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MILTON'S SONNET "ON HIS BLINDNESS"

BY ROGER L. SLAKEY

Whatever the differences between them, the interpretations of Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" treat the sestet in terms of the poetic talent defined in the octave. The change they describe is a shift from irritation to some degree of resignation. For Tillyard, that resignation is one of utter defeat;¹ for Smart, one of religious abandon;² for Miss Eleanor Brown, one of triumph.³ According to Smart and to Miss Brown, Milton sees no chance that he will ever be able to use his gift; hence the resignation is complete though in neither view is it accompanied by despair. But according to Tillyard some hope for its future use is suggested in the word "wait" of the last line.

These interpretations fail, I think, to appreciate the gravity of the problem described in the octave. When, in the likeness of the kingdom of heaven, Christ recounted the story of the talents, He was describing a life drama whose end was to be either heaven or hell. The situation of the three servants to whom the talents were entrusted is one of dead seriousness. They are bound to serve. And as they do not know when the master will return, they are called upon to use the talents at once. There is no suggestion of futurity. They must work now. When the master returns, two, having bettered their endowment, enter into reward; one, having neglected even so much an increase as interest, is cast "into outer darkness" (Matt., 25: 30), that is, into hell. Thus the talents must be used even if they are only "put . . . to the exchangers" that the master might receive his own "with usury" (Matt., 25: 27); for they are the only means of serving the master. They must not be buried. A man's salvation or damnation depends upon their use.

¹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Milton* (London, 1930), 190-91.

² John S. Smart, *The Sonnets of Milton* (Glasgow, 1921), 108.

³ Eleanor G. Brown, *Milton's Blindness* (New York, 1934), 52-53.

The literalness with which Milton takes this parable is evident in the poem itself. It is death to hide the talent, and yet the talent is as good as hidden ("lodg'd . . . useless"). And there is an inevitable accounting to be made. At the same time the speaker is bent upon using that talent though he feels helpless to do so. There is, therefore, a dilemma in the poem which is not in the parable, a dilemma which arises only because the conclusion in the parable is accepted as true. The question is whether he is excepted from the divine decree implicit in the story, an exception based upon the fact that he is anxious to serve though, because of blindness, he cannot.

That the acceptance of the story is not merely for the purpose of a forceful image is evident in the prose. Milton refers to this same parable on three occasions. In an early, undated letter which includes the sonnet "How Soon Hath Tyme," he says that by study one is led away from the vanities of life and directed toward that "solid good flowing from due and tymely obedience to that command in the gossell set out by the *terrible seasing* of him that hid the talent."⁴ Perhaps twelve or thirteen years later, in *Church Government*, he argues that a knowledge of the true good oppresses the mind because one understands "that God *even to a strictnesse requires the improvement* of these his entrusted gifts." Such knowledge is a "sorer burden of mind" than any bodily toil or suffering ("waight") because one must constantly ask himself "how and in what manner he shall dispose and employ those summes of knowledge and illumination, which God hath sent him into this world to trade with."⁵ Clearly the reference here is to the talents of the parable. The phrase "even to a strictnesse" reflects the same view as line three of the sonnet, "Talent which is death to hide;" and that death is a terrible seizing. In *An Apology* he explains that while acknowledging his talents, he fears "lest at my certaine account they be reckon'd to me many rather than few."⁶ That is, he sees the exercise of

⁴ Letter XXXVIII, second draft, in *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank A. Patterson et al., 18 vols. in 21 (New York: Col. U. P., 1931-1938), XII, 324. Italics mine. "Terrible seasing" is suggested by the conclusion to the parable, "And the unprofitable servant cast ye out into the exterior darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt., 25: 30). Both first and second drafts make reference to the parable.

⁵ *Works*, III, pt. I, 229. Italics mine.

⁶ *Works*, III, pt. I, 232.

his talents as pressing not only because an inescapable judgment awaits him at death, but also because he is not, and apparently can not be, sure that he has one rather than five talents. He must work; and he must work immediately since procrastination might leave him with unused gifts.

Yet according to the foregoing interpretations the sestet proposes as a solution to the dilemma either relinquishing the talent—the very act Milton fears since he knows nothing of its outcome—or trusting to a future use—though “neither the day nor the hour” of reckoning can be known. In the octave the speaker asks whether he is yet bound by the conditions of the servants in the parable. Such interpretations, I think, only worsen his situation, unless he has recourse to some vague hope that God will be sympathetic, a hope they do not mention.

Thus the poem seems to collapse theologically. The very real problem of any religious man, and quite clearly of Milton long before he wrote these lines, is simply dropped; for since it does not satisfy the terms of the parable as Milton uses it, the solution is false. Moreover, it fails artistically. To the serious dramatic problem posed by the octave, Patience’ reply in the sestet offers nothing. After all, it is somewhat absurd to argue that the speaker should forget his talent when he understands that neglecting it means death. For apparently, though he has not hid it, he thinks himself responsible for its use. Then, too, if God does not need man’s work or a return upon the endowment, in what sense is the parable of the talents valid? In short, the poem seems to break in the middle; for there is no correspondence between the parts.

I do not mean that these interpretations have no validity. Something is relinquished. But they focus only upon the poetic talent which Milton is forced to abandon. Yet there is also a question of serving God. In fact, exercise of the talent is seen not as an end in itself, but as a means toward that service. Hence the question is whether he can serve God at all (“day-labour”) now that blindness has apparently made useless his endowment.

Two concepts in the octave have greater meaning than the speaker at first realizes. Before Milton, the interpreters of the parable of the talents generally argue that one should diligently employ his talents for the glory of God and the edification of men. That is, he should be productive in some way. Tyndale asks in

his *Doctrinal Treatises* what this talent is. Referring to Pharaoh and to the heathen, he insists that those who resist God's will and harden their heart are like the man who has buried his talent in the earth. In the end they will be stripped, but "he that hath a good heart toward the word of God, and a set purpose to fashion his deeds thereafter, and to garnish it with godly living, and to testify it to others, the same shall increase daily more and more in the grace of Christ."⁷ Those who harden their hearts will grow daily blinder until they become resolute enemies of God, but those who love Him will grow daily in His grace. Whether he knew this study of the parable or not, Milton describes a condition similar to that of the man "that hath a good heart." The speaker of the poem wants to serve God. When ills befall him, he only desires more intensely to serve. In fact his problem arises only because of the sincerity of his intention. Thus he certainly has a "good heart toward the word of God" and a "set purpose" to live accordingly. His intention to serve is stable.⁸

This notion of disposition is picked up in the sestet. Those who bear the yoke serve; that is, neither the works nor the returns upon the gifts are important in themselves. The intention, that is important. Hence the angels who "only stand and wait" in the heavenly court are serving because they are disposed to serve. In his *Holy Living* Jeremy Taylor explains that when the plans of the Angel of Judea were frustrated, he worshipped God with as great fervor as if he had succeeded.⁹ Apparently for Taylor the disposition is all, providing, of course, that one makes what effort he can to realize intent—but, then, such effort is supposed in the disposition to serve God.

In the octave this disposition, intensified ("more bent/To serve"), indicates a right will. And when that is coupled with bearing the yoke of blindness, it is clearly a high degree of service the speaker can render. The inclination of the octave expands in the sestet from a desire to serve with the talent to a desire to

⁷ William Tyndale, "Prologue upon the Gospel of St. Mathew," *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 42 of the Parker Society series, ed. Rev. Henry Walter (Cambridge, 1898), 472.

⁸ V. Luther's interesting discussion of stability in the intent to serve with reference to Mary in "The Magnificat," tr. A. T. W. Steinhauser in *Luther's Works* (Concordia, Mo.), vol. 21 (1956), 308-9.

⁹ *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, D. D.*, ed. Reginald Heber, rev. Charles P. Eden, 10 vols. (London, 1864), III, 85-86.

be of service in whatever way, for the end of “stand and wait” is not made clear.¹⁰ Thus in the octave, without realizing it, the speaker is meeting his situation and thereby making possible the explanation of the sestet.

The second concept of the octave is that of the talent itself. Everyone agrees that here Milton is referring to his poetic gifts and that he is crushed by a blindness which seems to rob him of the chance for fulfillment. Milton insists in the *Defensio Secunda* that when faced with the alternative either to withdraw from his work and save his sight or to work on and lose it, he chose to go on as much from religious conviction as from patriotism.¹¹ Hence he could not here mean that he, like the unprofitable servant of the parable, had deliberately buried his talent and refused to work. The problem is rather whether he will be punished because it is buried without any consideration given to the fact that he has not been responsible.

Interrupting the complaint, Patience rejects two things—man’s accomplishment and the return on the gifts—but rejects them only in a sense: “God does not need” them. She reminds the speaker that in serving, he is not supplementing Divine weakness. God can do without him. Next she urges bearing the mild yoke. How it is borne will determine the excellence of the service. In the last three lines she explains this service in terms of the two conditions suggested in the octave with the difference that they are now ways of bearing the yoke. Both those who “speed and post” and those who “stand and wait” are serving. Hence conditions of life in no way limit service; rather they are the means of service. Thus one serves not specifically by using the gifts he has, not even by his acts, but by bearing with his situation. Whether he is actively engaged in the cause of God or not, he is serving so long as, like those in the court, he “waits on the Lord” (Ps. 27: 14). That the mediate intentions are frustrated makes no difference, for the final intention is fulfilled. Only the means are rejected. And the result of that rejection is gain, intensified desire.

Smart has pointed out that the word “wait” in line fourteen

¹⁰ This notion of service through desire, common among spiritual writers, is succinctly expressed by Saint Teresa of Avila in *Las Moradas*: “Y este amor . . . no ha de ser fabricado en nuestra imaginación, sino probado por obras; y no penséis que ha menester vuestras obras, sino la determinación de nuestra voluntad.” *Obras de Sta. Teresa de Jesus*, ed. P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, S. D., 6 vols. (Burgos, 1915-18), IV, 35.

¹¹ *Works*, VIII, 69-71.

has many Biblical parallels and suggests, I think correctly, that the Biblical meaning is intended here.¹² If so “wait” would mean trust and confident, joyous expectation of one’s ultimate fulfillment in God. Because of the image of the court here used, it would also mean being present with the intention of serving or attending, that is, disposing oneself. Neither of these meanings suggests even the slightest thought for one’s own ambitions; for the act of waiting demands that one rest entirely in the will and the plan of God. Hence lines nine and ten gain added weight through the last line. They express the total rejection of personal aims—one may further personal aims even by the use of God’s gifts. At the same time Patience is not suggesting Quietism; for the given condition is the thing with which one must work and within which he must dispose his will.

Thus, like the concept in “my Soul more bent,” the concept in “Talent” has grown. The speaker begins with a limited understanding and is enlightened. His talent is not simply the specific poetic gift he has received; it is his blindness, his poetic gift, his frustration, and whatever else makes up his situation or present life condition. Service is the use of oneself according to that condition and, in fact, the use of that condition.

Taken in this sense, the sestet does provide an answer to the octave by rearranging experience. It offers great spiritual discovery for one who is intent upon serving God and whose only concern is his inadequacy for such service. Thus the poem is an affirmation. It does not close upon a clear note of resignation at all. The poetic gift may well be forsaken, but, if so, it is only left behind. I suggest, however, that the concluding line does not justify the assumption that this specific gift must be abandoned any more than that it will be used; for the yoke is in part made up of ability and continuing desire.

The question at once arises whether there is any justification in tradition for identifying talent literally with life condition. In his prose Milton does not mention it. I have found nothing in either Luther or Calvin about it. What sources I have checked in Patristic and Renaissance commentary do not mention it. The *Catena Aurea* of Saint Thomas, a compilation from the Fathers of interpretations of the gospels, yields in the main the usual view that talents are specific endowments—capacities (Jerome) or

¹² *Op. cit.*, 110.

graces (Chrysostom)—given men for the service of God.¹³ Saint Thomas himself in his *Commentum in Matheum Evangelistam* identifies the talents with different graces, “verba sapientiae,” which incline the soul toward God.¹⁴ Apparently no one considers the possibility that God might also be giving as talent the situation in which one finds himself, not simply the graces and capacities he needs to perfect himself in that situation. The term *situation* here describes much more than the phrase “line of life” by which Calvin describes vocation; for it refers to particular problems as they structure men’s lives at least temporarily, not to the different “spheres of life.”¹⁵ While Calvin thought of these spheres as under Divine Providence and given by God, he did not identify them with talent.

However little tradition may yield, I believe there is much within Milton’s own thinking to warrant such an interpretation. In his *Commonplace Book*, indexed under virtue, there is an interesting note concerning the good man. A good man, he says, “in some measure seems to excel even the angels, for the reason that housed in a weak and perishable body and struggling forever with desires, he nevertheless aspires to lead a life that resembles that of the heavenly host.”¹⁶ In the sestet the angels are concerned only with serving God entirely no matter what their condition. Thus they “speed and post . . . without rest,” that is, upon the instant of His command. But apparently they do not go unless commanded, for since all depends upon God’s will, they serve whether going or not. If the good man is one who aspires so to act in spite of his desires, it would seem that he regards his endowment as the very plan of God for him. And the fact that the poem is in the present tense might suggest that the situation is repeated and that the *when* is *whenever*. The poem might then be less the expression of a crucial struggle in the life of a poet than a prolonged, but crucial struggle in the life of a good man. Whatever the case, this concept of the good man is affirma-

¹³ “In Mathaei Evangelium,” *Catena Aurea*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Peter Fiaccadori of Parma, 1852-1873, re-edited Vernon J. Bourke in 25 vols. (New York: Musurgia, 1949), XI, 287-290.

¹⁴ *Opera Omnia*, X, 251-256.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., tr. J. Allen (Philadelphia, N. D.), I, 790-91.

¹⁶ *Works*, XVIII, 129.

tive. His secret does not lie in resignation, but in aspiring to something great and sublime: a life which resembles angelic life.

Interestingly enough, this same affirmation characterizes Milton's definition of patience, a definition supported by such an early and perhaps catechetical poem as "On the death of a Fair Infant" and by *Paradise Regained* (Bk. III, 1.88 f.). In fact, in the latter he says that the good in glory may be attained by a virtuous life. And he specifies Job's patient endurance. Patience he defines in the *De Doctrina Christiana* as "That whereby we acquiesce in the promises of God, through a confident reliance on his divine providence, power, and goodness, and bear inevitable evils with equanimity, as the dispensation of the supreme Father, and sent for our good."¹⁷ "Confident reliance" is not so strong as the Latin phrase Milton used, *Fiducia suffulti*, meaning that confidence as it were takes over a man's being. The phrase "for our good" would seem to make clear what Milton intends by "stand and wait" and "mild yoke." "Confident reliance" and "equanimity" again suggest an affirmative direction of mind rather than resignation. There is submission, and the thing to which submission is made is an evil, but patience, a form of wisdom, enables the sufferer to recognize through it the loving care of a "supreme Father." "Supreme" is important, expressing as it does, a conviction that God could have disposed things another way had He wished. Since in the sonnet Patience introduces the speaker to a new depth of spiritual wisdom, the definition is particularly significant.

Structurally, such an interpretation is in accord with Milton's practice. In "Lycidas," in a similar situation, the speaker questions the wisdom of sacrificing the pleasant diversions with Amaryllis for "the slighted shepherd's trade;" after all the toil death comes, and yet no fame has been won. But Apollo, interrupting, gives to fame a new meaning, a spiritual one, approval before God. Essentially the speaker is reminded that life is for sanctification, not for worldly praise. Thus there is growth in meaning and deepening of experience. This same progression characterizes the sonnets generally.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Works*, XVII, 67.

¹⁸ V., e. g., Kester Svendsen, "Milton's Sonnet on the Massacre in Piemont," *The Shakespeare Assn. Bulletin*, XX: 4 (Oct., 1945), 147-155. Svendsen describes the change from vengeance to love.

There seems, therefore, every reason for assuming that in this sonnet Milton is concerned not with a mere resignation to his fate, but with some kind of spiritual growth. Perhaps—because of the suggested repetition of the experience through the present tense—he may not be able to embrace that recognition once and for all. Nonetheless at the time it is sufficient. Patience does check the murmur. Why? Essentially, I think, because Milton is concerned with the service of his God. It is the central concern for the good man. And if such service is at times bitter, knowledge of what it is is eminently worthwhile not only because the yoke is in reality mild, but because it is the very meaning of life. This understanding is, I think, what Milton is attempting to describe.

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