Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

FEISAL G. MOHAMED

A horror had come upon us. There were people on earth so eager to destroy us that they were ready to immolate themselves. That went right to the biblical root. Samson had pulled down the pillars of the Temple. Now there were all these Muslim Samsons. A ripple went through the country, a determining wind. In its wake, flags rippled everywhere. Nearly everyone in America was waving a flag.
—Norman Mailer, *Why Are We at War?* (13)

NORMAN MAILER'S ACCOUNT OF THE "MUSLIM SAMSONS" RESponsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks is one in a series of current references to the biblical figure. Gilbert Achcar also compares the terrorists to Samson in their "hatred of the enemy and thirst for vengeance," adding that their violence is just as "pointless" and self-destructive as their biblical counterpart's (61–62). In *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, Tariq Ali states that "many Arab intellectuals see Israel as the biblical ass whose jaw has been borrowed by an American Samson to destroy the real and imagined enemies of the Empire" (xxii). W. H. von Dreele contributes a brief piece of conservative doggerel to the *National Review* entitled "Chirac Plays Samson": though "[h]e doesn't have the hair," the French president does his best to pull down the pillars of the United Nations headquarters—if "there's no place to veto in, / Jacques will, in French, boo-hoo." These politically disparate Samsons share a common feature: the biblical hero is consistently evoked as morally benighted, threatening, and blindly destructive.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the current political climate sparks controversy over *Samson Agonistes*, inspiring especially those critics who have always found in Milton's Samson a portrait of blind animosity. This tendency is evident in John Carey's article in the issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* marking the anniversary of

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9/11. In a manner similar to that of Mailer and Achcar, Carey remarks that "the similarities between the biblical Samson and the hijackers are obvious. Like them he destroys many innocent victims, whose lives, hopes and loves are all quite unknown to him personally. He is, in effect, a suicide bomber, and like the suicide bombers he believes that his massacre is an expression of God's will" ("Work" 15).[1]

Carey strives to dismiss the suggestion that Milton's dramatic poem looks favorably on such actions, an argument that he attributes to Stanley Fish's recent book *How Milton Works*. In Fish's comment that Milton's Samson bases his actions on a reading of divine will, Carey finds a "monstrous . . . licence for any fanatic to commit atrocity." The events of 9/11, he claims, "seem like a devilish implementation of [Fish's] arguments." If this license is the message of *Samson Agonistes*, "should [the work] not be withdrawn from schools and colleges and, indeed, banned more generally as an incitement to terrorism?" Any person with a sense of "common humanity" would be repulsed by Samson's actions, and since Milton is a "subtle-minded poet" and not a "murderous bigot," we can safely attribute to him such repulsion (15). Thus, Milton holds up for our excoriation his portrait of the Danite Chorus celebrating Samson's murder of the Philistine lords, an image Carey likens to "the pictures screened on British television in the immediate aftermath of September 11, which showed people in Arab dress dancing for joy in the streets" (16).

Carey's alarmist reading of Milton is truly frightening, though not in ways that he intended. Not only do his comments on withdrawing *Samson* from schools and colleges presuppose that educational curricula should suppress dissenting views on terrorism, but he also states that a right-thinking community cannot attribute aesthetic value to a work that condones Samson's actions: "September 11 has changed *Samson Agonistes*, because it has changed the readings we *can* derive from it while still celebrating it as an achievement of the human imagination" (16; emphasis mine).[2] The status of Milton's dramatic poem as literary achievement is, in this view, contingent on eliminating readings that associate the poet with religious violence. Such a view paradoxically empties the work of complexity by making a narrowed field of interpretation prerequisite to literary merit: *Samson Agonistes* can be celebrated if and only if it is nestled comfortably alongside such achievements of the human imagination as *Black Hawk Down* and *Saving Jessica Lynch*. Rarely has the complicity with the political dominant underpinning categories of literary value been so explicitly affirmed. Such views on what should and should not be taught in schools and colleges would sit well with the Defense of Civilization Fund of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which in its recent report *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done about It* has lamented academic reluctance to reflect public endorsement of the war on terrorism (Martin and Neal).

Carey's emphatic rescue of Milton from an implied association with terrorism has less to do with horror over *How Milton Works* than it does with a certain history of interpreting the poet and his dramatic poem. His advocacy of Milton as a "subtle-minded poet" rather than a "murderous bigot" is not a response to Fish so much as it is a comment on the tradition exemplified by T. S. Eliot's criticism that "of no other poet is it so difficult to consider the poetry simply as poetry, without our theological and political dispositions . . . making unlawful entry" (3); by Ezra Pound's famous "disgust" with Milton's "asinine bigotry, his beastly hebraism, [and] the coarseness of his mentality" (109); and by Samuel Johnson's description of *Samson Agonistes* as "the tragedy which ignorance has admired, and bigotry applauded" (103). Carey seems to see this tradition continued by "the modern view of Milton as primarily

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interested in politics and only incidentally a poet" (15). More specifically, he is buttressing the claim of his 1969 book *Milton* that Samson is an "outmoded" Jewish hero denounced in a Christian poem (138) and taking aim at those who deviate from his brand of rigorous close reading. In this light, his vituperative warnings of the dangers of accepting a positive reading of Milton's Samson are less an expression of humanistic horror over the tragic fallout of fanaticism than they are a histrionic repetition of his previous arguments.

Also worth noting is that Carey's comments misinterpret significantly Fish's reading of *Samson Agonistes*. It is true that in the passage cited by Carey, Fish declares that "the only value we can put on Samson's action is the value he gives it in context. Within the situation, it is an expression, however provisional, of his reading of the divine will; and insofar as it represents his desire to conform to that will, it is a virtuous action. *No other standard for evaluating it exists*" (Fish, *How* 426; qtd. in Carey, "Work" 15). Fish's qualifications here carry a weight in his argument for which Carey only marginally allows: Samson's reading of divine will is "provisional," and his action is virtuous "insofar as it represents a desire to conform to that will."[3] Milton's version of the biblical story, Fish claims, forces us to grant "the Philistines the status of human beings" and in the process evinces a "disinclination to allow us a comfortable perspective on Samson's action" (424). The human cost of Samson's "triumph," in other words, impels us to question his ostensible motive of obedience to God and thus to contemplate the inscrutability of divine will and the fallibility of human interpretation of it.

In Fish's reading, two plots are resolved at the end of the play—Samson's internal regeneration and his external vengeance on the Philistines—and although it is "tempting . . . to assume an intimate connection between these two plots, especially at those points where they coincide temporally . . . to do so would be to mistake contiguity in time for causality" (425). Samson is praiseworthy because he "intends" his actions to be conformable to the divine will, but Milton's text is skeptical of such intentions, teaching us that "he cannot know [this will], nor can we" (428).[4] Opposed to readings suggesting that Samson develops during his agons, Fish revives Dr. Johnson's remark that the dramatic poem "must be allowed to want a middle," arguing that Samson's final illumination "is not the end of a linear and chartable progression or the conclusion to a chain of inferences" (Johnson 102–03; Fish, *How* 413).

This point is an important one: the view, most influentially voiced by John M. Steadman (esp. 26–28) and Mary Ann Radzinowicz (esp. 274–79), that the middle of *Samson Agonistes* constitutes progressive, stepwise sanctification and regeneration tends, as several critics have recognized, to misrepresent the text (e.g., Rumrich). If taken too far, however, Fish's comments paint a disjointed portrait of Milton's dramatic poem; they leave us ultimately with a work that has no middle and two unrelated resolutions. What I argue here comes much closer to the approach that Carey accused Fish of taking. If Fish is to be faulted, it is not for being too strenuous in asserting that *Samson Agonistes* is a work that looks favorably on Samson's final action but rather for not being strenuous enough in doing so. Inquiry into the internal attributes of Milton's dramatic poem and into the historical context that both Carey and Fish are reluctant to acknowledge provides a preponderance of evidence pointing to Samson's heroic status.

The middle of the dramatic poem does not, it is true, develop linearly toward its conclusion in a manner that allows for assertion of causality. Each of Samson's three major dialogues—with his father, Manoa; with Dalila; and with the Philistine giant, Harapha—rather operates to develop a framework for proper interpretation of the climax. As John Shawcross recently observed, "Samson doesn't 'grow'

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with each episode so much as he eradicates a negative aspect of himself with each episode" (60).[5] By seeing in what terms Samson refutes these characters, we see a collection of negative definitions that delineate boundaries for interpreting his final triumph.

From the first encounter with Manoa we gain a sense of the insufficiency of the Old Law. Manoa's hope resides solely in the physical and legal. He suggests that his son return home and visit God's "sacred house," where he can "bring . . . offerings" to "avert / His further ire" (lines 518–20), which might lead to the restoration of Samson's eyesight.[6] Yet we know that for Milton, as he states in the autobiographical portion of the *Second Defence*, it is "not blindness but the inability to endure blindness [that] is a source of misery" (*Complete Prose Works* 4: 584). That Samson feels in his early lament that his loss of "light" is a loss "almost [of] life itself" (90–91) contrasts directly with the recompense of internal illumination emphasized by the bard in *Paradise Lost*: though light "Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain / . . . / So much the rather thou Celestial Light / Shine inward" (3.23, 51–52). Manoa's offered hope of restored eyesight leaves Samson in the "swoonings of despair" (631). The remedies derived by Manoa from the Old Law—his legalistic notion of ransom and devotion through physical offering—make no impact on his son's spiritual condition, which requires, as the Chorus recognizes, "Some source of consolation from above" (665).

If Samson does not embrace the promise of the Old Law offered to him by his father, it should be no surprise that he spurns the rekindled romance offered by Dalila. Her betrayal, she claims, was motivated by the human foibles of jealousy and possessiveness (739–95), an argument for which Samson has little patience: "Love constrained thee; call it furious rage / To satisfy thy lust: Love seeks to have Love" (836–37). After failing to persuade Samson to rekindle the romantic spark that first drew him to her, she declares finally that "civil Duty" and "Religion" prompted her to "entrap / A common enemy" (853–56). This episode, pointing as it does to competing political and religious ideologies and definitions of marital duty, would seem to speak to a modern "clash of civilizations," to employ Samuel Huntington's phrase. While some current commentary has seen the Dalila episode pointing to the irreconcilability of competing value systems—Dalila voices her allegiance to her nation and her gods while Samson retains allegiance to his—there is an important difference between these two declarations of allegiance: Dalila's marks her as a confirmed idolater, while Samson's is a commitment to God.[7] Though Samson's arguments are superior in kind, we are far too aware of his physical passion, of his lust for Dalila and of her ability to rouse in him the desire to "tear [her] joint from joint" (953), for him to be said to provide here a normative view of godly marriage and duty. The dialogue serves most strongly as a reminder of Samson's sins, a point brought home in his summation of the encounter: "So let her go, God sent her to debase me, / And aggravate my folly who committed / To such a viper his most sacred trust" (999–1001).

Politico-religious ideologies especially confront each other in the dialogue with Harapha. That Milton departs completely from his biblical sources in introducing the Giant of Gath suggests that this portion of the drama is particularly significant to his view of the Samson story. Those who see the final slaughter of the Philistines as negatively presented tend to look to the confrontation with Harapha as a precedent of Samson's error. His challenge to Harapha is indeed striking in its trial of God:

> . . . I to be the power of *Israel's* God
> Avow, and challenge *Dagon* to the test . . .
> . . . . . .
> Then thou shalt see, or rather thy sorrow
> Soon feel, whose God is strongest, thine
> or mine. (1150–55)

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Samson seems here like a classical warrior pitting his gods against those of his opponent. His statements are in the spirit of Seneca's Hercules calling on Athena's and Phoebus's assistance to thwart Juno's attempts to destroy him (lines 1768–79) or of Euripides's Iolaus entering a seemingly hopeless battle against the Argives: "Hera may be their patron but we have / Athena; and what counts in the long run / Is having stronger gods upon your side" (*Heracleidae*, lines 349–51).

This attitude is opposite to the calm defiance exemplified by Jesus in *Paradise Regain'd*: "it is written, / Tempt not the Lord thy God: he said and stood" (4.560–61). Samson aims in this episode, by contrast, to justify God through works. Where Jesus's faith is unshakable, Samson's sense of godliness resides in heroic deeds. In the exchange of taunts with Harapha, we are most aware of his history as Danite champion: Harapha has "come to see of whom such noise / Hath walk'd about, and each limb to survey" (1088–89), he wishes "that fortune / Had brought [him] to the field where" Samson "wrought such wonders with an Ass's Jaw" (1093–95), and he criticizes Samson's murder and robbery of "those thirty men / At *Askalon*" (1186–87). As the earlier description of the victory at Ramath-lechi suggests—when "with the Jaw of a dead Ass, his sword of bone, / A thousand foreskins fell" (143–44)—these are conflicts fought under the terms of the Law. Samson carries with him, as Harapha describes it, "the highest name for valiant Acts" among "the unforeskinn'd race," a heroism defined in tribal, legalistic terms contrary to the universality of the gospel. We are reminded in this flyting between the circumcised and uncircumcised that Samson's achievements are those of the flesh rather than the spirit and that he is thinking here of justification by works rather than justification by faith. He is, to use the terminology of Philippians, a mutilator of flesh rather than one circumcised in the spirit of God (Phil. 3.2–3).

Such are the nets of despair, sin, and vengeance in which we find Samson entangled in the middle of Milton's dramatic poem. As those who question the spiritual justification of his final action would point out, these nets leave him looking more like a washed-out strongman than they do a hero of faith. If we are to see Samson's final act as positive, it must transcend the fleshly, legalistic terms of his previous heroics; it must show valuation of internal illumination over physical sight and show recovery from the hubris that led him to marry Dalila. If Milton's Samson is indeed the hero of faith recorded in Hebrews 11, the final slaughter of the Philistines must be different in kind from the three encounters of the tragedy's middle: he will be a hero under the terms of the gospel if and only if he is not avenging his loss of eyesight, not succumbing to fleshly lust, and not settling a tribal blood feud.

Before we move from these negative definitions to a positive definition of Samson's role at the end of Milton's dramatic poem, let us review seventeenth-century readings of Samson and justifications of religious violence. It should be noted, first, that many exegetes of the period sustained the traditional typological association between Samson and Christ, a tradition rooted in Augustine's *Sermo de Samsone*.[8] To provide just a few examples, John Diodati, nephew of the scholar with whom Milton proudly reports he "conversed daily" during his stay in Geneva (*Complete Prose Works* 4: 620), provides in his *Pious and Learned Annotations* the view that Samson's final action is "a figure of the efficacie of Christs death, by which he finished all his combats and victories against the Devil and Sin" (Bb3v [comment on Judg. 16.30]). In *Biathanatos*, John Donne describes Samson as a "man so exemplar, that . . . the tymes before, had him in prophecy . . . and the tymes after him more consummately in *Christ*, of Whome he was a figure" (135; 3.5.4). George Herbert similarly evokes this typological tradition in his poem "Sunday": "As Samson

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bore the doors away, / Christ's hands, though nailed wrought our salvation, / And did unhinge that day" (lines 47–49).[9] Clearly, to recall Carey's terminology, many of Milton's contemporaries saw the biblical Samson as more than a "suicide bomber," and this group includes such "subtle-minded poets" as Donne and Herbert.

Milton's departure from this typology, however, is more substantial than his adherence to it. Joseph Wittreich recently described Milton's engagement of this tradition as a "typology of difference," where "Samson's slaying . . . sets him at odds with Christ's saving" and even from the "moral bearing" and "heroic character" of Hercules (*Shifting* 49, 55). In this way, Wittreich continues, Milton engages in the interrogation of Samson's heroism evident in such contemporaries as John Trapp. While it is true that Trapp and others raise questions about Samson's heroism, the questions raised are typically not whether Samson is the hero of faith of Hebrews 11 but rather how he can be both this hero and the vengeful lecher of Judges. Such questionings, as Trapp's commentary evinces, typically raise objections so that they can be quelled and, in the process, illustrate God's patience with his people:

> *Sampson* fell so farre . . . that we should hardly take him for a godly man, did we not find his name in the list of those Worthies, *Heb.* 11. But, like a tame Hawke, though he flew farre, yet he came to hand again. So will all that belong to God: recover they shall of their relapses, though with difficulty, yet sometimes with advantage.
>
> (682–83; cf. Wittreich, *Shifting* 84–85)

This portrait of Samson is similar to Heinrich Bullinger's in the *Sermonum decades quinque*, which states that while Samson "fuerit peccatum" 'sinned' in betraying the source of his might, the strength he draws on in his final act is of divine origin: "nomen domini inuocauit . . . redijt robur, id est, redijt spiritus Domini" '[He] invoked the name of God [and] his strength returned—that is, the spirit of God returned' (166r; sermon 3, par. 6; my trans.).

The interrogations to which Wittreich draws our attention, then, tend to explain the complexities of this biblical character while maintaining the heroism for which scripture provides sanction. Similarly, the "typology of difference" generated by Milton does not preclude Samson's heroism but argues for a heroism different from that of Christ or Hercules. Samson is not the perfect man that Jesus is in *Paradise Regain'd*; his actions do not evince a godlike impeccability. Nor is Samson's heroism legal or moral in the spirit of Euripides's Heracles. If the comparison of Hercules and Jesus in *Paradise Regain'd* is of "[s]mall things with greatest" (4.564), the terms by which Milton relates Samson to these two heroes instantiates a middle value between mere humanity and inimitable divinity. Milton presents, as Norman T. Burns has argued, a rare literary example of a hero of faith directed by spirit rather than bound by law (32). The interrogations of typology in Milton's brief tragedy generate a neither-nor dialectic, where such a hero is rendered ontologically inferior to Christ and, simultaneously, spiritually superior to such pagan counterparts as Hercules.

More pertinent than the typological tradition are definitions of the hero of faith by some of Milton's revolutionary comrades. Henry Vane, who knows "both spiritual power and civil, what each means" (Milton's sonnet 17, line 10), develops a federal theology soteriologically privileging the "spiritual seed" on whom the "living, unwritten Word of God" has been imprinted (*Retired Mans Meditations* 19). Because the Son is the Mediator from the beginning of time, the existence of these spiritual men precedes the physical arrival of Jesus. In this way, Vane can describe such figures of the Hebrew Bible as Abraham as among the spiritual elect and, more relevant for our purposes, look favorably upon

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Gideon. Like "Gideon and his three hundred," the Saints are justified in their militarism because they hold "*the sword of the Lord*" and have "been taught the practice and use of it in the greatest purity and most exact subserviencie unto Christ it is capable of" (382). Though introduced in the 1655 tract *The Retired Mans Meditations*, Vane's spiritualist views would enjoy their greatest currency after his 1662 execution as a regicide made him a martyr of the Good Old Cause: they were rehearsed in George Sikes's hagiography *The Life and Death of Sir Henry Vane* (1662) and in Vane's posthumous *Pilgrimage into the Land of Promise* (1664).

Henry Lawrence—the Puritan revolutionary who became president of Cromwell's Council of State and who, like Vane, is immortalized in one of Milton's sonnets (sonnet 20)—also provides a definition of spiritually justified militarism. The role of the Saints as Lawrence defines it is to avoid the worldly snares with which they are surrounded and to rely on "God and his holy Spirit," who "has married us to himself in holiness and righteousnes," and thus to embrace the spiritual peace offered by the gospel. This inner peace will paradoxically—although this paradox exists in the modern secularist mind rather than in the seventeenth-century one—justify the Saints in their militarism: "Let the world know that warre is but the Vizard, but there is peace within, underneath" (140).

This view informs Lawrence's exegesis of Matthew 5.9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." In Lawrence's terms, the peace found by the sons of God is internal and justifies outward war. I refer to this particular point of exegesis because it carries a modern counterpart that will assist us in reevaluating Carey's opposition of *Samson Agonistes* to Middle Eastern extremism. When Jimmy Carter achieved one of the greatest diplomatic successes of our time and brokered a peace accord between Egypt and Israel, he stood in the United States Congress and quoted this very verse of Matthew (*Jimmy Carter*, part 2). When Lawrence cites this passage, it is to direct us toward the spiritual peace by which physical violence is justified. "Experience tells us," Lawrence concludes, "that it is the fate of some warres, not onely to be the meanes by which peace is gotten, and procur'd, but by which it is nourisht, and maintayn'd, and we know some countryes, which injoy the greatest benefites of peace in the midst of a confirm'd warre" (188). As with Vane's view of Gideon, militarism is not a necessary evil at odds with the teachings of Christ but is rather an expression of the spiritual peace bestowed on the elect by the Mediator.

The religious violence that Carey would see as part of an "outmoded" Jewish heroism and that Fish would see as calling into question Samson's reading of the divine will is thus very much a part of the discourse of the revolution in which Milton was engaged. To see Milton adhering to Jimmy Carter's sense of peacemaking, furthermore, is not only to divorce him from his seventeenth-century context but also to ignore his increasing sympathy with radical spiritualism after the Restoration.[10] As a good deal of recent criticism has shown—the branch of scholarship that Carey dismisses as seeing Milton "only incidentally" as a poet—Milton's sympathies with the far left wing of Reformed religion grew a good deal stronger with the imposition of high-church uniformity that accompanied the restored monarchy. Janel Mueller and Sharon Achinstein associate resistance elements of *Samson Agonistes* with Restoration Nonconformity. David Loewenstein explores parallels between Milton's hero and the Quaker polemics of such figures as Thomas Ellwood, George Fox, and Edward Burrough, arguing for Milton's growing sympathy with the sect most harassed and persecuted by Restoration authorities (269–91). Barbara Lewalski has placed *Samson Agonistes* in the context of an overriding project of resistance evident throughout Milton's post-Restoration activity,

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showing how the supposed "retirement" from politics traditionally associated with his late religious poetry has been overstated ("'To Try'" and *Life* 525–36). Most relevant to our discussion is Blair Worden's argument that Milton's Samson is partly a tribute to Henry Vane. That Milton was affected by his longtime comrade's execution is suggested not only by the great affinity between his late thought and Vane's but also by the inclusion of sonnet 17 in Sikes's *Life and Death*, a work that rehearses the major principles of Vane's spiritualism.

If we see Samson as a hero of faith inspired by God in his slaughter of the Philistines, then, we would expect him to conform to the brand of sainthood defined in the spiritualist discourse especially important to Milton in his later years. The options Samson faces over the middle of the dramatic poem do not open this spiritual path, but Milton shows us early in the work a precedent for such spiritual illumination in Samson's account of his marriages:

> The first I saw at *Timna*, and she pleas'd
> Mee, not my Parents, that I sought to wed,
> The daughter of an Infidel: they knew not
> That *what I motion'd was of God; I knew*
> *From intimate impulse* . . .
> She proving false the next I took to Wife
> . . . . . .
> Was in the Vale of *Sorec*, *Dalila*,
> That specious Monster, my accomplisht snare.
> *I thought it lawful from my former act* . . .
> (221–31; emphasis mine)

Milton here adapts Judges, which states that Samson's desire to marry the woman of Timna was "from the Lord" (14.4), to his purposes. Samson's fulfillment of his divine promise is contingent on his ability to decipher the "intimate impulses" received directly from God. It is when he is not "motion'd of God" and when he instead relies on rationality and legal precedent—he thinks the marriage to Dalila is "lawful" from his "former act"—that his actions bear the corruption of common humanity rather than the spiritual justification of the true Saint.[11]

The "rousing motions" felt by Samson as he is escorted to the Philistine arena recall these "intimate impulses" from God—and hark further back in the 1671 edition to the "strong motion" leading Jesus into the desert of *Paradise Regain'd* (1.290–91). Samson, like Jesus, is not fully aware of why he is going:

> Be of good courage, I begin to feel
> Some rousing motions in me which dispose
> To something extraordinary my thoughts. . . .
> If there be aught of presage in the mind,
> This day will be remarkable in my life
> By some great act, or of my days the last.
> (1381–89)

What separates this speech from Samson's previous ones to Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha is an uncertainty different from that of the tragedy's middle. While uncertainty is generated in the three major dialogues through a cacophony of competing truth claims, here it is generated by the limits of human reason. Unlike in his refutations of Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha, Samson is now reduced to speculation.

This is why *Samson Agonistes* cannot have what Johnson would call a "middle." For Samson's final act to be justified, it cannot be causally related to the fleshly, rational concerns of his three major dialogues; it must instead take its impulse from the immediate divine illumination residing entirely outside the events with which we are presented.[12] Samson must calm the human impulses that led him astray and follow the divine "impulse" that is the guide of the Saint. Thus, Milton presents his response to the issues raised by Trapp and Bullinger regarding Samson's heroism: it is by following the agency of the Spirit, rather than his own, that Samson ultimately escapes from his hubris and becomes a hero of faith. If, as Johnson complains, *Samson Agonistes* does not fully adhere to classical standards, it is because Milton is drawing our attention to a relationship between divinity and humanity

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fundamentally opposed to that of his classical sources. For Greek tragedians, Jean-Pierre Vernant observes, "human action is not, of itself, strong enough to do without the power of the gods, not autonomous enough to be fully conceived without them" (19).

Samson Agonistes, on the other hand, dramatizes a temporary removal of divine agency from human action to show that in marrying Dalila and betraying the secret of his strength, Samson is, to recall Trapp's hawking analogy, flying far from God. The hubris of the classical hero always carries with it a certain degree of divine impulsion, even if only as the determination of the Fates. In Milton's Christian ontology, hubris is a by-product of man's tendency to be, to use Augustine's phrase, "inclinatus ad se ipsum minus esset" 'inclined to his own inferior being' (434; bk. 14, ch. 13; my trans.), and the Saint is the one granted the divine illumination necessary to transcend this corrupt nature. Like the typology of difference generated between Christ and Hercules, the dramatic development of *Samson Agonistes* challenges the classical categories it evokes in order to show their insufficiency in accounting for a hero of faith different in kind from Hercules, Oedipus, Macbeth, or Christ in *Christos Paschon*.[13] None of these heroes ever flies far from his divinely appointed role.

This dramatic development is entirely consistent with Milton's plans for an Abraham or Phineas tragedy, to which plans Burns draws our attention in his astute reading of *Samson Agonistes* (32–33). These differ markedly from Milton's proposed Christ tragedy, which, after a brief scene showing Judas's betrayal, simply provides "noble expressions" by "message & chorus" of Christ's "agony" (*Complete Prose Works* 8: 560). In the projected Abraham tragedy, on the other hand, the Chorus speaks of "Abrahams strange voyage," "discoursing as the world would of such an action divers ways," and is left in confusion until finally the hero returns "home with joy" (557–58). Even more pertinent is the plan for a Phineas tragedy, where "the Epitasis" shows "contention" over the legality of Phineas's actions until finally the "tumult" is quelled by "the word of the lord . . . acquitting & approving phineas" (560). As in *Samson Agonistes*, the epitasis of the Abraham tragedy is not causally related to the catastophe; it serves instead to highlight the hiddenness of the divine plan. The Phineas tragedy resembles *Samson Agonistes* in that it shows the insufficiency of legal proscription in interpreting the actions of the hero of faith, who is at last publicly justified by divine intervention. Each prototragedy accentuates the "new acquist / Of true experience" (*Samson Agonistes* 1755–56) granted to God's true servants by staging imperfect and misguided human understanding of the Saint's errand, the very point emphasized in the confusion over God's ways evident in the speeches of Manoa and the Chorus immediately following Samson's departure (1427–540).

Also worth noting is that the Chorus's confused rendition of Samson's triumph is significantly more graphic than the Messenger's report, the speech that Fish claims prevents us from viewing comfortably the divine origin of Samson's final action. Nowhere in the Messenger's description of the massacre do we see the kind of grisliness evident, for example, in Amphitryon's account in *Hercules furens* of Hercules's murders—as it appears in Jasper Heywood's translation, Hercules "rolled" his first son until "his head resoundeth out, / The sprynkled howses with the brayne / of him throwne owt are wet" (Seneca, lines 1978–81)—or in the Euripidean Messenger's description of the Bacchae's murder of Pentheus:

> One tore off an arm,
> Another a foot still warm in its shoe. His ribs
> were clawed clean of flesh and every hand
> was smeared with blood as they played ball
> with scraps
> of Pentheus' body. (*Bacchae*, lines 1133–37)

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The Miltonic Messenger's very brief statement on the human cost of Samson's actions, by comparison, seems designed not to grant the Philistines the status of human beings. Unlike the Chorus's more graphic description of miraculous "slaughter," which description incorrectly discerns God's ways, the Messenger's account glosses over human torment in a way that does allow comfortable attribution of the action to divine agency:

> The whole roof after them with burst of thunder
> Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
> Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, or Priests,
> Thir choice nobility and flower, not only
> Of this but each *Philistian* City round . . . (1651–55)

We are never allowed to forget in these lines the victims' status as Philistine political elite and the attendant association of this class with oppression of Israel. The kind of human suffering that elicits our horror over Hercules's actions and complicates our response to Pentheus's hubris simply does not emerge in Milton's portrait of the Philistine massacre.

Thus, Fish's claim that Milton directs us to the limitations of Samson's reading of divine will is misguided: in downplaying the human cost of Samson's triumph, in showing the independence of Samson's final action from the rationalism and legality of the tragedy's middle, and in recalling in the climactic scene the immediate divine direction evident in Samson's first marriage, Milton shows us a hero of faith achieving the saintly militarism described by Lawrence and Vane. That Samson's actions carry a horrific human cost does not preclude consideration of them as consistent with Providence; rather, it serves as a reminder of the natural conclusions arising from, to employ Fredric Jameson's comments on *Paradise Lost*, the "ideological closure" of "ethical binaries of good and evil, to which the Providential vision is irredeemably shackled" (42). In presenting a hero of faith whose ultimate achievement is providential slaughter, Milton shows an ideology marginalizing the humanity of nonadherents—just as he did in his satisfaction over the beheading of Charles, in his triumphalism over Cromwell's Irish slaughters, and in his advocacy in the final days of the republic of military suppression of the "inconsiderate multitude['s]" desire for monarchy (*Complete Prose Works* 7: 446).

An awareness of these currents in Milton's thought allows us to challenge the readings of *Samson Agonistes* that Carey declares acceptable. As we have seen, Carey raises the issue of terrorism in an effort to elevate the reading of Milton to the level of crisis: either we see him as a "subtle-minded poet" who necessarily would recoil from the actions he presents in his dramatic poem or we foolishly ignore his poetic achievement and see him as the kind of "murderous bigot" who would praise the events of 9/11. Ezra Pound opted for the second alternative in his professed "disgust" of Milton's "beastly hebraism." What is most disconcerting about this parallel between Carey and Pound is how completely their systems of literary value overlap. Both men offer interpretations of Milton predicated on a politics of identity that separates humanist endeavor from a race of "beastly" subhumans. Though they are on opposite sides of the fence with regard to Milton, the fence is much the same for each: just as "Hebraism" is the Other to which Pound relegates Milton, "Arabism" is the Other from which Carey rescues him.

We cannot, Carey argues, associate Milton with those "pictures screened on British television in the immediate aftermath of September 11, which showed people in Arab dress dancing for joy in the streets" ("Work" 16). The language he uses to divorce this spectacle from the realm of culture is telling: these are not real-life Arabs with a literature

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and religion of their own, but television images of actors in costume staging a macabre dumb show. In Carey's view, these "murderous bigots" are entirely removed from the rarefied realm of "human imagination." This high-humanist argument betrays its own ideological closure in mounting a geopolitically coded opposition of good and evil in which Milton's radicalist sympathies are silenced.

If, as Carey claims, 9/11 has indeed "changed" the way we read *Samson Agonistes*, then we would do well to be chary of this impulse. To see the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York as a historical rupture necessitating such change is, as Amy Kaplan has observed, to generate "a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an antinarrative that claims that the event was so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis" (56). At such a time, it is especially necessary to see both literary production and literary criticism as politically charged *prises de position*, to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, and skeptically to unpack those narratives that aim to silence analysis of these position takings (319–20). Through this skepticism, we see, as Gayatri Spivak has put it, how "a literary habit of reading the world can attempt to put a curb on . . . superpower triumphalism only if it does not perceive acknowledgment of complicity as an inconvenience" (xii). By imposing permissible readings of Milton's dramatic poem, Carey seeks to render impossible a view of the text that might interrogate Western location of religious violence in the Other. Though he would criticize Carey's liberal humanist interpretation, Fish generates similar conclusions.[14] By divorcing Milton from his historical milieu and attributing to him a concern with the hero of faith's "provisional" reading of divine will, he forecloses discussion of the text's radicalism. This view, too, tends anachronistically to associate Milton with skeptical humanism rather than religious enthusiasm.

If Milton holds especial importance in current political discussion, it is precisely because he frustrates uncomplicated narrativization of the Western tradition. In examining his work, we are aware, to use Achcar's phrase, of how "each civilization has its own barbarism" (64). Even as humanistically "pure" a speech act as Milton's pastoral elegy *Lycidas* expresses anxiety over "what the grim Wolf with privy paw / Daily devours apace" (lines 128–29), thus voicing fear of the threat to homeland security posed by Catholic infiltration. His propagandist prose for the Protectorate mirrors the conflicted relationship between the discourses of liberty and conquest inhering in "Operation Iraqi Freedom." One of the most Miltonic statements of recent history is the Ayatollah Khomeini's (probably unwitting) paraphrase of *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, immediately before Khomeini would institute the brand of oligarchic, absolutist regime advocated in Milton's tract: "Islam is fundamentally opposed to the whole notion of monarchy" (qtd. in Ali 129).[15] Because Milton's literary achievements are undeniably great while sometimes exhibiting what we would now call religious extremism and political radicalism, honest and clear-sighted criticism of his work can lead us to challenge ontological separation of these modes of thought. Through such challenges, we interrogate the coding of high Western culture as fundamentally rational and nonviolent and examine the tendency of libertarianism, in Milton's day and our own, to privilege the freedoms of the elect above those of the marginal.

The most valuable readings now of any literary text that seems to endorse religious violence are those seeking to disclose the implications of the text rather than to dismiss them. Such readings should interrogate both the author's position and the critic's without rejecting evidence that does not coincide with an uncomplicated vision of cultural history.

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Rather than a change in the way we attribute value to literary texts, this position represents a reaffirmation of the value of critical rigor and clear-sightedness. What has changed after 9/11—now that the university finds itself in the precarious position of being deemed a threat to national security; now that religious violence no longer takes its toll only in distant corners of the world; and now, above all, that the world's most powerful nation has a newfound sense of victimhood—is the difficulty, and also the vital necessity, of scrutinizing Western ideology and seeing how frequently even cherished artifacts of its tradition show evidence of the very brand of thought that the political dominant vilifies in the Other. The chief intellectual challenge of the war on terrorism is precisely not to fall into the comfort of easy bifurcations—"subtle-minded poets" and "murderous bigots," "good" and "evil," "for us" and "for the terrorists"—that elevate Western culture above the Other's barbarism.

Notes

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[1] See also the letters to the editor resulting from this article in the issues of 13 Sept. (17), 20 Sept. (15)—which includes a response from Carey—and 4 Oct. (19), as well as Guttenplan; Shea. For the last of these references, I am indebted to Joseph Wittreich's forthcoming "Why Milton Matters," which the author has generously shared.

[2] On this comment, see also Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship" 466.

[3] Tucked almost imperceptibly among Carey's accusations of dogmatism is the following: "As Fish concedes, Milton's Samson cannot know whether his vengeance conforms to the divine purpose or not" (16). In his forthcoming article "Returning the Gorgon Medusa's Gaze: Terror and Annihilation in Milton," Michael Lieb similarly observes that Carey misreads Fish's argument on *Samson Agonistes*; see also Lieb's reading of Samson in "'Our Living Dread.'"

[4] According to a similar argument by Derek Wood, Milton's portrayal of Samson calls into question the sufficiency of works under the Old Law and shows the limits of faith without "the example of Christ living the lesson of charity in time" (122). In his review of Wood's book, David Urban interrogates Wood's claims on Miltonic nonviolence, citing Michael's approval in *Paradise Lost* of "Joshua's bloody victories over the Canaanites" (45; see *Paradise Lost* 12.261–69).

[5] See also Shawcross's reading of the three episodes of the tragedy's middle (116–33).

[6] Milton's *Complete Poems and Major Prose* is my source for quotations from *Samson Agonistes* (549–93), as well as from *Paradise Lost* (207–469), *Paradise Regain'd* (483–530), sonnet 17 (161), and *Lycidas* (120–25).

[7] For fuller articulation of the differences between Samson's arguments and Dalila's, see Rudrum, "Discerning," esp. 248–50, and "Milton Scholarship" 483–84.

[8] See Krouse 40–44. In his 1640 treatise *The General View of the Holy Scriptures*, Thomas Hayne presents a long point-by-point comparison of Samson and Christ, relating Samson's murder of the Philistines to Christ's judgment of the Jews and Romans (Krouse, pl. 4).

[9] For further examples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exegetical treatment of Samson, see Krouse 63–79; for an interrogation of Krouse's view of the tradition, see Wittreich, *Interpreting*, ch. 4. See also the encyclopedic commentaries of Lapide (137–49) and Poole (cols. 1162–87).

[10] Apparently, some feel that Carter's sense of peacemaking is also a thing of the past. Responding to the former president's comment that the phrase "axis of evil" is "overly-simplistic and counter-productive," William Bennett's Americans for Victory over Terrorism has placed Carter among those who "fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the war we are facing" (Lobe; Young 13; Shapiro; Leibsohn).

[11] John P. Rumrich similarly observes that "past performance is no guarantee of future results. Perhaps God did impel Samson to marry the woman of Timna; that does not mean that Samson was right to marry Dalila" (314). For fuller discussion and a view opposed to the one here presented, see Rushdy 297–306.

[12] Rumrich's account of the brief tragedy's absent middle argues that the Aristotelian term supporting Johnson's claim is *pefuken*, the "natural" quality that should mark dramatic progress and that is defined according to the classical view that "natural phenomena . . . act as they do through necessity" (317).

[13] Alan Fishbone has provided a fresh translation of *Christos Paschon*, a text significant in its Euripidean rendition of biblical subject matter. Mark R. Kelley tends to elide Milton's tragic hero with those of Euripides in his account of "Milton's Euripidean poetics of lament" (esp. 146, 156).

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[14] For a concise statement of Fish's objections to liberalism, see *There's No Such Thing* 134–38; see also his "Postmodern Warfare."

[15] Cf. Milton's *Complete Prose Works* 7: 359–60, 364. Though he does not connect Khomeini to Milton, Ali later describes Iranian resistance to the shah as "Islamic Jacobinism," stating that "nothing like this had been seen since the victory of Protestant fundamentalism in seventeenth-century England" (131).

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