

John Milton,
***Epitaphium Damonis* (1639), lines 1-26**
(edited by Victoria Moul)

John Milton (1608-1674) composed a substantial body of impressive and original Latin poetry, largely in the earlier years of his career. Remarkable for their mastery of Latin and the beauty of their verse, these poems are also strikingly emotional – they include pieces to his friends and his father more deeply personal than anything found in the English verse. In addition, Milton’s Latin poetry offers instructive insights into his developing self-definition as a poet, especially in his handling of genre.

Unusually, Milton’s 1645 *Poems* includes a section of (largely) English poems followed by a section of (largely) Latin pieces, the two halves bearing equal weight and of careful construction: the importance of his Latin work to his claim to European laureate status is clear. In this scheme, the *Epitaphium Damonis*, the last of the Latin pieces, corresponds to the English pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, the last of the English pieces, with which it may be fruitfully compared. As the final poem in the collection, its movement from pastoral to epic is a significant statement of the emergent poet’s literary ambitions. For readers interested in this aspect of the poem’s significance, see: Colin Burrow, ‘*Poems 1645: the future poet*’ in the *Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (CUP, 1999), 54-69 and Stella Revard, *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera’s Hair: The Making of the 1645 Poems* (Columbia, 1997). Revard is particularly good on Milton’s own reception of earlier neo-Latin poetry.

For a line by line commentary, Bush’s Variorum commentary is a good place to start (Douglas Bush, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton: Volume I: The Latin and Greek Poems* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970)); Carey and Fowler’s commentary and translation is also useful (John Carey and Alastair Fowler, eds, *The Poems of John Milton* (London: Longmans, 1968), as is John Hale’s edition of selected Latin works (*John Milton, Latin Writings: A Selection* (Van Gorcum, 1999)). The introduction to John Hale’s *Milton’s Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on Style* (CUP, 1997) contains an excellent discussion of the significance of Latin writing at the period in general.

In addition, the *Epitaphium* has been the subject of an unusual number of articles for a

neo-Latin work; probably the most useful single piece for students of neo-Latin is John Hale, 'Sion's Bacchanalia: An Inquiry into Milton's Latin in the *Epitaphium Damonis*', *Milton Studies* 16 (1982): 115-30. The most moving feature of the poem, but perhaps the hardest to describe, is the extent to which Milton's farewell to his lost friend becomes, by degrees, a farewell to Latin poetry in general, and to Virgil's Latin in particular. I have attempted to discuss this aspect of the poem in my article 'Of hearing and of failing to hear: the allusive dialogue with Virgil in Milton's *Epitaphium Damonis*', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature – Special Issue: Neo-Latin and the Pastoral* 33.1-2 (2007), 153-70.

Metre: hexameter (see Hale for a detailed discussion of Milton's metrical practice)

Thyrsis & Damon ejusdem viciniae Pastores, eadem studia sequuti a pueritiâ amici erant, ut qui plurimùm. Thyrsis animi causâ profectus peregrè de obitu Damonis nuntium accepit. Domum postea reversus, & rem ita esse comperto, se, suamque solitudinem hoc carmine deplorat. Damonis autem sub personâ hîc intelligitur Carolus Deodatus ex urbe Hetruriæ Luca paterno genere oriundus, cætera Anglus; ingenio, doctrina, clarissimisque cæteris virtutibus, dum viveret, juvenis egregius.

Epitaphium Damonis

Himerides Nymphæ (nam vos & Daphnin & Hylan,

Et plorata diu meministis fata Bionis)

Dicite Sicelicum Thamesina per oppida carmen:

Quas miser effudit voces, quæ murmura Thyrsis,

Et quibus assiduis exercuit antra querelis, 5

Fluminaque, fontesque vagos, nemorumque recessus,

Dum sibi præreptum queritur Damona, neque altam

Luctibus exemit noctem, loca sola pererrans.

Et jam bis viridi surgebat culmus arista,

Et totidem flavas numerabant horrea messes, 10

Ex quo summa dies tulerat Damona sub umbras,

Nec dum aderat Thyrsis; pastorem scilicet illum

lands.

Already the corn-stalk has arisen twice with its green grain,
And twice the granaries have counted golden harvests 10
Since Damon's final day took him beneath the shades.
But still Thyrsis stayed away; although a shepherd
The sweet love of the Muse kept him in a Tuscan city.
But when his curiosity was satisfied, and his concern for the flock he had left behind
Called him home, then he sat down beneath his accustomed elm tree, 15
Then at last he truly felt the loss of his friend,
And he began to ease his boundless grief.
Go home unfed, lambs, your master has no time for you now.
Alas! What powers in earth or in heaven can I call upon,
Now that they have snatched you away in cruel death, Damon? 20
Is this how you leave us? Shall your virtue vanish without renown
And keep company only with the host of unknown shades?
But no – may he who divides the souls with his golden wand
Refuse to allow it; may he bring you into the ranks of the worthy,
And ward off from you the ignoble host of those who go down in silence. 25
Go home unfed, lambs, your master has no time for you now.

Commentary

Line 1: *Himerides*: The Himera is a river in Sicily, mentioned by Theocritus; the 'Himerian nymphs' are therefore the muses of Sicily and of the pastoral poetry of Moschus and Theocritus, poets cited by Virgil as he opens his own pastoral collection. Daphnis and Bion both feature as the subject of pastoral laments, in Theocritus and Moschus respectively. The rhythm of the opening invocation recalls that of *Eclogues* 4: 'Sicelides Musae'; of Virgil's collection, this is the poem which most radically challenges pastoral convention with national and prophetic content. It is thus an appropriate allusion for the opening of Milton's poem which tracks the modulation of the poet's aspiration, prompted by grief, from pastoral to epic.

Daphnin & Hylan: these are Greek accusative forms, and the accusative is used here as an accusative 'of exclamation'. The effect is one of heightened emotion.

Hylan: the name here has a long first syllable, noted as a "false quantity" by Carey and Fowler. It is interesting however that the fullest reference to Hylas's story in the

Eclogues also includes a metrical irregularity introduced for emotive and rhetorical effect and centred upon this name. At *Eclogue* 6. 43, ‘Hyla Hyla’ the second ‘a’ scans short (as usual) but the first long, followed by an hiatus. Milton’s line, and its associations, invites comparison with Campion’s use of the similar Greek name Hyas at lines 16 and 18 of his *Ad Daphnin* (also included in this anthology).

Line 3: This line is modeled upon Virgil, *Georgics* II, line 176, in which Virgil promises to sing the song of Hesiod (that is, didactic verse) through the Roman towns (i.e., in Latin): ‘Ascraeumque cano Romana per oppida carmen’. In the very opening lines of his pastoral poem, Milton thus alludes to the scope of the *Epitaphium Damonis* beyond pastoral towards the ambitions of higher genres. Just as the *Aeneid* is foreshadowed in the *Georgics*, so too the *Epitaphium* goes on to include a description of a future epic poem.

Line 7: *Damona*: Damon is a poet-shepherd in Virgil, *Eclogue* 8.

Line 8: *loca sola pererrans*: ‘wandering’ in ‘lonely places’ is a stock trope of love elegy (compare Ovid, *Amores* III. 6. 50, ‘errabat nudo per loca sola pede’), as is the ceaseless grief. In Virgil’s *Eclogues* tormented love is also a theme, and love elegy itself is introduced in the person of Gallus in the tenth poem. The poet will move from these ‘lower’ genres of pastoral and love elegy into intimations of (Christian, British) epic in the final sections of the poem.

Lines 9-10: both lines echo adjacent lines in the *Georgics* (I. 48-9) – there is a sense in these opening lines of the poem of a progression through the range of possible Virgilian genres. Again, this adumbrates the shift into an epic register.

Line 13: *Thusca . . . urbe*: the ‘Tuscan city’ is Florence, where Milton spent several months in 1638 and 1639. He was much influenced by his exposure to Italian literature, and composed several poems in Italian himself.

Line 18: *Ite domum impasti, domino iam non vacat, agni*. The refrain is based upon the last line of the *Eclogues*: ‘ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae’ (Go home well-fed, my goats, the evening-star is rising) and also alludes to Thyrsis’s line at *Eclogues* 7. 44: ‘ite domum pasti, si quis pudor, ite iuveni’. The elision between *domum* and *impasti* – which moves *impasti*, “unfed”, close to *pasti*, “fed” – creates a very close aural echo of the second of these Virgilian lines, and dramatises movingly the poet’s sense of loss in the contrast between Virgil’s language and Milton’s own: just as Milton-Thyrsis longs for Damon-Diodati, so does the line yearn towards Virgil. The refrain is repeated seventeen times in Milton’s poem, but its tone

modulates from hopelessness and despair (reminiscent of the shepherd who cannot feed his flock in *Eclogue* 1) to the confidence of a poet who dismisses the goats – emblems of pastoral – because he is preparing himself for epic endeavour. As such, it bears a good deal of the psychological force of the poem. Refrains also occur in Theocritus I, the *Epitaphium Bionis* attributed to Moschus, Bion's *Epitaphium Adonidis* and in Virgil *Eclogues* 8.

Line 23: *ille . . . qui dividit*: this refers to Mercury; his wand (*virga*) is described summoning shades from Orcus and dispatching others to Tartarus at *Aeneid* IV. 242-3. Milton's line also hints at Christian notions of judgement after death. This blending of pagan mythology and vocabulary with Christian theology is characteristic of the poem, especially in its final lines (the apotheosis of Damon, described in vividly Christian terms).

