

Untying the Temporal Knot:

A Criticism of “Sonnet XIX”

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“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,’ / I Fondly ask; But patience to prevent /
That murmur, soon replies...” (7-9).

Sonnet XIX
When I Consider...

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present 5
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,"
I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need 10
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait." (1652?)

Milton's Sonnet XIX is a thought process, divided into Milton's question of how he might serve God when he has become blind, how he can avoid falling prey to losing "that one Talent which is death to hide" (3), and patience's explicit reply that prevents Milton's question in the first place- that those who "stand and wait," (14) serve God just as well. The problem with the sonnet lies in that what should be this comfortingly resolute solution to Milton's worries doesn't hold very convincingly. The sonnet presents a temporal paradox that begs us to question how we might justify this idea of a "preventative reply," and what this paradox suggests about the sonnet as a whole. For Milton to center his poem around such a temporal impossibility underscores a certain strain in patience's response, and this sense of discomfort is really founded in the entire latter half of the sonnet, during which patience essentially commandeers control of the poem, but flounders as it overextends itself, stumbling over its response in a cascade of enjambment, suggestive diction, and confusing pronouns. If this poem were read as merely a thought process, as Milton's mental musings, certainly the strains created through temporal and structural shortcomings might be justified since the mind works in circles and explosions of ideas, yet because the sonnet has been laid to paper, that "murmur" that Milton claims patience prevented, has in fact been vocalized. Ensnared in temporal confusion, unable to escape the duplicitous nature of its diction, and betraying underlying doubt in structural shortcomings, Sonnet XIX loses its convincing reassurance and ultimately fails as a rationalization simply because Milton has written it down in the first place.

Patience's reply to Milton's worries of ably serving God centers on the idea that God does not need "Either man's work or his own gifts" (10) and that those who stand and wait are equal in their loyal servitude. However, there are more than a few problems with patience's response that undermine the soothing nature of the content. Firstly notable is the fact that this

figure of “patience” literally takes charge of the latter half of the poem; we have the sense of dialogue as if Milton were literally conversing with someone else. Though patience is a creation of the author, the fact remains that Milton has created this external voice to justify what he himself cannot.

Recognizably, the word choice Milton employs is dubious in itself. For example, when patience says “who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best” (10-11), the word “yoke” brings to mind two very different connotations. Patience’s “mild yoke” recalls immediately Matthew 11, in which Jesus instructs “Take my yoke upon you, and...ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” On the other hand, however subtly or mildly, the use of a yoke in reference to these faithful believers compares them to beasts of burden. Milton (though the poetic voice is still that of patience) makes them into servile subjects to a God whose “State is Kingly” (11-12); the sense of servant-like duty evoked by comparison to burden bearing beasts hardly parallels the quality of the yoke in Matthew.

If the making of faithful followers into beasts of burden isn’t enough to betray any slight discomfort on Milton’s part, patience’s response is represented in a manner that renders its rationale doubtful: patience appears to be itself, impatient. The structure in the latter half of the poem is characterized greatly by enjambment, which contributes to our sense that the response is a cascade of reasoning, tumbling into itself as it picks up speed until the very last line of the poem. There is no part of patience’s response that ends within the bounds of a line, instead the whole speech (if we may call it that) jumps and falls into the next continually until the very last line. Furthermore, the diction very much suggests movement, “bidding speed” (12) and “without rest” (13), to name two. Even words that might otherwise suggest stillness are forced through enjambment into a moving rhetoric: “His State / Is Kingly” is hardly a “state” at all since the

natural rhythm demands that we keep reading. “And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:” (13) is the only point in the end of the poem that we are given a punctuation break which, especially after following so much enjambment, gives us a chance to catch our breaths and focus on the final conclusion: “They also serve who only stand and wait” (14).

This final line is a resounding conclusion, something to rest on- Milton has gone out of his way to convey this sense of speed until the end reaches a sudden stop. It’s almost as if he wants that we overlook, that we regard with less focus, that which precedes the seemingly conclusive and comforting end. But given the impatience with which the poem has moved in its latter half, it seems as though some sort of cohesion is missing and instead of accepting the reasoning and rushing through these lines as the rhetorical structure so desires us to do, the content instead becomes more subject to scrutiny. Why create a structure in which what should be the most comforting part of the sonnet is rushed through? Adding to this is the strangely unrestrained use of pronouns prevalent in the final seven lines, wherein there is little mention of who we as readers suppose to be God and his followers, and instead everyone is referred to with pronouns, often in lines in which there are at least two ambiguous figures mentioned: “who best bear,” (10-11), “they serve him best” (11), and even “They also serve who only stand” (14).

Between the enjambment-induced speed and the multitude of vague pronouns, the impatience of “patience” becomes something of question, and there are several ways to rationalize this stylistic decision: one is that Milton is not entirely convinced by the solution he’s let patience deliver, and the other is that this structure is less reflective of a carefully constructed piece of writing, and more indicative of a thought process (which entertains a more free-flowing form). In this case it appears to be a little of both, the internal musings of a man doubtful of his ability to be faithful and the solution he invents to prevent himself from questioning it in the first

place. Indeed, this poem reads like Milton's internal thought process as he attempts to justify the blindness whose crippling nature has largely prevented his "day labor" for God. If these were his thoughts, the problem of temporal knots and of diction or structural inconsistencies might not even be relevant, but the fact that Milton has chosen to put these thoughts down in writing- the fact that this poem exists as a poem- cracks the foundation on which the sonnet stands, that is, the idea that patience literally "prevents" Milton's thoughts in a reply, from being uttered. Assume for a moment this poem is the embodiment of his thought process, the entire poem merely the musings of the mind; in this case nothing has been uttered, and thus patience *has* prevented the literal vocalization of what's already been expressed, and we can accept the temporal paradox under this context. However, Milton wrote this poem down, and therefore he fails- patience fails him- and the temporal knot simply ties itself tighter and kills any sense of convincing resolution in the process.

It is not to say that Milton fails in creating a poem of certain beauty in which his concerns are superficially resolved, for certainly he does achieve as much in wrapping his mind, and ours, around the idea that this temporal paradox can be somehow plausible. Nonetheless, what remains integral is that Milton says that patience has stilled his would be murmur, but he isn't patient, his mind and doubts are clearly not quieted, because he feels the need to express it as a poem. Now, instead of adding to the sincere reality of a man questioning faith, any sense of strain suggested by diction or by form contributes to the failure of his poem's reasoning as a whole. We are left realizing emptily that Milton does not "stand and wait," but rather undermines that very idea, which he so advocates as his solution.