

# Forum

## What Critique Neglects

TO THE EDITOR:

In the Editor's Column of the March issue ("In Media Res" [120 (2005): 321–26]), Marianne Hirsch makes reference to a concern I expressed to her and responds to that concern with a question. I'd like to address her question and to clarify further my concern. As I shared with Hirsch, and as she cited in her column, "The question that troubles me . . . is this: In approaching literary texts primarily to critique them are we missing something important, both in our thinking about literature and in the ways of reading that this objective requires?" Hirsch then asks, "If not critique, then what?" (326). To respond to her question, I need first to offer a clarification. I am using the term *critique* to refer generally to two approaches to literary texts that seem dominant in successive generations of literary study. For the generation still hanging on in many places in the early eighties—my undergraduate years—critique took the form of New Critical practices, of reading literary texts largely to identify and analyze their characteristics. For the present generation, *critique* seems to mean reading texts for their cultural subtexts, ways that they reinforce or subvert forms of power. Both types of critique miss what makes literary texts powerful and valuable in their own right, the ways in which they move us and change us as readers.

Reading to critique a text in either of these ways means that we tend to hold ourselves at a distance from the text and treat it as an object of examination rather than a potential encounter, an opportunity for some kind of cultural and psychological work to be done in us, the readers. The importance of New Criticism's close reading and cultural studies' attention to the often invisible exclusions of literary texts is undeniable, and I am not suggesting that either practice be rejected. But when we as teachers of literature neglect this more engaged—even submissive—way of approaching texts, our students miss out on what makes literature such a compelling force and an area of study worthy of time and attention. That way of reading,

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I contend, allows literature to play a crucial role in society and fuels a love of literature that motivates lifelong reading. Our critique of texts has advanced our understanding of how texts work, but we need also to allow texts to work on us.

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## Milton and Religious Violence

TO THE EDITOR:

In its finest moments, Feisal G. Mohamed's "Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*" (120 [2005]: 327–40) presses toward the realization that, in the tragedy, Milton "frustrates uncomplicated narrativization of the Western tradition," as well as "an uncomplicated vision of cultural history" (337). Indeed, much recent criticism of *Samson Agonistes* drives toward these propositions, each of which finds striking reinforcement in the program notes by Robert Scanlan to the April 2003 performance reading of Milton's tragedy at New York City's 92nd Street Y. According to Scanlan:

*Samson Agonistes* is a troubling work at any time, for it is a timeless study of the self-righteous instinct urging all defeated men to vengeance and violence. As such, it is a work which remains curiously open, for who can without confounding ambivalence be sure *who* this English Samson is meant to stand for, or who next might feel justified in invoking his example.

Indisputably, Milton at one time embraced what Mohamed calls "religious extremism and political radicalism" (337). The question is whether Milton ever cast a dubious eye on such commitments, much as Cromwell eventually did; and the answer to that question seems forthcoming in *A Treatise of Civil Power* where Milton writes that "no man can know at all times" if "divine illumination . . . be in himself" (*Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Robert W. Ayers, vol. 7 [New Haven: Yale UP, 1980] 242); then in *Paradise Lost* where he frets over those "feigning . . . to act / By spiritual [power], to themselves appropriating / The spirit of God" (12.517–19); and finally in his 1671 poetic volume where, in their pairing, *Paradise Regained* may be said to place an ideological check on *Samson Agonistes*.

The crucial question is whether Milton's is a mind fixed or changing.

Mohamed has made much of his disagreements with John Carey and of Carey's disagreements with Stanley Fish. Yet at their core, both Carey's Milton and Fish's are "subtle-minded" poets with Milton's subtleties of mind marked most strikingly by various transgressions of his scriptural sourcebook. With Milton, the matter is always more complicated than routing a poem through this or that tradition. At issue, most of the time, is Milton and which traditions? In which of their manifestations? Carey is on target when he reminds us that *Samson Agonistes* is a remarkable rewriting of the Judges narrative, one omitting Samson's prayer and thus questioning Samson's motivation. Milton's transgressive maneuvers are given their point when we remember that Samson was the hero, as well as patron saint, of the New Model Army and that the first lines of its prayer book heroized Samson as a soldier at prayer. To equivocate on Samson's prayer, as Milton does ("as one who pray'd, / Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd" [1637–38; my italics]), is to equivocate on Samson's heroism. By altering the Judges story yet again, Milton leaves in doubt whether God's agency has now returned to Samson, this time by modifying the scriptural account to allow for escape of "[t]he vulgar . . . who stood without" (1659). While the spirit of the Lord may have left Samson, evidently it has not yet left history. Not a retaliatory but a merciful God enters history and transforms it. In *Samson Agonistes*, then, what is spared is owing not to Milton's Samson but to Milton's God, who here exemplifies not retributive but distributive justice.

Milton does not sanitize the scene of destruction, removing what Mohamed calls "grisliness" from it (335). On the contrary, he writes such signatures of violence into his poem: "Blood, death, and deathful deeds . . . / Ruin, destruction at the utmost point" (1513–14); then depicts "thunder [bursting] / Upon the heads of all who sate beneath" (1651–52); and thereupon presents Samson as "[s]oak't in his enemies blood" and caked with "clotted gore" (1726, 1728). The thunder-bursting "hero" of *Samson Agonistes* stands in startling contrast to the Son of *Paradise Lost*, who, "half his strength" withholding, "check'd / His Thunder in