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FROM ORTHODOXY TO HERESY: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SONNETS XIV AND XVIII

Timothy J. Burberry

The commentary on Milton's eighteenth sonnet ("On the Late Massacre in Piedmont") is rich and extensive. Kester Svendsen's oft-quoted 1945 essay, the first close reading of the poem, ushered in many other interpretations of its biblical imagery, as well as speech-act analyses, reader-response discussions, and at least one Foucauldian study. Yet even though a religious conflict inspired the sonnet, and although numerous interpreters have paid close attention to the work's biblical texture, no sustained theological account of the poem has been offered. The present essay seeks to fill that gap by examining the work in light of two heresies that Milton was probably thinking through when he wrote the poem, namely, Mortalism and Traducianism. Mortalism holds that, at death, the soul dies (or, in some versions, sleeps) with the body, and that both are resurrected at the end of the age. Traducianism (from Latin tradux, a shoot or sprout) is Mortalism's correlative. Like Mortalism, it assumes that the soul is corporeal, but while Mortalism draws out the logical consequences of that assumption for the end of life, Traducianism does so for its beginning, claiming that the soul is passed from one generation to the next in the act of intercourse. Milton considers each idea at length in De Doctrina Christiana, and John Shawcross surmises that the poet's thinking about the two concepts solidified between 1647 and 1655. The sonnet was probably composed in May or June 1655.

Prior to that period, Milton believed in the standard doctrine, held by Roman Catholics and Calvinists alike, that at death the soul immediately ascends to God. Lycidas's apotheosis fits this pattern, as do the souls of the Fair Infant and the Marchioness of Winchester. By the time he composed Paradise Lost, however, Mortalism had become a salient influence. Most notably, a central Mortalist tenet appears in Adam's soliloquy in Book Ten of the epic, where he intuits that at death "all of me then shall die" (792). Moreover, William Kerrigan, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, and Anthony Low have each argued that Samson Agonistes may reflect Mortalism in certain speeches by the
protagonist and Manoa. I would add that when Samson declares that the soul is "in every part" of the body (93), he echoes a central Scholastic precept that Milton relies on in *De Doctrina Christiana* when arguing in favor of Traducianism and against its opposite, Creationism, which holds that God creates a new soul every time someone is conceived. 5

The poet’s Mortalism and Traducianism matter because they comprise critical facets of his evolving heretical and radical views. Both doctrines appear to have developed concurrently with his most serious heresy, Arianism. Perhaps most importantly, the two heresies may be the only ones to have had any discernible influence on Milton’s poetry prior to *Paradise Lost*. As such, they could provide a key missing link in his evolution from orthodoxy to heterodoxy. Our present knowledge of that process can be outlined as follows: The poet was orthodox in the 1630s and 1640s, became heterodox when he composed *De Doctrina Christiana* in the 1650s, and in the next decade incorporated certain heresies into *Paradise Lost* and, perhaps, *Samson Agonistes*. Yet this bare summary does not take into account the sense of many critics that, in fact, Milton was moving away from orthodoxy before the 1650s. Regarding his Arianism, for example, Barbara Lewalski notes that "we cannot be sure when Milton abandoned [his Trinitarian] position: he wrote the Nativity ode as an orthodox Trinitarian, though his inability to complete a poem on Christ’s passion or to produce a very effective poem on the circumcision suggests that even in the 1630s the redemptive sacrifice of the incarnate Son was not at the center of his religious imagination."6 Still, no one has found specific Arian elements in the early poetry, nor have they done so with his Mortalism. Virginia Mollenkott was, apparently, the first to declare that no traces of the latter can be found in any work prior to *Paradise Lost*, and her judgment has been iterated by Norman Burns, Kerrigan, and Raymond Waddington. 7

Even so, the consensus about the lack of Mortalism in the earlier poetry has not been monolithic. Kerrigan, for instance, concedes that his own assessment is a "limiting half-truth" since it omits consideration of implicit, unstated influences the doctrine could have exercised on the poet. He then proceeds to make a compelling case for the indirect impact of Mortalism on *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. Similarly, Christopher Hill, in *Milton and the English Revolution* (1979), initially concurs with the received view when he states that "we do not know when Milton became a Mortalist." However, he follows this up with a helpful caveat:

We should not attach too much importance to the fact that the dead Edward King was described in "Lycidas" as sleeping. The "Epitaphium Damonis" (line 123), the dedication to Parliament of *The Judgment of Martin Bucer* and the sonnet which Milton
wrote to the memory of Mrs. Thomason in 1646 seem to express non-mortalist sentiments; but Milton published the poems in 1673, when his mortalism is hardly in doubt.  

Hill also notes in passing that the Piedmont sonnet “finds no consolation in immortality: its hope is that the suffering of the Vaudois will help to bring other Italians to abandon Catholicism on earth.” He thus anticipates my own reading of the poem. It is also worth noting that Hill’s intuition about potential Mortalist intimations in the pre-Paradise Lost poetry has already been confirmed in a 1994 study by A. E. B. Coldiron, which argues that Sonnet XIV (the tribute to Mrs. Thomason) accommodates both Mortalist and non-Mortalist interpretations. Because Sonnet XIV provides our first glimpse of Milton’s emerging Mortalism, I shall begin by reviewing and extending Coldiron’s findings, then proceed to the Piedmont sonnet, which, like the earlier poem, can be read as both non-Mortalist and Mortalist.

I

Milton’s interest in Mortalism seems to have begun in the early 1640s during the Toleration controversy, when The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce was consistently linked by its detractors with Richard Overton’s Mortalist treatise, Man’s Mortalitie, first published (under the initials R. O.) in 1643. That Milton read Man’s Mortalitie, met Overton, and perhaps even helped to revise the pamphlet for the new edition of 1655 are possibilities raised by Denis Saurat. While subsequent critics have attacked this supposition, Norman Burns points out that “if our caution is too great we shall fall into the error of making Milton impossibly independent, a figure who stood aloof from the intellectual and social ideas of his time and unassisted developed his own ideas of man and God.” Burns proceeds to strengthen Saurat’s conjecture by documenting the numerous similarities between Overton’s and Milton’s discussions of Mortalism, such as their privileging of 1 Corinthians 15:17–19 as a key Mortalist text, and by citing their mutual belief in Traducianism.  

Throughout the 1640s, Milton maintained a lively friendship with George and Catharine Thomason; the husband, a bookseller and pamphlet collector of both licensed and unlicensed works, purchased one of the first editions of Man’s Mortalitie on 19 January 1644. It is possible that he lent Milton this copy of Overton’s treatise, perhaps in return for four of Milton’s pamphlets that the poet had donated to Thomason’s collection. Mrs. Thomason was an avid reader and book collector in her own right, and Milton refers to her as his “Christian friend” in the manuscript title of Sonnet XIV. Moreover, his donations to the main collection ceased at her death. Anna Nardo
surmises that Milton’s “own pamphlet gifts stopped with Catharine’s death, which suggests that they may have been intended for her rather than George.”13 While we cannot know if Mrs. Thomason and the poet ever discussed Mortalism, it may be significant that Milton’s first possible allusions to the belief occur in Sonnet XTV, composed shortly after her death in December 1646. The poem, originally titled “On the Christian memory of my friend Mrs. Thomason,” can be seen as an orthodox eulogy, and indeed E. A. J. Honigmann, Barbara Lewalski, and John Leonard regard it as such.14 However, certain elements of the sonnet seem reminiscent of De Doctrina and its exploration of Mortalism.

For one thing, Honigmann observes that the work’s principal personifications, Faith and Love, constitute the two main divisions of De Doctrina: at the beginning of the seventh paragraph of the treatise’s first chapter Milton writes, “The parts of Christian doctrine are two: Faith, or Knowledge of God, and Love, or the worship of God” (YP 6:128). In the sestet of the sonnet’s first draft, the lady is escorted into the heavenly realm by Faith, the only named personification, who is seconded by Mrs. Thomason’s other personified virtues. In the final version, however, Love has joined Faith as one of the leaders: “Love led them [the virtues] on, and Faith who knew them best” (8). This elevation of Love may reflect the treatise’s statement that love is worship of God, since the lady will soon be one of heaven’s votaries.

Coldiron has identified another similarity between Milton’s discussion of Mortalism and the poem. Lines 3 and 4, “Meekly thou didst resign this earthy load / Of Death, call’d Life; which us from Life doth sever,” utilize the same terms set forth in the title of chapter 13 of De Doctrina, “Of the Death Which is called the Death of the Body.” She also points out that lines 3–4, which initially read, “Meekly thou didst resign this earthy clod / Of Flesh & sin, which man from heav’n doth sever,” and then were changed to “Meekly thou didst resign this earthy load / Of Death, call’d Life; which us from Life doth sever,” reflect De Doctrina’s understanding that the body does not necessarily denote the physical flesh, but, rather, earthly life:

Milton took care to detach the old signifiers from the medieval body-soul debate ... and [in the revised version] stress[es] their reattachment to another, slightly shifted, set of signifiers. Separation [in the revised version] is not at death—death is in fact the moment of reunion following a long prior separation of God and man by fleshly life. Milton opposes our common mistake of calling the body “life.” ... Such a reinterpretation of “death” and “life” is, in fact, precisely consistent with De Doctrina’s redefinition of the same terms. ... [Milton claims that] “Strictly speaking, the body cannot be killed... since it in itself is lifeless” (408), and “the word ‘body’ here must be taken to mean this frail worldly life.” (413)16
Milton’s revision of lines 5–8 may also indicate an interest in Mortalism. Here are the two versions:

Thy Works, & Almes, and all thy good Endeavor
Strait follow’d thee the path that Saints have trod
Still as they journey’d up from this dark abode
Up to the Realm of peace & Joy for ever. (Draft)

Thy Works and Almes and all thy good Endeavour
Staid not behind, nor in the grave were trod;
But as Faith pointed with her golden rod,
Follow’d thee up to joy and bliss for ever. (Final)

The drafted lines furnish an explicit statement about translated saints who have preceded Mrs. Thomason. The final version, however, omits those saints and their journey and focuses solely on the flight of the deceased lady. This alteration could be explained if Milton was becoming more sympathetic to Mortalism, as follows: The initial draft echoes the traditional view that throughout the ages all the saints have journeyed from earth to heaven immediately following their death; like them, Mrs. Thomason is traveling that familiar road. When Milton removed from the final version any mention of that ongoing collective narrative, he might have simply been rewording the poem to emphasize her individual apotheosis, yet he may have done so because he was starting to question the traditional claim. He might not have been a Mortalist yet, but the alteration could represent a step toward De Doctrina’s flat dismissal of the non-Mortalist view. In the treatise he states that “[t]here is no reward of good or evil after death until the day of judgment” (YP 6.414; my emphasis).17

If the poet were leaning toward Mortalism when he composed these lines, Mrs. Thomason’s apotheosis would not take place right after her death, but rather at the end of the age. The sestet’s imagery, I believe, reinforces that inference. For instance, the poem alludes to the Judge weighing the works of the deceased, an action that seems inspired by Revelation 20:12b: “And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.” Also, the final version’s representation of Faith pointing with her golden rod may be indebted to Revelation 21:15: “And he [that is, an angel, similar to the angelic Faith] that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof.” Similarly, the reference to drinking from “immortal” streams seems to be based on Revelation 21:6: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” If these images do point to the Last Day, it would appear that Milton narrowed his focus, not to keep from attenuating the eulogy, but
rather, to present Mrs. Thomason as typical of what will happen to every good soul at Judgment.

Even so, one could argue that the sonnet's past tense narrative undercuts the notion that her glorification is deferred until the Trump of Doom. I would agree with such an objection to some extent: The poem can be, and has been, interpreted as a straightforward account of what happens to her promptly after death. Nevertheless, De Doctrina provides a way to have it both ways, to read her apotheosis as immediate yet deferred. In his account of Mortalism, Milton attempts to explain one verse that would seem to refute the doctrine, namely, Saint Paul's claim in Philippians 1:23, in which the apostle voices the hope of departing from earthly life and joining Christ in heaven immediately. To do so, Milton adduces the Aristotelian notion that there is no time without motion, and applies it to those who have died: "for those who have died, all intervening time will be as nothing, so that to them it will seem that they die and are with Christ at the same moment" (YP 6:410). Coldiron applies this passage to "When Faith and Love": "This [Aristotelian concept] is one way to unite the sonnet's immediate apotheosis with De Doctrina's indefinite deferral: for Mrs. Thomason, the time passing between December 1646 and the Last Judgment will be as nothing, and it will seem to her (and to the reader of the sonnet) that her ascent is immediate." However, she rejects this reading in favor of an Augustinian understanding in which God exists outside of time, in eternity, so that the elegy "represents both the human-time, narrative, sequential future and the heavenly, non-narrative, eternal present." 18

Coldiron may be right to privilege the Augustinian interpretation, yet it strikes me as significant that Milton quotes Aristotle's theory, not only in De Doctrina, but also in his second poem on Hobson, the university carrier (line 7), whereas he never cites Augustine's theory in his poetry or prose. In any case, whichever thinker one adduces to reinforce a Mortalist interpretation is less important than Coldiron's more fundamental claim, which I agree with, that the sonnet lends itself to Mortalist and non-Mortalist analyses. Such indeterminacy could reflect the poet's ongoing progress toward the heresy.

Still, while Milton appears to have used this sonnet to explore such notions, subsequent events might have made him reluctant to publish these or related ideas. (The Thomason tribute, as we saw, did not appear in print until 1673.) In 1647, the year following the composition of Sonnet XIV, the Westminster Confession censured both The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce and Mortalism. Chapter 22 states, in part, that "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption, but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them." And in 1648 Parliament prescribed imprisonment for those who maintain that "the soul of man dieth or sleepeth when the body is dead." 19
The closest Milton came to going public was in 1650, when, as Latin secretary, he approved the publication of a translation of a Latin document that came to be known as the Racovian Catechism. The catechism was the main text of the Socinian movement, which denied Christ's divinity. While the catechism was not a Mortalist text, it held, among other things, that soul and body are so closely joined that man is neither. Milton came under questioning for allowing this translation to see print, though he was not punished for doing so. Nevertheless, the experience probably made him reluctant to discuss Mortalism publicly. It would be another seventeen years before *Paradise Lost* was published, with Adam's references to the belief, and even in the long poem this passage does not occur until the tenth book. If Milton was trying to foil the busy Restoration censor, Thomas Tomkyns, he seems to have succeeded, since Tomkyns did not flag Adam's Mortalist reflections.

He may have been equally shrewd when composing the Piedmont sonnet. Although it was not published until 1673, David Masson speculates that it circulated at the Protector's court, and of course it reacts to a very public event. Moreover, it praises the Waldensians for their theological purity, so any overt references to heterodox beliefs would have been inappropriate. Nonetheless, I believe that the sonnet is compatible with Mortalism, as well as with Traducianism. As we saw, *Sonnet XIV* proves that Milton could write a poem that lends itself to both orthodox and heterodox interpretations; such an experience may have enabled him to do so again, though in different ways, with "Avenge O Lord."

II

To understand how he might have done so, we first need to consider the extent of Milton's theological debt to the Waldensian sect. As I noted at the outset, *Sonnet XVIII* appears to have been composed in May or June 1655; the slaughter of the Waldensians took place on April 24 of that year, and the sonnet's title indicates that the event was recent. Like many early modern Protestants, Milton believed that the Waldensians, or Vaudois, dated back at least to patristic times, or even the apostolic era. His own view, in fact, may be evident in the poem's ninth line, which possibly puns on vales/Vaudois, based on the belief that the Waldensians derived their name from the Alpine valleys where they first sought refuge, starting in the early fourth century. Today, most historians regard the group as less ancient, arguing that they started as followers of Peter Waldo (1140–1218), a wealthy merchant of Lyons who donated most of his estate to the poor, and, upon acquiring disciples, began sending them out into villages to preach. In or around 1184, the Vaudois were excommunicated for heresy.
There is no evidence that Milton knew any Waldensians personally, nor did his Italian journey take him through any of their valleys. However, in addition to the nine letters of state written for the Commonwealth to protest the massacre, Milton alludes to the Waldensians ten times in his prose. The references are all favorable and indicate that his interest in, and approbation of, the Vaudois predates the sonnet by a decade. In or around 1645, for example, he cites their official history in his commonplace book; that history first appeared in 1644. Milton was impressed by the sect’s willingness to translate the Bible into the vernacular, by their refusal to support their clergy with tithes, and by their readiness to take up arms against tyrants. In Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings (1659), he deems them “our first reformers” and the “ancient stock of our reformation,” and in Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649) Milton refers to them as one of the first “Protestant churches” (YP 7:306, 312; 3:227).

His knowledge about the sect came primarily from Pierre Gilles’s Histoire Ecclesiastique des Eglises Reformees... en Quelques Valees de Piedmont (Geneva, 1644), and from a collection of writings on the Vaudois included in John DuBrau’s Historia Bohemica ab Origine Gentis (Hanover, 1602). William Hunter cites the parallels between Milton’s beliefs and theirs, including an animus toward the Roman Catholic church, repudiation of genuflection, the notion that clergy should have no possessions or special attire and should be self-supporting, and contempt for church councils. Like Milton, the Vaudois also rejected all sacraments, reserved baptism for adults, denied transubstantiation, allowed ministers to marry, and did not believe in Purgatory.23

Hunter concedes that Milton differs from them on certain points, such as support for polygamy. Even so, he concludes, “Milton found in [the Waldensians]... an authority for or primitive analogy to beliefs which he came to adopt as his own. How many of them were first suggested to him in [the histories of the sect] is problematical. The similarities, nevertheless, between his mature conclusions [in De Doctrina] and [the Vaudois] are remarkable. Milton may indeed be closer to Waldensian practice... than to those of any other established church of his day.”24

Did they influence the poet’s thinking on Mortalism? Their rejection of Purgatory accords with the doctrine, which condemns any notion of an intermediate state after death. However, the Vaudois did hold that deceased believers unite with God immediately after death. In 1655, shortly following the massacre, the sect published a confession to offset what had become a smear campaign. Jean Leger, moderator of the Piedmont churches at this time, was probably the author of the confession. The introduction reads: “Having understood that our adversaries, not contented to have most cruelly persecuted us, and robbed us of all our goods and estates, have yet an inten-
tion to render us odious to the world by spreading abroad many false reports, and so not only to defame our persons, but likewise to asperse with most shameful calumnies that holy and wholesome doctrine which we progress, we feel obliged . . . to make a short declaration of our faith." 

This confession was brought back to England by Samuel Morland, Cromwell's special envoy, who was sent to protest the massacre to Carlo Emmanuel II, who had ordered it. We do not know if Milton read the document, but if he did, he would have seen Article 23: "Those who are already in possession of eternal life in consequence of their faith and good works ought to be considered as saints and glorified persons, and to be praised for their virtue and imitated in all good actions of their life, but neither worshiped nor invoked, for God only is to be prayed unto, and that through Jesus Christ."

Nevertheless, although the Vaudois cannot be called proto-Mortalists, it is significant that Milton commends them for the fact that their clergy learned trades to support themselves. Such a custom, he felt, enabled them to "cure both soul and bodie, through industry joining that to their ministry" (YP 7:307). A unified view of soul and body is, as noted earlier, a basic presupposition of Mortalism.

III

That view may also be implicit in Sonnet XVIII, and if Milton believed that the victims had physically perished, he would also have held that their souls were dead as well. As we have seen, he certainly believed this doctrine by 1655, but are there traces of it in the poem? Its opening phrase, "Avenge O Lord," might seem to refute Mortalism. Beginning with Warton's 1781 text, nearly all editors have adduced Revelation 6:9-10 as a source for the phrase. In this passage John, the traditional author/secretary of the Apocalypse, witnesses the Lamb of God opening seven sealed scrolls. Some of the events presaged by the opening of each seal include famine, warfare, and death. At the unraveling of the fifth seal, John writes, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" Hence, this text indicates that while the bodies of the martyrs are dead, their souls are alive in heaven, petitioning God to revenge their deaths on earth.

Such an interpretation became standard during the seventeenth century, and in fact the passage was sometimes quoted to contest Mortalism. For example, in his explication of the Apostles' Creed, William Perkins argues: "Divers have thought, that the soules then, though they doe not die, yet are
still kept within the body (being as it were asleep) till the last day. But God's word saith to the contrary. For the soules of the godly lie under the altar, and crye, how long Lord Jesus." His marginal notes cite Revelation 6:9. Similarly, Calvin interprets the passage by concluding that "[the] soules of the dead do crye, and white garments are geven unto them" (YP 6:411 n. 29).

When editors cite the passage in connection with Milton's opening phrase, they imply that he echoes it in a relatively straightforward way. That is, the Vaudois are now before the throne, protesting their cause, and Milton is poetically adding his voice to the chorus. However, such an understanding is complicated by the fact that De Doctrina denies the orthodox reading of the passage and argues that it does not contradict Mortalism:

The sixth passage quoted [by anti-Mortalists] is Rev. vi. 9: I saw the souls beneath the altar. My answer is that in biblical idiom the word soul is regularly used to mean the whole animate body, and that here the reference is to souls not yet born, unless, that is, the fifth seal had already been opened in John's day. Similarly, Christ makes no distinction whatsoever, in the parable about Dives and Lazarus in Luke xvi, between the soul and body. He does, however, for purposes of instruction, speak of things which will not happen until after the day of judgment as if they had already happened, and represents the dead as existing in two different states. (YP 6:411)

Hence, by interpreting John's vision as a future scenario of the Last Judgment, Milton disputes the claim that Revelation 6 indicates that souls precede their bodies to heaven. Still, even if he held this view privately, the question remains: Did that opinion affect the poem? By appearing to echo Revelation 6, it would seem that Milton was aligning himself with the common view of the massacre. For these verses were central to the Protestant understanding of the crisis. After returning from the Continent, Morland published an official account of the event that included eyewitness accounts of the atrocities, vivid illustrations of the catastrophe, and other related documents. This collection included the eight state letters composed by Milton to various heads of state regarding the tragedy, as well as Morland's protest speech to the Duke of Savoy. Barbara Lewalski notes that the speech, though anonymous, has been correctly attributed to Milton, partly because its imagery resembles that of Sonnet XVIII, and partly because Morland, "who had but three days to prepare for his mission, would likely not have been entrusted to draft a speech in the Protector's own name, and he does not claim credit for it in his History [of the Evangelical Churches of Piemont (1658)]."27 The History became the chief source of the massacre to most Englishmen; its title page quotes Revelation 6:9. Hence, given the centrality of that citation to Protestant reflection on the atrocities, Milton may have felt compelled to allude to the verses; indeed, not doing so might have raised questions.
The deeper issue, however, is not whether but how he appropriates the passage. Does he simply echo the martyrs—or does he stand in for them? After all, it is Milton’s persona who utters the lines. This change need not indicate Mortalism, of course; he protests the injustice of the tragedy, so it makes sense for him to voice what many Protestants felt the Vaudois themselves were presently saying to God. And yet the change could be in line with the heresy, which obliged him to dispute the common notion that, at death, the soul “wings its way, or is conducted by angels, directly to its appointed place of reward or punishment.” Because he would have assumed that the souls as well as the bodies of the victims perished in the massacre, Milton may have felt that they needed someone to plead their case. Since he was still alive, he could, in a sense, stand before God and make that case; the Waldensians, in their present state, could not. Indeed, it is possible that Milton felt compelled to write the sonnet precisely because vengeance for the victims seemed slow in coming. Even though his letters of state had been sent to various leaders on the Continent, and these potentates had been given ample time to respond, most apparently dragged their feet. Masson notes that after six weeks had passed with little action, “Cromwell [grew] dissatisfied with the coolness of the French King and [Cardinal] Mazarin, and also with the shuffling and timidity of the Swiss Cantons.” The sonnet might reflect both the Protector’s frustration and Milton’s own, and that frustration could have been compounded for the poet by his Mortalism.

Other biblical passages alluded to in the octave might have been similarly appropriated by Milton. For instance, as Charles Goldstein points out, lines 1 and 2 may be based on Psalm 141, in which David petitions God for deliverance from his enemies:

Lord, I cry unto thee; make haste unto me; give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto thee. . . . Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. . . . Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness. And let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head; for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities. When their judges are overthrown in stony places, they shall hear my words; for they are sweet. Our bones are scattered at the mouth of Sheol, as when one cutteth and cleaveth wood on the earth. (1–2, 5–7; my emphasis).

Similarly, lines 6 and 7 are informed by Romans 8:36, which quotes the Septuagint version of Psalm 44:2: “for thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Echoes here include not only “slaughter” and “sheep” but the situation as well: that is, the Waldensians are treated like sheep, killed “in their ancient fold” (6). Throughout the octave Milton makes these protests his own, like a priest interceding for victims.
whom he might have regarded as inert, and therefore incapable of prayer on their own behalf.

The imperative of line 5, “Forget not: in thy book record their groans,” is also consonant with the Mortalist assumption that the dead will not be able to press their suit before the heavenly throne. The exhortation of the opening two words could be motivated by the fear that God may somehow overlook the sufferings of his people, a concern that would seem more plausible if the souls of the dead were not present before Him. And the demand that God record their death-cries in his book may also reflect a statement in the conclusion of De Doctrina’s discussion of Mortalism: “there is no rewarding of good or evil after death until [the] day of judgment” (YP 6:414). (One of the main charges leveled against the Mortalists was that the belief encouraged sinful living, since it removed the fear of immediate judgment after death.) On the other hand, if the Vaudois had gone promptly to heaven, there would be less need for God to record their sufferings in a document to be consulted later.31

Perhaps the most important section for a Mortalist interpretation of the sonnet is at lines 8b–10a, which depict the death throes of the victims: “Their moans / The vales redoubled to the hills, and they / To Heav’n.” Honigmann has demonstrated that these and other phrases in the sonnet are based on descriptions from contemporary newsletters of the event. He quotes one that probably provided the source for these lines: “But amongst so many furious assaults . . . did resound nothing else but the Cries, Lamentations, and fearful Scriechings, made yet more pitiful by the multitude of those Eccho’s, which are in those Mountains and Rocks [sic].”32

The lines are especially significant for what they say or imply about any potential apotheosis of the victims. Were the Waldensians somehow translated to heaven through their screams? Anna Nardo raises this possibility by highlighting the ambiguity of the passage. A straightforward explication of the lines would hold that the moans of the victims were echoed by the valleys to the hills, which then sent the moans heavenward. However, Nardo argues that “they / To Heav’n” can also be taken to refer to the Vaudois, resulting in alternate readings: “(1) the valleys reechoed the Waldensians’ moans to the hills, and the Waldensians repeated . . . their moans to heaven, and (2) through the valleys’ echoes of their dying moans, the Waldensians themselves were translated to heaven.”33

While Nardo’s first point does not present any problems for a Mortalist analysis of the poem, her second point does. I find the second untenable, however, for several reasons. First, it is ungrammatical, as Nardo admits (“‘they’ cannot be the object of ‘redoubl’d’”).34 Also, as we saw, the poet asks God to record groans that, apparently, have remained groans even when they
reach him, and there is no reason to believe that the moans should undergo a change on their way to the heavenly throne room. Furthermore, according to a strict non-Mortalist, the souls of the Vaudois would go to heaven the instant they died; there would be no need for nature to assist the process of translation, nor would any time elapse, not even the few seconds involved as they echoed off the hills and valleys. Hence, there would be little point in urging God to pay attention to the cries of the dying if their souls had already arrived ahead of them.

The closest Milton may come here to suggesting translation is in the possible implication that the moans and groans of the slain constitute their ruach, or life-breath. He insists that the ruach is not the same thing as the soul, in De Doctrina 1.7, where he remarks that “the breath of life mentioned in Genesis was not a part of the divine essence, nor was it the soul, but a kind of air or breath of divine virtue, fit for the maintenance of life and reason and infused into the organic body” (YP 6:318; my emphasis). Might the groans and moans of the dying constitute this “air or breath” returning to God? Perhaps. If so, however, their souls remain behind. Indeed, it is possible that Milton intended here to depict a purely “naturalistic” ascent of air and breath emanating from the slain, to contrast with “immortalist” poetry—which of course includes some of his own works—in which souls fly to God.

IV

Editors often point out probable sources for the sestet’s image of a new crop of faithful Waldensians springing forth from their sown remains. These include the comments of Milton’s friend and correspondent J. B. Stouppe, who remarked on the atrocity that “the children of God are not lost when being massacred . . . we may find in their blood and ashes the seed of the church.”35 There also seems to be an echo of Saint Cyprian’s commentary on the parable of the sower (Matt. 13); in De Habitu virginum, Cyprian argues that the hundredfold mentioned in the parable figure the martyrs. Furthermore, the myth of Cadmus may be referenced. (After killing a dragon on the way to founding Thebes, Cadmus was advised by a god to sow dragon’s teeth, from which sprang the ancestors of the Spartans.) And the poet probably alludes to Tertullian’s dictum (first echoed in Stouppe’s letter), “Semen est sanguis Christianorum,” usually translated (and expanded) as “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”36

Tertullian’s aphorism may have been especially compelling to Milton from a theological perspective.37 For it seems to me that the sestet’s description of the broadcasting of the victims’ blood and ashes represents a kind of metaphorical Traducianism, a belief that, as we saw, states that the soul is
physically transmitted from parents to their offspring. As such, the sestet may complement the poem’s implicit Mortalism. In *De Doctrina* 1.7 Milton defends Traducianism, citing Tertullian, as well as Augustine, as an early advocate of the theory (YP 6:319). The sonnet’s appropriation of the image of the martyrs is thus figurative, yet alive to the physicality inherent in Traducianism. When Milton enjoins God to sow the remains, the hoped-for action is analogous to Traducianism in that it presents a physical transfer of a spiritual substance: the remains will seed the Italian fields, from which will spring the next generation of the sect.

That the poet might have had a kind of Traducianism in mind here is suggested by the sestet’s use of the Cadmus myth. Earlier in his career, Milton alluded to the myth (or its Ovidian analogue) in one of *Areopagitica*’s best-known passages, in which he concedes that postpublication censorship of books may be acceptable: “Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon’s teeth, and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men.” Nonetheless, he advises caution in any such program: “as good almost kill a man as kill a good book... Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life” (YP 2:492).

This passage strikes me as metaphorically Traducian: The soul of a book is bequeathed to it by its author, and its life-blood is preserved in the book’s physical makeup. If the statement is informed by the doctrine, then this excerpt indicates that Milton already understood the Cadmus myth in Traducian terms some ten years prior to alluding to it in “Avenge O Lord.” *Areopagitica* was published in 1644, which was, as we saw, just about the time his interest in Mortalism, and therefore Traducianism, commenced. Hence, the possibility that the sonnet is also assuming an imagined version of the doctrine, not in sown books but dispersed remains, is strengthened.

In any event, by suggesting that new Vaudois can spring up from the remains of the old ones, Milton parts company with other early modern Traducians such as Richard Overton, who attacked a doctrine that Milton adduces as support for Traducianism, namely, the Scholastic notion of the soul being wholly present in every part of the body. In his discussion of Traducianism, Overton mocks this supporting belief by reducing it to what is, for him, an absurdity: “[W]ere a man minced into Atoms, cut into innumerable bits, there would be so many innumerable whole Souls, else could it not be wholly in every part.” But for Milton, this is precisely the case, at least
figuratively; the victims of the Piedmont massacre have been cut into bits, but if every bit contains the entire soul, God can take each one, no matter how small, and distribute it profitably.

It may be significant that God's action here is a comparatively detached one, for in *De Doctrina*’s account of Traducianism Milton argues that God has bestowed on all of creation the power to reproduce both physically and spiritually on its own, without the sort of divine intervention required by Traducianism’s opposite, Creationism. Creationism, he believes, should be rejected: “If God still created every day as many souls as man’s frequently unlawful passion creates bodies in every part of the world, then he would have left himself a huge and, in a way, a servile task, even after that sixth day of creation—a task which would still remain to be performed, and from which he would not be able to rest even one day in seven.” He immediately follows this comment with a remarkable observation: “But in fact the force of the divine blessing, that each creature should reproduce in its own likeness, is as fully applicable to man as it is to all other animals; Gen. i, 22, 28. So God made the mother of all things living out of a simple rib, without having to breathe the breath of life a second time, Gen. ii, 22” (YP 6:319–20).

Here Milton argues that in Genesis, God first tells all animals to be fruitful and multiply (1:22), then issues the same command to humanity (1:28). Milton then adduces the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib, suggesting, I think, that because of the prior command, Adam’s body now contains a kind of native potency that can be used to help create Eve. He cannot, of course, procreate without a partner, but God can shape Eve from Adam’s rib, which is itself vital. In other words, God works with a power already latent in the rib. The account of Eve’s creation in *Paradise Lost*, Book Eight, expands on this implication. Adam recounts that God,

stooping opened my left side, and took
From thence a rib, with cordial spirits warm,
And life-blood streaming fresh; . . .
The rib he formed and fashioned with his hands;
Under his forming hands a creature grew. (465–67, 469–70)

Significantly, there is no reference here to God imparting the breath of life a second time; instead, he takes a mere rib—albeit one still bloody and warm with vital spirits—and forms Eve from it.

The example of Adam’s rib is especially pertinent for *Sonnet XVIII*, since it constitutes a precedent of what Milton asks for in the poem. That is, just as Adam’s entire body contains a kind of potency, and inert portions of it can be used to help create Eve, so also God can sow the still-fresh remains of the Vaudois, from which will come a new generation. The victims are dead,
body and soul, and will not awaken until the last day, but their remains constitute vital seeds. Such a belief could also account for the care and dignity that Milton imaginatively bestows on the blood and ashes as he enjoins God, in effect, to take them from the freezing Alps and bury them in the warm fields. For as Kerrigan points out, Mortalism “invests the body with extraordinary dignity . . . [It holds that] flesh and spirit lie down together in darkness. Not a shell or a husk, the corpse is the repository of all its former life.”

As commentators often point out, the scenario of the new generation rising up is characterized by anti-Catholic imagery, such as the references to the pope as the “Triple Tyrant” (12), which alludes to his three-tiered crown, and to his “sway” (11), which figures both the papacy’s tyrannical domination and its precariousness. The new crop of Vaudois will learn God’s ways in time to flee the “Babylonian woe,” a phrase that recalls both the Babylon of Revelation and, for Protestants, the papacy. The fact that Milton envisions them as fleeing from their enemies is consonant with Mortalism. John Knott points out that the poet “could have introduced a different kind of apocalyptic perspective by rising to a vision of the Piedmontese reunited in a heavenly fold.” Instead, Mortalism may have led him to imagine a this-worldly deliverance for the new generation.

V

I have argued that Milton began experimenting with Mortalism in the revisions of Sonnet XIV, then adopted it as well as Traducianism in Sonnet XVIII. Does either doctrine figure in other pre–Paradise Lost poems? Christopher Hill and George McLoone have detected Mortalist traces in Sonnet XXIII (“Methought I Saw”), which was probably written three years after “Avenge O Lord.” Hill remarks that while the poet’s last sonnet “looks forward to Milton’s reunion with his wife in heaven . . . this brings little consolation: the sonnet is about the pain of her absence in this world.” I would add that she is described as being brought back “from the grave,” a kind of Lady Lazarus summoned from the tomb rather than called back from heaven. And what of the pre-1658 prose? In addition to the Areopagitica excerpt discussed earlier, other passages may evince Traducian or Mortalist imagery. Finding and assessing them is beyond the scope of this essay, but such an undertaking could further clarify the poet’s theological development, particularly how and when he turned from orthodoxy to heterodoxy.

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Charles Goldstein, "The Hebrew Element in Milton's Sonnet XVIII," *MQ* 3 (1975): 111–14, extends this line of inquiry by examining the work in terms of Hebrew catchphrases such as "thy truth" (amitekha), "of old" (mi qedem, or qedem), and "forget not" (al-tishkah). In like manner, John R. Knott, "The Biblical Matrix of Milton's 'On the Late Massacre in Piemont,'" *Philological Quarterly* 62 (1983): 259–63, explicates the images of the scattered bones of line 2, which, he contends, recall various passages from the book of Jeremiah, and of God as shepherd (line 6), a common motif in both the psalms and the prophets. More recently, Jay Ruud, "Milton's Sonnet 18 and Psalm 137," *MQ* 26 (1992): 80–81, has argued that the poem's concluding phrase, "Babylonian woe," is usually glossed in relation to Revelation 17:18—the verse alludes to the destruction of the whore of Babylon, commonly allegorized by early modern Protestants as the Roman Catholic Church—is better understood in terms of the curse that concludes Psalm 137, in which the psalmist prays that the Babylonians' children will be dashed against rocks.

My own reading of the poem shares some affinities with these studies, for in many respects Milton's understanding of Mortalism can be construed as Hebraic. While most historians agree that Mortalism is a Christian heresy that sprang up during the Reformation, Milton grounds it in the Old Testament's emphasis on the death of the body. His account of Mortalism in *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.13 focuses almost entirely on the claim that soul and body perish simultaneously, and he spends hardly any time on the Second Coming. Moreover, many of his proof-texts come from the Old Testament, and as I note in my main discussion, in *Paradise Lost* Adam intuits only the death of body and soul, without any reference to resurrection. Milton's emphasis on the Hebraic underpinnings of Mortalism anticipates the view expressed by literary historian Harold Fisch, who states that "the 'mortalist heresy' is at bottom one of those recurrent upsurges of original Hebraic doctrine which occur throughout the history of the Church" (quoted in William Kerrigan, "The Heretical Milton: From Assumption to Mortalism," *ELR* 5 (Winter 1975), 150).


2. Milton tends to espouse the variation of Mortalism known as Thnetopsychism, which holds that the body and soul die, though certain passages in *De Doctrina Christiana* seem to support the alternative type, Psychopannychism, which states that soul and body merely sleep until the Last Day. In his useful study on early modern Mortalism, Norman Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), helps to explain this apparent inconsistency: "Like Christians who since New Testament times have referred to the death of the body as a 'sleep' because they are confident of its resurrection, the Thnetopsychists may well have said that the soul 'sleeps' whenever they wanted to emphasize their faith that the soul will be raised to immortality on the Last Day" (18).
3. Shawcross's estimated dates for the solidification of Milton's Mortalist and Traducian views were proposed in an e-mail to me on 4 June 2004. Milton's Mortalism has not received extensive discussion in recent scholarship. Two exceptions are an article by Raymond Shawcross, "Murder One: The Death of Abel. Blood, Soul, and Mortalism in Paradise Lost," in Milton Studies 41, ed. Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh, 2002), 76–93, and a recent collection of essays, Milton and Heresy, ed. John Rumrich and Stephen Dobranski (Cambridge, 1998). Though none of the contributions is specifically devoted to Mortalism, the opening paragraph of the book's introduction states that in De Doctrina Milton "insists on the common materiality and mortality of body and soul." Several chapters touch on the implications of the poet's monistic views; Rumrich's essay, for example, argues that monism buttresses the poet's Arianism: "For the monist materialist Milton ... all creatures derive from God's own substance ... The Son's material being originally may be more refined and exalted than that of other creatures, but eventually parakeets and pachyderms would also qualify as participants in the Godhead." God the Father, he continues, created the Son from his own substance, but the Son does not share the Father's essence. See Rumrich, "Milton's Arianism: Why It Matters," 75–92; quotation, 83.

William Kerrigan's offering, "Milton's Kisses" (117–35), ventures a playful reading of Adam and Eve's kiss, described at PL 4.497–502. Although the couple does not actually make love until the end of Book Four, by describing the kiss in terms of Jupiter's impregnation of Juno, and by referring to Eve as a "matron" (501), Milton forecasts the later event. Kerrigan concludes that "the 'kisses pure' of John Milton, animate materialist, are the profoundest in our language, for they alone bear nature's power to create new human beings" (133).


5. Mary Ann Radzinowicz, Toward "Samson Agonistes": The Growth of Milton's Mind (Princeton, NJ, 1978), argues that Mortalism is "present in Samson Agonistes and simply underscore[s] the universality of its application to all men in all times. [In lines 91–94] Samson confirms ... the indivisibility of body and soul. ... [And] by what he both is allowed and not allowed to say of his son, Manoa confirms the mortalism. He notes positively that Samson's death is a freeing from bondage, a complete freeing shared by all men, and the final end of life whether it crown it or shadow it" (348). Anthony Low, The Blaze of Noon (New York, 1974), remarks that [t]he lack of references to Samson's being taken directly into heaven may also be relevant. Direct references are kept out by historical probability and poetic purpose, but plainer indirect reference could easily have been provided through the imagery, or through unconscious irony. ... [B]y the time Milton wrote The Christian Doctrine ... he became a mortalist. If the play was written after about 1658, then Milton would have assumed the death of Samson's soul along with his body, until he received eternal life at the Last Judgment. (225)

William Kerrigan, "Heretical," states that in the play "Samson is assumed to have perished in soul and body; no consolation of the orthodox sort will be achieved by his Old Testament father. ... Like his author, Manoa is in key particulars a mortalist. We may be almost certain that Milton prepared this speech with the knowledge, never to be shared directly with his readers, that [the tragedy's closing elegy, 'Nothing is here for tears'] demonstrated the experien-


9. Ibid., 323.


12. Ibid., 154.


15. Honigmann, Milton's Sonnets, 135–36.


17. This section of my analysis is indebted to Shawcross, who in an e-mail message on 2 June 2004 brought to my attention the potentially Mortalist qualities of lines 5–8.


21. Henry, "Milton and Hobbes," 248, was the first to suggest that Milton may have hidden this potentially controversial passage late in the poem to escape the censor.


24. Ibid., 159.


26. Goldstein, "The Hebrew Element," traces the line to Psalm 79:10: "Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? Let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed" (111).


31. Nearly all biblical allusions to the Book of Life have to do with salvation: If one's name is written in the book, one is saved; if God chooses to erase it, damnation ensues. See, for example, Exodus 32:32, Philippians 4:3, and Revelation 3:5. Revelation 20:12 complicates the meaning of the Book of Life somewhat by presenting the opening of not one but several books at the end of the age: "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged out of those things.
which were written in the books, according to their works." It would appear, then, that there were two sets of books, one with the names of the saved, and another with a record of their good works. It seems unlikely that the Waldensians would have needed to have their names written into the Book of Life, given that they were exemplary Christians. It may be, rather, that in the poem Milton refers to one of the volumes in which good works are set down, to suggest that the victims' groans can be counted as such.

32. Honigmann, Milton's Sonnets, 165.
33. Nardo, Milton's Sonnets and the Ideal Community, 134.
34. Ibid., 134.
35. Mystique's remark is from A Collection of Several Papers ... Concerning the Bloody and Barbarous Massacres (London, 1655), 2, and is quoted in Honigmann, Milton's Sonnets, 166.
37. Traducianism was derived from Stoicism, which held that parents generate the souls as well as the bodies of their children. Tertullian seems to have been the first to apply the Stoic notion to the doctrine of original sin. He did so in reaction to Irenaeus, whose concepts on original sin he found vague and overly mystical. In the preface to his treatise De Anima, Tertullian contends that "[Adam], being given over to the death on account of his sin, the entire human race, tainted in their descent from him, were made a channel for transmitting his condemnation." And in the treatise proper, he remarks that "[e]very soul, by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ; moreover, it is unclean all the while that it remains [unbaptized]." See The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 177, 220.