



Carl Sandburg

(1878-1967)

To the Ghost of John Milton (1928)

If I should pamphleteer twenty years against royalists  
With rewards offered for my capture dead or alive,  
And jails and scaffolds always near,

And then my wife should die and three ignorant daughters  
Should talk about their father as a joke, and steal the  
Earnings of books, and the poorhouse always reaching for me,  
If I then lost my eyes and the world was all dark and I  
Sat with only memories and talk—

I would write 'Paradise Lost,' I would marry a second wife  
And on her dying I would marry a third pair of eyes to  
Serve my blind eyes, I would write 'Paradise Regained,' I  
Would write wild, foggy, smoky, wordy books—

I would sit by the fire and dream of hell and heaven,  
Idiots and kings, women my eyes could never look on again,  
And God Himself and the rebels God threw into hell.

ANALYSIS

“This poem, like all of Sandburg’s, is written in free verse, which does not mean that it is free from any rhythm, but that it has been freed from the fixed and regular meters of traditional poetry. Sandburg’s poems have a strong rhythmical cadence, like a man speaking in a measured way, but they certainly are in revolt against all those patterns of strong and weak syllables which make up the ‘feet’ of meters with Latin names. This is connected with the meaning of Sandburg’s poem on Milton’s ghost, for that poem says, in effect,

that if the poet should have the sort of life Milton had, protesting against the king of England, marrying three times, going blind, he, too, would dream about the wild, violent world he had known, and especially those angels who revolted against authority, and were thrown into hell for it. Free verse attacked the authority of the regular meters. Milton attacked the authority of the throne. Hence Sandburg's sympathy, for much of his own poetry is in protest against established authority which interferes with the rights of people.

All of Milton's life seemed to fit the pattern of protest. He wrote pamphlets against the royal government and he wrote pamphlets against the extreme limitation on divorce (in the light of his unfortunate experience in his marriages, this latter might have been expected). For Sandburg, Milton is a symbol of the great man who took the same position that Sandburg has always taken—for the common people, against authority.... Read the poem aloud, accenting the hard phrases like 'Serve my blind eyes,' holding the pauses after 'Idiots and kings,' and after 'God Himself.' The poem will become the live sound of a man talking intensely....

Notice how the poem begins almost gently, with such a casual line, the sort you might say to someone on the street, about how the daughters 'Should talk about their father as a joke.' But with the sudden brevity of the eighth line the movement of the lines alters, and the rest of the poem is much more tense, for now the poet is turning from a description of the circumstances of Milton's life to the actions he took. The lines become more vigorous, culminating in the twelfth line with its piled up adjectives, 'wild, foggy, smoky, wordy.' And notice, also, how the last line of all is the strongest line of the poem, concerned with God and the rebelling angels. Can there be a hint that Milton, too, was in rebellion and was thrown into a human hell by the authority of the throne?

Much of Sandburg's poetry is too loose rhythmically to be successful, much of it is near-sentimental, much of it too diffuse. But this poem is tightly held down to the essential words only. This is its strength. One of the triumphs of the poem is that it takes a literary figure and makes him not a remote writer in history, but a living and vigorous man. It should be obvious that this poem, written earlier in this century in the United States by a poet who was formerly a hobo, about a seventeenth-century Englishman who was a classically educated Cambridge University graduate, belongs to the life of anyone who reads it in the 1950's. The same issues of liberty against authority, of the hazards of the individual, of the books he writes in protest, the problems of marriage, can apply to all of us. For over all of the exact applications of the poem to John Milton, there are the suggested meanings for our own lives, those related things which no doubt led Sandburg, feeling a real sympathy with Milton, to write the poem in the first place."

Paul Engle and Warren Carrier  
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