

**For John Milton, born 9 December 1608,
*On his Blindness.***

*A sequence of readings and poems by John Hale,
as presented at the Octagon Collective poetry night, October 1st 2008 at
Circadian Rhythm Cafe, Dunedin, compere Cy Mathews.*

John Milton is 400 years old very soon, and I'm here because of his poems, not mine.

He knew the old tradition of the Lament for the Makars, by which poets mourn and honour dead poets. He honoured Shakespeare: "What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones / The labour of an age in piléd stones?" He honoured an unknown poet too; Edward King, drowned at age 25. "He must not float upon his watery bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind, / Without the meed of some melodious tear." And he knows the obstacles, within and outside the self, to poetic achievement. "Alas! What boots it with uncessant care / To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade, / And strictly meditate the thankless Muse!" Milton's *Lycidas* is his first great poem, an act of generosity to a nonentity.

So this year, as another poetic nonentity, I have been honouring Milton in several ways; seminars, conferences and performances, here and overseas. How should I do it now, to this most suitable of audiences, writers and appreciators of Poetry?

I have three poems of my own, two silly and one serious, leading into a longer one of Milton's. It's the passage from *Paradise Lost* where he talks about himself; after speaking of his epic poem and his source of inspiration, he comes to the affliction of his blindness, and how he endures it.

oo

Once upon a time, I had to write a postmodern poem, but I don't know what postmodernism is. So I brainstormed the words, "postmodern poem."

Postmodern Poem

Postmodern poem

postmodern

post-modern

post modern

modern post

modem post

modem

modemmodemmodem

call me modem

modigliani had a modern modem-madam

there is no modem but a modern modem

the thoroughly modern modem-madam

said to modigliani

take this mostmodern poem to the post

put it on your website

take this postmodern poem to the past

said modigliani

after all

madam I'm adam

Just a doodle, but notice the final palindrome; "Madam, I'm Adam." Is this what Adam said at first meeting Eve, raising his hat if he had had one to greet her? Brainstorming and postmodernism lead back, or up, to Milton, because (for me) all roads lead to Milton.

The next poem is less of a doodle, and more direct. Savour the Wordsworthian pomposity of the circumstantial title, and the epic hexameter line.

**Poem occasioned by a Pilgrimage to John Milton's Mulberry Tree
in the Gardens of Christ's College, Cambridge, where I had the
honour to be stung by a Bee, and so to Discover (perhaps) how
Milton received his First Inspiration for *Paradise Lost*.**

I stood in thought, to honour the great cantankerous spirit.
I stood in the wrong place, nearby the collegial beehives;
I stood on the pollen-laden worker-bees' flight-path.

"Step aside, be off with you," cried one angry bee;
And stung my innocent neck, full of his vengeful wrath.
I burst into utterance then, and cried with a loud voice, "Ouch."

Kindly gardeners led me away to their low-roofed hut
And gave my neck unguents, Ah! sweet antihistamine cream;

"No matter," thought I, "for a vision has been vouchsafed me:
Have not bees *always* worked in this delectable garden?
And did not Milton, scribing beneath his mulberry tree,
Endure like pain, the Muse's creative sting?"

Eureka! I have discovered how *Paradise Lost* began:
The vengeful sting of Satan reverbs through a later Garden:
Here in primordial sting-song Genesis had its genesis."

After an involuntary meeting with Milton, then that pilgrimage which took a violent turning, here's how I think about him, his personality and mind-set as I understand it. It's called

Fortitude, in Three Parts.

Contentment

What is contentment? I wish I knew
Or would I be more content if I knew?
I don't know.

Is it no more than a state of mind,
Balance of body's heat and cold,
Or brain cells fluctuating?

Or is it affluence?
There's never enough of that,
Nor enough justice to go round.

Contentment depends on Enough,
Being and having enough:
Enough is not Everything.
But what is enough, and how we know,
I don't know.

Knowing

Did Milton attain contentment?
Is he that sort of hero?
He did know what he thought;
He knew he was right, always right.

What would that be like?
Godlike, and lonely?
But still, full of the joys
Of putting others right.

But is that contentment,
Or only self-satisfaction?
Or self-sufficiency,
Adding, in time of trouble, to
Fortitude.

The Eagle's Eyes

How do you sculpt a stone eagle to look modest?
Close one of its eyes,
Then the other,

And make it look down, cast down;
Downcast;

How do you make a Milton humble?
You blind one of his eyes,
Then the other,
Until contentment and self-confidence
Pass over into this,
His fortifying voice:

Paradise Lost, Book III, lines 40-55

Thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
Presented with a universal blank
Of Nature's works to me expunged and razed,
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
So much the rather 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.

Before and after I retired in 2005, my main research has been into Milton, especially his languages (five books). Same with my teaching, and I continue to perform his poems. That's especially *Paradise Lost* (ten marathons). This year being Milton's 400th birthday, it's a pleasure to perform him in new ways: his life in poems for the Queensland quatercentennial conference (featuring David Malouf), and now this medley for *Poetry Live* and *Deep South*.