

THE RETREAT (1-20 EXPL.)

*Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought;
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space,
Could see a glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness.*

Lines 1-20: The poet was happy in his childhood. When he still had the brightness of an angel about him. That was before he understood the nature of the place in which the second part of his existence was to be lived, and his soul had not yet learnt to imagine anything but pure, heavenly thoughts. He had not then walked more than a mile or two from the love he knew first [Christ], and looking back over so short a distance, could catch a glimpse of the brightness of His face. Sometimes, gazing for an hour at a golden cloud or a flower, he could see in such lesser beauty some weak shadow of what eternity might be.

At such time, the poet has not yet taught his tongue to speak sinfully, wounding his conscience, nor had he the evil art to provide a separate sin for each of his senses. Instead, he was aware through his whole being of the bright blossoming of eternal life.

Glossary and notes

Angell-infancy (2): *Infancy when I was pure as an angel*

This place (3): *The world*

Second race (4): *the first stage of the soul's existence or journey (race) takes place in heaven, the second on earth.*

When yet...first love (7-8): *"My first love" is heaven. Since I was a child, my soul had just come to this world from heaven and so I could not be said to be very far from there. 'Above' in line 7 means more than.*

Bis (10): *God's*

Those weaker glories (13): *The beauty of natural objects was only a faint reflection of the glories of heaven, but in it I was able to perceive those glories. The idea that natural objects are reflections or shadows of eternal Types is Platonic.CF. 'I walkt the other day, line 50 and note.*

A sev'rall sinne (18): *Different sins.*