

³ Michael Lloyd, "The Two Worlds of 'Lycidas,'" *Essays in Criticism*, XI (1961), 391. See further the discussion of the imitation of gods in Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, tr. Willard Trask (New York and Evanston, Ill., 1959), p. 23. For a pertinent discussion of the masque, said to destroy "the barrier between spectators and actors" ("in a sense, what the spectator watched he ultimately became"), see Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 6-7.

and judicial as physical. Stance writes two important laws in Milton: first, that we as audience participate morally in both the place and attitude of the stance; second, that we temporarily separate ourselves from a speaker, face him, and become his audience when he addresses someone else at length. The consequences of both laws are striking. If we realize, for instance, that our stance in Hell is that of a fallen being sharing the mentality of Hell, we will be less willing to credit the rhetoric of falsehood, whereas if we suppose that we receive Hell's doctrine from "impartial" earth, we may fondly dream of romantic rebels and divine tyranny.

To see *this* matter, for *this* stance, in both of which we ourselves are included, we with Milton therefore enact Adam or the other Son, at Eden or on their high mounts or in their tombs. By our participation, we confirm and recognize act and meaning as both theirs and ours, and also those of all men.

I perhaps should re-emphasize that the discussions which follow are intended for the general reader. For that reason alone, I have limited footnotes to those that offer further assistance to such a reader. The number of my notes stands in inverse relationship to my enormous debts to other scholars.

My obligations to my family, especially my wife Martha, are legion. I am grateful to Professor Merritt Y. Hughes and The Odyssey Press, Inc., for permission to use the Hughes edition, *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York, 1957), for all quotations from Milton. I am indebted to Ball State University and its English Department for released time and secretarial assistance. My major debt, as great as it is inexpressible, is to the land and people of Greece. During the time that I was writing most of these essays, Greece demonstrated to me that delicate beauty and tragic severity may be joined in one object, and that deep religious feeling and abundant enjoyment of life need not war. Greece is a useful mirror for much of Milton's poetic nature. I regret his sailing back to England without having seen divine Alpheus and the "steep of Delphos."

JON S. LAWRY

Clyde, Ohio, 1967