

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM OF MILTON'S SONNETS

by

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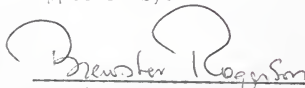
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Table of Contents

Nineteenth-Century Criticism of Milton's Sonnets.....	1
List of Works Cited.....	21
Appendix: Tentative Checklist of Nineteenth- Century Commentary on the Sonnets.....	22

It was a quality of the English Sonnet before Milton, that it was 'artificially drawn'; he overcame that tradition, and it is the merit of his sonnets that they are the natural forcible utterance, recorded at the time, of emotions actually felt, and not merely imagined by the poet for the sake of expression in language which he has at his command; the exercise of an instinctive faculty whose cultivation and indulgence are merely a source of refined pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

So states Alden Sampson, Harvard litterateur, in 1886, and such is the general reception of Milton's sonnets in the nineteenth century. To the nineteenth century "the English Sonnet before Milton" is the sonnet as practiced by the Elizabethans, mainly but not exclusively in the great decade of the 1590's, when Sidney, Shakespeare, Drayton, Daniel, and many another cultivated the genre. At the hands of these Elizabethans, the sonnet came to have a settled form, at least in the externals, and a settled subject matter, to the extent that most such poems dealt with love. Milton, however--as Sampson suggests, rejected both the form and the favorite subject matter of the Elizabethan sonnet.<sup>2</sup>

B.A. Wright, in the twentieth century, summarizes how Milton differs from the Elizabethans: his sonnets are "...less literary, less prone to the conventional borrowed phrases, images and ideas of the genre; each is a personal and characteristic utterance,

<sup>1</sup>Alden Sampson, Milton's Sonnets (New York, 1886), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>For his own purposes he chose to return to a basically Petrarchan (or, better, Italian) structure, and in so doing earned for these poems a special place in the English history of the form.

arising from an actual occasion and perfectly adapted in manner to the person addressed. These intimate and familiar poems reveal a Milton very different from the 'surly Republic(an)' imposed on the minds of his countrymen by Dr. Johnson."<sup>3</sup>

Far different is the nineteenth-century point of view. Critics in that century frequently show reluctance to praise Milton's work as a sonneteer as fully as Wright does because of their uneasiness with apparent liberties Milton has taken with sonnet structure; however, Milton's innovations in subject matter generally receive approval if not outright praise from these same critics.

On the subject of nineteenth-century criticism of Milton's sonnets little has been written. Though there have been in this century two fine editions of Milton's sonnets,<sup>4</sup> aside from a few comments in Smart's introduction the only noteworthy examination of such criticism is a rather brief chapter in James G. Nelson's The Sublime Puritan / Milton and the Victorians.<sup>5</sup> Nelson, in addition to surveying the Victorian criticism, discusses the Miltonic sonnet in relation to political and religious sonnets of the Victorian period. He finds that Milton's sonnets were considered praiseworthy "...because the readers preferred a sonnet which created a tone of earnest sincerity as a fitting back-

<sup>3</sup>Preface to the reprint of The Sonnets of Milton, ed. J.S. Smart (Oxford, 1966), p. vi.

<sup>4</sup>The Sonnets of Milton, ed. John S. Smart (Glasgow, 1921), and Milton's Sonnets, ed. E.A.J. Honigsmann (New York, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>(Madison, Wisconsin, 1963).

ground for an intimate, personal subject matter presented in a simple, clear, dignified manner."<sup>6</sup> Nelson further asserts: "...the Miltonic sonnet of the Victorian period had its impetus in emotionally disturbing events such as the Oxford Movement or the tense political repercussions on the Continent in 1848, and, therefore, was most often devoted to religious or political themes."<sup>7</sup>

Nineteenth-century criticism of Milton centers, of course, upon Paradise Lost; his reputation in that period, as in all others since his death, depends primarily upon the views that readers and critics have taken of that poem. Commentary upon his other works is scanty by comparison, except in systematic surveys of his writings, and with the possible exception of Lycidas there is not another work of Milton that has an independent critical tradition stretching over a long period of time. The body of nineteenth-century criticism and scholarship on the sonnets, as might be expected, is inconspicuous against the background of all that was written on Milton in the period, and no very coherent pattern can be elicited from it. Yet there is ample evidence of interest in the sonnets, not only on the part of the poets who learned from Milton's achievements in the form, but on the part of critics as well. It is the purpose of this report to examine the views of seven commentators on the sonnets, representative and unrepresentative, in order to exhibit

<sup>6</sup>op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>op. cit., p. 29.

the variety of approaches and attitudes that characterized the nineteenth-century dealings with these poems. The critics, taken in roughly chronological order, are the following:

(1) Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, who condemns Milton's sonnets for being too majestic and therefore unsuitable to the genre.

(2) Thomas Macaulay, who praises the sonnets for their personal quality.

(3) James Glassford, who praises the sonnets for those qualities which have precedent in Della Casa.

(4) Leigh Hunt, who criticizes Milton's handling of rhyme yet praises the "affecting" power of the sonnets.

(5) Charles Tomlinson, who censures Milton for his departures from the practices of Petrarch.

(6) Mark Pattison, who both praises and condemns Milton's apparent innovations in the genre.

(7) William Sharp, who praises Milton as the founder of a new type of sonnet, but nevertheless censures him as an inferior sonnet practitioner.

In the face of such a list, it may well be asked, where are the celebrated critics of the age? Where is Coleridge? Where Arnold? What about the second line of literary personages who were practicing critics, and who also were influential: De Quincey, Swinburne, and Leslie Stephen? Surely it is necessary to bring such figures into the scene. But the truth is that though each of them has a distinct relation to Milton, only one of them--Leigh Hunt--has anything to say about his sonnets

in particular. Thus, however relevant they may be to the total accounting of Milton's reputation in the nineteenth century, they form no part of the present topic.

# I

Bridging the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century critics in time if not in viewpoint is Thomas Sedgwick Whalley. Clergyman, gentleman, poet, and traveller, Whalley lived during the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth; his views parallel Samuel Johnson's observation that "Milton...could not carve heads upon cherrystones."<sup>8</sup> A characteristic eighteenth-century genre critic,<sup>9</sup> Whalley comments disapprovingly on Milton's sonnets. Although he finds in them gravity and dignity, these qualities he deems unsuitable to the genre:

The sonnets of Petrarch, equally and universally admired by the learned and unlearned in Italy. This far from being the case with Milton's, who is only an imitator, and surely a coarse one, of this master and inventor of the sonnet.... Gray and Johnson, two great authorities, thought little of Milton's sonnets. A little woman affecting great majesty of deportment, rather ridiculous. She may have all the grace imaginable, and grace becomes her, as it does a beautiful lap dog, but would not the latter appear laughable, if affecting in its looks and motions, the energetic dignity and grave resolute air of the mastiff? The Miltonic sonnet, is like the pigmy affecting the strut of the giant. Swift's Lilliputian's grace and tenderness become him, and you love and take a lively interest in the dear little creature; but when he puts on the hero, and talks

<sup>8</sup>Quoted by Smart, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>I am using "genre criticism" to denote that method of judging a work's merits on the basis of its conformity to the properties of other works in its class, or genre.

with grave importance of high and mighty deeds,  
 you laugh at and despise him.... Forgive me, if  
 I say, that the contracted dignity, the forced  
majesty of the Miltonic sonnet, too often reminds  
 me of the diminutive hero Tom Thumb, who swaggers  
 and slashes with a sword as long and as stout as  
 any stocking needle.<sup>10</sup>

Dignity and majesty are qualities which subsequent nineteenth-century commentators also find in Milton's sonnets, but Whalley is the only critic in the period to condemn these qualities in the sonnets, placing his genre emphasis on tone and subject matter, which, to Whalley's mind, should embody grace and tenderness. The critic's eighteenth-century viewpoint also manifests itself in that his aroumentum ad verecundiam, his appeal to authority, is to a pair of noted eighteenth-century men of letters, Gray and Johnson.

There is also in Whalley's approach of genre criticism a misconception not necessarily eighteenth-century in nature, and it recurs frequently in nineteenth-century criticism of Milton's sonnets. The misconception is that Petrarch was Milton's model. Subsequent scholarship by James Glassford, John S. Smart, and others, has revealed Giovanni Della Cesa and Cardinal Bembo as Milton's models; Milton emulated them in prosody, tone, and subject matter. As long as critics assumed that Milton was attempting to emulate Petrarch, they could hardly fail to be disappointed in his performance, for there is little in him that is "Petrarchan."

A significantly different strand in nineteenth-century criticism is represented by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1825.

<sup>10</sup>Journals and Correspondence, ed. Hill Wickham (London, 1863), pp. 256-257. The italics are mine.



It is the biographical nature of the sonnets which Macaulay singles out for praise:

They are simple but majestic records of the poet; as little tricked out for the public eye as his diary would have been. A victory, an expected attack upon the city, a momentary fit of depression or exultation, a jest thrown out against one of his books, a dream which for a short time restored to him that beautiful face over which the grave had closed forever, led him to musings, which, without effort, shaped themselves into verse. The unity of sentiment and severity of style which characterizes these little pieces remind us of the Greek Anthology, or perhaps still more of the Collects of the English Liturgy....

The Sonnets are more or less striking, according as the occasions which gave birth to them are more or less interesting. But they are, almost without exception, dignified by a sobriety and greatness of mind to which we know not where to look for a parallel.<sup>11</sup>

The accent on the personal, the diary-like quality which moves Macaulay to praise, reveals the critic working from a definitely Romantic perspective. Two further indications of Macaulay's Romantic outlook evidence themselves in his comment that events in Milton's life "led him to musings, which, without effort [*italics mine*], shaped themselves into verse." First, Macaulay speaks of "verse" rather than "sonnets"; he utterly discards genre considerations. Second, to the critic the works seem to have come directly from the heat of inspiration, that quality Wordsworth so emphasized, for they shaped themselves "without effort."

## II

In 1834, James Glassford, a translator of Italian sonnets and of Latin works by Lord Bacon, came out with Lyrical Compo-

<sup>11</sup>Essay on Milton, ed. H.A. Smith, (Boston, 1896), pp. 30-31.

sitions Selected from the Italian Poets. James G. Nelson says that Glassford was the first critic to observe how closely Milton's sonnets correspond in structure to Della Casa's. Nelson quotes Glassford: "It is evident how much Milton profited in the formation of his style by his acquaintance with the Italian poets, and his familiar knowledge of their lyrical writers; and to none, it may be presumed, more than to Della Casa, who may fairly be looked upon as his prototype."<sup>12</sup> Nelson also notes that Glassford praises both Della Casa and Milton for their freer sentence arrangement, which involves, in Glassford's words, carrying

the sense from the close of one line to the beginning or middle of that which follows, thus suspending the attention of the reader, and avoiding the monotony which is produced by a uniform termination of the sentence at the close of the line or couplet. The advantage is not merely to give a relief by the varieties of the pause, but often to add much force and grandeur to the sentiment itself, by arresting the reader at a place and time unexpected, and forcing him, as it were, to halt for a moment and consider. In this manner his compositions possess, as to their style, both the beauty of rhyme and the solemnity and varied cadence of blank verse.<sup>13</sup>

Glassford is the only nineteenth-century critic to point out that Petrarch is not Milton's model, and to praise both Milton and his predecessor for their departures from the orthodox Italian form. His findings seem to have been altogether

<sup>12</sup>The Sublime Puritan, p. 161, n. 11. Nelson's quotation from Glassford is from Lyrical Compositions (Edinburgh, 1846), pp. 587-588.

<sup>13</sup>Nelson, p. 163, n. 30; Glassford, p. 587.

ignored. Later critics continue to look at Petrarch as Milton's model, just as Whalley did, and to censure Milton for breaking tradition.

### III

Leigh Hunt is among those critics who disregarded Glassford's findings. He notes Milton's nonconformity to Petrarchan rules of structure, and offers praise to the poet: "...he has hardly left us one [sonnet] in which the rules respecting the division of quatrain and terzettes are not broken, and the music as the whole fourteen lines merged into a strain of his own."<sup>14</sup> Even though Hunt sees Milton's handling of the pause between octave and sestet as a musical and praiseworthy achievement, he is nevertheless uneasy about the poet's handling of rhyme: Milton's sonnets have "...this unmusical and therefore remarkable deterioration...they are unhappy and monotonous in their rhymes. Few of them, either English or Italian, are exempt from this fault."<sup>15</sup> Monotony of rhyme arises from repetition of the same vowel sound in the line-ending syllables; Hunt's objection to this is characteristic of those critics of the period who look on Petrarch as Milton's model. Hunt adds, "Criticisms on rhymes appear trifling and hypercritical, and in the case of the long poems would be so; but they are otherwise in respect to compositions that are at once so brief and so full of musical requirement

<sup>14</sup>Book of the Sonnet (Boston, 1867), pp. 79-80.

<sup>15</sup>op. cit., p. 80.

as sonnets."<sup>16</sup> However, Hunt mitigates this criticism with praise of the "affecting" power of the sonnets: "Most affecting, nevertheless, are those two sonnets; noble the one on the Assault Intended to the City; charming the Invitation to Lawrence; and masterly in passages all the rest."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Hunt also views Petrarch as Milton's model, and is consequently in part uncomfortable with the Miltonic sonnet. Yet he does concede that "The sonnet was too obvious a resource for expressing any emotion whatsoever, to be restricted to formalities so pedantic; and accordingly it finally obeyed no laws in general but those that are essential to all good poetry, with the exception of such as were necessary to render it what it was, and to secure for it that completeness, and that freedom from blemish, which alone can render a small thing precious."<sup>18</sup>

To Hunt's mind, Milton's sonnets are good, but not the best, for they rank below those of Wordsworth; Hunt cites Blackwood's Magazine:

It is allowed on all hands, now, that there are no sonnets in any language comparable with Wordsworth's. Even Milton must yield the palm. He has written but about a dozen or so,--Wordsworth some hundreds: and though nothing can surpass 'the inspired grandeur of that on the Piedmontese Massacre, the tenderness of those on his Blindness and on his Deceased Wife, the grave dignity of that to a Young Lady, or the cheerful and Attic grace of those to Lawrence and Cyriac Skinner,' as is finely said by the writer of an article in the 'Edinburgh Review' on Glassford's 'Lyrical Translations,' yet many

<sup>16</sup>ibid.

<sup>17</sup>ibid.

<sup>18</sup>op. cit., p. 11.

of Wordsworth's equal even these; and the long and splendid array of his sonnets--deploying before us in series after series--astonishes us by the proof it affords of the inexhaustible riches of his imaginative genius and his moral wisdom.

Hunt's comment: "Most true is this."<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to say what view Hunt took of Glassford's denial that Petrarch was Milton's model. But whether he accepted it or not, it is perhaps irrelevant to the moral and aesthetic judgment by which he found the sonnets of Wordsworth richer than Milton's.

As does Hunt, Charles Tomlinson considers Petrarch to be Milton's model. A student of Italian literature, translator of Dante and Dante lecturer at University College, London, Tomlinson in 1874 published a book on the sonnet, in which he professed to set down the ideal specifications for the form.<sup>20</sup> He showed himself a highly legalistic disciple of Petrarch, especially in regard to structure; for him the merit of the sonnet--or so it seems--was directly proportional to its closeness to the Platonic ideal as realized on earth by Petrarch. Sonnet form, he declared, is "built up of parts or quatrains, the Basi or bases of the structure; and of tercets or Volte, turnings or roads to which the basi point....each quatrain has its peculiar office or function,

<sup>19</sup>"Wordsworth and Milton," The Seer, vol. I (1840) (Boston, 1865), p. 204.

<sup>20</sup>The Sonnet: Its Origin, Structure, and Place in Poetry (London).

as well as each tercet, and hence they should be kept distinct, and not be run into each other,--as distinct as the separate parts of the Greek choral ode."<sup>21</sup> On this subject he was emphatic, adding elsewhere that the second quatrain "should not be run into the first tercet, but close with a full point."<sup>22</sup> Bearing in mind such sonnets as "When I consider how my light is spent" or "On the Late Massacre in Piemont," it is hardly surprising that Tomlinson could not altogether approve of Milton as a sonneteer. He offered him high praise, but with qualification: "The best English sonnets, according to the Italian type, are, in my opinion, those of Milton....Although Milton does not always close his second quatrain with a full point, and is not sufficiently varied in his rhymes, he is closer to the Italian type than any other English poet."<sup>23</sup> The standards for rhyming in the genre Tomlinson presents with particularity: "The rhymes must be sufficiently varied and contrasted without being forced, and must fall into their places so naturally as never to suggest the idea that a word, much less a line, is introduced for the sake of the rhyme."<sup>24</sup> The critic further legislates that the "quatrains must not contain more than two nor the tercets more than three rhymes"; and in a quatrain the rhyming pairs must not use the same vowel sound.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>23</sup>op. cit., pp. 74-75.

<sup>24</sup>op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>25</sup>ibid.

A further genre rule which Tomlinson declares is that "there must be no obscurity of meaning, no sense of irrelevancy or insufficiency; but the poem must go on increasing in interest and lead up to an impressive close."<sup>26</sup>

Tomlinson provides perhaps the fullest statement of any of the genre critics, and his dissatisfaction with Milton is the strongest note since the comments of Johnson and Whalley. Of all those nineteenth-century critics who saw Petrarch as Milton's model, Tomlinson is the hardest to please. He displays no sympathy with other critics, such as Macaulay, who value the biographical element in the sonnets. Glassford and the correspondences with Della Casa he does not consider.

#### IV

A prominent biographer of Milton and editor of Milton's sonnets, Mark Pattison makes what Nelson terms "the classic statement of the Victorian attitude toward the sonnet."<sup>27</sup> With their mixed praise and censure of Milton's apparent innovations, Pattison's remarks embody perhaps the dominant view of the nineteenth century toward Milton's sonnets. Smart comments that "...Pattison, in his Edition of the Sonnets, has censured [Milton] for irregularity, violation of laws, rebellion and literary anarchism."<sup>28</sup> He quotes Pattison's remark, "To that arch-rebel, rule

<sup>26</sup> op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> op. cit., p. 22.

and law were as a thread of tow, if they could not justify themselves to reason."<sup>29</sup> Despite such censure by Pattison, there is present also in his comments high praise for some of Milton's innovations (although they are truly Della Casa's innovations):

Of still greater value than this restoration of the true form were the improvements wrought by Milton in the material contents of the sonnet. He at once differentiated it from the ode or the elegy, by confining each sonnet to the utterance of a single independent emotion. Not one of Milton's sonnets is so connected with its neighbor as to require to be read along with it in order to embrace the whole train of thought or feeling. Each sonnet is here a complete poem, freighted with imagery or illustration sufficient to carry home the thought.... They do not...harp perpetually on one theme.<sup>30</sup>

The "restoration of the true form"--the Italian form--is a point of primary importance to Pattison, and this certainly echoes many of the earlier comments of nineteenth-century critics. In addition, Pattison is especially pleased with Milton's departure from the Elizabethan sequences, in which a sonnet "is so connected with its neighbor as to require to be read along with it in order to embrace the whole train of thought or feeling.... [and which]"harp perpetually on one theme."

"The effectiveness of Milton's sonnets," Pattison goes on to say, "is chiefly due to the real nature of the character, person, or incident of which each is the delineation."<sup>31</sup> On examining

<sup>29</sup>op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>30</sup>The Sonnets of John Milton, ed. Mark Pattison (New York, 1883), p. 51.

<sup>31</sup>op. cit., p. 53.



the sonnet, "On the Late Massacre in Piemont," he concludes that "The new and nobler purpose to which Milton put the sonnet is here in its splendour.... Yet with what homely materials is the effect produced!"<sup>32</sup> The sonnet has nothing but one "borrowed thought...viz., Tertullian's saying, 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'....with a familiar quotation for its only thought, and with diction almost below ordinary, this forceful flood of suppressed passion sweeps along the hackneyed biblical phrases of which it is composed.... From this sonnet we may learn that the poetry of a poem is lodged somewhere else than in its matter or its thoughts, or its imagery, or its words."<sup>33</sup> "The homely materials" and "the real nature" are those qualities which Macaulay also had praised, terming it rather a diary-like quality.

The simplicity, paradoxically, is for Pattison the basis of the majesty of the sonnets. "It is the glory of the Miltonic sonnet," he asserts, "that being based upon what is common and simple it attains to the high and noble. We may compare these sonnets with a Florentine palace of the fifteenth century...whose stern grandeur, proceeding from simplicity, is more effective than cunning device or elaborate design."<sup>34</sup> This remark affords an

<sup>32</sup>op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>33</sup>op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>34</sup>op. cit., p. 57.

amusing comparison with the attitude of Whalley (previously cited), for the very thing that Pattison praises, Whalley condemns: Milton's sonnets are "A little woman affecting great majesty of deportment, rather ridiculous." Needless to say, Pattison would reject the analogy.

Pattison's remarks are characteristically Victorian in that he lauds Milton for eschewing the fancy conceits and other frills that had been properties of the sonnet throughout the Elizabethan era. And Nelson points out that although Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti find their inspiration in the Elizabethan and Italian sonneteers, several writers of the Victorian period also discard fancy conceits and frills for the purpose of writing sonnets with religious and political themes. Tennyson, Arnold, Newman, Keble, Swinburne, and Hopkins all employ Milton as a model "in their deep feeling and high principle."<sup>35</sup> Even Rossetti uses the Miltonic model for "At the Sunrise in 1848," and "On Refusal of Aid Between Nations."<sup>36</sup> Milton's greatest influence, as Pattison has observed, is in broadening the scope of subject-matter in the sonnet.

#### V

William Sharp, sonnet-writer, personal friend and biographer of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, presents yet another facet of the nineteenth-century attitude toward Milton's sonnets. In

<sup>35</sup>op. cit., pp. 29-30.

<sup>36</sup>op. cit., p. 34.

1887 he brings up once more considerations of genre, seeing Milton as the founder of a new sonnet genre, but nevertheless as a sonneteer who is only partly effective. Sharp declares:

...there can thus only be three genuine sonnet types.

THE PETRARCHAN or NATURAL SONNET (comprehending the Contemporary).

THE ENGLISH or SHAKESPEARIAN SONNET.

THE MILTONIC SONNET (any Sonnet, whether in the Petrarchan or Shakespearian mould, with unbroken continuity, metrically and otherwise, in its presentation)<sup>37</sup>

As does Tomlinson, Sharp focuses on the structure rather than the subject-matter of the sonnet, but instead of condemning Milton for deviating from the Petrarchan form (as do Tomlinson and, to some extent, Pattison), he accepts his deviations as legitimate. Yet it seems that while Sharp can accept the Miltonic form, he does not see any special advantage to it, for example, as Milton uses it in the sonnet, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," which has but three end-stopped lines and runs octave and sestet together in order to achieve the rapidity of a booming, outraged protest and curse. That he truly sees Milton as a sonneteer who is less than excellent is shown in his ranking of sonnet-writers:

Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Mrs. Browning, Rossetti. Italy herself cannot present a finer body of poetry in the mould of this form than is to be found in the collective sonnets of these great English writers. As to the vexed question of priority among these sonneteers, I need not

<sup>37</sup>Sonnets of This Century (London, 1887), p. liii.

attempt to gauge the drift of capable opinion. For myself--and this I set forward the less reluctantly as I know the opinion is shared by so many better judges than I claim to be--I would simply say (1) that the three greatest sonneteers of our language seem to me to be Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Rossetti; (2) that the two greatest, regarding their work on masses and not by this or that sonnet, or this or that group of sonnets, seem to me to be Shakespeare and Rossetti; and (3) that no poet of our own or any language could show ten sonnets equal in breadth of thought, verity of poetry, and beauty of expression to the ten greatest of Wordsworth.<sup>38</sup>

Sharp apparently sees Milton as an innovator on whose techniques Wordsworth and subsequent sonnet-writers have improved, with Rossetti bringing the form to its culmination.

## VI

Nineteenth-century critics pay almost no attention to Milton's five sonnets in Italian, and their views on the poet's sonnets in English are so varied as to display no coherent pattern. In addition, although some critics of the period concern themselves with the subject-matter of the sonnets, most of them focus their attention on the outward form. Whalley's views on the incongruity of subject-matter and tone have their strongest pre-echoes in the eighteenth century, along with comments by an anonymous critic in the Literary Magazine in 1806. Macaulay, with his emphasis on the personal quality of Milton's sonnets, has parallels in the criticisms of William Hazlitt in 1821-1822, of Wordsworth ("Scorn Not the Sonnet," 1827), of Leigh Hunt in

<sup>38</sup>op. cit., p. lvii.

1867, of Stopford A. Brooke in 1879, of James Ashcroft Noble in 1880, of the Spectator in 1883, of Alden Sampson in 1886, and of George Serrell and Sir Walter Raleigh in 1900. Glassford's praise for the structural innovations in Della Casa and Milton, and his scholarship which reveals Della Casa as Milton's model finds no parallel in the nineteenth century. Leigh Hunt's position is taken in part by both Tomlinson and Macaulay, the former supporting Hunt in his criticism on Milton's handling of rhyme, and the latter supporting Hunt's praise of the "affecting" power of the sonnets. Tomlinson, with his strong genre criticism of structure and rhyme based on the orthodox Petrarchan form, is supported in his views by Henry Hallam in 1837-1839, and in part by Hunt (as was mentioned), and Pattison in 1883. Pattison, who criticizes Milton's handling of rhyme and structure as not being in accord with strict Petrarchan rules and yet lauds Milton's seemingly unorthodox choice of subject-matter, has parallels on the one hand with those who hold in varying degrees Tomlinson's point of view, and on the other hand with the comments of Henry Reed, of James Ashcroft Noble, and of the anonymous writer of "A Talk about Sonnets" in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, all in 1880. Sharp's attitude that Milton established a new sonnet genre is voiced also by Sir Thomas Hall-Caine in 1882.

Although even certain of the most important critics of the century, Coleridge, Keats, Arnold, and Hopkins, remain silent on the specific subject of Milton's sonnets, each of them is indebted to the sonnets to some degree in his own writing. And

even though the general attitude of the century in regard to Milton's sonnets seems to be that they are praiseworthy but not the best, what praise the century does afford them must be looked at in conjunction with the vast number of important writers and critics who themselves found Milton's sonnets a fit model for their own. It is these two factors which have subsequently stimulated to a high degree the twentieth-century opinion that Milton's sonnets, whatever their relation to the sonnet tradition before or since, rank among the greatest achievements in that difficult but rewarding form.

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM OF MILTON'S SONNETS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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The nineteenth century shows evidence of interest in Milton's sonnets, not only on the part of the poets who learned from Milton's achievements in the form, but on the part of critics as well. It is the purpose of this report to examine the views of seven commentators on the sonnets, representative and unrepresentative, in order to exhibit the variety of approaches and attitudes that characterized the nineteenth-century dealings with these poems. The critics, taken in roughly chronological order, are the following:

(1) Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, who condemns Milton's sonnets for being too majestic and therefore unsuitable to the genre.

(2) Thomas Macaulay, who praises the sonnets for their personal quality.

(3) James Glassford, who praises the sonnets for those qualities which have precedent in Della Casa.

(4) Leigh Hunt, who criticizes Milton's handling of rhyme yet praises the "affecting" power of the sonnets.

(5) Charles Tomlinson, who censures Milton for his departures from the practices of Petrarch.

(6) Mark Pattison, who both praises and condemns Milton's apparent innovations in the genre.

(7) William Sharp, who praises Milton as the establisher of a new genre, but nevertheless censures him as an inferior sonnet practitioner.

Although even certain of the most important critics of the century, Coleridge, Keats, Arnold, and Hopkins, remain silent on the specific subject of Milton's sonnets, each of them is indebted to the sonnets to some degree in his own writing. And even though the general attitude of the century in regard to Milton's sonnets seems to be that they are praiseworthy but not the best, what praise the century does afford them must be looked at in conjunction with the vast number of important writers and critics who themselves found Milton's sonnets a fit model for their own. It is these two factors which have subsequently stimulated to a high degree the twentieth century opinion that Milton's sonnets, whatever their relation to the sonnet tradition before or since, rank among the greatest achievements in that difficult but rewarding form.