Typological Symbolism In Milton's Sonnet XXIII

by John C. Ulreich

Although it has lately been illuminated by a good deal of scholarly and critical attention, Milton's sonnet on his "late espoused Saint" has yet to find a truly satisfactory interpretive solution.[1] Analyses of the poem continue to be troubled by problems of merely literal interpretation—in particular by the allusion in lines 5-6:

> Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint
> Purification in the old Law did save.[2]

Failing an adequate explication of these lines, the structure of the sonnet remains partially in doubt, and its vision is to that degree obscured.[3]

An understanding of typological symbolism helps greatly to clarify the poem. Read typologically, the phrase "old Law" suggests a two-fold allusion, to the Gospel of Luke as well as to Leviticus; the significance of "Purification" is thus spiritual rather than merely ritualistic. Once the function of this allusion has been accurately defined, it becomes possible to see the structure of the poem in coherent, typological perspective. Finally, that structural analysis provides an objective framework for interpreting the poet's vision.

Milton's reference to "Purification in the old Law" is invariably glossed as an allusion to the twelfth chapter of Leviticus, which describes the rite of purification after childbirth:

> And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled . . . she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtle-dove, for a sin offering. (12:6-7)

There is, however, another even more appropriate scriptural allusion in the New Testament, for which the old law of Leviticus is a source:

> And when the days of . . . [Mary's] purification *according to the* [*old*] *law of Moses* were accomplished, they brought . . . [Jesus] to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord . . . and [in the words of Leviticus] *to offer a sacrifice . . . a pair of turtle doves*. (Luke 2:22,24)[4]

Milton's "old Law" suggests that Luke rather than Leviticus is the primary referent of his allusion, which must therefore be understood typologically. The phrase simultaneously identifies the Old Testament and implies the New by distinguishing the old letter from the new spirit. The image of ritual purification is ironic rather than literal, for the law is powerless to save; it can "discover sin, but not remove" (*PL* XII.290). Milton's saint comes *as* one saved because real purification is spiritual and figurative, not literal and ceremonial; the law is *old* because it has been transcended by the new covenant of faith.

One function of the law, however, is to inform "by types / And shadows" (*PL* XII.232-33); although the letter is void, its spirit is not: "it is the tablet of the law, so to speak, that is alone changed, its injunctions being now written by the Spirit in the hearts of believers."[5] Because the old letter prefigures its fulfillment by the new spirit, typological allusions invariably require double vision. Moses, for example, was a literal type of the law, "who could not bring the children of Israel into the land of Canaan."[6] In his office of Mediator, however, Moses is a spiritual type of Christ: "Mediator, whose high Office now / *Moses* in figure bears" (*PL* XII.240-41). The allusion in the sonnet is likewise two-fold: "as whom . . . Purification in the old Law did save" refers both to one whom ritual purification could not save from original sin ("child-bed taint") *and* to the one (Mary) who *was* saved, not by law, but by Christ's sacrifice. Within the space of these two lines, the poem begins to move from "shadowy Types" of ritual to symbolic Truth, from the letter which kills to the spirit which gives life:

> from Flesh to Spirit,
> From imposition of strict Laws, to free
> Acceptance of large Grace, from servile fear
> To filial, works of Law to works of Faith.
> (*PL* XII.303-06)

II

Once the function of *Purification* is clearly apprehended, the structure of the poem falls into coherent perspective. The development of images, from the classical, through the Hebraic, to the Christian, is dialectical—in accord, approximately, with the division into quatrain, quatrain, and sestet. The poem moves from a dimly shadowed possibility, through purification and redefinition, to a final realization; from simile ("*like* Alcestis," "*as* whom") to concrete, metaphorical presence; and from the mere outward shape of a dream to the inward reality of vision.

Like Old Testament law, pagan myth is to be interpreted as a shadow of Christian truth. Typologically, Alcestis's self-sacrifice and resurrection are associated with Christ's: her subsequent need for purification foreshadows Leviticus and Luke. In the same way, "Jove's great Son" suggests Christ,

the Son of God; Hercules's fabled descent into Hell is an analogue of Christian redemption. But these associations are only apparent; like the classical Muse in *Paradise Lost*, Alcestis is "an empty dream" (VII.39), a pagan fable, *pale and faint*. The allusion points to the reality of salvation, but indirectly; the image is merely external and physical, a literal shadow of inward reality.

Movement inward begins in the second quatrain; the allusion to Purification in the Old Testament initiates the moral redefinition of the pagan type, the purging of literal illusion necessary to achieve spiritual vision. The law can not *save*, but it can *discover* sin and in this way help effect man's "natural regeneration," whereby "the natural mind and will of man" are "partially renewed by a divine impulse" so that "those in whom it takes place are said to be enlightened, and to be endued with power to will what is good."[8] And this recovery from natural corruption makes possible man's supernatural regeneration, "whereby the old man being destroyed, the inward man is regenerated by God after his own image, insomuch that he becomes as it were a new creature."[9] By this means the purified shadow of Alcestis is transfigured, remade in the spirit of "Love, sweetness, goodness," "the radiant image" of God (*PL* III.63). Pagan, Hebraic, and Christian images are thus characterized respectively as physical (literal), moral (allegorical), and spiritual (symbolic): the poem works typologically to transform the emotionally charged pagan image into a fully significant Christian one.

The transformation is not yet complete, however, for the New Testament antitype not only fulfills its Old Testament type, it also foreshadows the resurrection into eternal life, "such as yet once more I trust to have." Milton's saint is still veiled, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (I Corinthians 13:13). Once again the syntax is double: the parallel clauses, "Mine as whom . . . And such as," indicate both (1) similarity: *like* one purified (in but not *of* the old Law) and *like* one whom I hope to see again (since she has been saved in Christ) and (2) difference: *as though* purified but not yet *such as* I hope to see fully (at the Resurrection). As Alcestis, intellectually purified (by Hebrew law), prefigures Milton's veiled Saint, and as the myth of Hercules, half man, half god, prefigures the Incarnate Word, so the Incarnation itself prefigures the Resurrection into Eternal Life. Consequently, there are not three typological levels in the poem but four.[10] On the literal, emotional level, Alcestis is apparently *saved* by Jove's great Son and *restored* to her husband. Real salvation begins on the moral level and is completed on the spiritual; Milton's saint is *saved* by the Son of God. Her *restoration*, however, can take place only on the substantial level. Leviticus specifies that "a lamb of the first year" shall be offered as a sacrifice; in Luke the ceremonial law is fulfilled, morally by Mary, spiritually by Christ; in Revelation,[11] Christ himself becomes the sacrificial lamb, as well as the "glad husband" of his purified bride, who is Milton's "espoused Saint."

III

That consummation, however, is only shadowed by the poem, not realized by it; an analysis of its structure is only a starting point for an interpretation of the poem as a whole. Against the triumphant evolution of types Milton has balanced a sense of overwhelming loss: "I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night." And the typological structure of the poem, as I have tried to define it, does not correspond in any obvious way with what most readers feel to be its emotional force. Any attempt to interpret the poem, therefore, is faced with a two-fold problem: it must give some account of the experience of the poem, but it must also describe the relationship of that experience to the formal structure in which it is expressed.

It is difficult to define the emotion of the poem. One source of its power is clearly personal; Milton's blindness, for example, unquestionably contributes to our shock of recognition. Nonetheless, the shock is poetic rather than simply pathetic; it is created by the poem, not simply recorded from the poet's experience. By its very nature, poetic recreation is, in part at least, impersonal and conventional. On the other hand, it will not do to regard Milton's wife as simply a *donna angelica* after Dante or the poem as primarily a Petrarchan dream vision. Although Milton's wife is not the subject of the poem in any narrowly literal way, she is included in that subject, *as his wife*; that relationship marks a crucial difference from Beatrice, or Laura, as well as from the mistresses of Elizabethan sonneteers. Between the extremes of a personal and an impersonal reading there is no choosing, nor does the poem really lie in some mean between the two. In these terms, the most one could say is that the sonnet is both—a profoundly personal expression of a transcendent emotion. But such a formula tells very little about the specific quality of the poem. One does better, perhaps, to

speak of the ways in which conventions are reshaped by the poet's experience and by his art, to study the particular effects of rhythm, rhyme, and structure upon the substance of the poem. But even when one has explored the various means by which emotion is brought into submission and released by the discipline of form, the poem continues to possess a spontaneous power quite beyond the reach of mere technical excellence.

To identify that spontaneous energy one must move beyond the critical categories so far suggested to consider the relation between personal emotion and the aesthetic emotion which gives it shape. It is at this point that typological reading can be of assistance, for we have by no means exhausted the resources of the poet's symbolism. From the very first, Hercules' successful rescue of Alcestis inevitably suggests the countertype of Orpheus and his "half-regained Eurydice" (*L'Allegro*, 149),[12] and this countertype continues to function throughout the poem, not simply as a type of Christian sacrifice, but as an archetype of love and loss:

> But O, as to embrace me she inclin'd,
> I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my
> night.

The story that Milton re-presents is not the triumph of Christ but the failure of Orpheus, as it is narrated by Ovid: "He stretched out his arms, eager to catch her or to feel her clasp; but, unhappy one, he clasped nothing but the yielding air."[13] The basic pattern of experience in the poem is that of Orphic myth.

Given Milton's life-long identification of himself with the ancient poet-priest, his first-person recreation of the myth seems inevitable. Very early, in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, he had identified Orpheus with the creative power of poetry:

> bid the soul of *Orpheus* sing
> Such notes as, warbled to the string,
> Drew Iron tears down *Pluto's* cheek,
> And made Hell grant what Love did seek.
> (*Il Penseroso*, 105-8)[14]

Later, in *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*, Orpheus's redeeming love for Eurydice is swallowed up by the overwhelming tragedy of his own fate; he suggests not so much the power of imagination as the impotence of merely pagan inspiration. In *Lycidas*, the classical Muse is helpless:

> What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore,
> The Muse herself, for her enchanting son
> Whom Universal nature did lament . . . ? (58-60)

As she is in *Paradise Lost*: "nor could the Muse defend / Her Son" (VII.37-38). In Sonnet 23, Milton returns to the love story yet once more, and his own identification with the ancient poet is all the more profound for being implicit rather than explicit. Freed from topical associations with the "barbarous dissonance" and "wild Rout" (*PL* VII.32,34) of seventeenth-century England, the myth seems less narrowly allegorical, more deeply impersonal. Orphic associations in the sonnet are more complex, less unequivocably negative than in *Paradise Lost*, far more ambivalent than in *Il Penseroso*; Milton's early confidence has been regenerated into a mature faith, grounded in agonized self-doubt, but that very doubt draws the poem closer to the experience of the original myth, which includes both momentary triumph and desolating loss. The poem is not "about" Orpheus rather than Milton, but it is in large measure a recreation of the archetypal poet, and his voice can be heard speaking through the voice of the poem.

Milton's identification with Orpheus defines the emotional content of the poem. Because his experience is mythic, the poet is able to give universal expression to his personal feeling. The sonnet does express the very particular experience which George Boas described as the "pathos of the blind man's reaching after his dead wife in a dream."[15] But the experience of the poem is also general, as Leo Spitzer has suggested; as the embodiment of literary tradition, it represents the conventional "problem of the ideal in our world."[16] And the synthesis of these extremes is more than their sum: the poem fuses particular and universal in a concrete symbol. Considered archetypally, the sonnet describes the struggle of the human imagination to realize itself; indeed, the poem *is* such an imaginative act. As Orpheus tries to redeem Eurydice, to invest her shadow with substantial life, so Milton attempts to substantiate the shadowy image of his wife, to transform his dream into vision. The poet loves his wife as he does his Muse; the personal emotion of the poem is ultimately identical with its aesthetic emotion. The act of making the poem is the experience which the poem represents.

Once the experience of the poem has been determined, the appropriateness of its structure becomes apparent. By identifying himself with Orpheus, by assimilating himself into the archetype, the poet is able to recreate it from within, so that the myth becomes, as it were, conscious of itself. The typological structure of the sonnet reflects that self-consciousness; it is not imposed on the original matter of myth but articulated from it; through the poet's awareness the latent meaning of the type is fulfilled, and the myth is transformed. Milton does not, like Orpheus, try

to embrace his saint, but she him. This delicate but crucial variation suggests (among other things) that he does not so much actively seek to possess his vision as desire to be possessed by her, and thus her love becomes more significant than his lost desire. (The sacrificial image of Alcestis presses directly on this point.) Because his love is charitable rather than merely erotic, because it is the expression of faith, the poet is able to reach beyond the despair which ends Orpheus's experience. The anguish of "day brought back my night" is real, but its finality is only apparent, because the speaker's present helplessness is qualified by his future hope: "such as yet once more I trust to have / Full sight of her." From a shadowy type of pagan hopelessness Milton has evolved the substantial antitype of Christian hope.

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NOTES

[1]Criticism of the sonnet is summarized by A.S.P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* (New York, 1972), II, 486-501.

[2]Milton's poetry is quoted from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

[3]John Huntley, the only recent critic who has dealt specifically with this allusion, concludes that it is obscure and that, consequently, the sonnet is a "partial failure" ("Milton's 23rd Sonnet," *ELH*, 24 [1967], 468-81).

[4]My italics: Milton's "old Law" is Luke's "according to the law of Moses."

[5]*Christian Doctrine* I.xxvii (Hughes, p. 1010b). Milton quotes Matthew 5:7: "think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."

[6]*CD* I.xvi, in *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson, *et al.* (New York, 1931-38), XVI, 111. (Hereafter cited as *Works*)

[7]See Martin Mueller, "The Theme and Imagery of Milton's Last Sonnet," *Archiv fur das Studium der neueren Sprachen and Literaturen*, 201 (1964), 267; and F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton, 1949), p. 130.

[8]*CD* I.xvii (*Works*, XV, 345).

[9]*CD* I.xviii (*Works*, XV, 349).

[10]Typological development in the sonnet proceeds through the four levels of medieval allegory: from physical letter through moral trope and spiritual type to substantial anagogue. See, for example, Dante's letter to Can Grande, translated by Nancy Howe, in *Essays on Dante*, ed. Mark Musa (Bloomington, Ind., 1964), p. 37.

[11]Milton's saint comes "vested all in white": "Those that are arrayed in the white robes, who are they and whence come they? . . . These are they that come out of great tribulation and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb" (Revelation 7:13-14).

[12]For the identification of Hercules and Orpheus as types of Christ, as well as for Milton's self-identification with Orpheus, see Don C. Allen, "Milton and the Descent to Light," *JEGP*, 60 (1961), 614-30; see also Carolyn W. Mayerson, "The Orpheus Image in *Lycidas*," *PMLA*, 64 (1949), 189-207.

[13] *Metamorphoses* X.58-59, translated by Frank Justus Miller, in the Loeb Classics edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1916).

[14]The corresponding lines in *L'Allegro* are tentative, but they imply the same confidence that Orpheus might "have quite set free / His half-regained *Eurydice*." (145-50)

[15]"The Problem of Meaning in the Arts," *Meaning and Interpretation*, University of California Publications in Philosophy, 25 (1950), 319.

[16]"Understanding Milton," in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. A. Hatcher (Princeton, 1962), p. 127.