Memorial, Performance, and Tragic Action in *Samson Agonistes*

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Two weeks before Egypt’s May 2014 presidential election I was standing in front of Cairo’s Rabaa Al’Adawiya Mosque, site of the previous summer’s military assault on supporters of ousted President Mohammed Morsi. Naturally, I snapped a few photos. My raised camera drew the attention of two police officers who immediately came running toward me, demanded identification, and deleted the images from my memory card. An onlooking microbus driver amused by the exchange and who, in the local fashion, had inserted himself in the conversation mumbled as the police walked away something about preventing foreigners from making ‘*omra,*’ or pilgrimage. I continued my stroll, passing a column of fully stocked armored personnel carriers and coming upon the grandstand facing the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the very seats where President Anwar al-Sadat died in 1981 under a hail of bullets fired by Islamic militants posing as soldiers in a military parade, then Vice President Hosni Mubarak seated immediately to his left. Fresh from my experience at Rabaa, I scanned for men with guns before reaching for my camera, and noticed an army sniper perched at each end of the stands and two police officers taking refuge from the heat in a small shaded area at its center. I asked the police if I could take a photo. They smiled graciously and said that I could take as many as I pleased.

This morning walk revealed many things about the nature of memorial. Memorial is history’s opposite. It is an act of remembering that seeks to remove people, places, and events from the cross-winds of discursive reason and to fix them as objects of veneration that are a source of communal identity. Memorial guards against counter-narrative with a column of armored personnel carriers. In its terms certain deaths define the horizons of futurity, which frequently include the murder of those enemies...
deprived of historical voice. The assassination of Sadat at the hands of militants who may or may not have been blessed by the Muslim Brotherhood must be marked. In memorial’s antihistory, this also means that the deaths of Muslim Brotherhood supporters at the hands of the enormous military and security apparatus built by Sadat and Mubarak must go unmarked, though the visible strains of that effort assure its failure. If a context of revolution and counter-revolution makes these qualities especially pronounced, so too does a climate of terrorism and counterterrorism with its contending martyrlogies. Memorial urges acts of memory that are also acts of oblivion. Its central imperative, ‘Never Forget,’ is a toxic half-truth.

Published after a decade confirming Milton’s long-standing disdain for the Stuarts and their prelatical henchmen, *Samson Agonistes* closes with the promise of erecting a memorial to its hero’s decapitation of a tyrannous and idolatrous regime. Manoa relishes that Philistine memory will be comprised solely of ‘mourning’ and ‘lamentation’ (1702–3), and also imagines the lessons that future Israelites will draw from a monument to Samson’s career:

> I will build him  
> A Monument, and plant it round with shade  
> Of Laurel ever green, and branching Palm,  
> With all his trophies hung, and Acts enroll’d  
> In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.  
> Thither shall the valiant youth resort,  
> And from his memory inflame thir breasts  
> To matchless valour, and adventures high:  
> The Virgins also shall on feastful days  
> Visit his Tomb with flowers, only bewailing  
> His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,  
> From whence captivity and loss of eyes.

(1723–33)

Samson is here a figure undergirding an Israeliite national project, both in its militarism and in its preservation of community through marriage. Curiously, Samson’s appetite for Philistine women is lamented by Israel’s presumably female virgins, suggesting that they are the ones who should learn that unruly sexuality is socially disruptive.

This oddity is just one way in which we might detect dramatic irony in Manoa’s planned memorial. The passage rewrites the burial of Samson in Judges 16, and has been likened to that of Joshua in Tim’nath-se’rah, itself connected to the burial of Joseph’s remains at Shechem after their long sojourn out of Egypt, a moment of funeral on familial lands immediately preceding the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 50: 26; Joshua 24: 30–2; Judges 16: 31; see Dobranski 2009: n. at 1733–44). Joshua’s and Joseph’s burials are tightly associated with Israel as a community bound by the Word; Manoa, on the other hand, plans a monument to political community in a much more worldly sense of the term, as signaled in no small measure by its
classical-cum-chivalric assemblage of battle trophies. Roman monuments to military triumph come much more to mind than does a place for worshipping the living God.

We often sense that Milton expects readers of his tragedy to have internalized the lessons of his oeuvre, in which case we will react to Manoa’s plans with contracted brow: early and late, Milton discredits the ideas here expressed. Fame, Apollo teaches us in *Lycidas*, is ‘no plant that grows on mortal soil’ (line 78), and in his proposal to turn the family home into a theme park of anti-Philistine sentiment, Manoa justifies Dalila’s earlier comment that it is ‘double-mouth’d’ (971): her valorization for an attempt to subdue a public enemy will be all the more justified given the posthumous reputation Samson is to enjoy for his mass slaughter of Philistines. Having said this, however, we can detect differences that tend to be downplayed in current critical discussion (see, e.g., Gregerson 2014: 674–5). The text does not leave the scales balanced between Dalila and Manoa. The former articulates a debased desire to be celebrated in a polity of princes and priests, that is to say, one of arbitrary rule and idolatrous religion. And she chooses the preferred poetic form of Restoration conformity, the pentameter couplet, in sententiously describing the ‘contrary blast’ by which Fame ‘proclaims most deeds’: ‘On both his wings, one black, th’other white, / Bears greatest names in his wild aerie flight’ (972–4). The use of rhyme is a complex matter in the poem, but it does certainly seem in this instance to signal a heedless pursuit of reputation befitting a heedless follower of debased authority.

By contrast, Manoa speaks, as Douglas Bush noticed some time ago, in wonderfully elegant blank verse even as he and the chorus ‘have not comprehended the nature of Samson’s inward struggle and victory’ (Bush 1964: 200; see also Achinstein 2002: 181; Guibbory 2004: 200). After the emphatically placed ‘A Monument’ opening line 1724, he gently unfolds his planned tribute with liquid *l* and assonated *o* sounds: ‘Of Laurel ever green, and branching Palm, / With all his trophies hung, and Acts enroll’d / In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.’ Poetically there is a very marked difference indeed between this utterance and that of Dalila, one that corresponds to the difference between a politics that is not quite right and a politics that is utterly wrong, an anti-politics refusing to notice the very things that are the stuff of virtuous citizenship. And that political difference is one that animated much of Milton’s career, often marking the difference between those whom he sought to persuade and those on whom he heaped as much scorn as he could muster: it is the difference between the Smectymnuans and Bishop Hall, between Cromwell and the Stuarts, between James Harrington and Matthew Griffith.

Manoa thus rightly seeks to honor a hero of faith even as he cultivates the kind of cultural memory that Milton consistently critiques in *Paradise Lost*, and shows himself to be deaf to the true significance of his son’s restored strength. Narrating the War in Heaven, Raphael tells us that debased soldiery is eager for renown, but deserves to go ‘Nameless in dark oblivion,’ and that in their truly glorious service the ‘elect / Angels contented with their fame in heaven / Seek not the praise of men’ (VI. 374–80). Annals of war, the passage implies, are both motivation for and record of pernicious militarism, an attitude that pervades the bard’s harsh treatment of classical and romance epic
in the proem to Book IX. There it is the prominence of battle in epic that delays Milton’s performance and heavenly inspiration, both of which arrive after he hits upon a different tune: his ‘celestial patroness’ has made her ‘nightly visitation … Since first this Subject for heroic song / Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late; / Not sedulous by nature to indite / wars, hitherto the only argument / Heroic deemed’ (IX. 21–9). Poetic memorials of battle leave ‘the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom / Unsung’ (IX. 31–3). Paradise Regain’d echoes and underscores these values, from its opening assertion that the deeds it presents are ‘Above Heroic’ (I. 15), to Jesus’ dismissal of the ‘ostentation vain of fleshly arm, / And fragile arms,’ the ‘Luggage of war’ that is ‘argument / Of human weakness rather then of strength’ – though, we should note, he does earlier celebrate the godly general Gideon (III. 387–8, 401–2; cf. II. 439). That Samson is a figure of ‘heroic martyrdom’ means that Manoa rather misses the point in using his memory to inflame the desire for ‘adventures high.’

Manoa’s imagining of the lessons to be learned by Israelite virgins visiting the temple of Samson is also presented in ways that should lead us to see its shortcomings. Paradise Lost certainly teaches us to be skeptical of Adam’s attempts to blame men’s troubles on the inconstancy of women, seen most obviously in Michael’s rebuke of Adam’s anti-feminist response to the Sons of God episode: ‘From man’s effeminate slackness it begins …’ (XI. 634). Samson shows in the tragedy a nearly identical masculinist riposte to misogyny, castigating the ‘foul effeminacy’ leading him to turn ‘blab’ (410, 495). The virgins lament, as Lana Cable has put it, the ‘loss of an opportunity to be made the object of an exemplary nuptial choice,’ but in carrying the burden of that lament are also made to carry the burden of strict sexual discipline that patriarchy typically imposes on women (Cable 1995: 193). Manoa seeks to rewrite Samson’s life in a way that glosses over his betrayal of God’s secret and is at odds with his autobiographical accounts of his ‘race of shame’ (597).

Indeed, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the tragic hero, even by sympathetic onlookers, seem to be constitutive elements of Milton’s view of biblical tragedy. His plans for tragedies consistently sustain the emphasis of Michael’s biblical history in Paradise Lost: that the hero of faith is despised by enemies and mistaken by friends. Milton’s notes on a potential Abraham or Phineas tragedy tend to follow this pattern (CPW VIII: 557–8, 560; see Burns 1996). The hero of Attic tragedy disrupts social, political, and cosmic order that must be righted in the drama’s nemesis, to use Frye’s term (see Frye 2000: 209). Milton offers a Christian translation of these tendencies where the righting of the social and political balance in a fallen creation runs in a direction opposite to the hero’s attunement to Heavenly disposition. In the arc of his development, Samson resembles Lear much more than he does Prometheus or Oedipus, even if we take Oedipus at Colonus into account. Even more than in King Lear, however, we are made aware that the hero’s spiritual insight does not translate into, or even coincide with, favorable political outcomes. In this understanding of tragedy, the Israelites celebrate their faithful champion in ways that allow their sense of community to return in more stable fashion than that enjoyed even at the height of Samson’s race of glory. But we are meant to recognize this sense of community as limited at best.
And the limit is defined precisely by the inability fully to realize the significance of the tragic action’s nemesis: that Samson has returned to God’s favor and is guided once more by heavenly light. The Chorus catch glimpses of this insight, but also lose track of it as they get carried away in their exuberant celebration of slaughter. In the true terms of Samson’s triumph, the murder of Philistines and liberation of Israel are matters indifferent. The real lesson is that all nations must attend the guidance of the Spirit.

What, then, do we make of the parallels between Samson’s heroism and that of England’s martyred republicans? The show trials and public executions of the regicides, a fate Milton narrowly escaped, were an enormous shock to remaining Commonwealth men, as Ludlow’s memoirs attest. Especially affecting was the execution of Milton’s long-time friend the younger Sir Henry Vane, a nakedly political act given that he took no part in the regicide. If, as is often thought, Milton is paying tribute to his former comrades, then he is also signaling his consciousness that such tribute can be applied to meaner political ends: the Saints whom the Spirit had blown aflame in the glorious 1640s could be reduced to lawyerly defenders of parliamentary privilege. On this point Milton seems prophetic in anticipating the uses to which he, Ludlow, and others would be put in the Whig politics of the decade following the Glorious Revolution (see Worden 2001).

### Tragedy and Revolution Revisited

If Milton’s Samson is a political revolutionary, then, he is so in a way that shows the paltriness of politics as traditionally conceived. He resembles Antigone as Luce Irigaray sees her, where resistance of Creon does not reject politics as such, but ‘reminds us that the earthly order is not a pure social power, that it must be founded upon the economy of cosmic order’ (Irigaray 2004: 203–4). In Milton’s case that removal from the realm of pure social power also entailed a removal from the theater: that *Samson Agonistes* ‘never was intended’ for the stage is central to the tragic effect for which the poem strives (*CWJM* II: 68). This is in part motivated by disdain for Restoration drama, evident both in Milton’s brief essay on tragedy and in his note on the verse of *Paradise Lost*: ‘our best English Tragedies’ glances at rather less fine contemporary productions (‘The Verse,’ *PL*: 55). But it is also more. The spectator, whose interest is piqued when the end of the play is near, sits in company with Manoa and the Chorus, sharing in their expression of joy and ultimately of passion spent. In performance an audience is more likely to fasten upon the final anticipation of memorial, especially if the closing scene is accompanied by the kind of stage effects, dance, or music that had become prominent features of the Restoration stage in the wake of William Davenant’s invention of English opera. The reader of a poem responds differently: head inclined as one who prays or some great matter in his or her mind revolves, a kinship is struck with the quiet, interior experience of Samson at the pillars.
Put differently, a text read rather than performed is fundamental to the relationship Milton imagines between tragedy and revolutionary subject formation. Perhaps especially in the context of the monopoly of Davenant and Thomas Killigrew on theatrical entertainment in London, Milton could not imagine performance in his context as giving rise to anything but conformist sympathies (see Achinstein, Chapter 31, this volume). A politics, or religion, or aesthetics striving to reflect divine will had to be encountered on the page.

Thinking of Samson Agonistes in this way allows for comparison with modern and contemporary engagements of the topic of tragedy and revolution, especially those of Raymond Williams and Alain Badiou. Strikingly, when Williams proposed the book Modern Tragedy in a 1962 letter to Norah Smallwood of Chatto & Windus, he thought that it would end with a ‘a play of [his] own, which [he was] very keen about: it is based on the life of Milton and comes through as tragedy, both personal and social’ (Williams 1962b). Keenness apparently waned: when the book appeared in 1966, it ended instead with a tragedy on Stalin, suggesting that in Williams’s mind these two statesmen were curiously fungible (see Williams 1966).

We can only speculate as to why Williams might have had this change of heart, but the pages of the New Left Review (NLR), which, by his own account, serve as something of a laboratory for the ideas leading to Modern Tragedy, offer some hints (see Williams 1962a, 1963). Christopher Hill’s take on the English Revolution is represented in the 1960 volume, but in the January/April 1962 issue, the same issue in which appears Williams’s first piece on tragedy for the journal, an excerpt is published from R. H. Tawney’s Religion and Rise of Capitalism as a tribute to the ‘great Socialist teacher’ following his death that year (Hill 1960; Tawney 1962). In Tawney’s materialist refinement of Weber, Milton is not on the vanguard of a popular uprising, but represents precisely the Puritan character whose inner complexities remain beyond the reach of historians and whose outward manifestations are ‘the market-place and counting-house and camp’ (Tawney 1962: 103). With the counting-house Milton thrust upon his attention, Williams in composing a modern, socialist tragedy might have turned fairly naturally instead to the fate of Soviet communism, hotly contested in the years following Stalin’s death: in 1960 NLR ran a review of Isaac Deutscher’s book on Trotsky, The Prophet Unbound, and a 1966 article by Monty Johnstone declared that ‘few problems have been more fiercely debated on the left than that of democracy in a socialist state,’ pointing especially to the controversial De l’État Socialiste, l’expérience soviétique (1965), a work collectively written by a group of French Communists under the pseudonym ‘Jean Dru’ (McLeish 1960; Johnstone 1966: 85).

Even as it turns away from Milton, Williams’s project does nonetheless offer reflections on tragedy, history, and revolution that suit our purposes. If tragedy shows us a world thrust temporarily into chaos, where prevailing order, and especially political order, is cast into disarray, partly by human action and partly by forces beyond human control, then tragedy and revolution are twinned: tragedy contains elements of revolution, and ‘revolution as such is in a common sense tragedy, a time of chaos and suffering’ (Williams 2006: 90). This is quite opposed to epic, which encloses rupture in a larger
framework of historical stability and continuity. Williams hints at how this association between tragedy and revolution might operate in the seventeenth century, when the desire to bring a ‘social system’ into harmony with ‘permanent order’ is cast as a ‘restoration of the true and ancient constitution,’ a ‘consciousness that contained the most radical and even revolutionary actions’ (92).

Samson Agonistes seems rather more suspicious of political constitution than this, allowing for a truly revolutionary action that ultimately departs from all social order. Our reading of the tragedy’s closing promise of memorial suggests that social order cannot be made to incorporate heroism of faith, or at least not until God wills it to do so. In this sense, the particular kind of repristination in which Milton is invested comes closer to the relationship between tragedy and revolution that Williams identifies with later modernity, where ‘scepticism about the possibility of any social order’ locates resolution ‘outside the terms of civil society’ (Williams 2006: 92). The cataclysmic overturning of order experienced as tragedy is but one step in the long process of a true revolution seeking to change the fundamental form of human relationships in a way enacting full social equality (101). In the same stroke modern tragedy makes visible the brutal human choices in the social and political realms that lead to conditions of want and isolation:

This idea of ‘the total redemption of humanity’ has the ultimate cast of resolution and order, but in the real world its perspective is inescapably tragic. It is born in pity and terror: in the perception of a radical disorder in which the humanity of some men is denied and by that fact the idea of humanity itself is denied … It is born in an experience of evil made the more intolerable by the conviction that it is not inevitable, but is the result of particular actions and choices. (Williams 2006: 102)

Samson’s return to divine favor offers a glimpse in the poem of the end-time when God will be ‘all in all,’ and that this return runs against the grain of human society, most with that of the Dagon-worshipping Philistines, though also with that of the Israelites, plays up humanity’s stubborn refusal to bring social order into harmony with divine order, a leitmotif throughout Milton’s writings.

In this way, Samson’s final act is that of a revolutionary politics eschewing received forms of authority and resistance. And thus the tragic action of Samson Agonistes shares common ground with the work of Badiou, in his philosophical writings, especially those on tragedy, and in his own biblically inspired tragedy, The Incident at Antioch (L’incident d’Antioche). Fundamental to Badiou’s defenses of theater is a distinction between true theater and its false bourgeois counterpart. The latter is a mere appendage of the morality endorsed by the State — on this point we can see Badiou’s debts to his professor at the École Normale Supérieure, Louis Althusser (see Bosteels 2011: 66). True theater is also in its own way necessarily attached to the state, but in a way that shows the slippage between the state and the state of things — class violence, the plight of workers, the trials of adhering to truth — precisely the slippage that the state seeks to disguise for fear of revealing the violence of its impositions and that its very existence
is a wrench in true political community. The immediacy of the stage allows theater to realign the subjectivity of the spectator in a way that the novel more rarely achieves, and Badiou significantly turns to writing drama after he had completed two novels, *Almagestes* (1964) and *Portulans* (1967). Here, of course, we will notice a key difference from Milton, who seems in his moment to have deemed the stage too flimsy to support true theater; clearly the late poems testify to his commitment to the truth-effects of poetry. Badiou also strongly identifies poetry with truth: following Mallarmé, he associates poetic language with the impulse to lend presence to that which lies just beyond the reach of signification: 'to name a supplement, a chance, an incalculable event, we must delve into the void of sense, into the lack of established significations, at the risk of language. We thus must poetize, and the poetic name of the event is that which launches us outside of ourselves, through the burning hoop of foreseeings' (Badiou 2014: 43). Poetry is often in Badiou’s thought the exemplar of the artistic truth-procedure, one of the four generic procedures of truth alongside science, politics, and love (Hallward 2003: 181–3).

*The Incident at Antioch* makes very clear Badiou’s rejection both of bourgeois parliamentarianism and of a classical Marxist model of revolution leading to single-state authoritarianism. Where the former offers a mere theater of political choice in the sham divisions between politicians of the right and left – in the play the leaders of France’s two main, and supposedly ideologically polarized, political parties are brothers – the latter offers violent resistance that clears away the apparatus of the state only to erect its own mechanisms of state power. In discussing their course of action, the revolutionaries who have overthrown the state can imagine no alternative:

*David:* So how do we begin calming things down …?

*Mokhtar:* By having people return to the cities. Having a legitimate government. Re-establishing the legality of the courts. Overseeing purge commissions … Restructuring trade and the currency. Getting the school system back up and running. Devising a plan for industry. Rehabilitating the engineers, perhaps.

*(Silence.)*

*René:* What’ll be left of our enterprise, then? Won’t the world just come back the way it was before, with all its stability and security? Then what about the abolition of the State? (Badiou 2013: 95)

The sentiments are much the same in Williams’s Stalin tragedy, ‘Koba,’ where the death of the Lenin character, Jordan, leads to Joseph’s ruthless wielding of power through the Party. Though his personal associations with French Maoism can lead many to misconstrue Badiou’s attitudes toward the single-party state, this play makes clear his rejection of that brand of communism. Such skepticism of existing leftist politics is evinced in both tragedy and farce, as his Ahmed plays lampoon the too-many communist parties of France (see, e.g., Badiou 1994).

Badiou uses the conflict between Peter and Paul at Antioch further to elucidate the limits of revolution on the 1917 model. The Peter character in the play, Cephas, cares
only about seizing a moment of political instability to clear away the apparatus of the state, and in his final speeches in the play endorses its re-establishment: ‘You unwittingly want the abstract terror of a government to bring the vital terror of the revolution to an end. You’re right’ (Badiou 2013: 89). The Paul character, Paula, has a moment of true political awakening leading her to reject this mode of resistance. Rather than a ‘classical revolution [that] leads only to Empire,’ she advocates a ‘politics that would put an end to politics’ (105, 109). Her gender is, of course, significant: all the characters associated with traditional forms of political knowledge are men, and as a woman Paula designedly stands apart from the play’s parliamentarians, guerrilla warriors, and party leaders. As Badiou claims of Paul in his book on universalism, her truth cuts diagonally across existing divisions, revealing their arbitrariness: ‘Just as circumcision was for St. Paul,’ she declares, ‘revolution is nothing and unrevolution is nothing. Let’s relegate those incidents to the realm of trivial images’ (65; cf. 1 Corinthians 7: 19; Badiou 2003).

The battle for the emergence of this new politics ultimately takes place in the person of David, Paula’s son by the Arab factory worker Mokhtar. Though initially anointed to lead the development of a post-revolutionary state, a dialogue with his mother leads to a significant reconstitution of his political subjectivity. David then seeks to convert his fellow revolutionaries to this new ideal of political community, and, in a breaking of the fourth wall, invites the audience in the play’s final lines also to be converted: ‘And now, century at its close, let’s see what you have to say’ (Badiou 2013: 119).

In charting a path back to Milton, we might think of David’s conversion in the terms suggested by Paradise Regain’d: for him to build a new state would be equivalent to Jesus seeking only to sit on David’s throne as king of Israel, one of the Satanic temptations that he so easily dismisses. The temptation is to be a mere David redivivus, rather than to reconceive kingship in universalist terms. Here the parent selling filial promise short is Mary, who worries that her son’s destiny will attract the violent attention of kings, a worry over perceived rivalry that can only ‘mus[es]’ about the nature of the ‘Father’s business’ that Jesus goes about (II. 99). In a way more promising than Manoa, however, she is conscious of her inner brambles of emotion and words and chooses expectation over misguided resolution: ‘I to wait with patience am inur’d; / My heart hath been a store-house long of things / And sayings laid up, portending strange events’ (II. 102–4). In both texts, received political forms are presented as flawed at best to play up an alternative for which no existing knowledge can fully account. Motivated by a self-interest transparent to Jesus from the start, Satan attempts to limit the significance of the Son’s career on Earth in received categories. Mary’s virtue, like Andrew’s and Simon’s earlier in Book II, is to be conscious that received traditions fall short, that the truth-event is still unfolding, and that it demands fidelity rather than understanding.

Or we might say that Samson’s moment in biblical history necessitates tragedy where Jesus’ moment in biblical history allows for epic. In order to transform Samson into a fit subject for epic, his anticipation of the Redemption would have to be foregrounded, as is true of Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost. But this would be to engage in
the typological reading of Samson that Milton avoids in favor of adhering more closely to Hebrews 11, with its list of worthies accomplishing great deeds through faith, a list compiled, in a way that is often overlooked, to emphasize that their faith in things unseen is perfected by followers of Christ: ‘these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. Wherefore … let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith’ (Hebrews 11: 39–12: 2). This final turn is the path charted by Andrew, Simon, and Mary in Paradise Regain’d as they wait in suspended comprehension to witness the Resurrection. The language of supplement in Hebrews recalls the title page of the 1671 volume: Christians to whom are added heroes of faith. Epic provides an interpretive ground by which tragedy becomes more than an experience of disorder and confusion: in genre and content it asserts a true source of historical felicity that cannot be captured in Manoa’s planned memorial.

It is Williams’s insight that tragic action must pose a threat to prevailing order. Samson’s climactic slaughter of the Philistines certainly does that. In ways of which Badiou makes us aware, it also resists narration according to the terms offered by Manoa and the Danite chorus. The partial comprehension visible in Manoa serves as reminder that Samson’s is a religio-political subjectivity residing above the modes of knowledge available in the world of the poem. It is available in the world of the reader, however, who has the benefit of Christian revelation, though also lives in a world groaning under the weight of human sin until the Second Coming. Reading the climax of Milton’s tragedy aright thus involves a re-formation of subjectivity akin to that which David presses upon the audience at the end of The Incident at Antioch: an act of fidelity to the truth-event of divine will that cuts diagonally across received traditions of religion and politics and forges a new relationship between God and believer with soteriological, social, and political implications.

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