**L’Allegro and Il Penseroso**

Long before he wrote his great epic poem *Paradise Lost* (about the Biblical story of Adam and Eve), the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton wrote a pair of poems about two radically different personality types: the happy, upbeat person and the somber and more contemplative person. Borrowing from Italian, he called these types “L’Allegro” (which means “the cheerful man”) and “Il Penseroso” (which means “the pensive man”). In the following decades, these became very popular poems, often published and imitated; and in the next century, they inspired a musical work. In 1740-41, the composer George Friderick Handel collaborated with Charles Jennens to turn Milton’s poems into an oratorio—a work performed by an orchestra and choir. Handel wrote the music, while Jennens adapted Milton’s language into the text of the piece; they called it *L’Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*. Notably, Jennens invented a third character who does not appear in Milton’s original poems: the “Moderato,” an even-tempered person who is neither exactly super-happy nor super-sad but somewhere in between. (An even more famous collaboration between Handel and Jennens came the following year: their oratorio *Messiah* [1741-42], which is drawn from the language of the Bible, is still frequently performed around the world during the Christmas season.) Over two centuries later, the American choreographer Mark Morris adapted the “L’Allegro” oratorio into a two-hour dance piece; it had its premiere in Belgium on November 23, 1988. The performance we will be seeing at Lincoln Center marks its 25th anniversary.

To get ready for Friday’s performance, we will be discussing the work that originally inspired it, Milton’s two companion-poems. Here are a few things to know about these works:

1. Each poem is spoken in the voice of its respective character: *L’Allegro* is spoken by the happy man, and *Il Penseroso* is spoken by the pensive man.
2. The form of the poem is iambic tetrameter (four-beat, eight-syllable lines). Its rhyme scheme is rhyming couplets (e.g., Mirth/birth, bright/sight).
3. Each poem begins with a 9-line act of banishment or rejection: the Allegro tells “loathed Melancholy” to stay away; and the Penseroso sends away “vain deluding joys.” We can see this as an interesting exercise in perspective: the Allegro would not describe the things he takes pleasure in as vain or deluding, but the Penseroso thinks they are; likewise, the Penseroso sees Melancholy not as “loathed” but rather as “sage and holy.” In other words, Milton wants to describe a state of mind and a way of seeing the world.
4. After the opening act of banishment, each speaker formally welcomes his presiding goddess: for the Allegro, it is Mirth (also called by her
Greek name, Euphrosyne), and for the Penseroso, it is Melancholy. In each poem, the speaker lavishly praises his chosen goddess and asks her to bless him with her gifts. In other words, each speaker celebrates his own personality type and hopes that he will always stay in this mood and disposition.

5. In the 21st century, it might be tempting to equate “Melancholy” with what we understand as depression, but this was not exactly Milton’s meaning. Instead, the Penseroso is someone who prefers a quiet, contemplative life to a fast-paced, active one; he prefers listening to sad songs rather than happy ones; he watches tragedies rather than comedies. Though he might be somber or sad, Milton’s Penseroso very much enjoys these feelings.

6. It is possible to see the Allegro and the Penseroso as evenly matched: each gives a very strong case for his side, so that it’s impossible to say that there is a clear winner in the debate. It is also possible to see these two figures as representing two halves of the human psyche: that is to say, no one is always 100% Allegro or Penseroso all the time but rather a mixture of the two. Nevertheless, some scholars have suggested that Milton did have a preference: as someone with a deeply scholarly and contemplative disposition, he would have seen himself as a Penseroso. Or perhaps we was a young man with a little bit of Allegro in him who aspired to be all Penseroso.

**Short Assignment**

1. Milton represents the Allegro and the Penseroso through various symbolic images and scenes. For example, he associates the Allegro with Bacchus, the god of wine; and he associates the Penseroso with the nocturnal music of the nightingale. Choose one descriptive passage in either poem and comment on what you find striking or appropriate about it. How does the passage make the Allegro life or the Penseroso life the right one to lead?

2. In depicting his figures, Milton relies heavily on classical mythology and archaic references. Today, however, we would probably use a different symbolic vocabulary. Choose either the Penseroso or the Allegro and come up with your own contemporary symbols for him: a) what music he would listen to; b) his favorite activity; c) what scene or setting you would expect to find him in; d) an allegorical image or emblem that represents him. Note: Milton’s figures are male, but there’s no reason why you can’t update them as “L’Allegra” or “La Penserosa.”