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Chaos in the Convent's Narrow Room: Milton and the Sonnet

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> Those who admire the beauties of this great poet sometimes force their own judgment into false approbation of his little pieces, and prevail upon themselves to think that admirable which is only singular. All that short compositions can commonly attain is neatness and elegance. Milton never learned the art of doing little things with grace.... (Johnson, *Lives* 163)

In at least two of his 523 sonnets, William Wordsworth addresses the subject of the sonnet itself. In the first, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," Wordsworth speaks of the "weight of too much liberty" and of the "solace" afforded by the comforting enclosure of form, the pleasure of being "bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground."[1] In the second, "Scorn Not the Sonnet," written twenty-one years later, Wordsworth declares that for Milton "The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew / Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!" (13-4). In a letter to his brother Richard in 1803, Wordsworth maintained that Milton's sonnets "have an energetic and varied flow of sound, crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse, than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of" (quoted in Havens 534n3). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, Milton's nineteen English sonnets are rarely so successful as Wordsworth's praise suggests, especially as sonnets; and I would argue that, unlike Wordsworth, this is chiefly because Milton *did* come to "fret" at the narrow confines of the sonnet and very rarely perceived

liberty, in either politics or poetics, to be an unbearable weight.[2] Especially after 1640 and the beginning of a decade in which Milton's literary energies were spent chiefly on prose, debating issues of ecclesiastical, political, and even domestic liberty, Milton's sonnets often appear to be rooms far too narrow for the language they attempt to contain. As Patrick Cruttwell has remarked, the language of the sonnets "seems made for larger spaces. They are — almost — like fragments of epics" (31). Paul Fussell's comment about the effect of Miltonic enjambment in blank verse holds especially true when the same prosody is forced into the restraints of a Petrarchan sonnet: according to Fussell, Miltonic enjambment creates "an effect of strenuousness, of an energy that disdains containment, bursting through the line endings as if they constituted impious bars to liberty" (113).

For much of this century, readers of Milton's sonnets have largely ignored such formal concerns, accepting the style of Milton's later sonnets as characteristically and appropriately "Miltonic" without much questioning whether that style is truly appropriate for such a closed and tightly controlled form as the sonnet. When the question is addressed, it is usually dismissed as virtually rhetorical; if Milton found the sonnet a closed "lyric miniature" (Nardo 159), he breathed into it a life it had previously not known. In *Milton's Sonnets and the Ideal Community*, Anna Nardo has described Milton's innovations with the sonnet form as a productive liberation from the overly limiting "strictures of rhyme, meter, and length," thus enabling "this small instrument to resonate as it never had resonated before" (159). And yet recent discussions of Milton's sonnets have generally avoided the issue by focusing primarily on the content of the sonnets, the glimpses, though often puzzling, they give one into Milton's life, the variety of cruxes they present for the dating of Milton's works, and even their mysterious coherence as a sonnet sequence.[3] In a lengthy treatment of the sonnets in *Toward Samson Agonistes*, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, for one, has

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totally omitted any discussion of Milton's treatment of the sonnet's form, limiting her treatment solely to the "sequential unity which presents the public and private evolution of the poet as a teacher of his nation" (129).

As valid and convincing as such investigations may be, I would like to address in the following pages the concern R. D. Havens voiced timidly by way of a footnote in 1922 in his seminal *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*. Observing that the prosody of Milton's sonnets is often identical to that of his blank verse, Havens remarked, "These innovations are probably undesirable in a poem so brief, and therefore so highly finished, as the sonnet" (Havens 484n1). While allowing for the exceptions in a few of Milton's sonnets and in those of such poets as Wordsworth who adapted these innovations more smoothly to the form, I would agree that the "narrow room" of the sonnet is rarely well suited to the immensity of Milton's language. Commenting on Hopkin's "Pied Beauty," Paul Fussell has remarked: "This is surely an exquisite poem, but it is not an exquisite 'sonnet.' ... What this means is that the poem fails to exploit its 'sonnetness'..." (126). I would argue not only that this same objection can be said of many of Milton's sonnets but that most of those that fail as sonnets also fail as poems. Louis MacNeice once said that in "any poet's poem the shape is half the meaning" (Fussell 126). In those sonnets where Milton's innovations render the traditional Petrarchan structure virtually meaningless, the content is often equally insubstantial.

As rare as such an opinion may be in the twentieth century, it is not unique. In his *Life* of Milton, Samuel Johnson dismissed the sonnets with a brief paragraph saying that they did not deserve critical attention: "Of the best, it can only be said that they are not bad, and perhaps only the eighth and the twenty-first are truly entitled to this slender commendation" (169). Boswell tells us that the poet and eminent Blue Stocking Hannah More "expressed a wonder that the poet

who had written *Paradise Lost* should write such poor Sonnets," to which Johnson responded, "Milton, Madam, was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones" (1301). Johnson's was an age, of course, in which the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare were even less in favor; eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare often omitted the sonnets altogether. In his *Literary Hours* of 1798, Nathan Drake remarked

> The sonnets of Shakspeare are buried beneath a load of obscurity and quaintness; nor does there issue a single ray of light to quicken, or to warm the heavy mass. . . . his last Editor has, I think, acted with greater judgment, in forbearing to obtrude such crude efforts upon the public eye: for where is the utility of propagating compositions which no one can endure to read? (Havens 481)

In his dictionary, Johnson defines *sonneteer* as "A small poet, in contempt," a pejorative sense still preserved by modern lexicographers; and in his definition of *sonnet*, Johnson observes that it is "not very suitable to the English language."

Nonetheless, when poets of Johnson's age chose to employ the form, they more often than not modeled their efforts after Milton. Anna Seward, "the Swan of Lichfield," praised Milton's sonnets as "the pointed and craggy rock, the grace of which is roughness" (Havens 482). Author herself of 105 sonnets fashioned after the Miltonic model, which she pronounced to be the only "legitimate" sonnet, Seward argued that what she called the "floating pause" was the "characteristic grace" of the sonnet and was necessary to prevent the metrical monotony of an end-stopped line:

> But that jingling effect is entirely done away where the verses run into each other with undulating flow, and varied pause, after the manner of blank verse, as in the sublime anathema of Milton on the massacre of Piedmont. (Quoted in Havens 500n1)

What Seward appears not to have known is that much of what appears innovative in his sonnets Milton had found precedent for in the sonnets of Giovanni della Casa, a copy of whose *Rime e Prose* (1563) is listed in our earliest record of Milton's book purchases.[4] John Carey has noted the influence in Milton's sonnets of Della Casa's deliberate attempt to "create the impression of an intricate syntax akin to Latin":

> By multiplying pauses within the lines — manipulating clauses and sentences to chop across the verse divisions — [Della Casa] made his sonnets sound abrupt, uncompromising and densely meaningful. To allow opportunities for more elongated syntactical intricacies he planned the development of ideas within the sonnet so that it struck through the formal limits of quatrains and tercets and flowed across the octave-sestet boundary. . . . (89)

In *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse*, F. T. Prince noted that the characteristics we associate with the *Miltonic* sonnet can all be found in the sonnets of Pietro Bembo and his followers: a combination of tonal formality and intimacy, the placement of the vocative in the first line, extending the apostrophe throughout the octave with a complex syntax of relative clauses, and the attempt to create the sense of "spontaneous speech" (Nardo 158). Seward's seemingly paradoxical comment that the grace of Milton's sonnets is in their "roughness" is paralleled in the Italian idea of *asprezza*, which Prince has translated as "a pleasing roughness." Nardo's definition of *asprezza* suffices to describe all that is most *Miltonic* in the style of Milton's later sonnets: "complex and often surprising word order, rhythmic innovations; and *enjambment*, which ignores Petrarch's end-stopped lines and precise octave/sestet division" (158). Echoing Prince's conclusion that Milton's later sonnets carried Della Casa's innovations further than any poet had done even in Italian, Carey observes that in "these later sonnets [Milton] is clearly developing his epic style" (89).

It is important to emphasize that the *asprezza* of which Seward was fond is found chiefly in Milton's "later" sonnets; for, of the ten sonnets published in the edition of 1645, only the tenth, "To the Lady Margaret Ley," displays the type of syntactic chaos that characterizes many of his subsequent sonnets. In the 1645 edition, five of the ten sonnets and the single canzone are in Italian and are fairly conventional Petrarchan sonnets in both matter and form. Sonnets I and VII through X are in English and, with the exception of the tenth, are chiefly composed of smooth, flowing lines. Though it is hard to place the date of composition of these sonnets, they would all have been composed during or shortly after the decade of Milton's twenties, during which he showed himself to be not only comfortable with but a master of both closed form and rime in the modified Spenserian stanzas of the Nativity Ode, in the octosyllabic couplets of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" and of Comus's Song in the masque (*Comus* 93-144), and even in the comparatively open verse paragraphs of "Lycidas." For the poet who could move with irresistible grace in the octosyllabic couplets of the twin poems, the Petrarchan sonnet appears to have presented at first little difficulty. If Milton felt overly constrained by the form, these early sonnets certainly do not show it.

Yet even in the five English sonnets of 1645, we can find something of Della Casa's influence. Four of the five place the vocative not only in the opening line but in the first and second metrical feet: "O Nightingale," "Captain or Colonel," "Lady," and "Daughter" all begin the poems by naming the entity to which the sonnets are addressed. The one exception to this, the sonnet on Milton's having reached his twenty-third year, opens with a personification of Time, though Time is spoken of in third person rather than being directly addressed. With at least Sonnet I, we can also see Della Casa's influence in the irregular placement of the *volta*, the "turn in thought" generally found between the octave and sestet of the Petrarchan sonnet. In Sonnet I, the volta

appears with a heavy internal pause in the middle of line seven, when the speaker turns from describing the properties of the nightingale's song to an entreaty to the bird to sing before the ominous cuckoo spoils the lover's chance of success. Also in this sonnet, chiefly in the sestet, we find a few instances of the "varied pause" and enjambment, though without creating much of what one would consider a Miltonic "roughness." Lines nine and ten are slightly enjambed, as are ten and eleven, while line eleven is paused by brief caesura between the second and third positions: "As thou from yeer to yeer hast sung too late / For my relief; yet hadst no reason why."[5]

In general, however, these early sonnets display little of the types of innovations which have come to characterize the Miltonic sonnet. Sonnets VII through IX are very smoothly developed and observe fairly strictly the standard divisions of the Petrarchan sonnet. The quatrains of the octaves are connected but contained units, and the development of thought is closely connected to the bipartite structure of octave and sestet. Sonnet VIII, "Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms," is one of the two sonnets which Johnson singled out for the dubious praise of being "not bad," but I think it actually inferior to Sonnets VII, "How Soon Hath Time," and IX, "Lady that in the prime of earliest youth," both of which I would argue are, Dr. Johnson's censure notwithstanding, quite good.[6] There is in Milton's works perhaps no better strictly Petrarchan sonnet than "How Soon Hath Time," in which the structural divisions are perfectly employed to develop Milton's argument. The octave develops the speaker's dissatisfaction with his being no more spiritually and intellectually developed at the age of twenty-three, and each quatrain of the octave develops an independent thought. The first states the problem of the speed with which his first twenty-three years have flown and the lateness of a "spring" in which he has yet to show either "bud" or "blossom." The second quatrain admits that his surface appearance is deceptively mature, but

that the state of his spiritual development is still far from "ripe."[7] The sestet then completely reverses the thought with a dramatic volta, by which the persona encourages himself with the reminder that God's is the only timetable that matters, that "All is . . . / As ever in my great task-Masters eye" (13-14). All the lines of the sonnet are end-stopped, the problem and resolution of the argument accord perfectly with the structural divisions, and the few varied pauses we find occur only in the sestet and do little to disrupt the meter. One could argue that the form thus mirrors the immaturity of which the poem speaks, that the conventionality of the form confirms the poet's sense that he is, as yet, "undeveloped"; and yet the very mastery of the form in this sonnet also underscores the irony of Milton's having *any* misgivings about the accomplishments of his first twenty-three years.

For the full force of Della Casa's influence in the edition of 1645, we must look to the last sonnet, Sonnet X, addressed to "The Lady Margaret Ley." Here we find the beginnings of the Miltonic style that very much comes into its own in Milton's later sonnets. Milton's complimentary address to Lady Margaret employs the combination of a formal tone with the intimacy of courteous flattery. Since the focus of most of the fourteen lines lies primarily with Lady Margaret's father, the opening vocative is appropriately "Daughter" rather than her given name, and one interesting innovation Milton introduces is the withholding of Margaret's name until the very closing syllables of the sonnet. The apostrophe to Lady Margaret is extended throughout the octave by a complex sequence of subordinate clauses and similes, and the digression appears so tangential and disorderly as to approximate "spontaneous," albeit rambling, speech. Though the volta actually occurs between the octave and sestet, the complexity of the syntax and the high degree of enjambment makes the turn virtually indiscernible:

> Daughter to that good Earl, once President
> Of *Englands* Counsel, and her Treasury,

Who liv'd in both, unstain'd with gold or fee,
And left them both, more in himself content,
Till the sad breaking of that Parlament
    Broke him, as that dishonest victory
    At *Chaeronea*, fatal to liberty
Kill'd with report that Old man eloquent,
Though later born, then to have known the dayes
    Wherin your Father flourisht, yet by you
    Madam, me thinks I see him living yet;
So well your words his noble vertues praise,
    That all both judge you to relate them true,
    And to possess them, Honour'd *Margaret*.

I would argue that, after one has sorted through the rubble of such innovations, one is left with a rather incoherent utterance of very little substance. Anna Nardo has argued that, in this sonnet and in the sonnet to Sir Henry Vane, Milton "uses complex word order and periodic construction . . . to turn the opening formal addresses . . . into stately compliments that suspend the sentence until the subject and verb complete the praise in line 11" and that the effect is "to add dignity and weight to the compliment" (161). While one could easily allow this to be the intended effect, I believe the actual result is much different. In the case of Sonnet X, the suspension of the syntax leads the reader into such a confused tangent of details about the Earl of Marlborough's life that the compliment to his daughter becomes quickly obscured. Indeed, the reader may well have forgotten by the sestet to whom the sonnet is actually addressed. When the opening vocative does eventually resurface in the possessive adjectives and second-person pronouns of the sestet, the compliment is somewhat deflating, its logic questionable at best: Lady Margaret praises her virtuous father with such vigor that she must possess the same virtues. Even if one does grant the dubious logic of this conclusion, one cannot escape the sense that the object of the sonnet's praise has been rather slighted, the attention having been fo-

cused almost entirely on her father. After the catalog of the Earl's accomplishments, Lady Margaret's mere ability to praise her father seems a meager achievement at best.

Yet I would suggest that even more important than the failure of the compliment is what the sonnet shows us of Milton's failure to make the most of the Petrarchan form. While the poem is roughly bipartite, developing the portrait of the earl in the octave and applying that portrait to his progeny in the sestet, the complexity of the syntax and the heavy enjambment obscures the distinction. Indeed, "Though later born," the elliptical clause with which the sestet begins, squints grammatically, seeming at first to be a continuation of the thought of the octave rather than a return to the putative subject of the poem. In the context of the sestet, the clause clearly refers to Margaret, who was born too late to have experienced firsthand her father's glories; and yet its elliptical nature and its placement directly after the octave makes the clause appear at first to be a reference to the earl, an inane statement of the obvious: that the earl was born after Isocrates, the "Old man" mentioned in the preceding line. This ambiguity partially explains why the bipartite structure of the sonnet is hardly obvious and why the reader is unaware even that the focus has shifted from the earl to his daughter until the second line of the sestet: "Wherin *your* Father flourisht . . ." (my emphasis).

Secondly, Milton has so tightly enjambed the lines of the octave that its own duplex structure is completely obscured. Aside from the rime scheme, there is very little sense of the octave's comprising two distinct quatrains. In his biography of Milton, Parker has declared that the sonnet is "an ideal poetic form for a blind man" (413), but so heavy is the enjambment here that it is only to the eyes that such units suggest themselves as quatrains. For Nardo, such melting of forms into a single mass *enhances* meaning:

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> The traditional quatrain, octave, and tercet divisions provided him with signposts, where readers expected directions; and by observing, anticipating, overriding, or ignoring these limits, he enhanced the sonnet's semantic and syntactic meaning. (Nardo 159)

How such a disorientation of readers' expectations enhances "semantic and syntactic" meaning Professor Nardo does not say, nor can I see any such enhancement resulting from Milton's "overriding" of the quatrains and tercets of the sonnet to Lady Margaret. As Paul Fussell argues throughout *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, the shape of a poetic unit must be invested with its own consistent meaning if there is to be any point to the form. If, as Nardo has suggested, one disregards the signposts, one may well ask why they have been retained. In the development of the poem, Milton's most distinct units of meaning are the octave and sestet, a distinction which I have shown to be hazy itself. Aside from the rime scheme, the traditional interlocked quatrains of the octave have largely disappeared.

Nardo has also noted Milton's innovation of modifying the bipartite Italian model of problem and resolution by making his sonnets often tripartite structures with "aphoristic" endings much like the couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet (158-9). One could argue that the suspension of the compliment in the sonnet to Lady Margaret and the identification of the person to whom it is addressed is something of an instance of this, though certainly clearer examples can be seen in the sonnet on Milton's blindness and its memorable closing line, "They also serve who only stand and waite," or in the sonnet on his deceased wife, where the poignant turn in the closing two lines simulates the dramatic shift of a Shakespearean couplet: "But O as to embrace me she enclin'd / I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night." We must ask again, however, what the purpose is of retaining the Petrarchan bipartite rime scheme for what is tripartite in all but rime. While claiming

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that Milton has rarely been criticized for failing to mold his form better to his thought, Havens notes that

> surely little is gained by avoiding the couplet-ending if the last two lines of the poem stand apart from the others in sense, as they do in seven of Milton's sonnets. Similarly, there may be no important reason why the thought should not move forward without a break; but, if it does, the rimes and their relation to one another ought not to change suddenly at the beginning of the ninth line. (487)

As the latter part of this objection suggests, much of a formalist's objection to the Miltonic sonnet concerns the placement of the *volta*, the turn in thought considered necessary for one who would take advantage of the bipartite structure of the Petrarchan sonnet. J. S. Smart, in his edition of Milton's sonnets in 1921, declared that "Milton cannot be reproached for disregarding the Italian principle of the *volta* in the sonnet; for there is no such principle" (quoted in Honigmann 43).[8] According to Smart, the volta was not perceived as a requisite of the sonnet until 1880, when Milton was censured "for disregarding this 'rise and fall', this principle of principles in the sonnet" (Honigmann 43). Yet Wordsworth had discussed the importance of the volta as early as 1833 (Havens 487); and even Smart agreed that in Italian sonnets

> it is doubtless possible to find many sonnets in which a marked pause in the sense occurs after the quatrains, and a certain change of theme, or the presentation of a fresh view of the subject, begins with the tercets. (quoted in Honigmann 43)

If the occurrence of a volta between octave and sestet was not an original requirement for the form, it is easy to see how the practice and the perception of it would have evolved. Any poet wishing his rime scheme to be more than a simple arbitrary system of line endings with

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no relation to his subject would feel the simple structural logic of a shift in meaning as the poem moved from the interlocking quatrains of merely two rimes to a completely new organization and set of rimes in the sestet. Without such a turn, there would simply be no purpose for adopting the new scheme, and there would certainly be little relation between form and content.

While the sonnet to Lady Margaret adheres to the structural division well enough, Milton is at his most characteristic when the turn occurs before or after the regular break or, as in the case of Sonnet XVIII, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," does not occur at all. To echo Fussell's remarks about "Pied Beauty," I would say that this unique poem, which W. R. Parker has called "the most extraordinary sonnet ever written" (460), is successful far more as a poem than as a sonnet. In this poem, the enjambment which seems to serve little purpose in many of Milton's sonnets creates a prosodic sense of inexorable forward movement, paralleling metrically the military slaughter of the Vaudois and their flight from the *"Babylonian* wo."

> 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 groanes
> Who were thy Sheep and in their antient Fold
> Slayn 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 Heavn'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow
> O're all th'*Italian* fields where still doth sway
> The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow
> A hunderd-fold, who having learnt thy way
> Early may fly the *Babylonian* wo.

Here the enjambment underscores the rolling of "Mother with Infant down the Rocks," the reverberating of echoing moans through the hills, the sowing of blood and ashes "O're all th'*Italian* fields." Any sense of syntactic chaos is more than justified by the carnage which the language forcefully recreates. As Parker has remarked, "Richness and resonance fill the small room of his sonnet. . . . [T]here is fierce and terrible beauty in the impact of surging emotion and unyielding form" (460-1). Yet, once this has been said, we must also ask to what purpose this "unyielding form" has been put, whether any part of the poem has any relation with either the tradition or the form of the Petrarchan sonnet, what effect is achieved by forcing this "surging emotion" on a single theme into a bipartite rime scheme. There is certainly no turn in thought at any point in the poem, no division between problem and resolution or even petition and request. The entire poem is one single, reverberating cry for divine vengeance, a petition which may or may not be answered. Any possible divisions suggested by the varied pauses throughout the sonnet have no correspondence to the rime scheme; quatrain runs into quatrain, octave into sestet with no break in the movement of the poem. When enjambment is not operating to effect the fusion metrically, the grammatical relationships between stanzaic units provide connections of almost equal strength. While the final line of the first quatrain is metrically end-stopped, the main verb of the independent clause expressed in lines three and four opens the second quatrain. The transitive "Forget not" with which line five opens takes as its direct object the pronoun *them* of line three, to which the majority of lines three and four are subordinate clauses. While appearing end-stopped, therefore, the opening quatrain is tightly fused grammatically with the second.

More characteristic than Sonnet XVIII's omitting of the volta is Milton's placement of the turn in irregular positions, either anticipating the octave-sestet division or appearing amidst the sestet, in either

of which cases the turn is often made all the more irregular by appearing at internal caesurae rather than between lines. Occasionally, one can see a certain logic to this technique, as in the case of Milton's sonnet on his blindness, when the speaker complains about his misfortune in the octave and is interrupted in mid thought in the middle of line eight by Patience, which is eager to quell any hint of murmuring: "Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd, / I fondly ask; But patience to prevent / That murmur, soon replies . . ." (7-9). If the volta has anticipated the close of the octave by three feet, one can see it as a clever parallel of the interrupted thought. In Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us," one finds the delayed internal volta used effectively for surprise and emphasis, when Wordsworth continues the thought of the octave into the first two feet of the sestet and then initiates the surprising turn with an exclamation: "For this, for everything, we are out of tune; / It moves us not. — Great God! I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" (8-10). It is more often the case, however, that the placement of the volta appears arbitrary, giving us no clear reason why the shift in subject should not follow the divisions of the rime scheme.

The volta in Milton's sonnet to Cromwell (XVI) is an excellent instance of such confusion, for not only is there no apparent rationale for its placement, but it also creates such ambiguity that one can point to three separate places where the true turn in thought may actually occur:

> *Cromwell*, our chief of men, who through a cloud
>   Not of warr onely, but detractions rude,
>   Guided by faith and matchless Fortitude
> To peace and truth thy glorious way hast plough'd,
> And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
>   Hast reard Gods Trophies and his work pursu'd,
>   While *Darwen* stream with blood of Scotts imbru'd,
>   And *Dunbarr* field resounds thy praises loud,

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And *Worsters* laureat wreath; yet much remaines
To conquer still; peace hath her victories
No less renownd then warr, new foes arise
Threatning to bind our soules with secular chaines:
Helpe us to save free Conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves whose Gospell is their maw.

What Nardo has praised in the sonnets to Ley and Vane as the technique of suspending the sentence and the compliment leads the sonnet to Cromwell into what appears to be an incomplete thought. The opening apostrophe to Cromwell is extended throughout the octave with such a complex sequence of relative clauses that one arrives at the sestet without any idea of what the main clause is. The first strong medial caesura in line nine and the subsequent conjunction *yet* appear to signal a "turn" in thought before one even knows what the thought is. "[Y]et much remaines / To conquer still" is the first main clause, though the conjunction suggests that the clause is in some way coordinate with the fragmentary string of subordinate clauses that have preceded it. Yet neither is it clear whether this is the true *turn* in thought or the conclusion of what has been expressed in the octave, for the subsequent "peace hath her victories / No less renownd then warr" initiates the central idea of the sestet and could be perceived as the beginning of the second half of the bipartite structure. Yet when we arrive at last at the closing couplet, itself a surprising innovation of the Petrarchan form, we find the best grammatical candidate for the main clause of the sonnet, a direct petition to the vocative with which the poem has opened. When all is said and done, it appears that the main clause of the sonnet is simply, "Cromwell . . . Helpe us to save free Conscience from the paw / Of hireling wolves. . . ." If so, one could argue that, despite the appearance of a volta with the traditional signpost "yet," there is actually but a single thought expressed throughout the sonnet. The companion sonnet to Fairfax (XV) employs a similar

structure of separating the vocative from the main clause but with much less confusion. After the opening "Fairfax" and its much briefer accompanying adjective clause, one arrives at the main clause in the second quatrain: "Thy firm unshak'n vertue ever brings / Victory home. . . ." (5-6); and the sestet subsequently offers a clear turn in thought: "O yet a nobler task awaites thy hand" (9).

The harsh, colloquial rimes of the closing couplet of the sonnet to Cromwell remind us of a further innovation Milton borrowed from Della Casa, *asprezza*, the characteristic that led Anna Seward to think of a Miltonic sonnet as "the pointed and craggy rock, the grace of which is roughness." In this particular feature, I believe Milton is far more successful, for he employs the technique sparingly and only when the context makes it entirely appropriate. When the "dread voice" of Saint Peter, for example, disturbs the pastoral beauty of the poetry of *Lycidas* for eighteen lines, we find a deliberately harsh attack on corrupt clergy:

> What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
> And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
> Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,
> The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
> But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
> Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread: (122-6)

The harsh language is such a surprise within the context of the lyric *Lycidas* that the narrator has to assure the frightened waters of Alpheus that "the dread voice is past" (132), while the equally startled reader is left with a clear notion of the righteous anger with which an apostle would perceive the corrupted clergy of the remaining years before the civil war.

It is this same harshness with which Milton later viewed his Puritan peers after the war had begun and he quickly found how little he

had in common intellectually with even his compatriots. After his tractates on greater liberty in divorce proceedings met with general indignation and misunderstanding, Milton composed two sonnets that sound like the poetic equivalent of a sound and well-deserved thrashing. In the first, Sonnet XI, Milton speaks of being surrounded by a "barbarous noise" in response to his divorce tracts, and the "pleasing roughness" of his response to that noise is therefore most appropriate. Since this sonnet is the first to deal with the subject of liberty, it is ironic that the sonnet is fairly strict in its observance of the Petrarchan form. There is very little enjambment, and the individual stanzaic units are fairly well contained, though the volta does anticipate the traditional position by falling after line seven. Within the careful structure, however, we find a delightful *asprezza* that denounces the audience of the divorce tracts as "Owles and Cuckoes, Asses, Apes and Doggs" (4). Giving them his thoughts on divorce has been like "casting Pearl to Hoggs; / That bawle for freedom in their senceless mood / And still revolt when truth would set them free" (8-10).

Such a method is even more appropriate in the companion sonnet on *Tetrachordon* (XII), in which Milton ridicules the public response to the strange titles of his works, which are, quite literally, Greek to the uneducated public. Claiming that his most recent tract on divorce has been "wov'n close, both matter, form and stile," Milton presents a sonnet in which a "pleasing roughness" is woven equally close to the subject of "rugged names":

> A Book was writ of late call'd *Tetrachordon*;
>   And wov'n close, both matter, form and stile;
>   The Subject new: it walk'd the Town a while,
>   Numbring good intellects; now seldom por'd on.
> Cries the stall-reader, bless us! what a word on
>   A title page is this! and some in file
>   Stand spelling fals, while one might walk to Mile-

> End Green. Why is it harder Sirs then Gordon,
> Colkitto, or Macdonnel, or Galasp?
> Those rugged names to our like mouths grow sleek
> That would have made *Quintilian* stare and gasp.
> Thy age, like ours, O Soul of Sir *John Cheek*,
> Hated not Learning wors then Toad or Asp;
> When thou taught'st *Cambridge*, and King *Edward* Greek.

If *asprezza* is appropriate for the satiric bite employed in Sonnet XI, it is all the more so here, where Milton ridicules the public ignorance of Greek and the harshness of the "rugged" Scottish names with which the English have become familiar through the Civil War. Enjambment and colloquialism reach a new pitch as Milton simulates the babble of the stall-reader — "bless us! what a word on / A title page is this!" — and even forces a line break between the syllables of *Mile-End.* The humorously harsh Hudibrastic rimes of *por'd on* and *word on* with *Tetrachordon* and *Gordon* call even more attention to themselves in being in the prominent position of the *a* rime of the octave.

As appropriate as such rimes are in this very specialized context, their unusualness reminds us of another charge which has been leveled against Milton and which gives us some insight into why he appears to have such little regard for the rime scheme of many of his sonnets. John Dryden once said of Milton's use of rime that he "had neither the ease of doing it, nor the graces of it" (quoted in Johnson, *Lives* 162n4), a judgment with which Samuel Johnson agreed:

> The English poems have this evidence of genius, that they have a cast original and unborrowed. But their peculiarity is not excellence; if they differ from verses of others, they differ for the worse; for they are too often distinguished by repulsive harshness; the combinations of words are new, but they are not pleasing; the rhymes and epithets seem to be laboriously sought and violently applied. (*Lives* 162)

The sonnets give us numerous examples that would seem to confirm this point. One thinks, for example, of the crude praise of Fairfax, where Milton tells us that his fame is currently "Filling each mouth with envy, or with praise, / And all her jealous monarchs with *amaze*" (XV.2-3, my italics). In the interesting but uneven sonnet to Cyriack Skinner about the peace to which Milton has come concerning his blindness (XXII), Milton notes that his eyes are clear "To outward view, of blemish or of spot; / Bereft of light thir seeing have forgot," an unhappy couplet made even less fortunate by being linked to the second quatrain and the assurance that "I argue not / Against heavns hand or will, nor bate a jot / Of heart or hope . . ." (2-3, 6-8). Despite such infelicities, one could certainly counter Dryden's and Johnson's criticism by noting the mastery of the rimes in the octosyllabic couplets of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" and in the complex rime schemes of *Lycidas*, but it is certainly true that rime is not one of Milton's more notable achievements in the sonnets.

Yet we would also do well to remember that Milton resented the "bondage" of rime more and more as his style evolved, the evolution of which can be clearly traced in the sonnets. As the rime scheme came to mean progressively less to Milton in his sonnets, the prosody of blank verse to mean progressively more, all that finally remained was for Milton to discard rime altogether. As early as 1644 with the publication of "Of Education," Milton spoke condescendingly of prosody as being among the "rudiments of Grammar," and he denounced "our common Rimers and Playwriters" as "despicable creatures" (191). In his prefatory note on the verse of *Paradise Lost* over twenty years later, Milton described rime as a "troublesome and modern bondage," "the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame metre," "the jingling sound of like endings" (38-9).

Having seen so little connection between rime and content in Milton's Petrarchan sonnets, we should not be surprised to find in

Paradise Lost the next logical step for Milton's development as a "sonneteer": the blank-verse sonnet. Wordsworth remarked to Henry Crabb Robinson in 1836 that he had discovered in *Paradise Lost* "a perfect sonnet without rhyme," a lead which Lee Johnson followed in 1973 in a seminal article that noted "two dozen fourteen-line units in *Paradise Lost*, nearly a dozen in *Paradise Regained*, and roughly a half dozen in *Samson Agonistes*" (130). Nardo adds to this list by noting the submerged sonnets in *Lycidas* (1-14, 50-63, 172-85), the third song of *Arcades*, and the Echo song of *Comus* (163), and I would note as well the concluding fourteen lines of *Samson Agonistes*, a unique combination in irregular meter of two Shakespearean quatrains followed by a Petrarchan sestet. Especially in the blank-verse sonnets of *Paradise Lost*, we find Milton much more in his element, the expansiveness of his prosody being restricted by nothing more than the decasyllabic line. In God's praise of Abdiel in Book VI of *Paradise Lost* (29-43), for example, we find a perfect parallel of the heroic sonnets to Fairfax and Cromwell, yet with none of the syntactic confusion to which the "bondage of rime" leads Milton in the sonnet to Cromwell. The development of the compliment flows smoothly from the opening vocative "Servant of God" to the end of the fifteen-line passage, mirroring the Miltonic sonnet in length and subject but with neither confusion nor conflict of matter and form.

Yet I would not want to suggest that the blank-verse sonnet is the only possible alternative for one wanting to implement fully Della Casa's innovations in the English sonnet. Wordsworth, whose sonnets are among the finest in the language, showed in his own Petrarchan sonnets that Milton's methods could be employed quite successfully without doing much violence to the basic structure of the form. He often declared himself indebted as a sonneteer to the sonnets of Milton, though he came to write exactly five hundred more than his master's mere twenty-three. In a letter to Landor, April 20, 1822, he even

claimed that Milton's sonnets changed his opinion on a form which he had previously considered "egregiously absurd":

> I used to think [the sonnet] egregiously absurd, though the greatest poets since the revival of literature have written in it. Many years ago my sister happened to read to me the sonnets of Milton, which I could at that time repeat; but somehow or other I was singularly struck with the style of harmony, and the gravity, and republican austerity of those compositions. (Quoted in Havens 529n2)

The afternoon reading to which Wordsworth refers here occurred on May 21, 1802, an afternoon on which he declared himself to have taken "fire" and "produced three sonnets the same afternoon" (quoted in Havens 529). By the end of the year, he had written at least nineteen more sonnets, eleven of which are clearly modeled after the Miltonic model: "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic," "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," "London, 1802," "Fair Star of Evening, Splendour of the West," "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free," "Inland, within a Hollow Vale, I Stood," "O Friend! I Know Not Which Way I Must Look," "Great Men Have Been Among Us," "It Is Not To Be Thought Of That the Flood," and "When I Have Borne in Memory." While employing Milton's technique of internal pause and irregular voltas, however, these sonnets are clearly bipartite and display little of the type of syntactic chaos that we find in a number of Milton's sonnets. Of these eleven, only "O Friend! I Know Not Which Way I Must Look" and, especially, "It Is Not To Be Thought Of That the Flood" are truly flavored even by the style of Milton's diction.

Writing to Alexander Dyce in 1833 after three decades of a steady production of Miltonic sonnets, Wordsworth declared himself to be still unsure whether a strict bipartite structure should be observed. Noting that the "better half" of Milton's sonnets ignored this structural

concern, Wordsworth observed that

> this is not done merely to gratify the ear by variety and freedom of
> sound, but also to aid in giving that pervading sense of intense unity in
> which the excellence of the sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to
> consist. Instead of looking at this composition as a piece of architecture,
> making a whole out of three parts, I have been much in the habit of
> preferring the image of an orbicular body, — a sphere or a dew drop. . . .
> (Quoted in Havens 532-3)

The orbicular preference notwithstanding, Wordsworth's sonnets more
often than not fall into the regular bipartite divisions of the Italian son-
net. In his edition of Wordsworth's poems in 1897, Thomas
Hutchinson noted that the 1807 volumes have only seven sonnets that
display the "spherical" structure of entertaining neither pause nor volta,
while thirty-four are traditionally Italian in structure and fifteen are
bipartite but without the pause strictly dividing octave and sestet.

Therefore, even with Milton's most devoted follower and the
most skillful practitioner of his methods, there always persisted consid-
erable doubt about how far Petrarch's structure could be modified
without totally abandoning the attempt to wed matter and form.
Whether Wordsworth was entirely conscious of the distinction be-
tween his theory and his practice, between his own method and that of
the poet he admired, he appears to have taken his "solace" more often
in the rooms of Petrarch than of Milton, for whom a narrow room was
far more a prison than a place to rest from the "weight of liberty."
Nardo remarks that "the freedom [Milton] achieves within the limits of
sonnet structure becomes an aesthetic equivalent to the keystone of his
ethics, politics, and theology: disciplined liberty" (162). I would sug-
gest, however, that, in the chaotic energy of those troubled rooms, we
see much more of liberation than we ever see of discipline.

Notes

[1] William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, vol. 1, ed. John O. Hayden (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) lines 10-14, 2 vols. All references to Wordsworth's sonnets are to this edition.

[2] Milton himself appears to have had a much different association with the idea of a "narrow room." The word *room* occurs only eleven times in the epic and a surprising number of these occurrences is modified by a sense of *narrowness*, most especially from Satan's perspective. The phrase "narrow room" first describes, in fact, the vast Pandemonium and its inability to accommodate the gargantuan demons (I.779). Throughout the epic, the narrow rooms of Earth and Hell are contrasted with the indescribable vastness of Heaven. In contrast with the frequency with which *narrow* and *room* occur in the epic (10 and 11 respectively), *narrow* does not even occur in the editions of 1645 and 1673 and appears only once in *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson challenges Harapha to fight with him in "Some narrow place enclosed" (1117). As for *room*, it does not appear at all in *Samson Agonistes* and occurs only three times in 1645 ("On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" 78, "On the University Carrier" 15, and "Il Penseroso" 79) and only once in 1673 ("At a Vacation Exercise in the College" 62). A further example of the type of confinement which *room* could connote for Milton is that it is used to describe Hobson's grave in "On the University Carrier," the "room" in which the carrier "must lodge that night." In short, it appears unlikely that Milton would have found much comfort in the thought of the sonnet as a "narrow room."

[3] Though Milton wrote his sonnets between 1628 and 1658 and thus could not have originally planned them as a sequence, William McCarthy has argued convincingly that Milton's arrangement of the sonnets in the collection of 1673 and the Cambridge manuscript indicates a deliberate pattern of the "three conventional phases of youth, maturity, and old age" (96). McCarthy sees the sonnets as falling into an Italian group (2 through 6 and the Canzone) concerned with the passions of youth, a group representing Milton's maturity by focusing on public and private topical themes (8 through 18), and a third group (20-23) showing us the poet in retirement. (Sonnets 15 through 17 and 22, the politics of which were dangerous in 1673, were suppressed in the publication of that year.) In addition, McCarthy has shown that Sonnets 7 and 19 represent "turning points" in the poet's career and hence link the three groups into a united

sequence. Anna Nardo has argued less convincingly that the sequence "suggests an ideal progress of man in a community from perfection of the individual to earthly love and service, to attainment of the Kingdom of God" (137). For a discussion of the sonnets as a united sequence displaying Milton's intellectual evolution, see Mary Ann Radzinowicz, "The Sonnets: The Exemplary Poet and His Evolving Politics," in *Toward Samson Agonistes* (128-44).

⁴ Milton's purchase in December 1629 of Giovanni Della Casa's *Rime e Prose* is recorded in French's *The Life Records of John Milton* (1: 205).

⁵ John Milton, Sonnet I, *Milton's Sonnets*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (St. Martin's, 1966) lines 10-11. All subsequent references to Milton's sonnets are to this edition, while all references to other short poems by Milton and to *Samson Agonistes* and *Comus* are to *Complete Shorter Poems*, John Carey, ed. (London: Longman, 1971). References to *Paradise Lost* are to Alastair Fowler, ed. (London: Longman, 1971).

⁶ The sonnet addressed to the "Lady" is a good example of one difficulty which Johnson may have had with the sonnets and which continues to trouble readers of today—their topicality, each being an occasion poem for which the occasion is not often clear. So much disagreement about those occasions has persisted over the years, in fact, that new theories continually arise. As recently as 1991, Leo Miller argued that Sonnet IX had *never* been properly understood or even dated, and that the only interpretation that made any sense was that the sonnet was written for Milton's first wife Mary Powell shortly before their marriage in 1642. See Miller, "John Milton's 'Lost' Sonnet to Mary Powell," *Milton Quarterly* 25 (1991): 102-7.

⁷ Autobiographical information from other works has led such critics as W. R. Parker and John Carey to read line four and the second quatrain far too literally. Knowing of Milton's fair complexion at Cambridge, where it seems to have earned him the label of "Lady," Parker assumes that by "the blossom of his late spring he meant some external evidence of maturity, and even his appearance did not show his age" (123), while Carey reminds us of Milton's comment at the age of forty in the *Defensio Secunda*, that "there is scarcely anyone who would not think me younger by nearly ten years" (147n5). Yet such a reading suggests that Milton's complaint is more against the triviality of a prepubescent appearance than with the despairing sense that he has the age of manhood with neither its wisdom nor its accomplishments. Rather than seeing line six as being in apposition with the "truth" of line five, I interpret it as being an explanation of the *deception*—that the maturity of his semblance deceives one into thinking that he

enjoys far more "inward ripeness" than is indeed the case.

    [8] Havens has shown that the volta seems not to have been a concern for most sonneteers of the eighteenth century, who chiefly followed Milton's example. Anna Seward, for one, declared in 1795 that the "legitimate sonnet generally consists of one thought, regularly pursued to the close" (quoted in Havens 487)

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