Taking a Stand for Milton’s Speaker: An Argumentative Letter Addressed to Gossman and Whiting, Critics of John Milton’s Sonnet “XIX”

To Ann Gossman and George W. Whiting,

As a scholar conscious of the dissonance surrounding John Milton’s sonnet “XIX” or “When I consider how my light is spent,” I am compelled to address with both consideration and criticism your essay titled “Milton’s First Sonnet on His Blindness.” I will first acknowledge the crux of your argument, that the poetic talents of Milton’s speaker are rendered “useless” following his blindness and that such loss of sight subjects him to an existence of resignation and crushed faith (370). As well, I will explore the essays of Roger L. Slakey, Harry F. Robins, and Fitzroy Pyle, whom you address with resentment in regards to their positions on sonnet “XIX.” I will also introduce a counter argument—that Milton’s sonnet “XIX” demonstrates initial despair for his or his speaker’s condition but concludes with confidence for his future, his poetics, and his God; and with passion for his religious duties. To strengthen my stance, I will provide textual and scholarly evidence from Milton, Roger L. Slakey, and Carol Barton. Finally, as your proposal states, the “assumptions and conclusions” inherent in your argument “demand strict analysis and evaluation” (364). Thus it is also my aim, with respect to your position, to dissect the nature of your claims and separate general accusation from fair analysis.

You begin your argument by addressing the discrepancies in interpretation between historical and “modern criticism” (364). Within the latter, you claim there is an “obsessive”
tendency to reject prior conclusions of sonnet “XIX” and instead fabricate “problems to be solved.” I agree that all literary criticism is fluid and, at times, frustratingly so; however, I insist that such a process of regarding literature through a different lens with each wave of criticism, and thus “discovering” different aspects of such works, constitutes the beauty of studying literature. There will never emerge a fixed consensus among scholars regarding a piece of literature—especially if historical. The nature of sonnet “XIX” is that of dissonance. Such conflict resides in the octave, when the speaker “fondly ask[s]” and, “to prevent [his] murmur,” “Patience [. . .] soon replies” (Milton 8, 9). Surely, if dissonance makes up part of Milton’s sonnet, then the nature of consensus regarding sonnet “XIX” must also be one of dissonance. Your claim to lead scholars of Milton to “a solution of [the] alleged problems” in interpreting sonnet “XIX” is one of presumption.

Your first criticism is of Roger L. Slakey’s essay, “Milton’s Sonnet ‘on His Blindness.’” Slakey’s thesis is, in essence, that Milton’s speaker’s talent, or gift of writing, must be put to use rather than wasted in passivity. Slakey states that if the speaker “resist[s] God’s will” by succumbing to his loss, he will be exactly like “the man” in the parable of talents who “burie[s] his talent in the earth” (Slakey 125). In reply to Slakey, you argue that Milton’s speaker is unable to “use his talent in God’s service” due to his blindness. You also challenge Slakey’s mention of blindness as a talent, for which you claim “there is no basis.” However, with reference to his “Second Defense of the People of England, Against an Anonymous Libel,” Milton does not take “a firm avowal of resignation,” as you state, in response to his loss (369). When faced with the injustices of Oliver Cromwell, the criticisms of his character, and his weakened vision due to profuse writing, Milton consciously chose “the loss of [his] sight [over] the desertion of [his] duty” (640). Such duty was to make a stand for the people of England and for his own faith.
Rather than, as you state, “conclude that in his case active service was not essential” (368), Milton argues:

There is, as the apostle has remarked, a way to strength through weakness. Let me then be the most feeble creature alive, as long as that feebleness serves to invigorate the energies of my rational and immortal spirit; as long as in that obscurity, in which I am enveloped, the light of the divine presence more clearly shines; then, in proportion as I am weak, I shall be invincibly strong; and in proportion as I am blind, I shall more clearly see. (641)

In standing up for justice, Milton loses his eyesight. If Milton willingly forfeits the remainder of his sight for the sake of his faith, it would be a disservice to his fellow citizens and his God for his representative speaker to succumb to resignation and passivity in the final line of “XIX.”

I understand that the effect of Milton’s blindness on his emotional state during the composition of sonnet “XIX” “should not be minimized” (369). I argue that the speaker’s despair for the loss of his vision occurs only in the first half of the sonnet, specifically “when [he] consider[s] how [his] light is spent/ Ere half [his] days, in this dark world and wide” (1, 2). His grievance over his lost eyesight also manifests itself as fear in line 6 when he envisions his “[m]aker,” or God, “chid[ing] him for not fulfilling his earthly duties (5, 6). Indeed, Carol Barton, author of the essay “‘They Also Perform the Duties of a Servant Who Only Remain Erect on Their Feet in a Specified Place in Readiness to Receive Orders’: The Dynamics of Stasis in Sonnet XIX (‘When I Consider how My Light is Spent’),” writes how the initial lines of the sonnet “reflect the tragic recognition of an accomplished visionary” who can no longer regard through sight the world he attempts to restore (109). I acknowledge your frustration
regarding critics who nullify Milton’s speaker’s suffering; however, to discount Milton’s agency and willpower is to do disservice to his inherent strength—both as a poet and a human of faith.

In his essay titled “Milton,” Lord Macauley argues that the character of Milton was one of “sobriety and greatness of mind” (25). “Of his feelings,” writes Macauley, “he was the master and not the slave” (46). In his “Second Defense,” Milton insists that “from [his] youth [he] was devoted to the pursuits of literature, and [his] mind had always been stronger than [his] body” (626). Wouldn’t you agree that Milton’s blindness, or bodily handicap, ultimately holds no limit over the scaffolds of his mind, and that his speaker in sonnet “XIX” embodies such mental and spiritual strength? Macauley further explains that Milton’s writing, particularly his sonnets, “most strongly display[s]” such a “loftiness of spirit” (23, 24). Sonnet “XIX” is no exception. In your analysis, Mrs. Gossman and Mr. Whiting, you argue against this spirit. You state that Milton’s speaker undergoes a “spiritual crisis” and that his “spiritual balance” is never restored within the sonnet (369). I argue, along with Slakey, that it is.

Despite your argument that “now, imprisoned in darkness [. . .] he cannot henceforth render service,” I insist that the speaker’s enlightenment occurs within the confines of the sonnet (369). Indeed, the sonnet begins by acknowledging the speaker’s predicament: his “light,” representative of both physiological and religious vision, “is spent” (1). He is now subject to a “dark world” where his written talent seems “[l]odged with [him] useless” (2, 3). However, the speaker’s concept of his reality in the first half of the sonnet mirrors his initial reaction to full blindness—acknowledgement of total darkness. In your essay, you argue that critics “completely ignor[e]” this line, specifically the word “useless” (370). Not all critics reject this line, however, but regard it as a mark of the process of acceptance and then transcendence. Barton addresses line 4 in her essay and, as a response, states that Milton, and certainly his speaker in sonnet
“XIX,” “respond[s] stoically to adversity” (113). It is possible that the speaker’s declaration in line 4 regarding his “useless” talent refers not to his poetic gifts but to his eyes. Rather than “wallow[ing] in . . . indolent self-pity,” which constitutes the “murmur” (9), the speaker’s acceptance of his blindness bestows upon him the “determination to press forward undaunted . . . despite the vicissitudes of fortune” (214). Such acceptance comes in the form of patience.

I agree with Slakey when he writes that the speaker of “XIX” “begins with a limited understanding and is enlightened” (127). You are correct to state that Milton’s speaker cannot “serve actively,” but only insofar as the octave (368). “Patience” interrupts the speaker’s melancholic “murmur” (8, 9). After Milton’s speaker “present[s] [his] true account,” the voice of Patience offers him transcendence from his dissonance by excusing him from his duties due to his blindness (5, 6). Since “‘God doth not need/ [e]ither man’s work or his own gifts,’” the speaker need not dwell on his sensory limitations (9, 10). Margaret Thickstun, author of “Resisting Patience in Milton’s Sonnet 19” argues that “the speaker’s outburst seeks to provoke a response from God—a recognition of the speaker’s . . . individual value” (175). Thickstun argues that Milton’s speaker rebels against the prospect of resignation and “relinquishment of poetic ambition” (179). Although Patience intervenes to justify the speaker’s passivity in the first half of “XIX,” the speaker ultimately takes a “stand” against resignation (14). Rather than fixate on how to “bear his affliction” and accept that “his poetic career [is] also at and end” as you state, the speaker must instead seek novel ways of incorporating his talent with respect to his condition (369, 370). He will continue to perform his poetic duty despite his “useless” eyes (4).

Regarding your assumption that there is no evidence for blindness being a talent in Milton’s case, I will invoke Slakey as well as textual evidence from sonnet “XIX” to reveal otherwise. As Slakey argues, Milton’s talent is not only his “poetic gift” (127). It is also “his
blindness . . . his frustration, and whatever else makes up his life situation or present life condition.” You are right to question blindness as a talent, as it is surely a weakness— but only on the surface. In his “Second Defense,” Milton addresses his “enemies” who label his blindness as a “retribution for the transgressions of [his] pen” (640). To a critic in particular, he replies:

I would, Sir, prefer my blindness to yours: yours is a cloud spread over the mind, which darkens both the light of reason and of conscience; mine keeps from my view only the coloured surfaces of things, while it leaves me at liberty to contemplate the beauty and stability of virtue and of truth. (641)

For Milton’s speaker, blindness becomes a catalyst to “serve [God] best” (11). As Barton states, interpreting sonnet “XIX” “relies on the meaning invested in its fourteenth line” (110): “They also serve who only stand and wait” (14). With respect to the wording in the final line, I argue against you that the speaker is not “moved to protest against God’s . . . injustice,” but instead reclaims his power as an advocate of divine truth (368). To “stand” is to accept with confidence; to “wait” is to hold fast to faith.

In his essay titled “Milton’s First Sonnet on His Blindness,” Harry F. Robins writes that “a new strength might lie in [the speaker’s] very weakness” (361). Such strength pertains to the statement above. You argue against Robins, insisting that the only reason for locating strength within the speaker’s blindness is “by associating the sonnet with later statements in which Milton expressed his faith in his high destiny” (365). You must be referring to Milton’s “Second Defense,” among other prose works composed after sonnet “XIX.” You are correct to question Robins’ interpretation of the sonnet under presumptions of the date of its composition—1655. I do not want to enter a debate with you regarding whether sonnet “XIX” was composed in 1652 or 1655, as Robins addresses. However, I must acknowledge Robins’ point that Milton’s vision
“waned over a period of about eight years” (361). As such, he must have expected his total blindness. Of course, a contemplative Milton would have dedicated much thought towards the fate of his eyesight. As Barton states, Milton “consciously sacrific[ed] what was left of his previous vision” (115). Regardless of the date and to which degree it pertains to his blindness, Milton’s speaker’s predicament is not of a great enough degree to dismantle the tenacity that defines Milton within the English literary canon.

A great portion of your argument is dedicated to criticising Fitzroy Pyle’s essay titled “Milton’s First Sonnet on His Blindness.” As an aside, I find it curious that your paper shares this title with two of the authors you address with contempt: Pyle and Robins. Much of your resentment towards Pyle stems from his interpretation of the “Parable of the Talents” from The English Standard Version Bible. The “Parable of the Talents” tells a story of three slaves, each “entrusted” with a different sum of their master’s “talents” or savings. Two of the slaves use their talents efficiently to gain profit. The third slave buries his talent in the ground to protect it from thievery. When the master returns, he praises the two slaves who have earned him more talents. To them he states, “[e]nter into the joy of your master.” The third slave the master declares “wicked and slothful”. The master chides the slave, as in Milton’s sonnet “XIX,” for not “invest[ing] [his] money with the bankers” to ultimately receive the sum back “with interest.” The master then takes the third slave’s money and entrusts it to the worthiest, or first, slave. Finally, he demands the unworthy slave be cast “into the outer darkness,” “weeping” and “gnashing [his] teeth” (ESV, Matthew 25: 14-30).

In his essay, Pyle asserts that the “imagery” of sonnet “XIX” relies on the “Parable of the Talents.” He states that Milton’s speaker cries “out against the apparent impossibility of using” his talent (378). Pyle declares that the “imagery” of sonnet “XIX” relies on the “Parable of the
Talents,” specifically that which is “mercantile” in nature (379). You remark that Pyle’s interpretation of the parable is “open to question” (366), stating that within the parable “there is no hint of a mercantile transaction or of financial profit” (367). I disagree. The “Parable of the Talents” relies on the metaphor of financial gain to justify the master’s responses to each of the slaves. As such, while there is no explicit monetary gain on behalf of the master, such profit is implied when he scolds the unworthy slave. To the slave, he declares that he could have “received what was [his] own with interest” had he entrusted it to the bankers. Thus, the master was hoping to gain profit, even if indirectly, from the decisions of his slaves. You then state that the parable was “literally a business transaction,” which contradicts your previous argument regarding the lack of profit involved in the parable (368).

“In harmony with [your] interpretation” of the parable, you state that Milton knew not to use his talent “selfishly for material reward or worldly fame” (368). With respect to Milton’s “Second Defense” and the sonnet itself, I argue that utilizing his poetic gift for such selfish purposes never crossed Milton’s consciousness. Indeed, Barton argues that sonnet “XIX” reflects Milton’s “progress toward reformation of [. . .] heroic ethos” (115). In other words, it reveals his “penetrating inquiries that lead from the personal [. . .] to the universal.” Thus, if anything, blindness renders Milton more selfless than before. Contrary to your statements, Pyle does not argue that sonnet “XIX” represents Milton’s selfishness as a reaction to injustice. In essence, Pyle argues that the speaker embodies Milton’s “accumulation of doubt” towards his God in response to his total blindness (379). However, as Slakey mentiones, “[t]hose who harden their hearts will grow daily blinder” (125). In accordance with Slakey, Pyle claims that after the sestet, Milton’s speaker discards his discontent for his God and regains his faithful vision. In the final line, “Milton represents” his speaker “as standing because that is a position of preparedness”
As mentioned above, by the final line of the sonnet, Milton’s speaker reclaims his sense of individual strength and purpose.

This sense of purpose manifests itself as “restore[d] spiritual balance” (Pyle 383). I will invoke Slakey in a final argument against your statement that Milton’s “elements in conflict are not reconciled” (369). Slakey states that “the speaker [ultimately] wants to serve God” and that “his problem arises only because of the sincerity of his intention,” as well as the sincerity of his emotions (125). Sonnet “XIX” begins with raw despondency, transforms into dissonance which climaxes in the octave, gives way to acceptance, and evolves into a final declaration of resolute faith. “The inclination of the octave,” Slakey writes, “expands . . . from a desire to serve with the talent to a desire to be of service in whatever way” (126). It is the outcome of the service that matters: restored justice and restored faith. Thus, Slakey envisions sonnet “XIX” as “an affirmation” for Milton’s speaker to rise above his despair and regain his trust in God (127).

The final line of “XIX,” as you state, “tolls the end of [the speaker’s] active career” (369). “The truth is,” you cry, Milton’s speaker’s condition remains “an unmitigated calamity,” and he did not “enjoy the cool detachment” that opposing critics bestowed on him (370). I am not sure what the truth is; I am not here to claim the secret of sonnet “XIX.” I understand the tragedy of his blindness must not be diminished. However, with respect to the final line and to the character of Milton, I will speak to both Slakey and Barton when I state that the speaker’s blindness gave way to a new facet of his faith. “The yoke,” in line 11, is “made up of ability and continuing desire,” rather than detachment (Slakey 127). Such a yoke is “the very meaning of life” (130). Just because Milton’s speaker endures blindness does not render him less willing to serve his beloved God, nor less able to take a stand against injustice for the remainder of his life.
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Barton states that “we are supposed to read the final line of [s]onnet 19 as a sigh of resignation” (118). However, we are ultimately meant to transcend such a limited interpretation. In consideration of Barton, Mrs. Gossman and Mr. Whiting, I understand your inclination to reject Milton’s speaker as an active server of God. However, the nature of his future does not consist “merely” of his “wait[ing] on the Lord” (370). As a scholar conscious of Milton and his speaker, I must pay a final tribute to his character and his sonnet. Milton’s speaker was too passionate to wait passively. The proof for this presents itself through the text of the sonnet. The speaker’s range of emotions, as explored above, bursts from the page with unmatchable force. His final line, which I certainly have not ignored, reads not as a tired sigh of acquiescence, but as an individual resolution to “serve,” “stand,” and “wait” (14). He does not project himself into a future less “dark” to express this eagerness—he is already there (2). He no longer needs to “wait.” He has waded through the darkness of his affliction and now stands with confidence. He will not serve in submission, but, in an alternate sense of the word, “wait.” In light of his blindness, he invents his own method of serving God and displays the conviction with which he will wield his poetic talent.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Camilla.
Works Cited


Robins, Harry F. “Milton’s First Sonnet on His Blindness.” *The Review of English Studies* 7.28
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