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Poetry in Numbers: A Development of Significant Form in Milton's Early Poetry

By *Hans Walter Gabler* (München)

John Milton was a maker of poems. He structured his works with consummate precision by shaping them to numerically definable measures of extension and proportion. The quantification of design which he practised as a matter of course has been rightly seen as one of the manifestations in his art of his allegiance to Christian Neoplatonism, where the number symbolism of the Greek philosophers and the Hebraic mysticism of numbers from the Biblical texts coalesced¹. The depth of Milton's understanding of Platonic thought in a Christian context, as of the poetic practice which followed from it, lends individuality to his mature application of numerology to poetic composition and renders it at times exhilaratingly original². His command of the conventions in their workshop implementation grew out of a process of learning and experimentation. Stages of this process may be recaptured from close study of his early poems, and especially of the states of composition of "At a Solemn Musick" in the Trinity Manuscript.

The recognition of the principle and practice of poetic composition by numbers in Milton's works falls into the province of our present-day rediscovery of an aspect of Renaissance poetology to which scholars and critics, as much as poets themselves since the latter half of the 18th century, had become estranged. Anyone vaunting today the critical commonplace that 'form is meaning: meaning is form' is assumed to be indicating a mutually attributive relationship asserting quality in a literary work. Yet with regard to significant numbers governing poetry, it has a literal, and quantitative, meaning, in response to which we need to redevelop a notion of quantities as signifying essence, and to alert our sensibilities afresh to the rich and manifold semiotic potential of the measurable and proportionable formal units of syllables, feet, lines and stanzas.

*

It may help to reflect that we have not in fact grown wholly unresponsive to quantified, or quantifiable, patterns, or to conventionalised significations

¹ On Milton's numerology as an aspect of his Platonism and 'syncretistic bias', see Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "The Hidden Sense", in: Maren-Sofie Røstvig et al., *The Hidden Sense and other essays* (Oslo, 1963); esp. p. 37.

² See especially the sections "Numerology", "Chronology", "Milton's Universe" in Alastair Fowler's introduction to his edition of *Paradise Lost* in John Carey and Alastair Fowler (eds.), *The Poems of John Milton*, Longman's Annotated English Poets (London, 1968), pp. 440—450.

inherent in traditional poetic forms. We take for granted, for instance, that a sonnet invariably extends to fourteen lines (twelve- or sixteen-liners, as deviations, being felt to be not 'properly' sonnets); and we expect the line total to be subdivided into eight plus six lines. The division figurates meaning by articulating formally the argumentative mode of poetic discourse characteristic of the genre. In the *volta* which it marks, and on which the individual sonnet hinges (as much as does the genre's claim as a whole to being an intellectual poetic kind), form and meaning coincide. The 8:6 proportioning of the typical sonnet's fourteen-line extension is the conventional sign of the genre-specific opposition-in-progression of thought, mood or emotion.

Still, accepting so much, our responsiveness to the semiotic potential of such poetic quantity remains vestigial. Though sensing a harmony of the sonnet form, we are yet not truly conditioned, for example, to an immediate recognition, be it conscious or intuitive, of the 8:6 division as an embodiment of the 4:3 harmonic proportion of the musical fourth, or *diatesseron*. But within a cultural tradition incorporating numerological thought, this underlying musico-numerical ratio would be directly perceivable and would precisely convey the sense and idea of harmony. Beyond, one would not wish to claim a genre consciousness of numerological roots, or of commonly number-based implications, of the practical art of sonneteering over the centuries. Nevertheless, the sonnet genre is an instance where significant form expressible in terms of numbers and numeric proportions has clearly survived beyond the general disappearance of numerology from the art of poetry. This realisation may act as an incentive to relearning, on a broader basis, some of the fundamentals of the conventionalised significations of numerology in poetic compositions of past ages.

*

Pioneering studies of specialised scholarship have focussed attention on the tradition in recent years³. A basic distinction of the referential and the constructional aspects of numbers in poetry has been clarified. Though analytically separable, these aspects are complementary. The semiotics of numerology are

³ Among the most important studies of the past two decades are A. Kent Hieatt, *Short Time's Endless Monument. The Symbolism of Numbers in Edmund Spenser's Epithalamion* (New York, 1960); Gunnar Qvarnström, *Dikten och den nya vetenskapen. Det astronautiska motivet* (Lund, 1961), the essential findings of which were translated and developed in English in *Poetry and Numbers: On the Structural Use of Symbolic Numbers* (Lund, 1966), and *The Enchanted Palace. Some Structural Aspects of Paradise Lost* (Stockholm, 1967); Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "The Hidden Sense" (see above, note 1); Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London, 1964); Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism* (London, 1970); Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms. Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1970); S. K. Heninger Jr., *Touches of Sweet Harmony* (San Marino, 1974).

primarily established referentially through number symbolisms capable of bringing vast areas of knowledge and thought to bear on the themes and meanings of works of poetry or prose. Conceived mainly in the conventionalities of decorum, the extra-textual references of symbolic numbers tend to be established affirmatively: as when, for example, the fourth chapter or division of a given text treats of the world, the fifth of marriage, or the eleventh of transgression and sin. In such uses, they often seem static and tend to remain inert in context. But a dynamic potential explorative of contextual implications of referentially established meanings is released when numbers are used constructionally to govern the very extensions and proportions of poetic composition.

An admirable example for observing in interaction the affirmatively decorous and the constructionally explorative employment of numerology is presented by *Paradise Lost*, III.56—415. In the narrative unfolding, in this passage, of the divine foreknowledge of Adam's temptation and fall, and its dialectic response, the plan for man's salvation, the lengths by linecount of the speeches of God Father and Son symbolically enhance the spoken words. The symbolic numbers employed for the speeches are specifically biblical, and Christian⁴. In addition, however, one should observe that the narrative segment as a whole extends to exactly 360 lines, a number whose symbolism, though overlaid by Christian thought, is ultimately Platonic in origin. The passage's decorous number symbolism is clearly syncretistic. Importantly, it is the entire 360-line extension which provides the basis for a twofold mode of numeric articulation. For, in a manner that cuts across the sequence of symbolically dimensioned speeches, the passage appears as a whole subdivided by line-count. At its mid-point, in line 236 (significantly the tenth line of the Son's 39-line speech 227—265), Christ proffers his pledge "Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life | I offer." By a deliberate quantification of the narrative structure as such, Milton has literally centered on Christ the Redeemer the divine promise of redemption. A central doctrine of Christian faith is bodied forth as narrative meaning through a central symmetry, numerically established, of the symbolically dimensioned poetic composition. Of course the example points forward to the disposition of the line total of the first edition text into two equal halves which establishes *Paradise Lost* as a Christocentric poem⁵.

It looks back, too, to the central symmetries and their significations in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity". Repeated analyses of this fanfare to Milton's early mature art have established beyond doubt a numerological practice in its composition and a complex Christian-Platonic frame of reference

⁴ See G. Qvarnström, *The Enchanted Palace*, ch. 3 "The Structure of Epic Speeches".

⁵ See G. Qvarnström, *The Enchanted Palace*, ch. 2 "The Christocentric Structure".

of its symbolic numbers and number proportions⁶. Its constructional numbers are those of the lines to a stanza — the seven of mutability in the "Proem", and the eight of renewal in the "Hymn" — and the number totals of the stanzas themselves. Only the latter establish the significative formal patterns for the poem as a whole. This is acceptable and sufficient for the stanzaic poem, which, however, was a poetic type that Milton soon abandoned. If we correctly assume that "The Passion" and "Upon the Circumcision" predate "On Time" and "At a Solemn Musick", the units of segmentation in all his poetry from the latter two onwards were the verse paragraph and the individual line. Since it is eminently clear that Milton did not relinquish numeric principles of composition when he abandoned the stanzaic form, he needed to invest the lines and paragraphs with numerological properties. The successive drafts of "At a Solemn Musick" in the Trinity Manuscript show not only that this was precisely what he did, but also how he proceeded. They reveal in process an act of writing poetry by numbers.

*

Leo Spitzer, most succinctly among critics, and with deepest penetration of the conceptual traditions behind the poem, has focussed attention on its thematic realisation of the classical and Christian ideas of world harmony. "The ancient spherical harmony", he writes, "is ingrafted into the Christian history of man: paradise, sin, and hope for redemption". "'At a Solemn Music' is a true Christian hymn with Jewish and Platonic accents: its music is 'solemn' because it has the primordial and primeval aim of all Christian music: religious elation; the poem itself is simply a translation into words of this music celebrating the music of the world⁷." To this we may add that the poem is also a translation into numbers of that music.

As a hymn of religious elation, "At a Solemn Musick" is not an ode in praise of music. It is a prayer for salvation to be experienced in harmony restored between the *musica humana* and the *musica mundana*, the universal harmony of God's creation. Its *musica instrumentalis* — shouts, trumpets, harps — functions metaphorically in that it provides an audible correlative to that music of the universe. The poem's constructional numbers are the symbolic signifiers of the Christianised Platonic concept which is its theme⁸.

⁶ See Maren-Sofie Røstvig in "The Hidden Sense", esp. pp. 54—58; Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "Elaborate song: conceptual structure in Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'"; and H. Neville Davies, "Laid artfully together: stanzaic design in Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'" pp. 54—84 and 85—117 in Maren-Sofie Røstvig (ed.), *Fair Forms. Essays in English Literature from Spenser to Jane Austen* (Cambridge, 1975).

⁷ Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony. Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"* (Baltimore, 1963); p. 106; p. 103.

⁸ The most detailed recent study of "At a Solemn Musick" which discusses amply its Platonic heritage, touches on its numbers and only just falls short of systematically

“At a Solemn Musick” is a 28-line, non-stanzaic poem. The lines are pentameters, except for line 8 (a trimeter), lines 15 and 16 (tetrameters), and the final six-stress alexandrine. The employment of a concluding alexandrine here, as in “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”, “The Passion” and “On Time”, has been claimed as evidence for the Spenserian heritage observable in Milton’s early religious poetry, which at the same time, it is held, shows affinities to Italian verse forms, notably the *canzone* and its formal derivative, the madrigal. A seemingly irregular line-length pattern in particular is said to be the sign of the madrigal⁹. Yet — just how irregular are the line lengths in “At a Solemn Musick”?

The poem’s first version in the Trinity Manuscript, entitled “Song”, shows — in so far as it can be deciphered from the torn manuscript leaf — what presumably must be called irregularity in the frequent alternation of trimeters, tetrameters and pentameters. It is notable, though, that Milton begins even in this draft to regularise the lines to pentameters. The process continues through the second draft. In the fair copy of “At a Solemn Musick”, only three lines remain which fall short of pentameter length. Such conscious manipulation is conspicuous. The hypothesis is tempting that, in the revised poem, line-length variation signals a numeric organisation, comparable to that which, recognised for Spenser’s “Epithalamion”, has plausibly been shown to be present also in Milton’s “Lycidas”¹⁰. Perhaps, in analysing the act of rewriting “Song” into “At a Solemn Musick”, we are catching the moment in Milton’s poetic development when he discovered for himself the particular expedient of using short lines as markers in numeric composition which Spenser seems first to have introduced into English poetry, and may have invented¹¹.

Alerted to the possibility of numeric organisation by the revisions of the line-length pattern, we may proceed to the rhyme-scheme for further evidence, and for an indication of the nature of the numbers employed. After an initial *a b a b* alternation follow couplets — though with one exception, namely the rhyme ‘jubilee — everlastingly’ of lines 9 and 16. It spans eight lines, or a line-count octave. This rhyme remains a constant element through all compositional states. In each case, the release of the suspension created by the delay in the

analysing its numerology is Mother M. Christopher Pecheux, “‘At a Solemn Musick’: Structure and Meaning” *SP*, 75 (1978), 331—346.

⁹ See F. T. Prince, *The Italian Element in Milton’s Verse* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 60—66; and John Carey in the introductory commentary to the poem in Carey/Fowler (see above, note 2), p. 162.

¹⁰ A. Kent Hiatt, *Short Time’s Endless Monument*; and Alastair Fowler, “‘To Shepherd’s Ear’: the form of Milton’s *Lycidas*”, in: Alastair Fowler (ed.), *Silent Poetry* (London, 1970).

¹¹ Maren-Sofie Røstvig, “The Hidden Sense”, p. 23, assumes an awareness of numerical properties of long and short lines in Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesie* (1589).

rhyme's completion introduces a clearly felt declamatory caesura. Optionally, it allows one to regard the 30-line "Song" as divided into 20 + 10 lines, or proportioned as 2:1, the Pythagorean *diapason*, or octave, ratio. The first 20 lines of "Song", moreover, could conceivably be further divided into 12 + 8 according to the rhyme-scheme, or else into 8 + 12 according to content (Invocation : Vision). Each way, the ratio corresponds to the musical fifth, or *diapente*.

The rhyming octave may thus lead to a provisional discovery of musical proportions relatable to the musical contents of the first draft, as well as to its title, "Song". But there are problems, since the concluding ten lines of "Song" cannot as easily be accounted for; nor ought one to overlook that, syntactically, "Song" is spun out beyond its line 20 into the continuation of the sentence

while all the frame of heaven and arches blue
resound and Echo Hallelu.

Interestingly enough, it is precisely these two lines, after passing through several stages of revision, which were the first to be deleted in the poem's second draft. Lines 5—8 of "Song" followed; and finally, the poem's conclusion was rewritten and lengthened from 8 to 12 lines. The result was the 28-line "At a Solemn Musick", divisible into 16 + 12 lines (the proportion 4:3 of the musical fourth) on the strength of the declamatory caesura of the rhyming octave now coinciding with a syntactic division. Syntax, moreover, gives a clear lead to the further subdivision of the concluding 12 lines into 8 + 4: a new instance of the octave, or *diapason*, which the revised wording itself refers to. Practitioners of numerological analysis commonly stress the importance of such self-referring commentary indicating compositional intent. "Diapason" in line 23 is not only a poetic evocation of harmonic unison in the context of "the fair musick that all creatures made/To their great Lord, whose love their motion sway'd/In perfect Diapason, whilst they stood/In first obedience, and their state of good", but constitutes a reference to the triple octave quantification in the poem, as proportion in the second half, and as extension in the first half, realised in the rhyming octave as well as in the first half's clear division into 8 + 8 lines. After so much reiteration of the octave proportion, too, the last revisional touch to the concluding alexandrine — made at some unknown date after the inscription of the fair copy and before the publication in the *Poems of Mr. John Milton* of 1645 — has a specific formal significance. The change from "To live & sing with him in endlesse morne of light" to: "To live with him, and sing in endles morn of light", gives not only precision of sense by avoiding the awkwardly homely notion of God as cantor leading the congregation. It also divides the line into 2 + 4 stresses in a final octave proportion.

We are now in a position to return to a consideration of the line-length pattern. Short lines 8 and 16 mark the articulation of the poem's initial 16 lines

into 8 + 8 lines. In a further line-count pattern, short-line 15 also fulfills a precise marking function. Short-line 8 completes a first octave of lines, and short-line 15 a second — for two consecutive octaves constitute a scale of 15 notes, with the middle tonic sounded only once¹². Furthermore, this double octave may also be seen as divided into 7 + 1 + 7 lines, where short-line 8 holds a central position corresponding to its verbal evocation of God in his throne in a central position of sovereignty¹³.

The harmony which is the theme of “At a Solemn Musick” finds a correlative also in its total number of 28 lines. Extending to the double length of a sonnet, it realises the sonnet’s 4:3 *diatesseron* proportion. Moreover, it explores the symbolic connotation of the number 28 itself, which, according to all ancient handbooks on numbers, is a perfect number in that it is one of the few numbers representing the sum of its divisors: $1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14 = 28$. The divisors are all present and accentuated in the poem. It contains one trimeter, and one alexandrine; two tetrameters; groupings of four abound; and lines seven and fourteen are marked optically, since short-lines 8 and 15—16 recede beneath them. In yet a playful transmutation, thus, of the art of poetic quantification, Milton has devised a figure poem on the perfect number 28.

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The devices of line-count, rhyme-scheme, spatial proportioning of syntactic units and the visual figuration of the number 28 on the one hand, and the conscious employment specifically of the numbers and numeric ratios expressing the theme of harmony on the other, may be distinguished respectively as the aspects of number composition and of number symbolism in “At a Solemn Musick”. True to the precepts of numerology in poetry, the number symbolism serves to evoke philosophical and religious truths and beliefs beyond the development of verbal discourse in the poem’s articulated language. In the composition, the form is quantified so that as metaphor, or icon, it configures the poem’s meaning.

What this means in the case of “At a Solemn Musick” may become clear from the choices in terms of number symbolism which the successive draft stages show Milton to have made. Assuming that a numerically controlled structure was intended from the outset, a reconsideration of the main syntactic division of “Song” helps to recognise what class of symbolic numbers Milton started out from. By its syntax, as was shown, “Song” was divided into 22 + 8 lines. 22 and 8 are numbers with a generally recognised significance in a Christian context. 22 is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and as a sym-

¹² On musical conceptions of 15, see S. K. Heninger Jr., *Touche of Sweet Harmony*, pp. 99 and 184—185; on the number’s Christian symbolism, cf. H. Neville Davies, (see above, note 6), pp. 88 ff.

¹³ Numerological accentuation of the centre is the subject of Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms*.

bolic number was used to refer to the law of God of the Old Testament. 8 is the number of renewal, of Easter Sunday, and hence of the New Testament of man's redemption¹⁴. "Song"'s second half is indeed a prayer for redemption from sin, whereas its first half centers on the vision of God's creation at the beginning of time when, preceding the fall of man, the Old Testament world was instituted. The symbolism of the numbers is Christian — a conclusion reinforced by consideration of the total number of lines, 30: i. e., the 3 of the Trinity raised by 10.

The number symbolism of "Song", then, relates to the Christian content of the poem; and, to point a contrast, one might say that its poetic numbers thus remain the appurtenances of decorum. The semiotic potential with which, as symbols, they are charged, exists, in a sense, alongside the poetic discourse, related like the tenor to the vehicle of a simile. Conversely, the number symbolism of "At a Solemn Musick" embodies the very idea of harmony. An analysis of the quantitative aspects of the poem's passage through its several drafts has enabled us precisely to affirm that "At a Solemn Musick" is not a poem about music, but one that, employing *musica instrumentalis* as metaphor, constitutes the harmonic concert of *musica humana* and *musica mundana*. Within the reference frame of Christian Platonic thought, the realisation of that concert is the numeric proportion of the octave itself. Through the acts of revision, the numerological referentiality appears elevated: the significative numbers now correlate in essence to the level of theme. Without sacrifice of the numerologic functions on the level of content, the poem's total structure expressible in numbers is thus endowed with an immediacy and depth of meaning. As icons, the poetic form and the symbolic numbers coincide.

The achievement of "At a Solemn Musick" under the aspect of poetic numbers, which the fortunate survival of the text in its successive drafts permits us to analyse from the material stages of the poem in the making, is of an order with that of *Paradise Lost*. Of course the 28-line Hymn does not rival the tenor twelve-book epic in the range and versatility of the modes of numerological composition and symbolism. But in both works alike the originality with which, through processes of transformation within the numerological code system, the total form is made to figure forth the poetic essence, springs from the centre of Milton's thought. Poetic numbers are not a learned adjunct to his craft. They are at the core of his creative conception of the art of poetry.

¹⁴ See Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "Structure as prophecy: the influence of biblical exegesis upon theories of literary structure", in: Alastair Fowler (ed.), *Silent Poetry* (London, 1970), pp. 32—72; esp. pp. 50 ff.