

AVENGE, O LORD

Tom Misch

When Milton wrote his great sonnet, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," he had just been engaged in one of the most bitter controversies in his life. In an anonymous pamphlet he had been attacked as a "monster, ugly, huge, bereft of sight," and he answered these charges in even more violent language. After this bitterness had passed, Milton brought forth the eloquent eighteenth sonnet, believed by many critics to be his greatest.

Macaulay, in his essay on Milton, writes that "(Milton's) sonnets are more or less striking according to the occasion which gave birth to them are more or less interesting. They are . . . dignified by a sobriety and greatness of mind to which we know not where to look for a parallel."

The noble and lofty spirit which animates Milton's best work is certainly present in this excellent verse. Whatever technical defects it may have in the strict forms of the sonnet are easily forgotten. One needs only to read this sonnet aloud to realize Milton's achievement. The power of the poem's sound is the power of music: the deep rolling tones of organ music, similar to, yet more effective than the appeal of "At a Solemn Music." The assonance of all the last syllables of the first eight lines is not a defect; rather it enhances their value. For here, the long syllables of "bones," "cold," "old," "groans," and "soul" furnish a recurrent sound that is completely in keeping with the full tone of the sonnet. These tones augment effectively the expression of the poet's passionate concern for the Vaudois. The recurrent use of the long "o" throughout the poem continuously reveals the tones of supplication.

Milton's choice of image-producing words in this sonnet deserves special attention. "Slaughtered saints" may be qualified alliteration, but it provokes an image that is at once powerful, terrible, and demanding compassion. The emotion is sustained in

. . . Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all the Italian fields, . . .

again by the repetition of the long "o" in "sow" and "O'er." Here the sound in the verse is of primary importance.

Most adverse criticism of this sonnet seems to be directed at the absence of a pause at the center—a lack of contrast between what should be the first and second part. This should occur (according to Hilaire Belloc*) in the ninth line. Further Belloc believes that the appeal of a sonnet should run in a crescendo: in this sonnet, the emotion is sustained. And Belloc maintains that this sonnet "dates." It is no longer necessary to flee from the Babylonian woe (or Pope). This critic does defend the slanted history of the sonnet when he declares that "bad history makes good verse."

According to Matthew Arnold, the grand style occurs in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or severity a serious subject. Milton's "Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints" is a sonnet in the grand style severe.

*Hilaire Belloc, Milton, New York, D. Appleton 1923, p. 213.

SONNET XVIII — On the late Massacher in Piemont, by John Milton

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 Heav'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 hunder'd-fold, who having learnt thy way
Early may fly the Babylonian wo.
