

## THE EDUCATION OF THE FAITHFUL IN MILTON'S PIEDMONTESE SONNET

*Nicholas R. Jones*

---

READING MILTON'S sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piemont" as an expression of the poet-statesman's personal dismay over the atrocities of a Catholic tyrant, a process encouraged by a knowledge of the circumstances of its composition, blinds the reader to the sonnet's larger rhetorical and thematic nature. To some degree, of course, the voice of the poem is Milton's own, and its subject therefore one of personal importance: the intensity of the complaint matches what we might expect of Milton, confronted with news of such a disaster. Without robbing the sonnet of its biographical appeal, however, a reader can go beyond the local and individual meaning. Thematically, the sonnet treats more than mid-seventeenth-century politics: it deals with a specific example of the efficacy of faith in relation to wisdom and zeal. Rhetorically, the sonnet is more than an exercise in "personal relief": it dramatically humanizes its themes through the creation of a fictitious speaker whose monologue involves and moves the reader.<sup>1</sup> The personal components of struggle and relief transcend their personal origins and produce a statement of universal meaning and impact.

For a closer analysis of the character and growth of the speaker, a text of the sonnet is essential.

### On the Late Massacre in Piemont

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones  
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,  
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old  
When all our Fathers worship't Stocks and Stones,  
Forget not: in thy book record their groans  
Who were thy Sheep and in their ancient Fold  
Slain by the bloody *Piemontese* that roll'd  
Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans  
The Vales redoubl'd to the Hills, and they  
To Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow  
O'er all th' *Italian* fields where still doth sway

The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow  
 A hundredfold, who having learnt thy way  
 Early may fly the *Babylonian* woe.<sup>2</sup>

The sonnet presents a nameless, fictitious character involved in the universal process of religious self-education. Although his faith remains essentially stable, providing the basis for a steadily religious interpretation of experience, his wisdom grows from a temporary state of indignation into a more balanced and durable state of charity. The harsh zeal of the opening lines, a prayer for vengeance on the enemies of the church, develops into a more profound feeling of compassion, expressed in a prayer for conversion. The poem, so ordering the emotions of its speaker, vividly demonstrates its theme—the operation of faith in the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

The speaker's continuing faith manifests itself through the unified rhetorical intention of his poetic speech. The sonnet, though a poem of growth, is seamless in its fabric. Compared to the almost conversational variety of other sonnets by Milton, such as "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness," the Piedmontese sonnet conveys a uniformly intense concern. The syntax, with its "three request structures," binds the poem together in parallel and mounting supplications.<sup>3</sup> The imagery—hard, penetrating, and extreme—also unifies the poem with its implications of a world of bare, uncompromising strife: "bones," "mountains cold," "groans," "woe."<sup>4</sup> Finally, although Milton chooses the sonnet form with its compartmental quatrains, octet, and sestet—a form which so often emphasizes the shifts and divisions of its subject matter—he avoids any of the expected breaks of thought. This speaker does not cut off his syntax at the crucial fourth and eighth lines; here, and throughout the sestet, the enjambment ensures that the poem be read as one continuous utterance rather than a collection of diverse attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Kester Svendsen has noted that the extraordinarily intense movement of this sonnet is organically related to just such matters of "conscious artistry," that the awareness of Milton's control over the technical details of the sonnet enables the reader to "preserve aesthetic distance."<sup>6</sup> The nature and purpose of that "aesthetic distance" is of interest here—how the personal is made universal.

Directed by these unities—syntactical, imagistic, and formal—the reader may consider the poem as a single rhetorical unit, specifically as an example of prayer (or *deesis*, in the language of the rhetorician).<sup>7</sup> The immediately established tone of supplication re-

mains unbroken except for a brief sentence of description (8–10). Again and again, the supplications follow the pattern of the first request: calling for action, asserting or implying the presence of the divine audience, and recounting the events of the massacre. They are not so much separate requests as amplifications of one underlying pattern of prayer, the attempt to move a specific audience by direct petitions.

The rhetoric of prayer, of course, has its thematic complement in faith. The speech which takes the form of such a supplication to God reflects an inner condition of belief in his promises and power. In *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton outlines the relationship between prayer and faith: "Supplication is that act whereby under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we reverently ask of God things lawful, either for ourselves or others, through faith in Christ."<sup>8</sup> Prayer is a form of worship; worship consists of good works; and the essential form of good works is their accordance with faith. "For it is faith that justifies, not agreement with the decalogue; and that which justifies can alone render any work good; none therefore of our works can be good, but by faith" (p. 9).

Doctrinally, a true prayer is a good work in accordance with faith. The question arises, then, of the authenticity of this sonnet-prayer. Certainly the initial request might seem too zealous to be a true prayer, for is not the speaker demanding a vengeance which should be the Lord's alone? "Among errors under the head of prayer may be classed rash imprecations, whereby we invoke God or the devil to destroy any particular person or thing" (p. 103). Several factors in this case, however, combine to remove the label of "error." First, to "avenge" does not necessarily mean to destroy. Second, the apparent rashness of the sudden opening may be an abruptness only of expression and not of thought. Milton does acknowledge that in considered prayers it is lawful "to call down curses publicly on the enemies of God and the church" (p. 99). Finally, the unity of the poem's expression, which I outlined earlier, moderates this first request by linking it with the later ones, making them all part of one continuing prayer. The last expression of that prayer (the final supplication: "that from these may grow . . .") certainly fulfills Milton's own criteria for a true prayer: it asks "things lawful" (conversion and salvation); it asks them "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (that is, it involves "calling into action . . . the gift of the Holy Ghost" within the speaker); it prays reverently (with purity and charity, promptly, humbly, and earnestly); and, most important, it prays through faith in Christ's promises (pp. 81–105).

There are many varieties of faith, of which this sonnet spans at least two: hatred of the enemies of God's church and desire for the expansion of his kingdom. The first prayer—perhaps rash, certainly abrupt, fierce, and indignant—develops into the assured, hopeful prayer at the end of the poem. Concentrating on the elements of change, Milton energizes the religious experience through the speaker, primarily by attention to his growing wisdom. This important narrative demonstration of change occurs only because the speaker believes in the promise of God; through faith, his understanding grows in the knowledge of God's will. In *The Christian Doctrine*, analyzing the causes of good works and virtue (including prayer), Milton identifies faith as the foundation of all development, citing St. Peter: "add to your faith virtue" (p. 5; 2 Peter i, 5). There is a significant doctrinal foundation for the attributes of growth in the persona of a religious poem.

Milton's comments on wisdom in *The Christian Doctrine* offer a useful working definition for a close examination of the development of this sonnet's speaker: "Wisdom is that whereby we earnestly search after the will of God, learn it with all diligence, and govern all our actions according to its rule" (p. 27). The sonnet parallels this sequence. *Searching* is the movement of the poem, a subtle process in which an angry zeal considers and reconsiders the event of the massacre. *Learning* is the effect of the search, a demonstration of knowledge through mature and assured language. Finally, *acting* by the rule of God's will (a separate step in Milton's doctrinal exposition) immediately accompanies the preparatory stages of quest and education: the contemplative and active stages are simultaneous. Thus, growing in wisdom, the speaker demonstrates the unity of faith and action in language, a unity which lies at the root of the concept of religious poetry.

The growth of wisdom has its starting point in the first four lines of the sonnet. In them, the speaker, intensely denouncing the massacre, is separated by anger from the wiser response of compassionate charity. His language, cold and awkward after the splendid first outburst, reflects an initial detachment from God's will.

The speaker seems in his first request ("Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd Saints") to be a part of the popular English zeal of 1655, generated in immediate response to the brutal murder and displacement of Italian Protestants.<sup>9</sup> As E. A. J. Honigmann has shown, an intense nationalistic indignation filled the newspaper accounts and inflammatory narratives of the atrocities.<sup>10</sup> The

speaker's outburst bears some resemblance to the passionate outrage of the Protector Cromwell, who supplemented his letters of protest with plans for vengeance in the form of military action against the Duke of Savoy.<sup>11</sup> The speaker's righteous anger allows him no time for the amenities of a more meditative prayer—the leisurely invocation, the narrative of circumstances, the careful requests. His demand in the sonnet's first clause reflects a notion of immediate, tangible retribution, a naive providentialism. Surely it is God's will to avenge this massacre! Yet, unknown to the speaker, the search for the appropriate response is just beginning. Only as he understands the event in fuller, sympathetic detail will he learn what specific vengeance God might intend.

Immediately after the intense first clause, there is a strange loss of warmth. Depending at first upon an easy, popular emotion, the speaker now reveals his essential detachment from the event. After the vehemence of "Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd Saints," the next two lines give an impression of chill clarity. With its direct sensory impact, the phrase "Alpine mountains cold" operates by connotation to express the speaker's feelings. He sees the massacre with a detached and "cold" anger: the atrocities are catalogued in his mind, not as present realities, but only as past events. They are ready as evidence of injustice but not as objects of grief or charity. They are present in knowledge but not yet in spirit. In retrospect, the reader can see that even in that intense first clause the massacre stands at one remove from the speaker: he chooses a verb form bound to the past tense ("slaughter'd") instead of, for example, a substantive form ("the slaughter") of indeterminate tense and therefore capable of a closer temporal relationship to the speaker.

The search for God's will, with the consequent growth of wisdom through faith, occurs only indirectly in these first lines. Although the speaker appropriately chooses to review the events and implications of the massacre, the naive elements of self-righteous and nationalistic anger which characterize his first attitude cause him to digress from a true Christian search. The image of scattered bones, for example, accentuates the attitude of detachment, expressing cruelty with vivid details but without an immediate sensation of involvement. Here are no suffering victims, no felt terrors, not even corpses, but "bones"—an image grim enough but lacking a necessary quality of sympathy with human life. The homeless wandering of the oppressed Protestants, which might have provided a strong impulse of pity, assumes only a very indirect expression: not

people, not the faithful Waldensians, but "bones / Lie scatter'd." All together the lines describe a tableau—a static and dehumanized image of past action.

The dehumanized clarity is once again evident in attitude and diction as the speaker amplifies the concept of "Saints": "Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old." The emphasis upon the religious history of these early Protestants, derived from the speaker's initial anger, is of course crucial to his argument: it was obviously a major component of the popular outrage. Yet once again an essentially active subject assumes a static quality. The monosyllabic words, supporting with their rhythmic simplicity the concept of primitive purity, make the victims seem part of an antique and unapproachable world of innocence.

Line 4 contrasts the early enlightenment of the Waldensians with the relatively late Reformation in England. At this transitional point in the sonnet—the end of the introduction, as it were—the speaker confirms his detachment from the situation and at the same time reveals a movement which is to lead him closer to it. The theme of English idolatry is relevant to the indignation of the speaker, but as a serious argument it is awkward and out of place. The ludicrous alliteration ("Stocks and Stones") resembles the bitter language of sectarian controversy, a literary pursuit far removed from poetic prayer. This picture of idolatry, another static tableau, further extends the already static effect of the previous line, but there is a major difference: with the introduction of awareness of the self (the English Protestant and his history), the earnest search for God's will has begun. The criticism of self-righteous anger (reminding English Protestants that their Reformation was long delayed) has a humanizing effect on the speaker's own naive emotion. His development of the events of the massacre now begins to broaden as he becomes aware of his own inadequate assessment of the event and his hasty demand for a providential response from God.

At the end of this fourth line, an abrupt discontinuity, the most prominent rhythmic feature of the sonnet, signals with its awkward displacement of thought the upswing of self-awareness and the resulting growth in wisdom. The belated addition of the imperative verb "Forget not" converts the third and fourth lines, which seemed to be a clause in apposition to "Saints," into a direct object, forming a new and unexpected request (to paraphrase: "do not forget them who kept thy truth so pure of old"). Syntactically, the third and fourth lines, stretched from each end, undergo a severe tension which, for me, recurs at every reading of the poem. Semantically as well as

rhythmically there is a jolt: of these two parallel requests ("Avenge . . . Forget not"), the second is unexpectedly mild. The strong, unreflective anger of the first has disintegrated; its facile unity has vanished in expansion and self-awareness. The speaker begins the second quatrain no longer sure of what to ask of God. Out of his unsettledness comes a germ of sincerity: he demands not retribution but remembrance, a wiser request for a mortal consciousness. For God needs no reminders of his knowledge or will; it is man who must labor to "Forget not," to achieve and maintain a close sympathy with the event.

It is no accident that the phrase which so jars the syntax should use the figure of litotes, expressing memory by the negation of forgetfulness. The two contraries epitomize a crucial reversal. Forgetting—drifting in aimless anger—has been the pattern of thought of the first quatrain. Now, the slower process of remembering begins with the summoning of details that are capable of an intense personal application: the speaker initiates the earnest search "after the will of God." Already in the fifth line the anticlimax of "Forget not" begins to focus more sharply. From an indeterminate sense of infuriating wrong the speaking voice turns to the specifics of human response: "their groans." The contrast of the sensual and active re-creation with the silent, static tableaux of the first lines implies that the event is now imaginatively remembered, although the speaker is still far from a full knowledge of God's will.

Rhetorically, the last three lines of the octave constitute the general figure of enargia, or vivid and objective description. There are no prayers or demands, no obvious signs of sympathy or emotion. This section, shocking in its details but free from pathos, accomplishes a major transition from naive and self-willed narrowness to wisdom. The change occurs between the two separated rhyme words of the second quatrain, between "their groans" and, four lines later, "Their moans." Without the blinding anger of "Avenge, O Lord," the event becomes approachable. The image of "Sheep," a metaphor extending the inarticulateness of the "groans," invites more emotional involvement than its initial equivalent, "Saints." Vulnerability becomes so intensely realized that the static images develop into vivid action, as if a still photograph had suddenly become a moving picture. These "moans" are as yet only remembered from the past, but the temporal detachment of memory grows ever smaller as the poem moves toward fulfillment. While the verbs, of course, retain their past-tense forms, the powerful substantive phrases move the action toward the present tense of the mind's

sympathy. From the almost archeological condition of "their ancient fold," the speaker moves to the less distant image of "the bloody *Piemontese*"—the enemies of the faithful still covered with badges of slaughter. From there the progression of sympathy—still without any explicit figures of emotion—leads to a sharply horrifying image, "Mother with Infant down the Rocks." It is a continuing, immediate image, for though it is governed by a verb in the past tense, "roll'd," that verb's situation in the preceding line diminishes its effective control. Pathos is now wisely excluded because the speaker's consciousness is wholly directed away from himself and toward the event; he is involved in discovering not his own desires but God's will.

At the end of the octave the transitional image of "moans" is strongly present in the mind of the speaker. From his sudden political anger at the beginning of the sonnet, the speaker has wandered into the paths of cold argument, only gradually and indirectly developing a fuller human sorrow. His present emotion resembles the anger of the first line in its intensity but differs in containing the seeds of its fulfillment. The anger of the eighth line has assimilated some important developments: a retraction from vengeance, a sense of personal misdirection, and an image of human cruelty.

In the sentence beginning "Their moans," the speaker seems suspended in the absence of will. The octave gives over to the sestet without a break in syntax, entering a quiet moment of reflection and growth in which the slow Virgilian image of echoing sounds matches the suspension of emotion.<sup>12</sup> The speaker now holds his conscious desires and his anger away from the discourse while the divine order reasserts itself in spiritual guidance. Although this sentence tells of a moment of intense horror, it is nonetheless a moment of quiet grace in the natural world, with all its impatience, cold disengagement, and brutality, gives way to the transcendent. The figure of ascensus (also called climax) here incorporates a literal ascent "To heaven," so subtly worked as not to impose but to permit a spiritual motion. The mystery attendant on the fulfillment of prayer partly justifies the arresting plainness of the accompanying zeugma: there is no verb to tell exactly how this motion to heaven occurs. At this point, the violent willfulness in the imperative forms of the beginning of the sonnet has developed into a more peaceful state of verbless transformation.

In the final sentence of the sonnet the speaking voice returns to a modified form of his initial demand. Now, however, instead of an

uncompromising demand for vengeance, there are three gentle and ambiguous petitions. The event of the massacre still appears in the past tense, for the meditative interval of sympathetic perception has given way to the call for action. This use of the past tense, however, has none of the chill of the initial tableau. These "blood and ashes" are more intimate, more nearly connected with the episode itself, than "bones": with "blood," for example, the reader senses the lost life in the very act of spilling. The historical precision of "slaughter'd" has developed into a far richer concept, "martyr'd," viewing the time-bound massacre in the light of eternity. The harsh cry of vengeance has modulated, through the increasing sympathy of consideration, into a plea for growth. The final requests might still include the military vengeance which the sonnet's beginning implies (the possible allusion to the myth of Cadmus makes one think that "Italian fields" could mean the battlefields of an English invasion of Savoy), but the two major, unmistakable allusions of this passage are more indicative of faith than of revenge. As many have pointed out, these primary references are to the parable of the sower (Matthew xiii, 3-9) and to the apothegm of Tertullian, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."<sup>13</sup>

The extraordinary richness of the last five lines conveys the assurance, synthetic power, and newfound eloquence of the speaking voice. From faith has emerged the wisdom which seeks and acts upon God's will. After the intense and confused exposition and the moment of reflective stillness comes this assimilation of contemplation and action, of meditation and prayer. From the awkward shifts of the first lines the voice has grown to a mature assonance and a flexible but not mannered use of enjambment. From the hasty pinpointing of topics in the first lines the voice has engaged a complex of simultaneous emotions and thoughts. Victim and victor now are bound together; though "the triple tyrant" is still excluded from any thought of grace, the prayer for conversion dissolves the purely national and sectarian impulse of the opening lines. Most important, the prescriptive demand has become acceptance of God's will. A political solution with its need for partisan cruelty is no longer relevant.

The Piedmontese sonnet is a characteristically Miltonic prayer, calling for education of the conscience, looking toward an action of self-sacrifice, and leading eventually to individual salvation. The process of the sonnet—education—becomes the subject of its concluding prayer. It is finally more than a personal outcry: it is a poem

about the education of the faithful, a rhetorical demonstration of how the wisdom to recognize and conform to God's will can grow only in the presence of faith.

Oberlin College

#### NOTES

1. The quoted phrase is from William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography* (Oxford, 1968), vol. I, p. 460. See also Lawrence W. Hyman, "Milton's 'On the Late Massacre in Piedmont,'" *ELN*, III (1965), 27, for the statement that the poem represents Milton's own "struggle to overcome his shock at the ways of God to those just men who follow His way."
2. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).
3. Taylor Stoehr, "Syntax and Poetic Form in Milton's Sonnets," *ES*, XLV (1964), 299-301.
4. Kester Svendsen, "Milton's Sonnet on the Massacre in Piedmont," *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, XX (1945), 147-55.
5. For consideration of the nature of the unity of a sonnet with respect to its boldness of form, see F. T. Prince, *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse* (Oxford, 1954), esp. pp. 89-107.
6. "Milton's Sonnet," p. 154.
7. The rhetorical terminology used here and elsewhere in this essay is catalogued by Richard A. Lanham in *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), and by Sister Miriam Joseph in *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947).
8. *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson et al. (New York, 1934), vol. XVII, p. 81. Subsequent references to *The Christian Doctrine* are to this volume and are given by page number in the text.
9. A summary of the historical background may be found in John S. Smart, *The Sonnets of Milton* (1921; rpt. ed., Oxford, 1966), pp. 87-93.
10. *Milton's Sonnets* (New York, 1966), pp. 164-66.
11. Smart, *Sonnets of Milton*, pp. 91-92.
12. The Virgilian echo is noted in A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, *The Minor English Poems: A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* (New York, 1972), vol. II, p. 440.
13. *Ibid.*

## MILTON ON THE PROVINCE OF RHETORIC

*Irene Samuel*

I hate when vice can bolt her arguments,  
And virtue has no tongue to check her pride.

—The Lady in *Comus*, 760-61

Nature and laws would be in ill case if slavery were eloquent  
and liberty mute.

—*First Defense*

WHEN MILTON compared Satan-in-the-serpent, about to launch his delusive harangue at Eve, to "some orator renowned / In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence / Flourished, since mute" (*PL IX*, 670-72), he was hardly equating eloquence with trickery, denigrating the oratorical skill in which Athens and free Rome excelled, or congratulating later times on having grown virtuously tongue-tied. It is a hopeful sign in Milton studies that commentators no longer accept as valid every misleading word given Satan to utter; it is less hopeful that some now read Milton as assigning to deliberate misleaders the entire province of rhetoric. Like the distrust of learning that supposedly overtook him in his later years, his supposed distrust of rhetoric has been foisted on him by those unwilling to make distinctions such as he himself habitually made.<sup>1</sup> Too thoroughly a man of the Renaissance ever to suppose that ignorance of any valid learning could improve mankind, Milton, along with Renaissance humanists generally, regarded rhetoric, rightly understood and used, as a valid branch of learning.

What the passage in Book IX shows is the poet's knowledge of the ancient art, and knowledge too of how the trickster may misuse it.<sup>2</sup> Against the remark that Satan's preliminary bit of *actio* calls to mind—how, with effective speakers of antiquity, "each part, / Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue" (673-74)—may be set the comment in the *Tractate Of Education* that a proper training in the "organic arts" would have a number of beneficial effects on public speakers: