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The Physiology of Art In Bach and Milton

by Harvey Hess

(Dedicated to John Thomas and Jerre Tanner)

Bach and Milton have much in common. A survey would reveal that the years of Bach's life (1685-1750) and Milton's (1608-1674) make the two men, if not contemporaries, at least fellow partakers of the Baroque period. Both artists professed themselves to be Christian. Both were Protestant. Both died blind, though Milton's blindness seemed compatible with his vocation, while with Bach, it was an impairment and affliction.

Other biographical similarities could be cited. The similarities between the two of most importance, however, are those found in their works of art. Both music and poetry find their physiology in the empirically audible and temporal spheres of reality, and Bach's and Milton's art demonstrate similar means in which this physiology is manifested and made maximal.

Some explanation respecting the term "physiology" is in order. "Physiology" refers to a particular view or theory of nature and its function. If there are "anatomies" of melancholy and criticism, why should there not be a "physiology" of art? Every artistic medium, as well as any given work of art, can be perceived as having a functional nature. Sound is the essence of poetry and music. Temporality is also essential and embodied in the progress of the movement of sound and thought-sequence.

"Function" in an artistic medium can be perceived in the means whereby what is essential to that medium is energized and rendered structurally operative. Tonality in music and meter in poetry, for example, can effect energy in these media, among other things, while technical transcendence in the case of Bach's use of tonality and Milton's use of meter present sublime achievements in rendering these elements maximally operative.

So viewed, the physiology of art may be said to be somewhat analogous to the nature (or "physiology") of God as it is held to be in

the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, especially in the thought of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359.)¹ To summarize this theological viewpoint, God is understood as having (and being) an essence – eternal, immutable and static – that functions dynamically beyond itself in the operation of its energies, distinct yet not apart from the divine nature.

Before proceeding to an examination of the following pairs of examples taken from the work of Bach and Milton, it is important to note that these examples are not intended to be viewed as precise parallels, correspondences or equivalents between the arts of music and poetry. (Even meter itself, which is shared by both media, does not function identically in music and poetry.) The examples point out similarities, at increasingly refined levels of articulation, between the practice of Bach and Milton. The operative similarity of tonality in music and meter in poetry is that they function as a means of movement proper to the physiologies of their respective media. (Bach and Milton move through their media, like God, in mysterious ways.)

One of the most salient examples of the way Bach made his medium functional, and even changed the physiology of Western music, is found in his establishment of tonality in his keyboard work *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Albert Schweitzer gives a clear account of the importance of this masterpiece:

On the old keyed instruments fifths and thirds were tuned naturally, according to the absolute intervals given by the divisions of the string. By this method each separate key was made quite true; the others, however, were more or less out of tune, the thirds and fifths that were right for their own key not agreeing with each other. So a plan had to be found for tuning fifths and thirds not absolutely but relatively, – to “temper” them in such a way that though not quite true in any one key they would be bearable in all.

(VI, 333)

By making it practicable to move at will through all twenty-four keys, Bach established the means whereby modulations from one key to another could be managed with unimpeded flexibility. It is partly on the basis of Bach’s system of temperament that many music historians, at one time, divided Western music into two eras: pre-Bach and post-Bach.

Milton’s blank verse is not as obvious a means of modulation as Bach’s tonality, although it does advance and facilitate movement. It works somewhat as the skeleton does in relation to musculature in permitting movement through a combination of fixity and elasticity.

It may be objected that iambic pentameter was used, even to

transcendent effect, long before Milton and, further, that for a good while after him—even to the present—it has provided a standard metrical medium. To address this problem, it may be useful to situate Milton's metrical practice in *Paradise Lost* in relation to two other significant poets, Spenser and Pope.

Spenser, one of Milton's masters, not only used iambic pentameter in his *Fairie Queene*, but also created a stanza for that work which uses a recurring rhyme-scheme and concludes with a line of iambic hexameter. An examination of a Spenserian stanza will reveal something of the gap between Milton's blank verse and Spenser's meter.

There did I find, or rather was found
 Of this false woman, that *Fidessa* hight,
Fidessa hight the falsest Dame on Ground,
 Most false *Duessa*, royall richly dight,
 That easie was t'invegle weaker sight:
 Who by her wicked arts, and wylie skill,
 Too false and strong for earthy skill or might,
 Unwares me wrought into her wicked will,
 And to my foe betrayd, when least I feard ill.
 (FQ I xxi. 32)

Here the Red Crosse Knight protests his having been duped by a false lady. The Knight's embarrassed stammering shows Spenser's ingenuity in making his medium function to great poetic effect. However, the onrush of metric movement is somewhat hampered by rhyme and stanzaic preoccupation.

By the time of the Augustan period, following the Renaissance and Baroque, a metrical practice differing sharply from that of Milton was in effect. Paul Fussell accounts for this difference in his study of meter, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*:

Although the best poets of the early eighteenth century (poets like Dryden, Prior, Gay, Swift, and Pope) largely maintained the Renaissance tradition of expressive variations, even they could not help responding to the regularistic climate: they carefully observed a uniformity in the number of syllables per line—that is, they were careful to use in substitution duple feet only—and they generally rejected the enjambed line in favor of a strict line integrity. (84)

Adding to this the consideration that Augustan prosody works by way of the heroic couplet, with its endless rhymes and tidily balanced cesuras, and the great influence these factors exert over syntactical

progress, one encounters a metric system quite removed from the subtle dynamism of Milton's blank verse.

The following excerpt from Pope's *An Essay On Criticism* demonstrates his manner:

True wit is nature to advantage dressed;
 What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed;
 Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,
 That gives back the image of our mind.

While Pope is a genius able to construct verse paragraphs of considerable variety, finish and subtlety from the marble-like building block of the heroic couplet, even he cannot totally override or transform the balanced regularity of the couplet's physique.

With regard to the forceful course of Milton's blank verse, even a cursory scanning of a single passage of *Paradise Lost* leaves the reader with the sense of being in the presence of whatever makes the art of Bernini, Bach and Rubens feel so powerful. All of these masters were able to produce the sensation that boundaries can be burst without utterly destroying either classical antecedents or the nature of an artistic medium.

An example from *Paradise Lost* will serve to illustrate:

... Hail horrors, hail ||
 Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell ||
 Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
 A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time
 Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. ||
 What matter where, if I be still the same,
 And what I should be, all but less than hee
 Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least
 We shall be free; || th' Almighty hath not built
 Here for this envy, will not drive us hence: ||
 Here we may reign secure, || and in my choyce
 To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: ||
 Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. ||

(PL I 250-63)

As indicated by the scansion, Milton's use of run-on lines and his substitution of one kind of foot for another allow him to use the anticipated regularity of basically iambic movement as a springboard for leaping forward into rhythmic expressiveness. Furthermore, Milton creates a sequence of syntactically and metrically conditioned phrases that "thickens" in a rhapsodic lengthening that begins with Satan's salutation, "Hail horrors, hail," and concludes with the word "free." This technique advances the tension in the first half of Satan's utterance and thus serves to release his mighty and infuriated tonic cry, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n."

The epic genre, with its vast dimensions, gives Milton the space to rise to whatever metrical heights his Muse inspires. Not even Shakespeare, certainly a transcendent master, often enjoys the opportunity to build with meter so extensively. And even when he has the opportunity to narrate, in *Venus and Adonis* for instance, he still does not exceed Milton's prosodic virtuosity, which when regarded in its sustained state, is unique in English literature.

*

At a more prominent level, Bach's methods of illustrating words and phrases by means of related musical ideas, while extending far back into the Middle Ages, were brought to a high point of development by the madrigalists of the late-Renaissance period. By the time of Heinrich Schutz (1585-1672), the range of symbolic and representational devices was enormous. Described as "Musica Poetica" in the time of Schutz, the practice was often called "tone-painting" or "word-painting" in Bach's day. Although the Italians, during the seventeenth century, generally chose to abandon the technique, it continued to flourish in Germany.

The following example, taken from Schutz's *Symphoniae Sacrae III*, illustrates the text, "Ice hebe meine Augen auf zu Bergen (I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills)," in which the outline of a range of hills is suggested by the contours of the bass line.²



In Bach's music one finds what Albert Schweitzer calls "pictorial and symbolical representation" which is used to great effect in Bach's chorale preludes. Chorale preludes are works for the organ composed

... to mark how spring
 Our tended Plant, now blows the Citron Grove,
 What drops the Myrrhe, & what the balmie Reed,
 How Nature paints her colours, how the Bee
 Sits on the Bloom extracting liquid *sweet*.
 (PL V 19-23; italics added)

When God the Father sends the angel Raphael to paradise to warn Adam and Eve of Satan's designs, near rhyme signals the reader to the importance of the Lord's utterance and makes it memorable.

This night the human pair, how he *designs*
 In them at once to ruin all *mankind*.
 Go therefore, half this day as friend with *friend*
 Converse with Adam . . . (PL V 227-230; italics added)

When speaking of the importance of food, Raphael is given to emphasize its meaning and importance to Adam thusly:

. . . but with keen dispatch
 Of real hunger, and concoctive heate
 To transubstantiate; what redounds, *transpires*
 Through Spirits with ease; no wonder; if by *fire*
 Of sooty coal the Empiric Alchemist
 Can turn . . . (PL V 436-441; italics added)

Then, in Book IX, when Eve commits the primordial sin, this action is strongly set apart by the use of full rhyme:

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
 Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck'd, she *eat*:
 Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her *seat*
 Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe . . .
 (PL IX 780-783; italics added)

It should be stressed that this is by no means the sole instance of Milton's use of full rhyme, which he uses sparingly. A study of the various kinds of rhyming devices Milton uses in *Paradise Lost*, including an account of their effect, would make a worthwhile study in itself. The instances cited here, however, illustrate how Milton is able to introduce in his verse an element of poetics that transcends, yet does not injure, its prosodic integrity and makes it part of the physiology of his medium.

Of the ideas or concepts central to *Paradise Lost*, none is more important than that of woman. Milton shows Eve (woman) to be the embodiment of a complex of attributes including, among others, beauty, fatal fascination and – in part owing to her ability to bear offspring by which humanity's existence can be extended into the future – hope.

In the following passage, Milton achieves the remarkable feat of creating a kind of canon of ideas in which a complex of attributes proper to woman are made to overlap each other, through temporal progress, so as to manifest the nature of Eve via the nature of art:

. . . but *Eve*
 Undeckt, Save with her self more lovely fair
 Then Wood-Nymph, Or fairest *Goddess* feign'd
 Of three that in Mount Ida naked strove,
 Stood to entertain her guest from Heav'n no vaile
 She needed, Vertue-proof, no thought infirme
 Altered her cheek. On whom the Angel Haile
 Bestowed, the holy salutation us'd
 Long after to blest Marie, second *Eve* . . .
 (PL V 379-87; italics added)

In terms of sound, this excerpt begins with the word, "Eve," at line 379 and concludes with the same word in line 387 so that sound and sense cooperate in defining the temporal boundaries of this passage.

With respect to the overlap of ideas in this "canonic" passage, the image of Eve, beautiful and unfallen, leads off. Then Venus is presented, a fascinating pagan (hence "fallen") goddess, bound to abet the strife brought about by the judgment of Paris, a fatal choice which will lead to the Trojan War. Finally, the second Eve, Mary, is named, bringing this passage to a close or "cadence." Both the repetition of the word, "Eve," and the forward-looking significance of Mary transmutes the "cadence" of woman's position in Milton's thought as "hope" into the position of a recapitulator and potentially eschatological postulate.

Further examples from the art of Bach and Milton which demonstrate how they maximize the functional physiology of their respective media to a transcendent degree could be compounded virtually without number. Of course, Bach and Milton are by no means the only artists to maximize their media. However, their achievements deserve ever increased accolades. I hope that the application of a neologism to Bach, Milton (or their peers) will not seem impertinent. Such artists may properly be called transcendent masters; they also may be called *physiologues*.

Notes

- ¹ For a full treatment of Palamite theology, see Lossky.
- ² To survey the extent of Schutz's musical language, see Smallman.
- ³ For further information see Rilling.

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