fact of one's identity as a Philistine condemn one, regardless of how much or how little one contributes to either Samson's degradation or the war between the Israelites and the Philistines?

One could argue that it is God's will that all the Philistines in the temple die. But as Mohamed rightly points out, neither the reader nor Samson knows God's will. Samson claims that he feels "Some rouzing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts" (1381–82), a passage that echoes the Son's assertion in *Paradise Regained*:

> And now by some strong motions I am led
> Into this wilderness, to what intent
> I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know;
> For what concerns my knowledge God reveals
> (1.290–93)

Milton uses almost the same phrase ("rouzing motions"; "strong motions") to describe their inner promptings. But a crucial difference separates the two. In *Paradise Regained*, we know that the Son's "strong motions" have their source in God, who tells Gabriel that he wants to "expose [the Son] / To Satan" (1.142–43), and so, God continues:

> I mean
> To exercise him in the Wilderness,
> There he shall first lay down the rudiments
> Of his great warfare (1.155–58)

But in *Samson Agonistes*, we have no such certainty. Unlike the "strong motions" of *Paradise Regained*, Samson's "rouzing motions" are not given an explicitly divine origin. Killing everyone including himself seems to be Samson's idea, and we do not know if God's view as God is entirely absent from this poem.

The discovery that some Philistines want to exercise mercy, the indiscriminate nature of the slaughter, the cry that tears the sky, and the removal of divine agency collectively demonstrate that Milton uses a poetics of incertitude, rather than certitude, as suggested by Mohamed, following Jameson. Far from insisting on ideological closure, *Samson Agonistes* questions the legitimacy of "providential slaughter" and an ideology that marginalizes "the humanity of nonadherents" (336), and Milton does so in a manner particularly relevant today. As many have argued, including Mohamed, the events of 9/11 lend new urgency to the debates over Milton's poem, as the spectacle of a man committing mass slaughter of the infidels while claiming divine sanction bears a terrible resemblance to the justification used by al-Qaeda. But instead of divorcing *Samson Agonistes* from history or arguing that Milton approves of providential slaughter, I suggest that *Samson Agonistes* invites us to look skeptically at this confluence of religion and mass murder.

Peter C. Herman
San Diego State University

Reply:

I must first express heartfelt thanks to Peter C. Herman for his generous words on my essay and to Joseph Wittreich for sharing some of the nourishing interpretation typical of his two full-length studies of *Samson Agonistes*.

It must be said, however, that neither of Wittreich's books finds a tradition available to Milton denying Samson's divine inspiration. The issue is thus not "Milton and which traditions?" but whether or not Milton departs entirely from tradition. Those claiming he does in *Samson Agonistes* tend to build their houses on shifting sands. Wittreich claims, echoing John Carey, that "[t]o equivocate on Samson's prayer . . . is to equivocate on Samson's heroism." This is simply untrue. In the *Institutes* John Calvin expresses manifest disapproval of Samson's "vicious longing for vengeance" but maintains nonetheless that God grants this "perverted prayer" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 1845 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], bk. 3, ch. 20, sec. 15). I would argue that the removal of this prayer in *Samson Agonistes* allows Milton to distance his hero from a desire to avenge the loss of his "two eyes" (Judg. 16.28) and to emphasize instead a quiet attunement to divine will.

Equally suspect is Wittreich's reference to *A Treatise of Civil Power*, which establishes only that Milton did not think that the members of Parliament he addresses in this tract could hold sufficient confidence in their divine illumination to exercise absolute authority in matters religious. The case of a biblical hero of faith is rather different—the final two books of *Paradise Lost* are

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900165642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

largely structured around praise of Samson's fellow worthies of Hebrews 11, showing us Milton's firm belief in the divine favor bestowed upon them. Also dubious is reference to the mercy of the Son in book 6 of *Paradise Lost*, who banishes his opponents to ages of torment and holds half of his strength in reserve only to postpone annihilation of the fallen angels. As in the climax of *Samson Agonistes*, we are aware at this moment that the limited punishment dealt to God's enemies is a shadow of apocalyptic triumph.

This awareness will assist us in evaluating Herman's points of disagreement. It is true that Manoa describes certain "civil" Philistines—who, incidentally, must be satisfied in revenge and infliction of misery before they show what Herman calls "mercy"—but in the context of the tragedy as a whole this is just another example of this character's limited view of events, emphasizing human civility and ignoring the larger struggle of godliness against ungodliness. As is typical for Milton, triumph in *Samson Agonistes* is an attendance on the will of God that has little concern for human niceties; to paraphrase Mark Juergensmeyer's description of modern religious violence, the tragedy justifies its savagery by placing its hero's actions in a larger "cosmic war" (*Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* [Berkeley: U of California P, 2000] 146). Herman's second point of disagreement tends to downplay that Milton does everything but provide a deus ex machina declaring divine sanction of Samson's actions: he selects a hero whose divine inspiration is unequivocally recorded in scripture and evokes in the tragedy's climax clear-cut instances of God's direction—Samson's earlier "intimate impulse" and Jesus's "strong motions" in *Paradise Regain'd*.

There has been enough ink spilled on such passages of *Samson Agonistes* to ensure that critics will remain awash in its confusion. More significant is the issue raised in Wittreich's final sentence, pointing as it does to Carey's work as compelling literary criticism. It must be said that as an editor and translator of Milton's works, not to mention as a celebrity literatus, Carey has admirably led a good many readers to embrace Milton—that least huggable of English poets—in all his majesty and complexity. I will concede that it is Carey's and Wittreich's Milton much more than mine that will put a glimmer in the eye of one viewing the passage of *Areopagitica* inscribed in the Rose Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library: "A good booke is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life."

Insofar as such liberalization of Milton inevitably rests on distortion of his works and their historical context, it is less than compelling literary criticism; and when this distortion is deployed in an effort to solidify a Western sentiment of superiority to religious violence it is downright unsettling. I wholeheartedly agree with Herman that the dramatic poem "invites us to look skeptically" at a "confluence of religion and mass murder," a skepticism that finds fullest expression in interrogation not only of the artifacts of England's seventeenth century but also of the cultural presuppositions informing our approach to them—we can only expect Milton to agree with us more than a radical Islamist does out of a spurious sense of the unity of the Anglo-American tradition. It is fitting that my essay shares covers with Dean Franco's claim that "Chicano criticism's strongest contribution to ethnic studies is its self-conscious and deeply political meditation on appropriate figurations of the group" (383) and with Seyla Benhabib's and J. Hillis Miller's explorations of Jacques Derrida's legacy of sophisticating our conception of otherness (468–69; 482–84). At bottom, I have advocated that the political awareness and self-consciousness common in "ethnic" studies inform our meditations on a canonical English poet and his period and, more broadly, that this might illumine the terms of our construction of cultural ipseity and alterity.

I write this in the wake of horrifying bombings in London, both successful and failed, an equally horrifying shooting of a suspected terrorist in a crowded Tube station, and, this morning, deadly blasts in the Edenic resorts of Sharm al-Sheikh. As terrorists and counterterrorists continue to terrify, the temptation to perpetuate narrativization of a tradition of humanist pacifism will surely mount; so, too, will the necessity of resisting this temptation and of seeking informed understanding of religious violence in all its manifestations.

Feisal G. Mohamed
Texas Tech University

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900165642 Published online by Cambridge University Press