

“Sion’s Songs”: Milton, the Psalms, and Counter-Tradition

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The impulse to oppose cultural norms appears as inarticulate revolt, as social criticism, as vision, as ideology, as completed revolution; it may spring from logic, disillusionment, or the experience of oppression. In short, it is part of the continuing dialectic of history, as much our cultural heritage as what it opposes. What I mean, then, by ‘counter-tradition’ is not ‘that which opposes tradition,’ but ‘the tradition which opposes.’ —Sheila Delany¹

Sheila Delany’s first book conveys an incisive critique of the assumptions conveyed in the texts of higher learning. *Counter-Tradition: A Reader in the Literature of Dissent and Alternatives* presents selected texts beginning with the prophet Amos and ending with writers still active in 1971, the year of its publication. The text was a strong statement in its time. The book observes, in the midst of the War in Vietnam, the influence of Thomas Jefferson on Ho Chi Minh; it links, at the time of the civil rights movement, black leaders from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X; it connects, during the resurgence of the feminist movement, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to name only some of the writers represented in the volume. The selections comprise, in Delany’s words, both “an intellectual tradition” not available in many of the standard readers of the time, and a “literary corpus of excellence and rhetorical variety” that is supportive of undergraduates in their growth and formation as writers and critics.²

1 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 4.

2 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 4.

What is most impressive about the volume, therefore, is the ability of its creator to take the measure of her own times. The anthology offers a dissenting alternative to texts which assume and inculcate the “dominant values of our culture,” which might include “social hierarchy, the sanctity of private property, strongly differentiated sex roles, absolute morality, undiscriminating respect for the law, and the wisdom of resignation to society as it is.”³ The anthology does not, however, embrace the clichés of “relevance” proffered by the counter-cultural forces at the time of its publication: “that contemporary relevance is achieved only (or best) in contemporary writing is a solipsistic notion; it implies that our society sprang phoenix-like from the ashes of dead civilizations and that, being unique, it cannot be understood through history.”⁴ Navigating the tension between cultural dominance and contemporary relevance, Delany identifies a *tradition* of opposition. Demonstrating an exceptional empathy with her students and readers, Delany argues that opposition is traditional “simply as a habit of mind and a social force constantly present in history.”⁵ This book shows how historical perspective can reorient and renovate the enterprise of education.

Delany’s concept of counter-tradition, though stated briefly in the introduction to her volume, remains timely, durable, and suggestive for teaching and scholarship. In this essay, I will show the value of her concept to Milton. Milton is a significant choice for this purpose. As a major canonical writer, Milton could easily be found in a “traditional” anthology, yet he is present in Delany’s counter-tradition where he is represented by *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. While Milton’s position as a major canonical author is both justified and secure, recent scholarship has sought to regain the radical Milton by placing him more in the context of his contemporaries.⁶ That context is dissent, both religious and political. As a canonical and radical figure, Milton perhaps epitomizes the relationship between tradition and dissent Delany articulates.

My purpose is not simply to justify Milton as an example of counter-tradition; instead, I want to demonstrate how that idea functions dynamically within his writings. I will focus on two poems: *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Published together in 1671, these poems invite a joint reading. Sharon Achinstein undertakes this joint reading by contextualizing the poems within the culture of religious dissent in Restoration England.⁷

3 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 3.

4 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 3.

5 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 4.

6 See Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution*, esp. 175-295.

7 See Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent in Milton’s England*, esp. 130-53.

Both poems present heroes in confrontation with authority; both illustrate a critique of authority that is grounded in prior texts and traditions which the heroes internalize, maintain, and interpret in their resistance to temptation and subjugation. Confrontation implies a prophetic stance of the kind Sheila Delany describes in her introduction to the prophet Amos: “In a theocratic society, where nation and congregation are one, the prophet, speaking by inspiration, is at once poet, visionary, and professional social critic.”⁸ As she affirms, the Hebrew prophet is an archetypal figure for a literary counter-tradition which embraces writers like Milton and Blake and Carlyle. Jesus and Samson are prophetic in their different conflicts in these poems. I want to focus on a different biblical text as the foundation of counter-tradition in these poems: the Psalms. In examining the Psalms, I emphasize texts which connect these individual heroes and their experiences to the larger pattern of history in its Hebraic contours. The Psalms give a voice to suffering and a structure to time and memory: they enhance the educative process in Milton’s poems, and thereby demonstrate how counter-tradition offers a unique vantage point on literary education.

The Psalms and Early Modern Literature

Robert Alter, who has done much to open the richness of the Hebrew Bible and Hebrew language for students of English literature, makes this observation on the prominence of the Psalms in the early modern era:

It is symptomatic of the general response to these poems that so many poets in Renaissance England, though equally innocent of Hebrew and of an understanding of biblical poetic structure, should have tried their hand at producing metrical English versions of the Psalms. In whatever way biblical versification was thought to work, it was almost universally assumed that the psalms exhibited the rhythmic regularity, the symmetries, the cadenced repetitions, of artful poems.⁹

Rivkah Zim demonstrates that the “achievement of the later sixteenth-century English psalmists was to regenerate their contemporaries’ expectations of psalms as poetry, and to make English metrical psalms a suitable vehicle for contemporary devotional poetry.”¹⁰ Sir Philip Sidney, whose sister Mary continued his translation of the Psalms after his death, begins his *Defence of Poetry* by considering the literary properties of the Psalms from the authority of “learned hebricians”:

⁸ See Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 7.

⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 111.

¹⁰ Zim, *English Metrical Psalms*, 152.

And may not I presume a little further, to show the reasonableness of this word *vates*, and say that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name of Psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs; then that it is fully written in metre, as all learned hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found; lastly and principally, his handling his prophecy, which is merely poetical: for what else is the awakening of his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith?¹¹

As Ramie Targoff argues, Sidney "participated in, and probably helped to provoke, a widespread rethinking of the distinction between poetry and devotion at the end of the Elizabethan period."¹² His affirmation of the poetic properties of these sacred texts encouraged the development of devotional poetry in early modern England.

Sidney's influence appears in seventeenth-century commentaries. In *A Preparation to the Psalter*, George Wither remarks on the literary variety found in the Psalms:

As the *Psalmes* are excellent in regard of the *Author*, and *Matter* of them; so, are they also in respect of their *Forme*. For, they are in *Verse*, & *Verse* of sundry kinds; wherein there is also greater varietie of expression, then can be found in any one volume of *Poesie*, whether you haue respect to the nature of the *Poesie*, as it is *Heroicall*, *Tragicall*, *Lyricall*, & such like; or, to his manner of setting forth those things he purposeth: which is sometime by way of complaint, sometime petitionarily, sometime in one fashion, and sometime in another; [. . .]. And in my opinion, it addeth somewhat to their dignitie, that they doe by a sweete and extraordinary kind of speaking, seeke to ravish the mind with the loue of God.¹³

Similarly, in the *Reason of Church Government*, Milton praises "those frequent songs throughout the law and prophets beyond all these [which], not in their divine argument alone, but in the very critical art of composition, may be easily made appear over all the kinds of lyric poesy to be incomparable."¹⁴ As Mary Ann Radzinowicz observes, Milton read the Psalms, "not simply as an anthology of moral, intellectual, and psychological

11 Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, 22.

12 Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 74.

13 Wither, *A Preparation to the Psalter* (1619), 127.

14 Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, 669. All references to Milton's works are to this edition and will hereafter be provided parenthetically in the text above.

episodes,” but as “encompassing a variety of genres, each marked by a distinctive decorum, rhetorical structure, and poetic figures.”¹⁵ Milton translated Psalms 1 to 8 and Psalms 80 to 88. More than poetic exercises, certain translations engage with central questions within the literary culture of dissent. Psalm 6, for instance, engages with questions of the efficacy of prayer; Achinstein observes, for example, that “Psalm 6 is both appeal and proof, robust evidence from the Bible that God answers prayers and punishes enemies.”¹⁶

The psalm-like utterances which Milton creates in his major works as spontaneous expressions of praise or lamentation maintain this kind of engagement. The morning prayer of Adam and Eve in Book V of *Paradise Lost* evokes the Psalms as songs of praise:

Lowly they bow’d adoring, and began
Thir Orisons, each Morning duly paid
In various style, for neither various style
Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
Thir Maker, in fit strains pronounc’t or sung
Unmeditated, such prompt eloquence
Flow’d from thir lips, in Prose or numerous Verse,
More tuneable than needed Lute or Harp
To add more sweetness.

(PL 5.144-52)

In this state of innocence, the unadorned human voice surpasses the “harp” that accompanies many biblical psalms; moreover, Milton’s evocation of psalmody in this passage contains suggestions of a dissenting literary tradition when viewed in its historical context. The spontaneous nature of Edenic prayer amounts to a politics of voice for Milton. After 1662, with the imposition of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as established religious practice, dissenters like John Bunyan preferred prison to conformity in religious worship. From the dissenter’s perspective, prescribed or “stinted” prayers comprised an artificial, human, even idolatrous tradition; counter-tradition required prayer in the spirit, and Milton shows his empathy for that counter-tradition in imagining the psalm-like power of the unadorned voice in the state of innocence. Counter-tradition is therefore both artistically excellent and politically engaged. While Milton’s epic conveys its readers to a spiritually pre-lapsarian world, it is connected to the dynamics of dissent and conformity in post-lapsarian history.

15 Radzinowicz, *Milton’s Epics and the Book of Psalms*, 3.

16 Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent*, 148.

The Psalms maintain this connection. The Hebrew title of the Psalms — “Tehillim” — means “praises,” but praise in the psalms emerges from the polarities of time, memory, experience, and history which produce the vicissitudes of exile and return, lamentation and praise. As Patrick Miller has shown in a survey of the history of the Psalms, Calvin and Luther were impressed by the spectrum of feeling and emotion in these poems. Calvin remarks,

I have been accustomed to call this, I think not inappropriately, “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul”; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.¹⁷

Similarly, Luther sees in the Psalms the polarities of praise and lamentation:

A human heart is like a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is stuck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and of anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present blessings. These storm winds teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies at the bottom of it. [. . .]

What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts of fair and happy thoughts toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God!¹⁸

As Miller observes, “the psalms give speech to human response and human existence before God [. . .] the psalms range through the gamut of *experiences* (disaster, war, sickness, exile celebration, marriage, birth, death) and *emotions* (joy, terror, reflections, gratitude, hate, contentment, depression).”¹⁹ Poets and theologians of Milton’s period valued

17 Calvin on the Psalms, quoted in Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 19. See also “John Calvin to the godly Readers,” *The Psalmes of David* (1571), A5.v.

18 Luther, “Preface to the Psalter,” 35:255-56. Partly qtd. in Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 19.

19 Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 19.

the Psalms for providing both a structure and a language of suffering. Milton relies on these structures in both *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

History and Education in *Paradise Regained*

In *Counter-Tradition*, Sheila Delany presents a selection from the writings of Gerard Winstanley, leader of the Digger movement, a “tiny sect of artisans, farm workers, and small tradesmen” in the seventeenth century, to exemplify the potential of the Christian Gospels as foundations of counter-tradition.²⁰ Delany suggestively compares Winstanley’s “The True Levellers’ Standard Advanced” and Milton’s *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*: “Winstanley was ill-educated and often impoverished, Milton the comfortable cosmopolitan intellectual. In first principles, though, the essays are often closer than style alone might suggest.”²¹ The turbulent decade of the 1640s linked writers otherwise distant in class and education in a common milieu of revolutionary and reforming energy; they combine, notwithstanding their different beliefs and purposes, in a counter-tradition of religious argument, political vision, and biblical language.²²

In April 1649, the Diggers, who hoped to abolish the wide disparities of wealth and landownership preserved in the English class system, occupied St. George’s Hill in Surrey in an effort to demonstrate that they could work the land co-operatively and as equals. With the site they chose being named after St. George, the patron saint of England, their provocative action was a performance of counter-tradition and, indeed, counter-nationalism. The name “George,” moreover, means “earth worker” in Greek, and in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, for example, the association with the soil is given special emphasis by the image of a ploughman finding the infant St. George in a furrow of earth:

Where thee a Ploughman all unweeting fond,
As he his toylesome teme that way did guyde,
And brought thee up in ploughmans state to byde,
Whereof *Georgos* he thee gave to name.²³

20 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 70.

21 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 70.

22 Christopher Hill remarks, “Milton himself was not an extreme radical, Leveller, Digger or Ranter. He agreed with these groups on some issues, but only on some. What I suggest is that this is the milieu in which we should set Milton.” Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, 99.

23 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al., I.x.66:3-6.

As Delany notes, the Diggers “called for a fully revolutionary reorganization of society: not only universal suffrage and religious equality, but redistribution of land among the poor, communal cultivation, and ultimately the abolition of private property in land.”²⁴ As James Holstun observes, the “utopian communal experiment of Winstanley and the Diggers at George’s Hill justifies itself with an appeal to the rational use of waste ground,” or common land.²⁵ Their intention, as Amy Boesky explains, “was to plant crops on the unused land for their own subsistence.”²⁶ Local landowners and neighbours harassed the Diggers until they finally abandoned the land.

Milton published *Paradise Regained* more than twenty years after the eviction of the Diggers. The poem expands on Luke’s account of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. Milton’s Jesus is a type of dissenter in the poem. Dressed simply and speaking plainly, he confronts a Satan who is at once a courtier, a power broker, and a persecutor of those who resist assimilation into his world order. The invocation to the poem proclaims “Recover’d Paradise to all mankind,” but this is not a claim to any material space like that of the Diggers, nor is it a utopian vision. Eden is “rais’d in the waste Wilderness” figuratively through the testing and triumph of its hero. The poem develops Milton’s concept of the “paradise within” established at the end of *Paradise Lost* (12.587). The inner paradise is the spiritual antitype of Eden: it is the textual ground of conscientious resistance in response to persecution and temptation.

Importantly, the first temptation addresses the most basic of human needs, food. Satan assumes the disguise of an old man labouring on inhospitable ground:

But if thou be the Son of God, Command
That out of these hard stones be made thee bread;
So shalt thou save thyself and us relieve
With Food, whereof we wretched seldom taste.
(PR 1.342-45)

Satan provokes Jesus to produce a material paradise. Despite an agonizing hunger from his forty-day fast, Jesus refuses by affirming the priority of the sacred text. Deuteronomy 8:3 is the core of his refusal:²⁷

24 Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 70.

25 Holstun, *A Rational Millenium*, 72. Holstun compares Milton’s call for the “just division of waste commons” as a means to prevent civil war to Winstanley’s appeal for “a free allowance to dig and labor the commons”; *A Rational Millenium*, 72.

26 Boesky, *Founding Fictions*, 103.

27 In fact, Deuteronomy provides Christ’s core statement in each of the three refusals. Christ cites Deut. 6:13 to refuse the second temptation and Deut. 6:16 to reject the third.

Think’st thou such force in Bread? is it not written
 (For I discern thee other then thou seem’st)
 Man lives not by Bread only, but each Word
 Proceeding from the mouth of God, who fed
 Our Fathers here with Manna? In the Mount
Moses was forty days, nor eat nor drank,
 And forty days *Elijah* without food
 Wander’d this barren waste; the same I now:
 Why dost thou then suggest to me distrust,
 Knowing who I am, as I know who thou art?
 (PR 1.347-56)

Through typological identification with his predecessors, Jesus reconstructs the tradition which forms him through figures representing key phases of the biblical canon: Moses is the giver of the law, and Elijah is a prophet. Law and prophecy are linked through narratives of exile. Unlike law and prophecy, the Psalms do not provide a unique phase of biblical revelation; they do, however, provide structures of inwardness and meditation through which Jesus can identify with the history of Israel and internalize that history in his present experience. The Psalms offer a nexus of individual and collective experience, demonstrating that suffering is not isolated, but is rather a powerful process which connects the individual to the community and the world. Since the poem brings its hero into what Psalm 23 calls the presence of an enemy, Milton maintains psalmic meditation in a mode of interiority:

One day forth walk’d alone, the Spirit leading,
 And his deep thoughts, the better to converse
 With solitude, till far from track of men,
 Thought following thought, and step by step led on,
 He enter’d now the bordering Desert wild,
 And with dark shades and rocks environ’d round,
 His holy Meditations thus pursu’d.
 (PR 1.189-95)

Arguably, the dynamic mobility of Jesus’s relation to the Psalms characterizes Milton’s treatment of this scriptural episode in a post-medieval, Reformation context. In her study of the traditions underlying *Paradise Regained*, Elizabeth Marie Pope remarks on the “stable iconography” of the medieval tradition. Medieval artists emphasized Matthew’s order of temptations, which placed the kingdoms of the world third; in the Renaissance, however, “the stable iconography of the Middle Ages broke down, and artists began to

depict the temptations in whatever order they pleased.”²⁸ Milton presents Luke’s order, which places the kingdoms of the world second in the sequence of the three temptations. Milton was not simply opposing the dominant Matthean tradition by choosing Luke; I argue that he chose Luke in order to emphasize the imperatives of dissent and opposition in the present world. Hence, while the first and third temptations are relatively brief, the second temptation of the kingdoms of the world is developed at great length in *Paradise Regained*. Milton understood the Reformation as a new impulse in history with a new emphasis on life in the world. When he completed the poem, life in the world entailed a new phase of persecution and suffering for dissenters after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

The Psalms come to the foreground in a specific component of the second temptation: the temptation of learning and education in Athens. Satan turns to Athens because of Jesus’s propensity for “contemplation and profound dispute” (4.213). He also recognizes that Jesus’s intellect is intensely iconoclastic, and therefore threatening to the fallen world Satan seeks to conserve. Satan neutralizes this threat by making education as harmless and escapist as possible:

Athens, the eye of *Greece*, Mother of Arts
And Eloquence, native to famous wits
Or hospitable, in her sweet recess,
City or Suburban, studious walks and shades;
See there the Olive Grove of *Academe*,
Plato’s retirement, where the *Attic* Bird
Trills her thick-warbl’d notes the summer long.
(*PR* 4.240-46)

Recess and retirement imply sequestration from the world, or education as disconnection. Satan offers the classical tragedians, orators, and philosophers as ways of retreating from the Bible. Jesus responds by affirming the literary value of the Psalms:

Or if I would delight my private hours
With Music or with Poem, where so soon
As in our native Language can I find
That solace? All our Law and Story strew’d
With Hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscrib’d
Our Hebrew Songs and Harps in *Babylon*,

28 Pope, *Paradise Regained: The Tradition and the Poem*, 9.

That pleas’d so well our Victors’ ear, declare
 That rather *Greece* from us these Arts deriv’d.
 (PR 4.331-38)

From this foundation of literary excellence, he then declares the political potential of scripture:

In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt,
 What makes a Nation happy, and keeps it so,
 What ruins Kingdoms, and lays Cities flat;
 These only, with our Law, best form a King.
 (PR 4.361-64)

Taken together, these passages construct the two necessary dimensions of counter-tradition: literary excellence and political engagement. In rejecting the kingdoms of the world through a celebration of the Psalms, Jesus implicitly adds a third figure to the typology of Moses and Elijah established in the first temptation: King David, the poet of “*Sion’s songs*” (PR 4.347). He cultivates the “paradise within” (PL 12.587) in opposition to Satan’s presentation of Athens as the “Olive Grove of *Academe*” (PR 4.244), and envisions a spiritual kingdom in opposition to Satan’s worldly power:

Know therefore when my season comes to sit
 On *David’s* Throne, it shall be like a tree
 Spreading and overshadowing all the Earth,
 Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
 All Monarchies besides throughout the world,
 And of my Kingdom there shall be no end.
 (PR 4.146-51)

Education is the nexus of literary excellence and political engagement in the concept of counter-tradition. Recognizing that this combination is a potent force for dissent, Satan seeks to make education innocuous. Jesus places education at the centre of counter-tradition, reclaiming its potency. He rejects Satan’s offers of instant gratification, preferring the temporal process of patience which leads to wisdom, even through suffering. Jesus’s patience in turn affirms that education is not a reactionary process. Jesus grounds himself in a textual rather than material space, integrating social criticism into his evolving vision of a kingdom without end. The temporal continuum he uncompromisingly maintains thereby characterizes his zeal in God’s service as mature, disciplined, and informed. The textual and temporal spaces which literary education can open distinguish criticism from reaction, service from subservience, and radicalism from fanaticism.

History and Memory in *Samson Agonistes*

Samson Agonistes, published jointly with *Paradise Regained* in 1671, has become a conflicted and polarizing text for readers and critics. Readers troubled by the violent climax of Samson's career consider comparison with our contemporary milieu. The slaughter of thousands in the Philistine temple evokes acts of terrorism or suicide bombing. Important as these current considerations are, the concept of counter-tradition requires us to engage our contemporary context in a dialogue with the past. Recent scholarship that sets Milton and his writings among his contemporaries highlights a key term in Delany's theory of counter-tradition: dissent. *Samson Agonistes* shares the concern for post-Restoration dissenting culture discussed above with regard to *Paradise Regained*. Conformity in religion, as required by the restored monarchical regime after 1660, became, for Milton, an issue of religious toleration rather than fanaticism insofar as circumstances pitted outward coercion and compulsion against inward conscience and conviction. As Achinstein remarks, dissent "was a performance, a drama, because preserving the inner realm of conscience alone was not enough to define human freedom; the state's compulsory regime made actions matter."²⁹ Exploring the literary culture of dissent need not contradict the concerns of contemporary readers witnessing a new merger of religion, rhetoric, and violence in their own historic moment; instead, this exploration establishes a dialogue with the past through which today's reader can better appreciate the support dissenters looked for in their literature.

Milton was himself in dialogue with past traditions concerning Samson when he completed his dramatic poem. *Samson Agonistes* is a final, major interpretation of Samson in a post-medieval, Reformation context. In a Christian context, Samson's prominence in biblical exegesis is based on his inclusion in the catalogue of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. This canonization of Samson impelled a long tradition of allegorical and typological readings of the details of the Judges narrative from the patristic to the early modern period. As F. Michael Krouse has shown, these readings include a strong element of Christian allegory in Ambrose and Augustine in the patristic period and in Rupert of St. Heribert in the scholastic period. Hence, "Samson's bearing away the gates of Gaza and going up the hill near Hebron was a figure of Christ harrowing Hell and ascending into Heaven."³⁰ An emphasis on Samson's suffering and death in scholastic commentaries led to a new focus in late medieval literature, where writers such as Chaucer, Gower,

²⁹ Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent*, 142.

³⁰ Krouse, *Milton's Samson*, 52.

and Lydgate emphasized Samson’s downfall at the hands of a treacherous Dalila. In “The Monk’s Tale,” Chaucer writes,

O noble Sampson, strongest of mankynde,
 O whilom juge, in glorie and richesse!
 Now maystow wepen with thyne eyen blynde,
 Sith thou fro wele art falle in wrecchednesse.³¹

Milton also emphasizes the final events in Samson’s life, after his betrayal and downfall are complete. In adapting the narrative to the genre of classical tragedy, Milton presents Samson’s last hours in a time frame which is “according to ancient rule, and best example, within the space of 24 hours.”³² Hence, the Chorus of Hebrews fulfils the role of Chaucer’s narrator by marveling at Samson’s fall:

O mirror of our fickle state,
 Since man on earth unparallel’d!
 The rarer thy example stands,
 By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
 Strongest of mortal men,
 To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall’n.
 (SA 164-69)

In conforming to the classical convention of the unity of time, Milton shifts the main site of his action inward to Samson’s memory. Past events are retold and reinterpreted obsessively in dialogue with his visitors — the Chorus, Manoa, Dalila, and the fictitious adversary Harapha — or in dialogue with his own, inward self as that self is divided by his failure to live up to his divine commission as a Judge of Israel.

Tradition enters the poem as its main characters fixate on how they will be remembered by future generations. Spurned when she first seeks reconciliation with Samson, Dalila strikingly appropriates Samson’s status as a heroic deliverer by imagining an alternative, partisan tradition:

In *Ekron*, *Gaza*, *Asdod*, and in *Gath*
 I shall be nam’d among the famousest
 Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,
 Living and dead recorded, who to save

31 Chaucer, “The Monk’s Tale,” ll. 2075-78.

32 Milton, “Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem Which is Call’d Tragedy,” the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, in *Complete Poems*, 550.

Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose
 Above the faith of wedlock bands, my tomb
 With odors visited and annual flowers.
 Not less renown'd than in Mount *Ephraim*,
Jael, who with inhospitable guile
 Smote *Sisera* sleeping through the Temples nail'd.
 (SA 981-90)

The counter-typology Milton constructs between Dalila and Jael is justified by the imagery of the Book of Judges: both figures bring down their nation's adversary; both figures lull the enemy to sleep in a domestic setting; both figures inflict head wounds on their enemies, Jael by striking Sisera with a tent peg, Dalila by directing a servant to cut Samson's hair. These gendered, symmetrical, oppositional perspectives provide instances of what Mieke Bal calls "counter-coherence" in the Book of Judges.³³ Milton uses them here to enhance both the tragedy of partisanship and the dynamics of dissent in the poem.

In his final hours, Samson despairs of any rehabilitation of his heroic image. He is obsessed by his status as the outward "scorn and gaze" (SA 34) of his persecutors; he does not fully understand that the psalm-like quality of his speeches on suffering approximate the psalmic mode of inwardness and meditation. More ironically, after Samson's death and the destruction of the Philistines, Manoa imagines a future tradition in which Samson will be renowned for his final act of destruction. Once home "to his Father's house," with a monument erected, Samson's acts will be inscribed

In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
 Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
 And from his memory inflame thir breasts
 To matchless valor, and adventures high.
 (SA 1737-40)

This heroic poetry of valour and action, like Dalila's counter-narrative of Philistine deliverance, does not offer a true counter-tradition because it celebrates a polarized historical record. The Psalms, though often partisan in their view of God's enemies, offer a more authentic counter-tradition in the poem through their unique way of connecting individual memory to collective history through the transformative and educative dimension of suffering.

33 Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, esp. 5-7, 12-16, & *passim*.

Samson’s relation to the Psalms is the same as his relation to the whole of Scripture and is markedly different from that of Jesus in *Paradise Regained*. Jesus reflects on the written record of the Hebrew Bible as he formulates the gospel vision that will extend the canon into Christianity; Samson, in contrast, possesses the sacred text orally, and in a form consisting mainly of oral fragments, echoes, and allusions. The writing of the Book of Judges lies in the future, but the significance of that text will depend on its various intertextual relationships with other parts of the entire biblical canon. Those relationships are in the hands of readers and redactors, and are beyond Samson’s control.

What is the relationship between the Book of Judges and the Psalms? “Tehillim” means “praises,” but these poems are not songs of constant joy. Many psalms present praise in a dialectical and generic relationship with lamentation. Given the intense suffering Milton portrays in *Samson Agonistes*, the poem maintains a strong relationship to the psalms of lamentation. With few exceptions, the most notable being the unrelieved complaint of Psalm 88, we discover that the psalms of lamentation enact a verbal process which culminates in praise rather than contradicting it. Westermann’s analysis of the lament structure illustrates this transformation. The stages, according to Westermann, are as follows:

Address (and introductory petition)
Lament
Turning toward God (confession of trust)
Petition
Vow of praise.³⁴

The key to the transformation of lamentation into praise is memory, yet the exercise of memory requires an acknowledgment of the state of suffering and exile and the recollection of God’s past promises and deliverances. This dialectic corresponds to the two aspects of Samson’s inwardly divided self; he cannot reconcile the tension between the deliverer and the slave:

Promise was that I
Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver;
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in *Gaza* at the Mill with slaves.
(SA 38-41)

34 Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 170.

In view of the place of memory in the dialectic which informs the poem, praise and lamentation correspond to the two aspects of memory encountered in *Samson Agonistes*. This dialectic corresponds in turn to the states of disorientation (human failure) and reorientation (divine promise) which Walter Brueggemann identifies in the psalms of lamentation. Describing the movement from disorientation to reorientation, Brueggemann suggests that the “turn is a move beyond remembering. But it could not be done without the painful part of remembering. In the various psalms of lament and in the various parts of these psalms, the speaker is located at various places in the movement of living into and emerging out of disorientation.”³⁵

For Samson, memory as disorientation and lamentation is based on his breaking his covenant with God by divulging the secret of his strength. Thus the attempt at petition or prayer, rendered in the opening line in an allusion to the twenty-third psalm, is followed by a lengthy prologue of lamentation which involves a painful but realistic appraisal of his situation. Even so, the bitterness of memory as lamentation is a prelude to praise and reorientation because it necessarily entails a comparison of the lapsed self with the memory of the self created in the image of God. Yet the transformation or turning point, as so many of the psalms illustrate, is dependent upon God’s reciprocal recollection of the individual.

Samson’s hubris was to assume that his status as charismatic champion allowed him to transcend history, as if through a form of divine license; instead, his suffering and exile become his mode of internalizing the history of his people, although with an ironically limited perspective which contrasts with the certainty and rectitude of Jesus in the companion text. The narrative framework of the Book of Judges presents just such a pattern. Brueggemann observes this framework in the four part “formula” which governs the Judges narrative:

- a. . . . the people of Israel did what was evil . . .
- b. Therefore the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel.
- c. But when the people of Israel cried to Yahweh,
- d. Yahweh raised up a deliverer (mosi’a) (Judg. 3:7-9).³⁶

While a closed and repetitive pattern conveys a pessimistic conception of history, the structure of exile and return, lamentation and praise arguably corresponds to the patterns of the lament psalms. Hence, as Brueggemann has shown, it is the turn which is

35 Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” 8.

36 Brueggemann, “From Hurt to Joy, from Death to Life,” 14.

based upon a petition or “cry” which links this narrative structure to the psalms of lamentation. Generally, this is a pattern of reorientation after a time of disorientation, of remembrance after a time of forgetting.

Samson Agonistes is a very prayerful poem. It culminates in Samson’s final prayer before he pulls down the pillars in the Temple of Dagon. Judges 16:28 records this prayer for revenge: “O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” Milton conceals this prayer, representing Samson’s final moments in the report of the Messenger who witnessed the catastrophe: “he stood, as one who pray’d / Or some great matter in his mind revolv’d” (SA 1637-38). As Achinstein suggests, perhaps the words of Judges “would have been too dangerous to write in 1670.”³⁷ The context of dissent that Achinstein emphasizes reminds us that we as readers are privy to the meditations and conversations of Samson and his followers. We observe a network of psalm-like prayers and psalmic allusions throughout the poem: “A little onward lend thy guiding hand” (SA 1); “God of our Fathers, what is man!” (667); “My trust is in the living God” (1140); God’s “ear is ever open; and his eye / Gracious to re-admit the suppliant” (1172-73); “Go, and the Holy One / Of *Israel* be thy guide” (1427-28); “With God not parted from him, as was fear’d, / But favoring and assisting to the end” (1719-20). These allusions evoke the structure of the psalms of lamentation as a structure of suffering and experience; in turn, this structure derives in part from the pattern of history which provides the narrative framework of the Book of Judges. Milton combines these structural parallels in a dramatic poem committed to the support of dissenters both present and future. The combination of personal experience, collective history, and conscientious dissent presents the attributes of a counter-tradition.

Conclusion: Counter-Tradition and Education

Sheila Delany’s *Counter-Tradition* begins with biblical prophecy, specifically the prophet Amos, chapters 2, 4, and 6. Amos is an appropriate beginning, since biblical prophecy records inspired speech as a political event and affirms critical confrontation with the world as a dimension of education. As a challenge to the replication of oppression in history, Amos energizes the chronological sequence of a counter-tradition predicated on Hebrew prophecy in the overall structure of the anthology.

37 Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent*, 150.

Psalms complement prophecy in their unique affirmation of the human voice. They represent counter-tradition by giving structure to memory and by connecting individual to collective experiences of exile and deliverance in history. For Milton, the Psalms are indispensable to two related aspects of education: self-knowledge, and the transition from private to public life. For Milton's Jesus, temptation in the desert enacts a rite of passage into public teaching through a mode of critical resistance to Satan's authority; Milton's Samson, in contrast, moves from private introspection to public performance in a dramatization of the political conditions of early modern dissent. In contexts illustrated by Milton's poems, and potentially in many others cases, Sheila Delany's concept of counter-tradition offers a durable resource for teachers and students to consider the interaction of dissent and education.

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