On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough
John Milton (~1628)

I.
OFairest flower no sooner blown but blasted,
Soft silken Primrose fading timelesslie,
Summers chief honour if thou hadst out-lasted
Bleak winters force that made thy blossome drie;
For he being amorous on that lovely die [5]
That did thy cheek envermeil, thought to kiss
But kill'd alas, and then bewayl'd his fatal bliss.

II.
For since grim Aquilo his charioter
By boistrous rape th' Athenian damsel got,
He thought it toucht his Deitie full neer, [10]
If likewise he some fair one wedded not,
Thereby to wipe away th' infamous blot,
Of long-uncoupled bed, and childless eld,
Which 'mongst the wanton gods a foul reproach was held.

III.
So mounting up in ycie-pearled carr, [15]
Through middle empire of the freezing aire
He wanderd long, till thee he spy'd from farr,
There ended was his quest, there ceast his care.
Down he descended from his Snow-soft chaire,
But all unwares with his cold-kind embrace [20]
Unhous'd thy Virgin Soul from her fair biding place.

IV.
Yet art thou not inglorious in thy fate;
For so *Apollo,* with unweeting hand
Whilome did slay his dearly-loved mate
Young *Hyacinth* born on *Eurotas* strand, [25]
Young *Hyacinth* the pride of *Spartan* land;
But then transform'd him to a purple flower
Alack that so to change thee winter had no power.

V.
Yet can I not perswade me thou art dead
Or that thy coarse corrupts in earths dark wombe, [30]
Or that thy beauties lie in wormie bed,
Hid from the world in a low delved tombe;
Could Heav'n for pittie thee so strictly doom?

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Oh no? for something in thy face did shine
Above mortalitie that shew'd thou wast divine. [35]

VI.
Resolve me then oh Soul most surely blest
(If so it be that thou these plaints dost hear)
Tell me bright Spirit where e're thou hoverest
Whether above that high first-moving Spheare
Or in the Elisian fields (if such there were.) [40]
Oh say me true if thou wert mortal wight
And why from us so quickly thou didst take thy flight.

VII.
Wert thou some Starr which from the ruin'd roof
Of shak't Olympus by mischance didst fall;
Which carefull *Jove* in natures true behoofe [45]
Took up, and in fit place did reinstall?
Or did of late earths Sonnes besiege the wall
Of sheenie Heav'n, and thou some goddess fled
Amongst us here below to hide thy nectar'd head.

VIII.
Or wert thou that just Maid who once before [50]
Forsook the hated earth, O tell me sooth,
And cam'st again to visit us once more?
Or wert thou that sweet smiling Youth!
Or that crown'd Matron sage white-robed truth?
Or any other of that heav'nly brood [55]
Let down in clowdie throne to do the world some good.

IX.
Or wert thou of the golden-winged hoast,
Who having clad thy self in humane weed,
To earth from thy præfixed seat didst poast,
And after short abode flie back with speed, [60]
As if to shew what creatures Heav'n doth breed,
Thereby to set the hearts of men on fire
To scorn the sordid world, and unto Heav'n aspire.

X.
But oh why didst thou not stay here below
To bless us with thy heav'n-lov'd innocence, [65]
To slake his wrath whom sin hath made our foe
To turn Swift-rushing black perdition hence,
Or drive away the slaughtering pestilence,

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To stand 'twixt us and our deserved smart
But thou canst best perform that office where thou art. [70]

XI.
Then thou the mother of so sweet a child
Her false imagin'd loss cease to lament,
And wisely learn to curb thy sorrows wild;
Think what a present thou to God hast sent,
And render him with patience what he lent; [75]
This if thou do, he will an off-spring give
That till the worlds last end shall make thy name to live.

Notes:

Introduction. As his first major poem in English, "A Fair Infant" may serve as a starting point from which to examine the development of Milton's craft (see Gayle Wilson). Thematically, the poem contains elements which appear throughout the body of Milton's work. As James Holly Hanford argues, Milton's first poem in English establishes patterns for his later poetry. In particular, the poem enriches the study of Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," as the two share similar thematic concerns and formal structure.

The largest controversy surrounding Milton's "Fair Infant" concerns the date of its authorship. According to Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew, the poem is about Milton's niece, Anne Phillips, who was buried in the winter of 1628 (Raffel 93). Anne's mother was pregnant with Milton's other niece, Elizabeth, during this period, which is consistent with the expected child in the poem (Lewalski, *Life* 43). Problematically, Milton dated the poem to his seventeenth year, though he was nineteen when Anne was buried. Because Edward Phillips was born after Anne's death, those who wish to trust Milton's account of the date believe this weakens the claim that the poem is about Anne (Raffel 96). Furthermore, 1625 was a great plague year, which supports the 1628 date, given the content of the poem (Woodhouse 120). However, A. S. P. Woodhouse notes that Milton also mis-dated "In Obitum Procancellarii"; for whatever reason, he may well have mis-dated "Fair Infant" (Woodhouse, 119). Ultimately, as Raffel explains, critics reluctantly conclude that the poem is the work of a nineteen year old university poet, and not the work of a seventeen year old boy (Raffel 93). Perhaps their reluctance stems from a desire to distance the poet of "Fair Infant" from that of the "Nativity Ode," which was written in 1629. Regardless, critics mostly agree that the poem was written about Anne Phillips in 1628.

There are, of course, many reasons why Milton might have incorrectly backdated his poem. In particular, Barbara Lewalski postulates that the error was due to faulty memory, scribal error, or an intentional compensation for belated accomplishment (Lewalski, *Life* 27). Raffel characterizes the poem as

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"apprentice work"; perhaps Milton might have thought so too and dated it at a younger age out of his own pride (Raffel 93). As James Holly Hanford argues, "It is almost easier to suppose that he intended to mislead the reader in the interests of vanity" (Hanford, 313). Furthermore, Milton did not publish "Fair Infant" in his 1945 Poems, his first published collection. Harris Fletcher suggests that Milton waited until 1673 to publish the poem because its content was a sensitive family matter (Fletcher 56). It is more likely, however, that Milton intentionally distanced himself from his "apprentice work," as Stella Revard claims; the later publication makes "Fair Infant" look like "a precocious experiment with the ode form" (Revard 265).

Though scholars differ widely in their analyses of the poem's stanzaic groupings, the poem's structure is formally standard (Gayle Wilson 6). As Lewalski explains:

The eleven-stanza funeral ode finds its chief models in Spenserian poets like the Fletchers, in neo-Latin funeral epigrams on the death of children for the use of the flower motif, and in Pindaric odes for the myths and mythic transformations. The seven-line stanzas meld Chaucerian rime royal with the Spenserian stanza, retaining the Spenserian final alexandrine as well as Spenserian archaisms and schemes of alliteration and assonance. (Lewalski, *Life*27)

Formally, "A Fair Infant" is in the same stanzaic form as the Proem to "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (Lewalski, *Life* 47). This is significant, especially since Harris Fletcher calls the poem a "practice piece" for the "Nativity Ode" (Fletcher 56).

Thematically, Milton's "Fair Infant" expresses ideas that appear throughout his career, but most importantly in his "Nativity Ode." As Hugh Maclean claims, "the earlier poem finds Milton grappling with elements which will be successfully combined only when the fusion of poetical power and religious experience is achieved and given expression in the Ode" (Maclean 299). Leonard Nathanson explains that the poem introduces a persistent theme for Milton: "the employment of classical form and conventions to convey Christian ideas and meaning," in which "a man's earthly career is subordinated to the soul's joy in higher life" (Nathanson 24).

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