

# JOHN MILTON'S "ON TIME"

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On Time<sup>[1]</sup>

Fly envious *Time*, till thou run out thy race,  
 Call on the lazy leaden-stepping hours,  
 Whose speed is but the heavy Plummets pace;  
 And glut thy self with what thy womb devours,  
 Which is no more then what is false and vain, [5]  
 And meerly mortal dross;  
 So little is our loss,  
 So little is thy gain.  
 For when as each thing bad thou hast entomb'd,  
 And last of all, thy greedy self consum'd, [10]  
 Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss  
 With an individual kiss;  
 And Joy shall overtake us as a flood,  
 When every thing that is sincerely good  
 And perfectly divine, [15]  
 With Truth, and Peace, and Love shall ever shine  
 About the supreme Throne  
 Of him, t'whose happy-making sight alone,  
 When once our heav'nly-guided soul shall clime,  
 Then all this Earthy grosnes quit, [20]  
 Attir'd with Stars, we shall for ever sit,  
 Triumphant over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

A ARTE ALEGRE  
 #8

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John Milton most likely wrote "On Time" between the years 1631 and 1633, when he was about 25 years old. During this

period, Milton wrote another poem on the theme of time entitled "How soon hath Time" (Sonnet VII). The sonnet describes Milton's unease before a path he will take in life and on aging in a general sense. "On Time" discusses the concept of time in a different manner; it has less reference to youth and takes an extended theological approach to the issue.

The poem can be divided into two parts—the first eight lines, and then the rest. As a whole it narrates in a way that reflects an individual's contemplation with a community in mind. The first three lines give us a familiar picture of someone sitting before a noisy clock and criticizing the mechanism (that is, what the clock is doing and how it is doing it). Until the first period, at line 8, we feel ourselves in the room with the poet, at least on the level with the complaints about this mundane thing.

But beyond a commentary on time, the first eight lines may be seen as the poet reflecting on his mortality and imagining death at a future time. Milton is using the way an individual feels time—with a clock that strokes the hours with an ominous tone—to discuss how time relates to humanity and the material world. The poet is able to reflect on time not only in the way it affects him, but also as something much greater than himself. Augustine imagines time in a similar way, and it may be helpful to recall one of the many exercises he uses to understand time. The example we imagine here is when Augustine thinks about the activity of reciting a poem. The poem is divided in his mind between the parts he has already recited, which have passed into memory, and the expectation before the parts left to be said: "As the poem goes on and on, expectation is curtailed and memory prolonged, until expectation is entirely used up, when the whole completed action has passed into memory.... The same thing happens in the entirety of a person's life, of which all his actions are parts; and the same in the entire sweep of human history, the parts of which are individual human lives."<sup>[2]</sup> In "On Time," Milton creates a palpable and familiar notion of time as something that one counts with a clock with relation to oneself; but when we move away from this familiar notion of time (of Augustine's present, past and

future time), a massive concept of Time emerges. This is then contrasted with Eternity later in the poem.

Milton's understanding of time in "On Time" is irrefutably negative. Time takes from the individual. Time eats away at the material of this earth, perhaps most evident in the changes to one's countenance and posture, and eventually the entire body, as Milton puts it "which is no more than what is false and vain, / and meerly mortal dross." Time is so successful in its course that what it defeats appears worthless to it; it is a victory without struggle. To this he adds "so little is our loss, / so little is thy gain." This wee loss—that no doubt occupies the minds of those who wish to accomplish something in life—is clearly substantial to the individual who is being robbed. But if we view Time as a concept, as one of those things that governs all activity and life on Earth, then each particle or particular of "mortal dross" is indeed small like one drop in a pool.

Thus Milton puts forward a negative image of Time as something that is not only compromising, but also something bad that eats "bad" things; these "bad" things are "false and vain," and constitute "mortal dross." Then at line 10, Time has nothing left to consume. So Time consumes itself like the serpent that eats its own tail. (In other words, without the corruptible to feast on, and no one left to persuade, evil succumbs to itself.)

The first section of the poem describes this familiar and negative vision of Time as an assailant. The other section of the poem is a glowing picture of "triumphing over Time." It is a curious "triumph," nevertheless, because Time has been overcome through its own doing; it annihilates itself through its own greed. We may well say that it is the only way the Enemy can be vanquished. It is not a just war, but a spectacle of evil. At the moment of victory, "we" (those on a certain side of humanity; and this "we" shifts between an impersonal formal reference to the poet himself and reference to a group) shall experience the Joy that overtakes "us as a flood; when every thing that is sincerely good / and perfectly divine, / with Truth, and Peace and Love, shall ever shine / about the Supreme Throne." At this point the poem takes an explicit theological turn; after this flood (a good flood), "Truth, Peace and Love shall ever shine about

the Supreme Throne.” Of course this is not an everyday sense of “Truth,” or “Peace” or “Love,” just as “Time” in this poem is not really what we count with a watch. The three positive concepts, a trinity of Christian teaching, shine (in contrast with those things that Time has entombed) as a light that does not extinguish itself through its own activity.

The “long Eternity” of line 11 strikes an opposition to Time (this also recalls Augustine when he describes the place of the Absolute “where time does not exist”).<sup>[3]</sup> Once we encounter Eternity, the “mortal dross” and “Earthy grosnes” has been left behind. The triumph “over Death, and Chance, and thee, o Time” of this final line brings home the notion that Milton’s Joy is great and comes at the cost of the apocalypse. Without Time to mark the moment of a thing planted and a thing harvested, there is nothing material left about; what remains is only what is perfect, which cannot be entombed.

Within the line “Then, all this Earthy grosnes quit,” there is the sense of a community brought together, but also something that relates to individual choice, or an individual act, the death of the body (an example of “Earthy grosnes” and “mortal dross”) and the death of all bodies. It may be because a few lines earlier, Milton describes seeing “Him, to whose happy-making sight alone when once our heav’nly-guided soul shall clime.” (“Happy-making” serves as the opposite of “each thing bad” Time has “entombed.” The description may not match the elation in tone, but the simplicity emphasizes the unmasked message of salvation of the soul.) To be able to see a sight like this is something of personal capability; one sees for oneself. A community may witness something simultaneously, but what is narrated is one individual’s experience. As mentioned earlier, Milton moves between an individual’s perspective to that of a community with an ambiguous use of “we” throughout. Paul does something similar, when describing this same “happy-making vision” in a familiar passage: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”<sup>[4]</sup> Milton’s description of the “happy-making sight” as the sight of Truth, with the ascent of the soul, explicitly follows this Christian context.

The implied belief that encircles the poem's final Triumph is also what informs this happiness.

The final expression in the poem "Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee, O Time" is the triumph of the community (along with Truth, Peace, and Love) over Death, Chance, and Time. Death, as the death of all natural things, is linked with the concept of Time and emphasizes that the growth and corruption of what is material leads inevitably to death. Death of the body, following Christian theology as returning to the ground (Gen. 4: 19) and entombed by Time, is only overcome by the death of all things in Milton's Joy-filled apocalypse. (What is present at the Beginning of humanity's story is overturned at the End.)

It is curious that Milton includes "Chance" in this group of negative concepts; chance does not usually figure in Christian theology as a motor or explicit evil. One of the few times we hear about chance is in Ecclesiastes 9:11-12:

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. For men also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so *are* the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

[5]

In this passage from Ecclesiastes, we find chance within a perspective on the timing of a person's death and chance in the works one does while living. Chance is not something exclusively related to death; it is also involved with an "evil time" that may extend through life.

When we put aside the "evil net" and "snare," and imagine chance in the day-to-day, a silver lining may come to the front. Chance and time both have their positive side; chance in art, in the broadest sense of the term, can lead to success. Although we may understand it as a disruption to a certain progress, it may bring forth an improvement in its immediate change to an activity. Time also allows for growth and development so that the work of art may flourish. All of these things are imperfect, nevertheless, and this is where the darkness of the argument takes root. As art

and labor are things of this Earth, they also pass away. Chance, that part of the everyday that can bring joy or sorrow, is also based in the material workings of life. And so these few things that are good in the scope of Time and Chance funnel toward what is false and vain as products of what is material and imperfect.

Death, Chance, and Time are ultimately more familiar to us in our daily life than Truth, Peace and Love. A clock that tones the hours is more familiar in our perception than Eternity. In this way it seems that Milton takes what is so familiar we may not always perceive it and contrasts it with a vision (not a future time, because there is no time in Eternity) so positive and glorious that we can imagine the possibility of defeating concepts that rule our life. The community may take comfort in the vocabulary that describes Eternity in virtue of remembering a particular vision of the apocalypse. And although Eternity cannot be counted, it is marked through a celebration; in Milton's Eternity, the community is active in continuous triumph.

Milton's positive tone at the conclusion betrays an opinion of the present and the past. The things of the poem "shall" take place; Time, for certain, annihilates itself. But notice that all of Milton's imagery and activity is in the future tense or asserted for some future time. It is the strongest tone the poet has to express something beyond the material. On the surface, the continuous triumph in Eternity seems only to be reached through the description and entombment of Time. But in order to do this, one needs Time to create a distance between our current stance and this *triumphing* so as to place it beyond a familiar continuum. Time, although a thing of the Earth, is what can be used to grasp Eternity because of the weakness of imperfect understanding; in this way the poem is not only on Time but also on Eternity.

[1] The poem follows the 1645 edition: *Poems of Mr. John Milton, Both English and Latin ....* London: Ruth Raworth for Humphrey Moseley, 1645.

[2] Augustine. *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, 361.

[3] *Confessions*, 363.

[4] 1 Cor. 13:12 (AV).

[5] AV.