

“When Contemplation like the Night-Calm Felt”: Religious Considerations in Poetic Texts by Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth*

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In *Milton's Burden of Interpretation* (1994), Dayton Haskin connected Milton's Sonnet 19, "When I consider how my light is spent," to Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, "When I consider everything that grows," from the standpoint of the marked difference between the two poems. "The challenge in 'They also serve who only stand and wait,'" Haskin observed, quoting Milton's arresting conclusion, "is for the 'I' to give up on his longstanding belief in the importance of his own productions" (116). Linking Milton's sonnet on his blindness to his earlier sonnet, "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth," Haskin added that "[unlike] Shakespeare's 'When I consider ...' sonnet, which culminates in a closing boast about the immortality of verse in the war against Time, Milton's poem suggests that the poet is struggling to make what is elsewhere designated 'That last infirmity of Noble minds' a matter of indifference" (116-17).

Haskin's interpretation eloquently speaks to the differences in the religious attitudes of the two poets, but what it leaves open is the question of why, given those differences, the initial phrase of Milton's sonnet echoes Shakespeare's. It is impossible to imagine that Milton would not have known Shakespeare's sonnets,¹ and so the question remains as to why Shakespeare's poem impressed itself on Milton's

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mind, even if, as may have been the case, it did so unconsciously. My contention will be that, when we examine the two poems against each other, we shall come to recognize that Shakespeare's sonnet posed—or perhaps consolidated—a threat that Milton had to take seriously.

In the first nine lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, the opening quatrain and then the turn to the sestet, two main ideas, transience and fatalism, are posed against each other in such a way as to constitute a single theme, one that is actually foreign to a specifically Christian outlook (although by Shakespeare's time it had become part of the Christian inheritance):

When I consider every thing that grows
 Holds in perfection but a little moment,
 That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
 When I perceive that men as plants increase,
 Cheerèd and check't even by the selfsame sky,
 Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
 And wear their brave state out of memory:
 Then the conceit of this inconstant stay [...] (Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* 40)

Nature in these lines is the vortex from which everything emerges and into which all things disappear. In what is probably an early elaboration of the poet's theater metaphor, all things present themselves—as on a stage—as mere appearances, and if there is an author or director behind what is shown he is completely hidden. It may be that the stars are mysteriously aligned with these appearances—in other words, that they are the occult bearers of some sort of destined order and, as such, betoken the possibility of transcendent meaning—but if so, the “influence” they impart is entirely secret and inscrutable.

The presence of Ecclesiastes, though its relevance to Sonnet 15 seems to have gone unnoticed,² is clearly manifested both in the poem's second quatrain and in its turn to the sestet. “Conceit” in line 9 is an elaborate pun—or indeed *conceit*: in Elizabethan English, of

course, it means *concept* or *idea*, but as the *OED* indicates, pointing to a 1567 entry, it can also mean “excessive pride” or “overstatement of one’s qualities.” In that case it is synonymous with *vanity* (from the Latin *vanitas* for “emptiness” or “falsehood”), which the *OED* glosses, from a 1325 entry, as “the quality of being vain or worthless, the futility or worthlessness of something.” Thus, we can see how Shakespeare’s “conceit” in line 9 is derived from the opening line of Ecclesiastes (in the Geneva Bible): “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher: vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The vanity of existence for Shakespeare—its nullity, the sense in which it is a mere show of transient appearances—is reinforced by the fact that men, however much they may “vaunt” their distinctiveness, are really no different from plants or animals. This idea is derived from two verses in chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes: “For the condition of the children of men, and the condition of beasts are even as one condition unto them. As the one dieth, so dieth the other: for they all have one breath, and there is no excellency of men above ye beast: for all is vanity. All go to one place, and all was of the dust, and all shall return to the dust” (3:19-20). Shakespeare’s beautifully phrased idea that men, like all other beings, “wear their brave state out of memory,” which brings closure to the octave through the irony of the slant rhyme, can be connected to a number of passages in Ecclesiastes, but perhaps most fully to this one in chapter 2: “For there is no remembrance of the wise, nor of the fool forever: for that that now is, in the days to come shall all be forgotten” (2:16). This idea is so powerful, its truth, one might say, is so unassailable, that it almost disables the poet’s attempt in the sestet to memorialize the beloved friend; or at least imparts an additional pathos of futility, so that what is memorialized, in the end, aside from the poem itself, is the futility of memorialization:

Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,

Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay
 To change your day of youth to sullied night,
 And all in war with Time for love of you,
 As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.

Although in the couplet the poet bravely enters into a war with Time, he has already admitted that the real debate is between Time and Decay—or in other words, given the tautology, that there is only the inexorable process by which Time lays waste to all things.

If there is a God in Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, he is the God of Ecclesiastes, an entirely hidden and impersonal deity, who, like the gods of the Epicureans, takes no interest in human affairs.³ When we turn to Milton's "When I consider" sonnet, the religious landscape is, of course, very different—indeed, on the surface, at least, diametrically opposed. Milton's God is the taskmaster of the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew, a personalized figure with whom the poet has entered into dialectical relations, those of the Servant to his Master:

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
 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
 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."

*(Complete Poems and Major Prose 168)*⁴

Milton is at once angry with God for taking away his eyesight and angry with himself for presuming, absurdly, to be angry. Overtly in the sonnet, he is expressing the fear that God will “chide” him for failing to make use of his “Talent” (and of course, the wonderful pun is Milton’s—it does not occur in Greek),⁵ but actually it is Milton who is chiding God for making it impossible for him to do that. After the “lest he returning chide” clause in line 6, or in other words at the very point at which we expect God to put his oar in, it is Milton, on the contrary, who says, “Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?” Though editors often change Milton’s comma after line 6 to a semicolon, it is eminently possible (as Stephen Fallon has suggested to me in conversation) that Milton wanted to preserve the ambiguity and create a kind of “double-take” for the reader⁶; in any event, it is only when the comma is converted to a semicolon that the grammatical error of anacoluthon (logical or syntactical inconsistency or incoherence) is avoided. But whether Milton is chiding God or worrying that God is chiding him, or whether he is worrying that, in foolishly presuming to chide God, God will chide him, the drama that is enacted is clearly a personal one.

Milton’s grammar is in tension with his Petrarchan form even more than usual in this sonnet, and the asymmetrical spanning of “but patience to prevent / That murmur soon replies,” a clause that moves from the conclusion of the octave to the commencement of the sestet, calls attention to the fact that the poem contains a second biblical intertext in addition to the Gospel of Matthew’s Parable of the Talents: namely, the Book of Job.⁷ Interestingly, Milton did not capitalize “patience” in the 1673 edition he prepared of his poems, perhaps because to some extent he was conceiving of it as a virtue or psychological propensity; but personification is definitely at work in the way the poet enters into dialogue with this virtue or propensity. In any event, the passage suggests that one must have the proverbial

patience of Job not to blame God, insofar as he is conceived as a personal deity, for what might be taken to be his injustice. To the extent that the Hebrew Book of Job mitigates the admonitory force of the Christian Parable of the Talents and thus offers some solace, this is because what “patience” has to say is that “God does not need / Either man’s work or his own gifts.” The important thing—as in the Book of Job itself—is to bear God’s “yoke” (mild or otherwise) without complaining. And hence the sonnet’s famous conclusion.

Even if it only involves standing and waiting, there is still in Milton’s sonnet an active relationship to a personal God, a God who himself is actively shaping all aspects of human destiny either through his own actions or those of his angels (“Thousands at his bidding speed / And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest”). But as soon as the initially consoling idea is broached that “God doth not need” anything that we do or are—in other words, to take this a little further, that he has no need of us whatsoever—we find ourselves on a slippery slope in which the God with whom we have been standing in personal relations has become more and more impersonal and is in danger of receding into the background or even disappearing altogether. True, there is no longer a reason to fear that one is being punished—as with blindness—for one’s failures and inadequacies, but at the same time one is now obliged to confront the indifference of the universe. The taskmaster God of the Parable of the Talents has become the hidden God of Ecclesiastes, and so once again we are in the orbit of Shakespeare’s “When I consider” sonnet.

In the philosophical meditation that begins Book 5 of *The Prelude*, not only does Wordsworth engage concerns that Shakespeare and Milton are pondering in the sonnets we have been discussing, but in this book on books he seems to be doing so in a way that focuses on those poems themselves—at least indirectly. Wordsworth refers to Shakespeare and Milton as “labourers divine,” and to their books as

“poor earthly casket[s] of immortal verse” (5: 164-65); moreover, as an indication that he has been thinking explicitly at least of Shakespeare’s sonnets, he quotes the phrase “weep to have” from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 64 (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced”) and puts it in quotation marks (5: 26).⁸ His own sonnets, including “London, 1802,” which opens: “Milton! Thou should’st be living at this hour,” generally follow the Petrarchan pattern that he absorbed mainly from Milton.

Though Wordsworth is writing in blank verse in *The Prelude*, the philosophical prelude to Book 5 nevertheless follows the *when / then* structure that Shakespeare’s sonnets so frequently adopt, where, instead of expressing the immediacy of a moment, meditation doubles back upon itself to reflect on those occasions in which thought takes a certain form.⁹ “When I consider every thing that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment [...] Then the conceit of this inconstant stay / Sets you most rich in youth before my sight” — this is what we might call a second-order rather than a first-order meditation. Shakespeare is not only meditating here on how everything that grows is transient, he is meditating on the shape that a thought-process of this kind, when he engages in it, takes in his mind. Wordsworth is doing something similar at the beginning of *Prelude* 5, except that there, simultaneously, in what we might call a third-order meditation, he is reflecting on the nature of contemplation itself—on the sense in which it comes to us, rather than being something that we do or pursue:

When Contemplation, like the night-calm felt
Through earth and sky, spreads widely, and sends deep
Into the soul its tranquillizing power,
Even then I sometimes grieve for thee, O Man,
Earth’s paramount Creature! (*The Prelude* 5: 1-5)

The tranquillizing power of contemplation, on which, in Wordsworth's view, the creative process depends, allows us to engage in thoughts that might otherwise overwhelm us with sadness; it imparts a kind of sublime disinterestedness (the very antithesis of an "egotistical sublime"), which is the expressive signature of this poet when he is writing at the height of his powers.

Wordsworth's sadness "finds its fuel" (5: 11) not in the fact of transience per se, as Shakespeare's does in Sonnet 15, and not in the possibility that God may either be unjust or unconcerned with human beings, as in my view Milton's does in the sonnet on his blindness, but rather in the recognition that, although human beings have created "Things that aspire to unconquerable life," those things must eventually "perish" (5: 20, 22). The pantheistic orientation of the 1805 *Prelude* is somewhat diminished in the 1850 version, but even in the latter Wordsworth identifies a "deathless spirit" that is immanent to Nature and has been "diffused" through it by a transcendent "sovereign Intellect" (5: 18, 16, 15). Consequently, if in the future a cataclysm were to destroy all earthly life, as Wordsworth assumes might actually happen (in Book 5 he seems to have secularized the apocalyptic vision of the Book of Revelation), "Yet would the living Presence still subsist / Victorious, and composure would ensue, / And kindlings like the morning—presage sure / Of day returning and of life revived" (34-37). In that case, however, the "consecrated works of Bard and Sage," although in one sense immortal, would no longer exist.

As G. Blakemore Evans observes in his commentary on Sonnet 15, Shakespeare "sounds the Horatian and Ovidian theme of immortality assured through poetry" (*The Sonnets* 127), and this is consistent with Shakespeare's implicit sense that the human soul is mortal and not in that respect different from the souls of plants or animals. Wordsworth's perspective is diametrically opposed: on the one hand, as we

have seen, he expresses the awareness that, because the works of Bard and Sage are enclosed in material form, they must eventually perish, but, on the other, he seems to take it for granted that we ourselves are immortal. This has sometimes been misunderstood. When Wordsworth writes, "Tremblings of the heart / It gives, to think that our immortal being / No more shall need such garments" (5: 23-25), he is not, contrary to what the editors of the Norton Critical Edition assume, asserting that the individual will be preserved after death as an individual soul (*The Prelude* 152); rather he is suggesting that just as in life the individual participates in immortal being, so in death he or she will be joined to immortal being—no longer as an individual, however, but as part of the oneness of being. In the 1805 version, Wordsworth phrases this as "*the* immortal being" (my emphasis); his substitution of the pronoun "our" in the 1850 version makes the conception sound more orthodox, but in actuality it amounts to the same thing (*The Prelude* 152-53). "Garments," in Wordsworth's extension of the old devotional metaphor, refers not only to the "consecrated works of Bard and Sage," as the Norton editors indicate (152), but also to the body; for in Wordsworth's conception, the individual soul simply returns to life—to the source of life itself.¹⁰ The sad irony is that, while the works of Bard and Sage are themselves immortal and divine, in the sense of containing and participating in a "deathless spirit" (5: 18), they are also unnecessary. Although for Wordsworth, the creator is not separate from his creation—which is why, instead of the word "God," Wordsworth employs such metonyms as "the sovereign Intellect" and "the living Presence" (5: 15, 34)—for him too, *mutatis mutandis*, "God doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts."

All three of the poetic texts we have been considering contemplate the future—of man and of his works. Shakespeare and Milton are concerned with death as it applies to the individual (in Milton's case,

to himself), and Wordsworth, remarkably, as it applies to the human species as a whole. For Shakespeare implicitly and Wordsworth explicitly, death involves annihilation (though for Wordsworth, only of the self and not of the core of our being). Milton's sonnet is mediated by Shakespeare's, and Wordsworth's text, if not specifically by those two sonnets, then certainly by the works in general of our two greatest and most exemplary poets. Ironically, among these three "labourers divine," it is only Shakespeare—and perhaps only because God does not directly enter the picture for him—who conceives of the possibility that poetry is enduring and will be salvaged, along with what it memorializes, from the ravages of Time. Unfortunately, as Shakespeare himself implicitly recognizes, over the long haul this is not very likely.¹¹

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NOTES

¹As Haskin observes, "Milton would probably have known the poem as it was printed in 1640, where it constitutes the third part (after Sonnets 13 and 14) of a long poem under the heading "Youthful Glory" (*Milton's Burden of Interpretation* 115). Jonathan Goldberg had earlier connected Milton's sonnet to Shakespeare's. For Goldberg, indeed, Milton's sonnet constitutes "a reading" of Shakespeare's (see Goldberg 130).

²There is no reference to Ecclesiastes in the discussions of Sonnet 15 contained in the editions of the sonnets edited by Stephen Booth (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* 1977), G. Blakemore Evans (*The Sonnets* 1996), and W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* 1965).

³The longstanding debate over whether Ecclesiastes was influenced by Epicureanism is still unresolved, partly because the question of when Ecclesiastes was composed itself remains so. The dates usually given for Epicurus are 341-270 BCE. Philological evidence indicates that Ecclesiastes must have been composed after the Persian conquest of Babylon (539 BCE) but before 250 BCE. The editors of the

New Oxford Annotated Bible suggest a date of around 300 BCE because its language and style are close to that of the Mishna (841).

⁴Whereas Hughes inserts a semicolon after line 6, I have retained—for reasons discussed below—the comma that occurs in the 1673 edition that Milton prepared of his poems.

⁵Haskin, in an essay related to but independent of the study cited above, observes that “in the Koine Greek of the first-century Mediterranean world the word *talanton* did not denote natural abilities.” It referred first to a unit of weight and subsequently to a unity of money. Haskin adds: “The sense of the English word designating a ‘mental endowment’ or ‘natural ability’ seems ultimately to be derived from the parable in Matthew 25. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records as the earliest instance of this sense of the word a passage from an early fifteenth-century poem. Over the course of centuries, a certain allegorical interpretation of the parable had become so widely disseminated and deeply entrenched that, not only in English but in most of the languages of Western Europe, the word ‘talent’ came to be used with increasing frequency to refer to natural abilities”; “Tracing a Genealogy of Talent” 71.

⁶The Modern Library edition of Milton’s poetry and prose that Fallon recently co-edited preserves the comma after line 6 for this reason. See *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* 157-58.

⁷If, as most scholars now assume, Sonnet 19 was composed in 1652, it is likely that Milton had already adopted the mortalist heresy. This is significant because the problem of why bad things happen to good people is salient, as the Book of Job itself makes clear at various points, because the ancient Hebrews had no clear dogma concerning the afterlife. If bad things happen to good people, but they are bound for Heaven, that eliminates the salience of the problem. In his edition of Milton’s *Complete Shorter Poems*, John Carey observes (328) that lines 9-10 of Milton’s sonnet are echoed in *Christian Doctrine* in a context at which Job 22:2 is quoted (see Milton, *Complete Prose Works* 6: 645).

⁸I quote the 1850 version of *The Prelude* throughout this essay.

⁹It is interesting to note that in “When I consider how my light is spent,” Milton subtly evades the logic of the *when / then* structure that comes to him from Shakespeare. As noted above, the sonnet’s conceptual turn comes not at the beginning of the sestet but from the middle of line 8 to the enjambed carry-over of the phrase in line 9: “but patience to prevent / That murmur [...]” One might even say, therefore, that the *then* clause or section that would normally have occurred is *prevented* from occurring by the lines on patience. For a discussion of the *when / then* structure in Shakespeare’s sonnets and in the sonnet tradition generally, see Waddington 97-104.

¹⁰I discuss these matters at greater length in my chapter on Book 5 of *The Prelude* in *The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens*; see esp. 98-103.

¹¹This essay was originally given as a talk for a panel on Milton and Wordsworth at the IAUPE conference that was held in London in July 2016. I am grateful to the other two members of the panel, Sandy Budick and Steve Fallon, for their helpful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Richard Strier and to the two anonymous readers of the essay for *Connotations*.

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