FRAMING FANATICISM:
RELIGION, VIOLENCE, AND
THE REFORMATION LITERATURE OF SELF-ANNIHILATION

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ABSTRACT

A study of the centrality of religious fanaticism to the development of European Renaissance politics and poetics, Framing Fanaticism suggests that the religious fanatic’s claim to divine agency created an epistemological and representational crisis—an incapacity to know and depict whether human or divine will drove sacred violence. This crisis resulted in two tendencies: the targeting of fanaticism as a threat and the engagement with it as an epistemological and poetic problem. This dissertation explores how fanaticism’s violence became inseparable from the basic problems with which modernity commenced: skepticism (how we can know anything about the passions and actions of others and ourselves), causation (how we can know whether and how divine agency functions within the world), and power (how we can know what shapes who we are and how we behave).

The introduction reconstructs how the meaning of fanaticism evolved in relation to theories of state and mind in the Renaissance, from Martin Luther to John Locke, locating in the radical Anabaptist claim that self-annihilation could turn an individual into an instrument of God’s violence a primal scene for fanaticism. Chapter two turns to Edmund Spenser’s representation of “organs” of divine might to show how fanaticism at once resembles and threatens The Faerie Queene’s allegorical project. My third chapter traces how John Donne uses sonnets to experiment formally with the self-annihilation required for the passive performance of God’s violent will that Samson and Christ inimitably exemplify. Fanaticism reveals to Donne that devotional poetic making itself may prepare for, but also necessarily postpones, the self-loss required for both martyrdom and fanatical revolt. In contrast to Donne, Thomas Hobbes reinterpreted Samson and Christ to exclude religious justifications of
rebellion or self-sacrifice. My fourth chapter contends that Hobbes redefined fanaticism as a product of passionate reading and cognitive breakdown and yet struggled to distinguish Christ from a self-annihilating fanatic. The final chapter claims that John Milton transformed tragedy to address the problem of fanaticism in *Samson Agonistes*. Milton reveals that tragic unknowability is the major aesthetic, epistemological and ethical problem with which the witness of fanatical violence confronts modernity.
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Part of chapter three previously appeared as “Donne’s Annihilation” in The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 44:2 (Spring 2014). I benefited from presenting aspects of this work both at Princeton (at the Renaissance Workshop, the Center for Human Values, and the Center for the Study of Religion) and at other venues (Occidental College, the University of Cambridge, the Renaissance Society of America Annual Conference in Washington D.C., and the American Comparative Literature Association Conferences in Providence and New York).
Chapter 1: Receiving Divine Action:
Fanaticism and Form in the Reformation

Still,
I’ve stood, a soldier listening for the word,
Attack, a prophet praying any ember be spoken
Through me in this desert full of fugitives.
Now, I have a voice. Entered, I am lit.

-Jericho Brown, “Burning Bush”

God when he makes the Prophet does not unmake the Man.

That I may rise, and stand, o’rethrow me; and bend
Your force to breake, blow, burne, and make me new.
- John Donne, Holy Sonnet 16 (1633)

We miss something fundamental about the phenomenon of religious fanaticism in the Renaissance if we explain away the abyss that separates John Locke and John Donne here entirely with reference to their historical or generic differences. For what is at stake in their different explorations of making and unmaking, prophecy and violence, is a phenomenology of fanaticism: an account of what makes fanaticism appear in the world,

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and what effects it has on the bodies and minds that bear forth its message, its violence. This dissertation explores how early moderns understood religious fanaticism. In particular, it shows how fanaticism was at the center of experiments with poetic form even as theorists of state and mind dismissed it as madness. The contrast between Locke and Donne is a microcosm of two tendencies that this project seeks to map: the philosophical and political inclination to exclude and control zealousry through the charge of fanaticism and the poetic commitment to see in fanaticism something more than an incarnation of unreason that must be policed, to locate in its invocation of divine violence a profound dilemma for knowledge and representation, for thought and poetry.

For Locke, in his critique of religious enthusiasm (I return below to the relationship between fanaticism and enthusiasm), making and unmaking are mutually exclusive. God decidedly makes a prophet, a speaker of divine will. And yet making a prophet does not require unmaking (transforming through nihilation) the man. Even a prophet, forged specially by divine craft, remains a man with the faculty to reason and thus to evaluate whether the voice that moves through him is divinely authenticated, or whether he has merely persuaded himself that it is so. The prophet may have some special status within divine creation, but becoming a prophet does not “unmake” and transform a person. In Locke’s text, anyone who seems or claims to have been unmade in becoming a prophet is merely an enthusiast, one who has convinced himself or others of immediate revelation but who is really a madman or a charlatan—a victim or a perpetrator of “ungrounded Fancies.” For Locke, one can only come to know that one has experienced God’s internal testimony by reason: “they must know it [divine Light] to

\footnote{Locke 4.19.3.}
be so [a Truth] by its own self-evidence to natural Reason.”

Locke suggests that anyone who claims such unmaking should be questioned, disciplined, and controlled. By doing so, he seeks to ensure that enthusiasts cannot claim that their actions are products of divine “possession,” of “the hand of GOD moving them from within.”

For the philosopher who defined consciousness as “the perception of what passes in a Man’s own mind,” how could it ever be possible for God’s light or hand to pass through—let alone overtake and guide—a person without that person being able to evaluate the origin of that perception with reason? Locke’s entire theory of personal identity is grounded on this theory of consciousness, and he thus proposes that divine revelation could never usurp reason’s authority. For Locke, “Reason is natural Revelation,” and reason is impossible without consciousness; revelation could never unmake the man.

Locke’s double negation (“does not unmake the Man”) could not be further from Donne’s proposal, in “Batter my heart,” that unmaking is an essential prerequisite for gaining some special relationship to the divine word. For Donne, throughout the Holy Sonnets, the only possible way to bring one’s action in the world into alignment with God’s (sometime inscrutable) command is to undergo an experience of total (and often brutal) unmaking: violent self loss. In order to be made “new”—which is to say, in order to be made in accordance with divine will—the sinful self, its ineffective reason as well as his awful passions, must be overthrown—not just transformed but annihilated by

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3 Locke 4.19.11.
4 Locke 4.19.11.
5 Locke 4.19.8.
6 Locke 2.1.19.
7 Locke. 2.27.13: “[T]he same consciousness being preserved […] the personal Identity is preserved.”
8 Locke 4.19.3.
divine violence. It is only through such thorough unmaking that a number of Donne’s Holy Sonnets imagine the possibility of being made new. The unmaking of self is the condition of possibility for a new self, who might enact the will of the divine. We can see this process in more detail by briefly glancing at Donne’s “I am a little World” (a poem to which we will return with greater attention in chapter 2):

I am a little World, made cunningly
Of Elements and an Angelique Spright,
But blacke Sin hath betrayd to endless night
My Worlds both parts, and Oh both parts must dy.
You, which beyond that heauen, which was most high
Haue found new Sphears, and of new Lands can wright
Powre new Seas in myne eyes, that so I might
Drowne my World, with my weeping earnestly.
Or washe it: if it must be drown’d no more:
But Oh it must be burn’d; alas the fyer
Of Lust and Envy haue burnt it heretofore
And made it fouler; Let those flames retyre,
And burne me O God with a fiery Zeale
Of thee,’ and thy house, which doth in eating heale.

- John Donne, Holy Sonnet 7

9 All quotations of Donne’s Holy Sonnets, unless otherwise noted, are from the Westmoreland sequence as reproduced in The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John
Typically read as a prayer for grace, this sonnet underscores Donne’s consideration of how divine fire might be used to unmake the self and reconstitute it as an instrument of zeal. Throughout the poem, the speaker claims that the self as World, both its elements and its “Angelique Spright,” “must dy”—they must be drowned, in a witty, technologically enhanced echo of the Genesis flood narrative, in order to be washed clean, and if drowning does not do the trick, the self must be burned. Personal apocalypse, the annihilation of the self, is key here to the capacity for “healing.” What takes the place of the sin-betrayed self? “A fiery Zeale / Of thee”: the speaker asks to be burned with a zeal for God that is also of God. Zeal itself at once burns and heals, destroys and reconstructs—the self is unmade so that it can be made new. The poem refuses to describe a process by which the self achieves a post-conversion zeal; instead, it articles a situation, or a least a desire, in which zeal itself at once cannibalizes and constitutes the being that remains after the self has been annihilated. Yet the poem’s refusal to disclose what a zealous life might look like, even as it shows that only grace will allow it to appear, is part of what makes it so formally innovative. As with other Holy Sonnets by Donne, this poem is not just the representation or expression of an attitude toward the divine, but is itself a devotional act, a practical enactment of supplication that at once unfolds and forestalls what it seeks: the immolation of the sinful world, the self, that enables the poem to be written. In this case, the poem begins with a


description of the status of the speaker’s being, which we learn quickly has been betrayed and corrupted by sin. Yet the sonnet then dwells in its own inability to figure the solution to this betrayal—it wanders through an extravagant but inadequate conceit in the second quatrain (a conceit that has more sustained efficacy in other Donne poems) before it images the “fiery Zeale,” counterpoised to “the fyer / Of Lust and Envy,” that might destroy and thus redeem the self. Donne’s sonnet thus delays the image of the speaker’s discovery of the necessary fiery annihilation by God’s fire—indeed, the volta takes place a line after the end of the octave, in line 10—restraining our arrival at a figure or solution which also would spell the end of the poet’s voice, the poet’s capacity to perform any devotional act (including the crafting of a poem), and then leaves the reader unable to access any image of what might define the speaker’s zeal.11 The poem is surely not doctrine: the sonnet only allows us to imagine what might emerge beyond its couplet, what kind of being would exist after this zeal overtakes and destroys the self, for the figure for this being is of a divine fire that consumes itself.12 Yet the figure of the

11 Giorgio Agamben’s comment on poetic endings is helpful here; he draws an analogy between poems and the _katechon_ (delayer or restrainer) in Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thesalonians (2:7-7), claiming that a poem “slows and delays the advent of the Messiah, that is, of him who, fulfilling the time of poetry and uniting its two eons, would destroy the poetic machine by hurling it into silence” (_The End of the Poem_, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999], 114]). For Agamben, poems perpetually attempt to restrain or delay their own ending, their own fulfillment in silence. Something similar happens in Donne’s Holy Sonnets, which perpetually delay and strain against the resolutions to the theological problems that they pose. The Holy Sonnets are thus conflicted artifacts, acts of devotion that, as poems, resist the theological resolution that might make their composition irrelevant.

12 And indeed, I will claim in chapter three that one of Donne’s greatest innovations in the Holy Sonnets is to underscore poetry’s constitutive incapacity, at once productive and disabling, to enact the self-annihilation required for zeal and martyrdom alike. The incarnation of inability in poetic form makes the Holy Sonnets uniquely paradoxical devotion acts, exercises in failure and impossible action, insistent on their capacity for wondrous devotional articulation and yet convinced of their incapacity even to begin the
fanatic—of a self emptied of self and paradoxically defined by its own unmaking, driven by a fiery zeal that is not its own but God’s—emerges in the couplet as a possibility toward which Donne gestures: the self burned away and reshaped, in the house of God, as a being whose only capacity for remediated action exists in being annihilated by God’s fire.\textsuperscript{13}

This fundamental difference between Locke and Donne brings into focus a number of problems that are central to this dissertation. On the one hand, Locke’s prophet, “not unmade,” always maintains the capacity to reason about his experience of the divine word and to present a reasoned account to observers, to the public. Reason has the capacity to evaluate any internal sense to determine and authenticate whether it is of divine origin. Any failure to use reason to examine the origins of faith leads to enthusiasm, which “takes away both Reason and Revelation” and leaves behind only tautology: “It is a Revelation, because they firmly believe it, and they believe it, because it is a Revelation.”\textsuperscript{14} A person possesses the capacity to reason and reflect, to determine his experience of the divine, even when made into a prophet, and not to use that reason properly is to prove that the revelation is false. By contrast, for Donne, one can only experience the divine, have the divine truly present within oneself, through the annihilating force of zeal. Reason is just one more faculty that sin has corrupted, as in “Batter my heart”: “Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captiv’d and proves weake and untrew.” Reason is itself a form of compromised self-persuasion rather acts they set out to perform: “grace, if thou repent thou canst not lacke/ But who shall give thee that grace to begin?”\textsuperscript{13} Judah Stampfer has also referred to the zealous figure projected past the end of the poem as an “extreme fanatic” in \textit{John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture} (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 270.\textsuperscript{14} Locke 4.19.10.
than a mode of divine illumination.

That faith induces a conviction that is not bound by the protocols of reason is a position held often in the Reformation. From Calvin to Milton, Reformed thinkers argued that faith works according to a “secret testimony” that creates greater certitude than rational proof ever could. Locke, of course, is deeply committed to disenchanting such claims to secret testimony, demanding, in hopes of creating greater toleration, that all revelation be interrogated by a reason that could authenticate its origins. Yet fanaticism doubles down on the possibility of a divine secret testimony, making conviction even more inscrutable. More than suggesting that divine testimony could create unshakable faith in a believer, the idea of fanaticism proposes the possibility of a condition in which divine testimony is at once present as a force that reason cannot compass and yet unknowable, unknowable precisely because the subject who could know has been annihilated. In Donne’s language, the self’s Elements and Angelique Sprite must die in order for the person to become an instrument of God, a fanatic. That is not to say that reason is opposed to zeal in a simple antithesis for Donne, but that the former threatens to lead Donne away from the divine word rather than allow him to know or authenticate it. Only by being overthrown and immolated, emptied of self and the very capacity to know, can one experience the presence of God’s word, an unknowable secret testimony.

15 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.vii.4: “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit” (see also III.i.1, III.i.3, and III.ii.15). Compare Milton’s *Artis Logicae*, which suggests that such secret testimony forces belief even if it is only reason that proves or yields understanding: “[D]ivine testimony does indeed affirm or deny that a thing is so, and it makes me believe; it does not prove, it does not teach, it does not make me know or understand why it is so, unless it also adds reasons” (*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Vol. 8: 1666-1682 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982], 318)
Unmaking and unknowing are prerequisite for the zeal that drives the true believer to act according to divine command.

This divide between Donne and Locke is irreconcilable. The experience of annihilating, rapturous, self-consuming zeal that defines true faith for Donne cannot appear as anything other than enthusiasm from the perspective of Locke; like Paul’s worry over those who speak in tongues in 1 Corinthians 14, the fanatic threatens to become illegible to a community, impossible to understand, because is overtaken with a divine gift, one that annihilates his capacity for willful expression. Thus questions emerge: Is the fanatic merely one who convinces himself or others that he has experienced a divine revelation, a madman or a demagogue? (As Locke puts the question in theological terms: “how shall any one distinguish between the delusions of Satan, and the inspirations of the Holy Ghost?”) Or is he a divinely inspired instrument, an organ of an irresistible superior might? How does he know? How do his countrymen? And how are readers of these figures, as they are represented in the literature of the Reformation, to tell the difference? Renaissance literature persistently inquiries into how one becomes a fanatic and how to interpret fanatical action in relationship to divine will; it also worries over how divine inspiration—even just the claim to it—is contagious, spreading to others like a virus as it forms fanatical communities who believe they are no longer bound by reason or law. Between the fanatics withdrawal from all forms of given political and social community and the foundation of new fanatical communities arises a deep epistemic crisis, a breakdown of received structures for aesthetic representation and knowledge in the face of the eruption of divine violence in the world through the

transformation of a person into what Edmund Spenser refers to as an organ of divine
might.

Framing Fanaticism: Religion, Violence and the Reformation Literature of Self-
Annihilation reflects on these questions as they emerge in literary texts by Edmund
Spenser, John Donne, and John Milton. It is not a project that attempt to look at how
Protestant thinkers sought to answer these questions, but rather an inquiry into the how
literary authors influenced by the Reformation and religious violence that proliferated
through this era of massive political and religious transition confronted the possibility
that such questions were not definitively answerable. Less an analysis of the “science of
the soul” of the fanatic than a meditation on the failure of systematic attempts to
determine the origin of fanatical motivation, this project asks how the epistemological
questions surrounding fanaticism gave rise to profound aesthetic experimentation even
while they tended, in philosophy, politics, and theology, to abet forms of reactive social
control.¹⁷

Perceptions of religious fanaticism have not changed much since the early modern
period. Contemporary scholars share with early modern philosophers and theologians a

¹⁷ Sarah Rivett, The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 2011); see Introduction and Chapter 1 for a helpful
analysis of the ways that 17th-century Protestants and natural philosophers “applied the
experimental method to witness, observe, and record the manifestations of grace on the
souls of others.” On the idea of the visibility of sainthood, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, Visible
Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957) and Edwin S.
Morgan, Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
1965).
sense of fanaticism as the incarnation of religion devoid of reason, the anti-type of modernity. Shaped by a long history of polemics against fanaticism, scholars seek to disenchant or to condemn the fanatic’s claim that he does God’s will, or that God works through him. Yet doing so, I argue, misreads the complex ways in which early modern religious forms interacted with and shaped the emergence of modernity. In contrast to the simplified binary of fanatical religion and rational politics, *Framing Fanaticism* shows that fanaticism was integral to how modern politics and poetics developed. Spenser, Donne, and Milton recognized in the fanatic’s claim to divine agency an epistemological and representational crisis—an incapacity to know and depict the true origins of sacred violence. Yet this crisis was a productive one. It led these writers to develop a poetics of formal experimentation to address fanaticism’s tendency to unsettle the boundaries between reason and revelation, human will and divine agency.

*Framing Fanaticism* focuses on two opposing but interrelated tendencies in the Renaissance: the targeting of fanaticism as an extreme political threat and the engagement with it as a deep epistemological and poetic problem. In the first, thinkers as disparate as Martin Luther and Thomas Hobbes positioned themselves against fanaticism to dismiss dissent, abet theological and political control, and produce theories of mind and human anthropology. Throughout the Reformation, the idea of fanaticism evoked religious individuals who, through a process of self-annihilation, became vessels for violence that they took to be of divine origin. The charge of fanaticism was meant to exclude or control madness or zealotry, but the charge performed multiple disciplinary functions. In the second, which arose alongside and often in response to the first, poets investigate the link between the extreme forms of life and death that define fanaticism
and the practices of writing poetry. *Framing Fanaticism* explains that religious fanaticism was central to the evolving relationships between religion, state, and poetic form during the Reformation.

The interaction between these two uses of fanaticism—as a political foil and as a tool for asking fundamental questions about agency and authority—shaped its meanings in the early modern period. The poets of fanaticism voiced the epistemological question underlying the demonization of fanatics: how can one know if a fanatical act is undertaken with human or divine will? Critiques of fanaticism as madness or demagoguery proliferated across theology, philosophy, and politics. Yet Spenser, Donne, and Milton remained haunted by the epistemological mystery of an individual who annihilates himself to become an instrument of divine violence. I argue that fanaticism’s violence became inseparable from the basic questions with which modernity commenced: skepticism (how we can know anything about the passions and actions of others and ourselves), causation (how we can know whether and how divine agency functions within the world), and power (how we can know what shapes who we are and how we behave).

Because scholars lean on narratives of secularization to explain European culture’s transition from a benightedly religious Middle Ages to the increasingly disenchanted early modern period, fanaticism has been relegated to a fringe phenomenon in early modern scholarship. Even scholars invested in overturning narratives of secularism by emphasizing the co-development of religious and secular forms of life in early modern Europe have trouble accounting for the forces of self-annihilation and
possession that fanaticism seems to summon. Scholarship to date has thus taken a fundamentally skeptical stance toward such claims to divine inspiration, interpreting fanaticism as the incarnation of unreason. Yet by aligning fanaticism with irrational conviction, we elide the subtler phenomenon of self-loss and divine possession at its heart. The fanatic’s claim that he does God’s will, or that God works through him, if it is not entirely dismissed as madness or demagoguery, is taken as the object of historical study within an explanatory idiom that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, depends upon the disenchantment of all claims of divine agency in the world. By ignoring fanaticism as a prime mover for politics and poetics in the period, and by focusing on the dangers religious violence poses to the legitimacy of states while effacing the violence and domination that made those states possible in the first place, scholars of early modernity miss the crucial epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic problems that fanaticism raises. Refusing to discount the fanatic’s claim to be an instrument of divine violence, and resisting teleological narratives that posit the overcoming of past religious forms, this

20 Some of the most important interventions in postcolonial studies have disputed precisely this tendency to view religious violence—particularly the religious violence of peasants—in isolation from state and colonial orders of domination and discipline. See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); the essays in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially Guha’s “The Prose of Counterinsurgency”; and Timothy Mitchell’s “Nobody Listens to a Poor Man,” in *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
dissertation attends to the alternative life worlds, the forgotten early modernities, that made fanaticism such an urgent possibility and problem.

Fanaticism took the problem of election—how to know if anyone, oneself included, was chosen by God—and focused it intensely on one burning moment of self-immolating violence. While the modern state was developing in opposition to threats to its legitimacy, like religious fanaticism, in the early modern period, these poets tarried with the possibility that fanatical bodies might trouble and transform how their poems know, represent, and teach. Spenser, Donne, and Milton were thus forced to renovate the poetic forms they inherited, asking (respectively) how an allegory, a sonnet, or a tragedy could represent fanaticism’s puzzle of self-loss and possession. Arguing that many technical innovations in poetry were mediated by the historical and cognitive problems religious fanaticism provoked, Framing Fanaticism therefore focuses on how Spenserian allegory formally addresses problems of divine possession and our ability to recognize it; how a Donne sonnet becomes a unique space for testing the limits of violent self-abnegation and sacrifice; and how Miltonic tragedy confronts us with what it means to bear witness to acts of religious martyrdom and mass violence. Fanaticism—as both context and concept—transforms our understanding of how the most canonical Renaissance poets represented divinely inspired action and passion in literary form, and struggled with their own skepticism and fears about a religious phenomenon that threatened both sovereignty and the subjects it shaped in its own vision.

When I speak of framing fanaticism, I gesture toward the double meaning that such a phrase articulates. On the one hand: allowing fanaticism to be a frame through which I can analyze a series of Reformation problems surrounding religion and violence,
singularity and community, epistemology and aesthetics, statehood and domination. But I also mean \textit{framing} in the sense of a set-up, implying that the figure of the fanatic comes to take the blame, to be criminalized, for a series of problems the birth of the early modern state tried to suppress or scapegoat. If there is something ultimately unknowable or illegible about the fanatic, how can a social order organized around a state’s monopolization of violence contain the threat that there are forces that will forever surpass, interrupt, or dispute its own? To put this in the terminology of Walter Benjamin, how does the violence meant to institute and preserve law—to bind citizens to law—work to maintain itself in the face of divine violence that destroys law and unbinds citizens from the structures that make them at once legible and obedient?  

Perhaps the anarchic and unknowable features of divine violence explain why Thomas Hobbes, the greatest theorist of state sovereignty and obedience, could propose in the wake of the English Civil War that that nothing “can be more pernicious to Peace than the Revelations that were by these Fanatics pretended.” In an effort to secure the state’s authority over life and death, to systematize what Max Weber refers to as the state’s organization and legitimation of domination and monopoly over violence, thinkers from Luther to Hobbes invent the fanatic not as a possible vessel of divine violence but rather as a madman or demagogue, a “stock character” of asocial anti-modernity who is

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item See the distinction between \textit{göttliche Gewalt} (divine violence that interrupts the worldly order and destroys the structures of law that institutionalize violence) and \textit{mythische Gewalt} (mythical violence, which encompasses violence that institutes and preserves law) in “\textit{Zur Kritik der Gewalt},” in Walter Benjamin \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, vol. II.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 179-204.
\end{enumerate}
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impervious to reason and determined to use his own deluded or deluding claims to power as an instrument for (at best) self-aggrandizement or (at worst) the obliteration of the distinction between the City of God and the City of Man.  

It is perhaps not surprising to observe that religious violence and its agents proliferate across literary texts composed in a period often thought of punctuated by so-called wars of religion, but it remains the case that a systematic study of the relationship between religious fanaticism and literature in the early modern period has not yet been undertaken. This may be in part because we have been so invested, and rightly so, with the powerful work that has been done to establish the new self-consciousness about the human individual in the Renaissance. Many of the most famous studies of the Renaissance, from Jakob Burkhardt to Stephen Greenblatt, have claimed that despite the religious violence that proliferated throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, a new sense of individualized self-consciousness, an ability to manipulate and present the self no longer as dependent on God, began to take center stage.  

If the fanatic does proliferate across

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24 On the fanatic as stock character, see William Cavanaugh, “The Invention of Fanaticism,” Modern Theology 27.2 (2011); see also his The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) for a useful exposure of the incoherent logic that underwrites historical as well as recent scholarly attempts to uncover a generalizable tendency toward violence in “religion” as a universal category. Dominique Colas has developed the most historically elaborate case for “fanaticism” as the antithesis to civil society and the state beginning with the Reformation in Le Glaive et le Fléau: Généalogie du Fanatisme et de la Société Civile (Paris: B. Grasset, 1992).

25 For Greenblatt’s overview of this long-held narrative about the “increased self-consciousness about the self-fashioning of human identity” in the Renaissance, see the introduction to Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For more recent accounts see Elizabeth Hanson, Discovering the Subject in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Cynthia Marshall, The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Udo Thiel, The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to
the literature of the early modern period, it must be said that it presents a supremely unsettling idea of character, since the fanatic as such emerges as a figure who negates character. To put it more precisely, it’s not just that a fanatic is a character who is defined either by his individual will’s bondage to God’s greater will (as the Lutheran argument would have it)\(^26\) or by his execution of unwilled, involuntary action, action whose origin resides in God.\(^27\) Rather, a fanatic only comes on to the scene when character, self, has itself been annihilated. The fanatic’s will isn’t just coerced but emptied of itself, overtaken and possessed as an instrument of inscrutable divine force. Fanaticism may—and this is one of the reasons it was so reviled—present something of an affront to this renewed self-consciousness of individuality’ in an age where new possibilities for fashioning identity came to be possible, the idea of fanaticism evoked the possibility that identity might be deleted—that self might violently become mere vessel—and that such deletion could be coveted and beyond knowledge, the fullest extension of the self’s being in the world and that self’s uncanny disappearance. Time and again my dissertation will

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\(^{26}\) Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1929), vol 18, 551-787.

\(^{27}\) On the importance and temporal complexity of the Aristotelian distinction between voluntary, involuntary, and mixed action to Renaissance ideas of will, see Bradin Cormack, “On Will: Time and Voluntary Action in Coriolanus and the Sonnets,” *Shakespeare* 5.3 (2009), 253-270.
focus on fanatics as the most peculiar kinds of characters—peculiar because self-negating in a total sense. To borrow a phrase from the Belgian anthropologist Luc de Heusch, the divine possession of the fanatic cannot take place without some form of “depossession” of the self, but this depossession, in the instance of fanaticism, is a violent version of self-loss that is at once the prerequisite and the goal for the pursued annihilation. That is, the fanatic is a character, and becomes represented as such, precisely insofar as he is no longer an individual but rather a vessel for the divine. The somewhat more surprising point is that this voiding of character, this abnegation of the individual, is what makes the fanatic, at least in certain instances in Spenser, Donne and Milton, potentially most alive. It is that loss of self in Redcrosse’s victory against the dragon, Donne’s achievement of self-annihilating fiery Zeal, and Milton’s Samson’s immolating regeneration that seems to allow sacred life to move through a being whose identity can no longer be accurately represented as an individual self-consciousness. The fanatic is most himself when he is outside himself, when his self is, in fact, annihilated so that the voice or will or violence of God may move through and define him. This paradox—that the new emphasis on the character of the fanatic must, by necessity, focus in on a characterless character, a self-annihilating vessel for a divine force—may be why fanaticism is often seen as atavistic—not because it is some "medieval" remnant in a secularizing age, but because it focuses our attention on a figure possessed by a divine force that any idea of individualized human being can’t account for. The fanatic threatens to bring an originary divine violence

into the world, one that depends upon the annihilation of agency and will alike.

Much has been written about the discourse of the passions in the early modern world;\textsuperscript{29} one might say that fanaticism is the limit experience of the passions in the ancient, non-pejorative sense of \textit{passio} that Erich Auerbach traced:\textsuperscript{30} a seizure of the self, a throwing of the self into a radical passivity, but with the possibility that such self-emptying, pushing the self out of itself so that the divine can gather within, may result in the most violent action (of rebellion or martyrdom). This dissertation must examine, then, how literary texts attempted to represent and think about this paradoxical character of the fanatic, and it suggests that, in attempting to address the epistemological and ethical opacity of fanaticism, Spenser, Donne, and Milton were moved to innovate and create radically new forms of allegory, devotional lyric, and tragedy, respectively.

An excursus on the terminology of this project is in order. In this dissertation, I focus primarily on religious \textit{fanaticism} rather than religious \textit{enthusiasm} for a series of reasons that I explain below, but it will become clear that, as terms of abuse, the distinction between the two only occasionally holds. For the most part, those who use these terms and their cognates in the Reformation mean to disparage someone as an irrational

\textsuperscript{29} For a recent, capacious narrative about early modern attempts to control, appropriate, evade, and indulge the passions, see Christopher Tilmouth, \textit{Passions Triumph over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

sectarian. Sometimes the terms are used to define one another, as in the writings of Friedrich Spanheim, a theology professor and Calvinist in Leiden in the first half of the 17th century whose works connecting the fanaticism of the early 16th-century German peasant revolt with the communal experimentation of radical religion in the English Civil War were translated into English almost immediately:

By enthusiasts we mean fanatical men, who either feign or presume to have God’s breath and inspiration, and whether by diabolical, melancholic, or voluntary illusions, deceive themselves and others that such inspiration should be assigned to divine revelation.31

For Spanheim, fanatic is just another name for enthusiast. Both signify to “feign or presume to have God’s breath and inspiration,” equating inspiration with divine revelation. The emphasis on deception is typical, as is the acknowledgement that fanatics can be deceiving themselves or knowingly deceiving others.

Yet it is worth noting that the words have quite different etymologies. Enthusiasm derives from the Greek entheós, the fact of being possessed by a God, and entered into Late Latin as enthusiasmus. A touchstone is Plato’s Ion, where Socrates describes the rhapsode in the following manner:

It’s a divine power that moves you, as a ‘Magnetic’ stone moves iron rings […]

31 “…per enthusiastas intelligiumus homines fanaticos, qui afflatum et inspirationem Dei fingunt, vel praesumunt, et vel Diabolicis, vel melancholicis, vel voluntaris illusionibus divinam revelationem tribuendo se aliosque circumducunt.” Fr. Spannheim, Disputationum Anti-Anabaptisticarum Decima Sexta…De Enthusiasmo, thesis IV (Leiden, 1646); see also Englands VVarning by Germanies Woe (London, 1646).
This stone not only pulls those rings, if they’re iron, it also puts power in the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does—pull other rings—so that there’s sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired [entheós] herself, and then thorough those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended. You know, none of the epic poets, if they’re good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. […] One poet is attached to one Muse, another to another (we say he is ‘possessed’ [katechetai], and that’s near enough for he is held [echetai]).

The locus classicus for enthusiasm, often glossed in the Renaissance as furor poeticus thanks to the subtitle (De furore poetico) Marsilio Ficino appended to his translation of the Ion, bears on poetry, or to be more precise, on the oration of poetry. In this passage from the Ion, Socrates describes the rhapsode’s performance as a form of divine possession, in opposition to a technique or skill. A comparison structures the exposition: enthusiasm is like a magnetic stone encircled by iron rings. The magnetic stone not only overtakes the movement of the ring closest to it, but also communicates its power to subsequent rings, which then each bear the force of the original magnetic stone.

Likewise, a Muse inspires an individual rhapsode—the god speaks through the person, emptying him of his own voice—and that enthusiast likewise communicates that possessive force to others—the spectators to song—who become enthusiasts. The two

primary features of enthusiasm in its Ionic form, then, are first, a divine possession that expels the rhapsode from himself so that the god can speak the poet’s words and act through him, and, second, a capacity to “possess” and “hold” an enthusiast communicates beyond the initial act of inspiration, spreading out in a magnet-like force that pulls all present within a given radius into enthusiastic possession. Thus enthusiasm as an intense singularity—the rhapsode held by the god so that the poet’s words can move through him—and as contagious movement—the force spreading from ring to ring, bringing all into a collective enthusiasm.

Though there was significant debate over the possibility of poetic enthusiasm in the Renaissance from Ficino through Milton, enthusiasm primarily came to mean something different in a culture that wrestled with the relationship between antiquity and Christianity. By the time of Spanheim and Locke, enthusiasm did not mean divine possession but rather the boasting of “divine inspiration, extasies [sic] and secret communication with God obtruding their Prophesies for the word of God, and preferring them before the written Word.” Enthusiasm, whether based on deception on melancholic madness, is a term that designates a convection that one has had a direct experience of the divine Word. As the first half of the 17th century unfolded, enthusiasm

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33 The classical discourse of enthusiasm is of course not entirely encompassed by the question of poetic inspiration and rhapsody. Other examples of divine possession abound, such as the goddess Allecto’s poisonous inspiration of Amata in Vergil’s Aeneid VII, also described as a kind of encircling: “vipeream inspirans animam; fit tortile collo / aurum ingens coluber, fit longae taenia vitae, / innectitque comas et membris lubricus errat” [“breathes into her its viperous breath. The huge snake becomes the collar of twisted old about her neck, becomes the festoon of the long fillet, entwines itself into her hair, and slides smoothly over her limbs”] (VII.351-353 in Virgil, Volume II: Aeneid Books 7-12, Appendix Vergilianana (London: William Heineemann/Loeb Classical Library, 1918). Shortly after Amata, possessed, is described as a spinning top (turbo) driven on by a force that is at once internal and external, “dant animos plagae” [“the blows give it life”].

34 Englands VWarning by Germanies Woe, 24.
came to be seen as a disease that could be diagnosed, culminating in the publication of both Meric Casaubon’s *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm* and Henry More’s *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* in 1656.\(^{35}\) Enthusiasm in the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) century, though it occasional still retained its Platonic meaning of possession by a God, became a term meant to indicate a mode of self-relation rather than of relation to God; enthusiast were those who believed that they had special access to a divine light or word. And as in the analysis from Locke discussed above, enthusiasm represented the threat that an individual could believe himself to be authorized to know or act in ways that broke with both positive law and Scripture. Yet despite the repeated figuration of the enthusiast as a melancholic or mad individual, cut off from communal conversation or reasonable discourse, the enthusiast, like Plato’s rhapsode, also threatened to pull others in to the orbit of its power.

In contrast to enthusiasm, fanaticism retains at once a broader and narrower set of semantic possibilities. Most directly derived from the Latin *fanum*, temple, fanaticism as a term of abuse has a particular historical association, emerging directly from a set of Reformation disputes. This is not to say that fanaticism did not exist as a term of abuse before the Reformation,\(^ {36}\) but, as scholars such as Dominique Colas and Alberto Toscano

\(^{35}\) For a history of the theological and medical critiques of enthusiasm, see Michael Heyd, “*Be Sober and Reasonable*”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). See also J. G. A. Pocock on the way that the generalization of enthusiasm as a term of abuse across Europe in the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) centuries, meant to dehumanize the “fury of millennial sects” from the Peasant War in Germany onward, never really lost its original meaning of “the in-pouring or in-breathing of the divine” (“Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60.1/2, 9-10).

\(^{36}\) See, for example, Cicero’s description of “superstitious philosophers” as fanatics in *De Divinatione* 2.118: “*Sed nescio quo modo isti philosophi superstitosi et paene fanatici quidvis malle videntur quam se non ineptos*” [But, for some inexplicable cause, those
have shown, it is to assert that it is only in the Reformation, in particular in the wake of the Anabaptist uprisings in Germany in the 1520s and 1530s, that fanaticism came so widely to be associated with a particular kind of sacred fury. It is with the figurehead of the great Peasant Rebellion in Germany, Thomas Müntzer, and with Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon’s polemics against him and the peasant rebels with whom he organized against both official state and church, that the modern sense of fanaticism was born. A portrait of Müntzer, made after he was captured and beheaded, bears the following caption: “archifanaticus patronus et capitaneus seditorsiorum rusticorum.”

What characterized the first and most intense fanatic, at least in the eyes of his enemies, was a total refusal, justified through divine revelation, to accept state authority, private property, or church hierarchy as legitimate. I will discuss Müntzer in more detail below, but for now it is worth specifying what he and his followers were called in German: Schwärmer, alluding to a group of swarming animals. Fundamentally different from the metaphor of the magnet that underwrites enthusiasm, the swarm of fanatics still contains the threat that a singular divine revelation or possession can spread, can create rings of forces that have unpredictable effects. Colas shows that Schwärmer is not just the German term that Luther and Melanchthon used in their vernacular polemics against peasant rebels and Anabaptists, but that, in the wake of these polemics, Schwärmer became the German translation of fanaticus in their Latin works. Colas shows further that “fanatic” is the term for Schwärmer in the contemporary English translations of these

superstitious and fanatical philosophers of yours would rather appear absurd than anything else in the world].

38 Reproduction in The Granger Collection, New York City (Image No. 0045311).
texts, though occasionally the preferred translation was “phanatic” or “phanatik” (or in French, *phantastiques*), based on the (mistaken but deeply interesting) assumption that the term “fanatic” derived not from Latin *fanum* but from the Greek *phantasma* (from the root *phos*, light), implying an association between fanaticism and vision (or mistaken visions: phantasms or hallucinations).³⁹

The point I’d like to insist on here is that the moment of Anabaptist revolt in Germany is something of a primal scene for early modern fanaticism especially in England. “England’s Warning by Germany’s Woe”: The title of Spanheim’s well-known denunciation of the fanatics and enthusiasts in the peasant rebellions of the 1530s and 1540s, which connects these events with sectarian revolts in England during the English Civil War, establishes that contemporaries were very self-conscious about drawing connections between the two configurations of fanaticism. Anabaptism’s association with the German Peasant Revolt led many in England in the second half of the 16th and 17th centuries to see in Anabaptism the recipe for religious revolt characterized by what they took to be unreason and extremism. What the multiple etymologies and translations of fanaticism reveal is that a fanaticism presents, like Ionic enthusiasm, a complicated play of singularity and multiplicity, of special revelation and collective swarming. Müntzer was the exemplar for England, positioned as a threat at the very inception of the Reformation with Luther. And what fanaticism seemed to threaten was individuals who could claim to have authorization to act in violent ways against state and church establishments and, at the same time, to bring others into their inspired, furious uprisings.

³⁹ Colas 12. Sometimes both spellings exist in the same text, e.g., in George Fox’s *A Distinction between the Phanatick Spirit, and the Sprit of God* (London, 1660). Calvin will sometimes, in French versions of his texts, translate the Latin *fanaticus* as *phantastique*. 
Most of the recent genealogical studies of fanaticism begin with this moment, the polemic between Luther and his former follower-turned-antagonist, Müntzer. And the work of establishing the origins and shifting means of the word (Colas) and the theological and philosophical force of the dispute (Toscano, with heavy reliance on Ernst Bloch’s study of Müntzer) has been extremely valuable. But these studies have rarely taken as an object of analysis what is most peculiar and complex about Müntzer’s so-called fanaticism. Both scholars emphasize, in their genealogical projects, the ways in which fanaticism appears as a figure for willed extremism or intense commitment. Both thinkers take Friedrich Engels’s attempt to claim the Anabaptist peasant rebels as the original communists (who were, in Engels’ estimation, deluded by their religious beliefs\(^{40}\)) as an excuse to trace such so-called fanaticism backward and forward through time. The two take radically different positions. Colas positions Müntzer as the originator of a fanaticism that leads to “fanatical Marxism,” which rejects, in Colas’s reading, political representation and seeks to bring about a “joyous Apocalypse that will witness the famous ‘withering of the state’.”\(^{41}\) Albeit from the opposite political spectrum, Toscano similarly conflates the religious fanaticism of Müntzer and the peasant rebels with later examples of “unconditional and passionate subjective convictions that determine a radically transformative and unequivocally antagonistic stance against

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\(^{40}\) Engels, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Berlin: Neuer Weg, 1945). See also Marx’s comment that the radical possibilities of the Peasant War were ruined because of theology: “Damals scheiterte der Bauernkrieg, die radikalste Tatsache der deutschen Geschichte, an der Theologie” [The Peasant War, the most radical event in German history, failed because of theology] (“ Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung,” in *Werke*, vol. 1 [Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976], p. 386).

existing society.” Taking his cue from Alain Badiou’s reading of St. Paul, which brackets Paul’s message of faith in order to focus on Paul as a model for a universal militant figure, Toscano takes the fanatic as a paradigm for his study of passionate zeal more broadly.

As has by now become obvious, my work on fanaticism resists both tendencies. Insisting that a unique phenomenon appears if we zoom in rather than out, I look at religious fanaticism in its particularity in the Reformation and consider how literature addresses that particularity. My thesis tracks a history of thinking about fanaticism that both Colas and Toscano overlook—fanaticism as a phenomenon ambiguously emerging between passivity and activity, annihilating self-sacrifice and radical action. This mode of studying fanaticism is particularly important for understanding the epistemological and aesthetic questions, fundamental to the literary works I explore, that arise for literary depictions of fanaticism when fanaticism is not taken as a screen for a disenchanted, secularized phenomenon.

So what does fanaticism look like in Müntzer? Scholars have shown that Luther finds Schwärmer dangerous for a host of reasons that led him to call for extreme violence against them: the fanatics wished to overthrow the secular realm, which, as it began to take the form of the modern state, Luther believed was irreducibly necessary; they

42 Toscano 67.
maintained that Luther’s distinction between inner freedom and faith and outward obedience to state authority, famously articulated in the 1520 text *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, was false and reactionary; they questioned the value of Luther’s grounding of Reform on the foundation of the written word, *sola scriptura*, if it foreclosed the possibility of God’s voice speaking to individuals in the present, and instead produced “inspired, mystical reading practices” through which new kinds of community and devotion were shaped; they appropriated elements of the German mystical tradition that were dear to Luther but to radically different ends; they believed that God drove them to violent rebellion; they opposed Luther’s continued investment in the sacraments of infant baptism and the Eucharistic presence of Christ; and they believed that the early kingdom could be transformed into the kingdom of God, which would produce a utopia of non-hierarchical and universal salvation in the present.  

44 The literature on the Luther-Müntzer dispute is voluminous. For particularly helpful analyses, see Niklaus Largier on “inspired, mystical reading practices” and on Luther’s investment in secular power as a way of limiting biblical hermeneutic possibilities (“Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience,” *Representations* 105 [2009], 37-60); Cynthia Grant Schoenberger on the malleability of Luther’s position on individual resistance to authority (“Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40.1 [1979], 3-20; Ernst Bloch on the ways in which Luther’s Christology, natural law theory, and selective reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans informed his stance against specifically collective resistance (*Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1960], esp. 143-171); Steven Ozment on the politics of mysticism in Luther and Müntzer (*The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* [New Haven: Yale University, 1980], esp. 80-134; *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973]); and “Eckhart and Luther: German Mysticism and Protestantism,” in *Thomist* 44.2 [1978], 259-280); Karl Gehrhard Steck on the political implications of Müntzer’s critique of Luther’s dualism (*Luther and die Schwärmer* [Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1955]); James Stayer on the threat of communization (*The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* [Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994]); and Jacob Taubes on Luther’s conviction that the authorities should murder the peasants in good conscience and on the influence of the Anabaptist
all these reasons did Luther consider Müntzer and the peasant rebels to be Schwärmer, fanatics who, overtaken by Satan, needed to be exposed as madmen or liars and killed by the state’s military force. Yet what tends to be overlooked by scholars’ emphasis on Müntzer ferocious counter attacks against Luther, his absolute certitude that he received and was inspired by divine revelation, and his political and economic commitment in communization (omnia sunt communia, the phrase supposedly extracted from him through torture before his execution) is the particular emphasis on enthusiastic possession that defines Müntzer’s fanaticism. Influenced by the late medieval mysticism of Meister Eckhart and his disciplines, John Tauler in particular, Müntzer at his most theologically reflective moments claims, in fact, that he is not the agent of the violent acts that God demands he and the peasants undertake against church and state. For Müntzer, it is God himself who acts through the faithful. As he describes the process in his famous sermon to the German princes, an extended interpretation of the second section of the Book of Daniel:

Sol nw der mensch des worts gewar warden und das er sein empfintlich sey, so muss ym Gott nemen seyne fleischliche luste, und wenn die bewegung von Gott


45 The essential texts by Luther on fanaticism are collected in volume 15 of the Weimarer Ausgabe of Luthers Werke (volume 40 in Luther’s Works), including: Ein Brief an die Fürsten zu Sachsen von dem aufrührerischen Geist (1524), Ein Brief an die Christen zu Strassburg wider den Schwärmergeist (1524), and, most venomous of all, Wider die Mordischen und Reubischen Rotten der Bawren (1525).

46 On how Tauler, according to a pastor who worked with Müntzer’s, “seduced,” Müntzer and the peasants, see Eric Gritsch, Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 13.

47 See Ozment, Mysticism and Dissent, on Müntzer as the point of origin for the nexus of this mystical tradition and rebellion in the Reformation.
In contrast to the unbelievers, like Luther, who are not capable of self-emptying ("sie können und wollen nit leherwerden," they can and will not become empty), Müntzer specifies that a certain kind of self-murder, an annihilation of the self, is necessary for true faith. In order be receptive (empfänglich) to the word of God, God’s movement (bewegung) must come into the heart of the believer. Through that enthusiastic arrival, God violently negates the self; God must take away the self in order to enter it. Thus true faith for Müntzer is the experience of violent self-loss. Attentiveness to the divine word becomes possible by the murder of the desires that constitute the human self. In this moment, the distinction between the person and the divine break down. Perfectly captured by the clause “das er yhm do stadt gebe,” in which the pronouns (er/yhm) make it impossible to distinguish grammatically between the human and divine (a pronominal conflation we will see again in Spenser’s representation of Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of divine might), God moves into the place (stadt) of the self, and that internal movement kills the self. God is not transcendent in this moment; the divine is entirely immanent, but in such a way that erases the distinction between er and yhm, God

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and self. The divine gives himself to the believer and, in this process of giving as penetrating movement, the person loses himself; as with Donne’s Zeal, the believer must die in order to become his true self, instrument of divine action. For in this process of self-loss and divinization, God, immanent in the person, is the agent—it is God’s action (wirkung) that the believer receives (bekommen mag). The believer does not will to fulfill God’s will, for he has been freed from his own will; God’s will works in him. The self, annihilated, becomes an organ for divine violence and action. And divine action may not end there; indeed, it may catch on and spread, creating a swarm that is defined at once by collective self-loss and violent action.

Müntzer is of course not the first to develop such a theory of self-emptying. It proliferates throughout the medieval mystical Christology, finding one of its richest elaborations in Meister Eckhart and his followers, through whom Müntzer encountered it. Yet it originated in Paul of Tarsus’s description of the incarnation in the Letter to the Philippians (2:5-8):

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself [heauton ekenōsen], taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁴⁹

*Kenosis* is thus originally an operation of self-emptying specific to Christ, who

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abandoned his divinity in order to take human form and die on the cross. Yet Paul’s
description indicates that kenosis is not an action that is exclusively Christ’s, or reserved
only for him: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Kenosis is a model
to be imitated, though Paul does not specify what imitation of self-annihilation would
look like for those who are not the Son of God. Though Müntzer is not as invested in the
intricate theological debates that exist in the traditions of kenotic mysticism on which he
drew, his innovations are influential. First, he believed that such a process of self-
emptying for a human believer was the prerequisite for divine possession and that
“receiving divine action” would itself lead to the transformation of the world, through
violence if necessary. Secondly, though he argues that each individual believer must
experience this self-loss for himself, a community of believers can take shape to perform
the acts required to allow more individuals to experience the movement of God into their
hearts. This community, not entirely unlike the ring of Ionic enthusiasts, is defined by the
fact that it is collectively lost to itself. It is God’s action that moves the community to act.

Thus, when I speak of fanaticism in this dissertation, I mean to refer to echoes and
fears of the kind of enthusiastic fanaticism that Müntzer theorizes. Though the
differentiation of enthusiasm and fanaticism becomes increasingly important in the wake

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50 I am aware that there are productive debates among of scholars as to whether the
category of mysticism is actually useful for understanding the theological
experimentation of someone like Eckhart, one of the main sources of Müntzer’s
mysticism (see, most polemically e.g., Kurt Flasch, “Meister Eckhart und die ‘Deutsche
Mystik’—Zur Kritik eines historiographischen Schemas,” in Die Philosophie im 14. und
15. Jahrhundert, ed. O. Pluta [Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1988], 439-463; and, more
subtly, Alain de Libera, “L’Un ou La Trinite,” in Revue des sciences religieuses 70.1
[1996], 31-47). I retain “mysticism” as a way of (perhaps reductively) referring to the
tradition of self-annihilation and divinization that Müntzer saw himself taking to its
logical and more explicitly political and violent conclusion.
of the 17th century, and though they emerge from different traditions, there are reasons to see them meet in Müntzer, not least because the mystical tradition on which he draws is almost as deeply influenced by modes of Neoplatonic thought as it is by Pauline kenosis and conversion. In contrast to what Colas and Toscano, the two most recent genealogists of fanaticism, have argued, I propose that fanaticism cannot be the formal equivalent of conviction unless we out-of-hand dismiss Müntzer’s claims, fold it into an idiom that disenchant its claims to divine possession. Likewise, refusing to disenchant Müntzer allows us to revise the claim that martyrs who commit acts of violence are committed to “the limitless pursuit of freedom, the illusion of an uncoerced interiority that can withstand the force of institutional disciplines” or to performing actions that are “exemplary” works that all Christians are enjoined to follow. There is no self to be convinced of its righteousness or freedom in Müntzer’s paradigm, no self that seeks to fashion itself as evangelical exemplar for a community; it is God who acts in and through the self and thus tears that self away from its prior community. The self has been emptied

51 See, for example Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s sharp correction (likely influenced by his reading of Immanuel Kant’s remarkable essay, “Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie,” which he admired) to Richard Baxter’s Reliquiae Baxterianae (London, 1696): “Baxter makes the usual mistake of writing Fanatic when he clearly means Enthusiast. The Field-Methodists are fanatics, i.e. circà fana densâ turbâ conçalefacti; those who catch heat by crowding together round the same Fane. Fanaticism is the fever of superstition. Enthusiasm, on the contrary, implies an undue (or when used in a good sense, an unusual) vividness of ideas, as opposed to perceptions, or of the obscure inward feelings” (Coleridge, Notes on English Divines, ed. Derwent Coleridge [London, 1853], 39-40).

52 Talal Asad, On Suicide Bombing (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 91. Feisal Mohamed, whose work I discuss in chapter 5, has made use of Asad’s work to discuss what he refers to as terrorism in early modern England. Despite my resistance to the conflation of all suicide bombing with a longing for uncoerced freedom, the value of Asad’s contribution is momentous. On martyrdom as “exemplary action,” see Brad Gregory, Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.
of itself, and now God moves it to a violent act that may end, as it did for Müntzer, in martyrdom, another version of self-loss. When Luther claims that the Holy Spirit does not act in the secular world and that Müntzer’s claims are thus categorically false, or when he asserts that Müntzer refuses to allow himself to be “tested and judged in humility”53 (a biblically derived version of Locke’s demand that enthusiasts submit to observation and have their reason examined), he attempts to deny in advance the possibility that God might be actually working through Müntzer and calls on the state to eradicate Müntzer and all his followers. This strategy—demanding that fanatics account for themselves and demanding that states use violence to be rid of them—takes various forms from Luther to Hobbes and, as we saw at the start of this introduction, Locke.

And yet what happens if, instead of dismissing Müntzer as a false prophet or madman, one were to worry about his claim in a different register. It is my claim in this dissertation that Spenser, Donne, and Milton find themselves unsatisfied with the polemical disavowal of claims like Müntzer’s; commanding them to account for their relationship to God and then imprisoning, exiling, or killing them when they inevitable could not provide a satisfactory account did not resolve the fundamental problems that fanaticism posed. It is not my intention to draw a direct connection between Müntzer and the representations of fanaticism in the literary or theological works of these authors (though the ideas of an Anabaptist threat is everywhere visible in Nashe, Spenser, Jonson, and Hobbes). Nor do I propose that these poets are especially invested in traditions of

mysticism (though Donne obviously, if ambivalently, was).\textsuperscript{54} My claim is more speculative—it is that the model of fanaticism that Müntzer introduced to the Reformation (based around the annihilation of the self, divine possession, and the communicative or mimetic possibilities of both) haunted these poets. And it is my further claim that they recognized in the epistemological question that Müntzerian fanaticism raised—how can one know if a fanatical act is undertaken with one’s will or with God’s?—a provocation to develop new poetic forms to address the possibility that this question might, in certain instances, remain unanswerable. They dwelled with the uncertainties raised by fanaticism and, understanding that fanatics might prove to be limit cases for what their art’s didactic and representational projects, they transformed the poetic materials available to them to explore the ambiguities of divine violence.

There is a long tradition of studying radical religion and its relationship to literature in the early modern period. Yet since the entrenchment of the so-called “war on terror” at the start of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, early modern studies has taken a renewed interest not just in the relationship between religion and the arts of the period but also, and with its own kind of zeal, in religious violence and the tension between political and religious authority. The turn to political theology in English Renaissance studies, most visible in the works of

\textsuperscript{54} For useful discussion of the 17\textsuperscript{th}-century enterprise of “Anglicizing the central mystical anthropology of Medieval German spiritualism as it had been interpreted by the 16\textsuperscript{th} century German spiritualist and Anabaptist Movement,” see Nigel Smith, \textit{Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 107-43, quote from 136.
critics like Julia Reinhard Lupton, Victoria Kahn, and Graham Hamill (to name just a few), has produced a renewed conviction that the literary works of the period were deeply engaged with the complicated processes by which the modern state produced itself as the institution that maintained a monopoly over force and obedience—in short, and in a decidedly Schmittian idiom, that literary works were especially attentive to the tension between desires for sainthood (salvation) and for citizenship (empowerment) in the struggles for state sovereignty. This project’s contribution to the field of political theology lies in a swerve away from the focus on sovereignty, law, and citizenship. Though Lupton, in particular, has been attentive to the ways in which a focus on political theology allows critics to examine the procedures by which literary characters are represented in moments of exception as “dying into citizenship,” the scholars of

55 See, most recently, Political Theology and Early Modernity, ed. Julia Reinhard Lupton and Graham Hamill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) and Victoria Kahn, Political Theology and Early Modern Texts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). In general these critics cite Schmitt’s Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty as the text that inspires or provokes their modes of inquiry, but see also, on the development of the modern state form, The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum, trans. G. L. Ulman (New York: Telos, 2003), especially section III (e.g., p. 140: “The first effective rationalization of the spatial form ‘state,’ in terms of both domestic and foreign policy, was achieved by the detheologization of public life and the neutralization of the antitheses of creedal civil wars. […] The conflicts between religious factions had been resolved by a public-legal decision for the territorial domain of the state—a decision no longer ecclesiastical, but political, even state-political”).

56 Julia Reinhard Lupton, Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 21: “Such tragic and tragicomic characters as Shylock, Othello, Caliban, and Isabella undergo a passage, real or imagined, voluntary or forced, from a situation before or under a particular legal order to a point beyond it, a passage that can take the form of conversion, naturalization, manumission, marriage, or some mix of these modes of radical status change. In each case, moreover, this point beyond is not otherworldly but this-worldly, associated with the social, sexual, economic, and political functioning of a politea—a constitution, a commonweal, a citizenry. Each of these characters must in effect die into citizenship, into an equalizing form of civic membership and social interchange that requires the renunciation of claims to distinction
political theology have not studied religious fanaticism and its threat (political, theological, epistemological and aesthetic) to the forms of sovereignty that were developing in the early modern world. My work reveals a literary reckoning with the capacity of an individual or community to become, through self-annihilation, vehicles of divine violence; fanatics experience—or at least claim to experience—a change of status that cannot be circumscribed by the protocols of citizenship or sainthood. They do not just go beyond a particular legal order but loses themselves entirely to become instruments of God that evacuate will and interrupt the order of the world.

Furthermore, studies in political theology have tended to divorce themselves from an emphasis on the formal analysis of literary texts. This is not to say that these scholars do not perform “close readings” of literature—they do, often masterfully—but rather that the close readings of literature are almost always in the service of a larger political theological problem. Recent calls to resuscitate formalism in the hopes of reconsidering the ways that martyrdom and literature interact in the period render form such a broad category that it comes to mean “the textual production of martyrdom” rather than specific formal strategies in literary texts.57 I hope, by contrast, to take some of the central questions of political theology and show how, in fact, they create occasions for immanent reflections on and experimentations with the poetic forms in which such questions are posed.

that had imbued their previous lives with an intensity of purpose verging on the charismatic.”

57 Alice Dailey, The English Martyr from Reformation to Revolution (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012), 8. This is an important study of martyrdom, but its call for a return to a historicized formalism seems half-hearted to me. Dailey is interested in how martyrdom circulates in narrative but does not examine how, for example, poems struggles (at the level of line, stanza, or larger structure) to think through the meanings of martyrdom.
One of the most influential recent studies that has simultaneously broken with the framework of political theology and emphasized the formal literary implications of early modern religious violence is Feisal Mohamed’s *Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism*. An elaboration of his post-9/11 exchange with John Carey over whether or not Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* is a celebration of religious terrorism, Mohamed’s book attempts to elaborate his argument that Milton wholly supports the idea that “[a]t his triumph, Milton’s Samson’s is much less a human subject than he is a vessel of God’s wrath, which wrath is an irruption of the divine into our world,”

drawing a clear connection between Samson and contemporary suicide bombers in order to dispute Milton scholars’ tendency to embrace Milton’s republican politics without acknowledging the place in his thought for the justification of divinely inspired violence.

At the same time, Mohamed attempts, at least in his first chapter, to reveal how Milton’s representation of such divinely inspired violence reverberate formally in his poetry.

Glossing the “rousing motions” that lead Samson to his final act of suicidal mass killing as unambiguously divine, Mohamed draws a connection between moments of what he calls “plain style” in *Paradise Lost* and Samson’s violence: “If there is an equivalent to Samson’s rousing motions in *Paradise Lost*, it is those moments where plainspoken truth distances us from the aesthetic response invited by the poem’s richly expressed passages.”

Indeed, Mohamed eloquently interprets moments in Milton’s verse, such as

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61 Ibid. 32.
Abdiel’s rejection of Satan, where zeal for the divine creates an expression of “unadorned truth” in which Milton’s simplifies syntax simpler, regularizes meter, and momentarily abandons his multilingual wordplay. All of Mohamed’s claims contribute to an effort to persuade the reader that “[p]erhaps more than any other poet, John Milton makes us keenly aware of the limits of an emphasis on ambiguity,” and thus to show the reader, once and for all, that Milton was fully convinced of Samson’s divinely inspired violence, and that our investment in finding ambiguity in *Samson Agonistes* has lead us to ignore Milton’s commitment to religious violence.

I’m not so sure. Mohamed’s claim against ambiguity allows him to decide in advance that Milton’s Samson is a vessel of divine violence, and yet it is difficult, as I show in my final chapter, to understand how any reader of the play could really claim that Samson’s inspiration is unambiguous. Milton goes out of his way to make the question of Samson’s relationship to God entirely inaccessible not just to the spectators within the play but also to those of us reading it. By denying this point, Mohamed’s powerful analysis nonetheless views *Samson Agonistes* as a propagandistic tool for terrorism, and his claim about form—the simplification of stylistics and versification and so on—becomes justification for viewing the play as unwilling to think through ambiguity.

My study of fanaticism takes a radically different approach. I claim that the very ambiguity that Mohamed dismisses is inescapably present in these literary representations of religious fanaticism. And how could it not be? As I have shown in this introduction, religious fanaticism emerges with the possibility that the divine could annihilate and act

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62 Ibid. 23-27.
through a person—not just bind a person to a specific set of rituals or actions but unmake the person and remake him as sacred instrument. Yet, given such annihilation, how could a fanatic or a community of spectators ever truly know, through reason or debate, if the person is a divine instrument or madman? This epistemological aporia provokes formal experimentation in the poets that I study. Technique, form, becomes the realm in which the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic problems that fanaticism raises are immanently crystalized, even if fanaticism indicates a state in which technique is absent (as Ionic enthusiasm suggests, and as I will address in my chapters on Spenser and Donne). These poets rethink how an allegory, a devotional sonnet, and a tragedy work at both the most fundamental and the most minute structural levels in order to grapple subtly with the unknowability that fanaticism introduces in their art; their transformation of literary techniques at once registers and attempts to address the conceptual complexity of fanaticism.63 To adapt a comment from Gillian Rose, these poets find that a “deeper submission to uncertainty leads to a more inclusive activity—to cultivation of plasticity rather than culture of terror.”64 Even if there are moments where these poets seem certain that what they are representing is divine inspiration (such as in Redcrosse’s transformation into divine violence at in the penultimate canto of Book I of the Faerie

63 My methodology draws on Adorno’s claim that “Technik ist nicht Abundanz der Mittel sondern das aufgespeicherte Vermögen, dem sich anzuwenden, was objektiv die Sache von sich aus verlangt” [“technique [in art] is not an abundance of means but rather the accumulated capacity to be suited to what the object itself demands”] (Ästhetische Theorie [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970], 320; Aesthetic Theory, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 216). We are still in need of a fuller articulation of how Adorno’s theories of technique might invigorate interdisciplinary readings of poetry that examine how poems crystalize social antagonism in their very form, but for a start see Brent Hayes Edwards, “Specters of Interdisciplinarity,” PMLA 123.1 (2008), 188-194, esp. 190-191.

Queene), they return time and again to worry over whether their poems can ever know such a thing with certainty. They maintain a fidelity to the potentially unknowable that fanaticism introduces; their fidelity begins precisely where reason stops.
Dieu comme objet d’amour est la lumière et l’âme humaine est l’œil, un organe de vision.
Elle est l’organe du ‘je.’ Mais quand le ‘je’ s’est efface, sans que l’organe ait perdu sa vertu, l’âme devient organe de la vision de Dieu.

- Simone Weil

Ioy may you haue, and euerlasting fame,
Of late most hard atchieu’ment by you donne,
For which enrolled is your glorious name
In heavenly Regesters aboue the Sunne,
Where you a Saint with Saints your seat haue wonne:
But wretched we, where ye haue left your marke,
Must now anew begin, like race to ronne;
God guide thee, Guyon, well to end thy warke,
And to the wished hauen bring thy weary barke.

Palmer, him answered the Redcrosse knight,
His be the prase, that this atchiu’ment wrought,
Who made my hand the organ of his might;
More then goodwill to me attribute nought:
For all I did, I did but as I ought. (2.1.32-33)

Readers tend not to be especially surprised at the start of Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* when the Palmer, a figure of exemplary sobriety and temperance, recasts Redcrosse’s action at the end of Book 1 as “hard atchieu’ment by you donne.” Something extreme happens in that “atchieu’ment,” as any reader of Book I knows; in becoming, finally, the allegory of holiness that he was destined to be, Redcrosse at the close of 1.11 seemed to become indistinguishable from the sword he wielded to do God’s will:

And in his first encounter, gaping wyde,

He thought attonce him to haue swallowed quight,

And rusht vpon him wth outradious pryde;

Who himrencountring fierce, as hauke in flight,

Perforce rebutted backe. The weapon bright

Taking aduantage of his open iaw,

Ran through his mouth with so importune might,

That deepe emperst his darksome hollow maw,

And back retyred, his life blood forth with all did draw. (1.11.53)

This is a difficult moment in the poem. Even though it is the culmination of Redcrosse’s journey—this is the moment where he embodies holy violence absolutely—it is also, and precisely for that reason, where any semblance of Redcrosse as character (an actor

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capable of change within the fictional world of the poem) falls away. Critics have not
hesitated to note the pronominal ambiguity in this stanza, the way the “he” and “his” of
Redcrosse, the sword, and the dragon become virtually indistinguishable; nor have critics
neglected to argue over whether the personification of Redcrosse’s “weapon” implies that
it is the weapon itself or Redcrosse the character that kills the dragon.  
Redcrosse, at the
direct or at the end of 1.11, seems to become his weapon, which is itself an embodiment of divine
violence. Put another way: Redcrosse drops away as character so that that “importune
might” of God can become manifest in the world of the allegory.

The Palmer’s glossing of this scene as a product of Redcrosse’s own doing offers
a reading that speaks to the romance’s need to have a character who acts, who wins his
own “euerlasting fame.” Envisioning Redcrosse’s fatal violence against the dragon as
rooted in and carried out by his own will, the Palmer sees the consequence as the
enrolling of Redcrosse’s “glorious name” in the registers of the heavens—Redcrosse, in
this telling, became truly Redcrosse, “a Saint with Saints,” and recognized eternally in all
the heavens, at the moment when he defeated the dragon with his might and thus
“wonne” salvation. The Palmer at once tempts us away from the allegorization of
Redcrosse and neutralizes the special status of the violence in 1.11. Redcrosse does not
hesitate to correct the Palmer. It is not his own “atchieu’ment,” Redcrosse insists, not his
own name that stands in for the agent who undertook the deed. Redcrosse did not
willfully undertake the killing of the dragon; it was God who, through him, manifested

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66 See Hamilton’s note, which connects the sword’s agency with Redcrosse’s later
description of himself as “the organ of his might,” and disagreements over how to read
pronomial ambiguity in John K. Hale, “Spenser’s Faerie Queene, 1.11.52 and 53,”
Explicator 53. 1 (1994): 6-7 and John McDermott, “Spenser’s Faerie Queen, 1.11.52 and
divine violence. Redcrosse, or at least the hand that, by way of synecdoche, stands in for Redcrosse here, became “the organ of his might,” with emphasis on the double meaning of “organ” as relating to both a sounding of the word of God and an instrument.

Critics typically take Redcrosse’s correction as a didactic lesson about the theology of grace. The Palmer, generally one of the poem’s savviest allegorical readers, at this moment attributes an abundance of character to Redcrosse by describing his salvation as self-won. In this staged interpretation of an earlier act, Redcrosse, by contrast, insists on the priority of grace, on the fact that only God’s grace could make possible his destruction of the dragon.

Yet even more is at stake in this interpretative divergence than doctrinal precision, and critics have not accounted for the thematic and structural importance of this retroactive interpretation of Redcrosse’s killing. Redcrosse does more than just insist on the priority of grace, more than remind the Palmer that willed temperance is not sufficient for salvation or for the violent execution of God’s will against an enemy. Redcrosse goes so far as to demand that he himself was not even an agent of the violence that killed the dragon; he was purely the organ of God’s might. But Redcrosse does not just communicate that his will aligned with the might of God. He goes further, suggesting that the achievement of holiness that enabled the killing of the dragon had nothing to do with

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his will whatsoever. “His be the prase, that this atchieu’ment wrought” at once counters the Palmer’s earlier attribution of agency to Redcrosse (“most hard atchieu’ment by you donne” is replaced by a sense that God is the one that wrought this) and renders the actual agency of the “achieu’ment” ambiguous by the use of “wrought.” “Wrought” remains equivocal in its attribution of agency; it fails to disclose who actually “wrought” the “achieu’ment.” It refers to the fact that the “achieu’ment,” whoever the agent of it may be, wrought the praise of the agent that made Redcrosse’s hand into the organ of his might—or, alternatively, that his praise wrought the achievement. (Achievement can be both subject and object here.) Redcrosse’s demand that we only attribute “goodwill” to him is hard to square with the sense that he did not undertake the “achieu’ment” as an agent but only as an organ of divine might. What does “goodwill”—a good will—look like when one is not in control of one’s own will, or when one is released from one’s will entirely to become an instrument of divine violence?

Redcrosse’s slightly pat but cryptic “For all I did, I did but as I ought” does little to resolve this interpretative dilemma; it raises more questions about the agency driving this doing than it answers. Not entirely unlike Iago’s, “what you know, you know,” “all I did, I did” obscures, through repetitiveness, the particulars of how, why, and who that would be necessary to understand the logic of causation that drove Redcrosse’s “hand” to do God’s will (“who made my hand”). A quick search of “organ” in the OED reveals how often in the Renaissance the hand was taken as the exemplary organ—take, for example, John Banister’s claim in The Historie of Man from 1578, that the hand is “the organ of organes, and an organ before all other organs.”69 How “ought” one to do

69 John Banister, The Historie of Man (London: I. Daye, 1578), f. 108.
something when one has been released of one’s characterological will and transformed into “an organ of his might”? Moreover, “ought” in the stanza is conjoined with its rhyme words “wrought” and “nought,” making the question of duty and will all the more difficult to surmise. “Ought”—duty—is contained within both “wrought” (which refers ambiguously to the agency of this “atchieu’ment”) and “nought” (which referred to the lack of agency that could be attributed to Redcrosse). Redcrosse’s achievement—the fulfillment of the “ought” for which he was “wrought”—renders his will “nought.” Once Redcrosse has been “wrought” to perform the deed he “ought” to do, once his hand has become the organ of his might, Redcrosse will becomes indistinguishable from God’s will; his violence becomes indistinguishable from God’s violence. Redcrosse becomes “nought”—as a willful character—at the moment he is “wrought” into the achieved allegory of holiness. That is to say, God’s achievement at this moment is in part the achievement of allegory in all its crystalline violence. Yet this is more than just an exemplary instance of what the critic Gordon Teskey calls allegorical capture, where the poem’s disordered and wandering meaning gets coercively related into an orderly didactic personification. At this moment we witness the totality of divine capture, where allegory is evacuated in the face of the divine: Redcrosse becomes holiness insofar as he becomes purely an instrument of divine violence. The Palmer does his part to help efface how deeply this violence, in its annihilation of Redcrosse’s character to produce the desired achievement, scores the text.

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One way to read the Palmer’s ambivalence is that his disciplined temperance—what Harry Berger has called Book II’s ambivalent focus on “heroic autonomy”\(^\text{71}\)—cannot at some intuitive level compass both the “prevenient violence”\(^\text{72}\) of divine capture—the violence required to turn Redcrosse’s will to nought and to make his hand the organ of God’s might. The Palmer’s attribution of agency to Redcrosse attempts to contain the violence that emerges as Redcrosse is transformed into the organ or God’s might, into (as it is represented in 1.11.53) a sword of the spirit. The Palmer may also, if we emphasize the sharpness in “but wretched we,” be objecting to the fact that Redcrosse was chosen to become the organ of divine might and he and Guyon must “now anew begin” in the wake of that inimitable “atchiu’ment.”

This chapter builds on an attempt to understand the philosophical, political, and affective reasons that the Palmer attributes agency to Redcrosse in this moment. I argue that we can learn much about the fear of religious fanatics through an examination of the anxieties the Palmer discloses. Andrew Escobedo has claimed that one of Spenser’s greatest innovations in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* is the way he successfully binds together Redcrosse’s apocalyptic and national identities in the final canto, suturing sacred time within earthly time and circumscribing a moment of apocalyptic divine violence

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\(^{72}\) Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 18: “It is necessary, therefore, that allegory somehow capture the substantiality of beings and raise it to the conceptual plane. But for this to occur any integrity those beings may have must be negated. The negation of the integrity of the other, of the living, is the first moment of allegory’s exertion of its power to seize and to tear. It is the moment of what may be called prevenient violence, a power that comes invisibly beforehand to soften the ground, converting all things before it into substance.”
within a genealogy of English nationhood. Yet before Redcrosse as an organ of divine might is safely converted to Saint George and the allegorical lessons of holiness are inscribed in the nation’s prehistory, Redcrosse as a singular instrument of divine might is reducible to neither the allegorical consolidation of holiness or the epic ambitions of retrospective nation-founding. He is an absolute manifestation of God’s violence. This is violence that neither allegory nor epic can entirely contain. As I showed in chapter one, fanaticism threatens the emerging modern state with kinds of violence irreducible to its attempt to monopolize violence in general. In addition to posing a violence that outstrips any institution of legal or political institution, fanaticism also offers an epistemological and ethical problem, one that the Palmer’s re-description of Redcrosse’s “atchiu’ment” begins to imply. After all, the poem never entirely authorizes Redcrosse’s interpretation of his own divine inspiration or the Palmer’s attempt to demystify his violence as heroism. The reader is left to choose without definitive evidence. How can spectators—the Palmer, we the readers—know whether inspiration has truly taken place, whether Redcrosse has truly become an instrument of divine violence, or whether such a violent act is really a “most hard atchieu’ment by you donne”? And how can we tell the difference, then, between a supposedly holy knight like Redcrosse, who properly embodies divine violence, and a fanatic?

74 This is in part a generic recasting of Walter Benjamin’s famous if difficult distinction between göttliche Gewalt (law-destroying violence) and mythische Gewalt (law-founding and law-preserving violence) in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” in Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften, vol. II.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 179-204.
Criticism on allegory, and in particular on Spenserian allegory, has long been concerned with the structural ways in which allegory depends on the negation or destruction of individual will. Witness Walter Benjamin’s evocation of the baroque allegorical subject’s inability “to emanate any meaning or significance on its own” and Angus Fletcher’s psychoanalytically oriented take on allegory as a medium in which daemonic possession and compulsion act as a structural norm. More recent theorists of allegory have not neglected this generic dependence on or lack of interest in freedom of the will: Gordon Teskey has theorized allegory’s literalization of Neoplatonic and mystical tropes of raptio (which we will have occasion to return to in the following chapter on Donne); Andrew Escobedo has examined the paradoxical affirmation of “volitional mastery” in scenes of daemonic possession and inspired motivation in The Faerie Queene; and Jeff Dolven has written of the anarchic flight of panic as a structural feature of the poem that often forces us to witness the “annihilation” or “sudden devolution” of character and self. This chapter is indebted to this line of criticism, yet asks a different sort of question about how this annihilation of character might at once secure and threaten the processes by which allegory makes meaning.

Allegory is an analytic procedure. It explains the motives of characters and illustrates why they act in certain ways by referring them back to their allegorization. Allegory, in other words, assumes at a structural level that the fictional world it upholds


is like a puzzle, in which each singularity can be represented as one interacting part
within a whole. And because of that principle, allegory seeks to reveal the deep essence
or structure of causality within the poem. But fanaticism is—or at least, and this is its
primary force, purports to be—absolute: the fanatic is not an emblem of an individual
impulse in God's creation, but a pure, unrefracted expression of God's will.\footnote{See Jeff Dolven on the analytic nature of allegory (Scenes of Instruction, 166: “And
that is how the teaching machine of allegory works too: analysis, separating things out, is
its opening move”).}

The fanatic in its purest expression is not an interconnected part within a whole; the fanatic is the
whole, an absolute manifestation of divine force. What place is there in the poem then for
the absolute expression of God’s will? I am not speaking here of the revelation of divine
providence, which often, at least retrospectively, seems to structure the narrative of the
poem. I mean instead: what space is there for a character to be annihilated altogether and
for God’s will to act through him absolutely? For the synthetic intensity of fanaticism to
interrupt the procedures of allegory even at the moment that allegorization is ultimately
achieved? In other words, what does it mean to us that Redcrosse becomes his allegorical
essence, holiness or holy violence, by losing himself, by having his character—and
therefore his will—annihilated and replaced with the might of God? And how, most
importantly, is allegory to help spectators and readers tell the difference between a truly
inspired and divinely authorized knight and a so-called fanatic, an insurrectionary or
zealot who disingenuously claims that he enacts God’s will? How do readers—both in
and out of the poem—interpret what appears as glimpses of fanaticism in all its purity?
What are the promises or dangers that become apparent if the will of God might find
direct expression in the poem, however briefly?
Let me summarize my claims about allegory and fanaticism so far. What was often called fanaticism in the period—the claim that one’s violence against state or self was inspired by God, that one’s will was overtaken by divine might—is nearly indistinguishable from the workings of allegory in Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of God’s might. And yet fanaticism threatens allegory in at least two ways. First, fanaticism demands that we look back to an origin—to trace the source of divine inspiration or misdirected passion—and yet continually forces us to discover that we are barred from that origin: it introduces an epistemological aporia. Second, fanaticism unsettles the poem’s didactic project. In his famous Letter to Walter Raleigh, Spenser claims that the purpose of allegory is to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle disposition.” Yet what Redcrosse comes to allegorize is the eventful unfashioning of “virtuous and gentle disposition,” an annihilation of self and the virtuous disposition the poem has been haphazardly building across Book 1. This unfashioning has another consequence: the interruption of the reader’s mimetic identification with that virtuous ideal. Redcrosse becomes a vessel of that divine force and to become as much means that the narrative must risk losing both the personification of his sacred agency and the national didactic lesson he is meant to teach.

This chapter poses a sort of limit case for the proposition that allegorical figures are most themselves when emptied of their characteristic traits and wills (compare Angus Fletcher’s comment that the “perfect allegorical agent is a robot, a Talus”78), since what

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78 Fletcher, Allegory 53. A more poststructural way to put this would be that an allegory is most itself when it renounces “the nostalgia and the desire to coincide” with its origin in character and that allegory establishes its own language “in the void of this temporal difference.” (Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in Blindness and Insight [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], 207). Fanaticism thus offers another
was often called fanaticism in the period—the claim that one’s violence against state or self was inspired by God, that one’s will was overtaken by divine might—is nearly indistinguishable from the workings of allegory in Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of God’s might. The Palmer’s attribution of agency to Redcrosse, though meant to honor him, exposes anxieties and epistemological terror regarding the nature of divine inspiration and religious violence that fanaticism crystallizes. Thinking about allegory and fanaticism together—perhaps allegory in its purest form as a kind of fanaticism and therefore no longer really allegory—allows us to ask how both illuminate problems of will, action, and inspiration, but also forces us to consider what it means to interpret divine violence as readers of a text and of a world.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. First, I read moments from the *Faerie Queene* in detail to develop an analysis of what seemingly positively-valued inspired action looks like in Spenser’s poem. I return to Redcrosse as the organ of God’s might and contextualize this figure within Renaissance depictions of the sword of the spirit; examine Guyon’s “rigor pitiless” at the end of Book 2 as a more equivocal act of (divinely?) inspired violence; and demonstrate that Britomart (in her initial melancholia at the start of Book III) both illuminates and obscures the poem’s fascination with the acting out of a will that is not one’s own as integral to its own process of allegory-making. In the second section, I turn to two figures that the poem separates out and disenchant as its own internal fanatics—Orgoglio and the Egalitarian Giant—figures meant, at least in part, to parody divine inspiration and Anabaptist discourses of mystical kind of threat to allegory’s meaningfulness, since fanaticism at once demands that we look back to an origin—to trace the source of divine inspiration or misdirected passion—and yet continually discovers that we find ourselves barred from that origin.
communism. The readings of these moments in the poem will help illuminate the anxieties regarding fanaticism that in part explain the Palmer’s attempt to attribute agency to Redcrosse, as discussed above. I argue that the poem’s allegory, even though its procedures mirror the structure of divine inspiration’s annihilation of will, attempts but productively fails to give readers the tools to distinguish definitively between true divine inspiration and fanaticism at specific moments. Briefly, I explore at the end the similarities between this productive epistemological failure to let us know the difference between inspiration and fanaticism within *The Faerie Queene* and the process of *poiesis* itself—as *enthusiasmos*—as it is represented in *The Shepherd’s Calendar’s* October Eclogue.

I. Becoming and Doing God’s Will

A. S. P. Woodhouse claimed some time ago that there is something that makes the first book of *The Faerie Queene* irreducibly different from the books that come after: “Book I moves (as has been generally recognized) on the religious level, or (as I should prefer to describe it) with reference to the order of grace, and the remaining books (as has not been recognized) on the natural level only: that the Redcross Knight is indeed *microchristus*, but Guyon, and each of the other heroes of individual books, *microcosmus* alone.”79 Woodhouse’s interpretation of the division and possible synthesis of the levels of nature and grace in *The Faerie Queene* begins with the supposition that Redcrosse is singular within the poem. By the end of Book 1, Redcrosse becomes an allegory of

holiness, and thus his allegorization is a uniquely Christian one; the other Books, by contrast, offer allegories that are informed by Christian values but are largely adopted from Aristotelian or Renaissance humanist ethics. For Woodhouse, then, knights such as Guyon, Britomart, or Artegall are microcosms of classical virtues that Christianity has incorporated into its social and ethical program; Redcrosse alone is a microchristus, an embodiment of Christ and the holiness for which Christ alone stands.

Not all critics have assented to the singularity of the microchristus label that Woodhouse has bestowed only upon Redcrosse. It is not my concern here to show that the allegory of holiness operates on a uniquely religious plane that separates it from the other Books. But Woodhouse’s reference to Redcrosse as microchristus is useful here primarily because it points to something remarkable in the poem: that Redcrosse, more absolutely than any other character, becomes the will of God, comes to have his hand directed not just by God’s providence but actually has his hand transformed into the organ of Christ’s might. Thus my reading of Redcrosse extends Woodhouse’s, but rather than seeing Redcrosse as embodying Christ more truly than any other character, I suggest that Redcrosse’s momentary transformation into holiness registers the manifestation of divine violence within the text of the poem, and that this violence empties Redcrosse as willful character. Woodhouse thus allows us to specify a problem that Redcrosse introduces into Spenser’s own narrative of the poem as directed towards the end of “fashioning a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle disposition” (Letter to Raleigh). For what Redcrosse comes to allegorize is the spontaneous, eventful unfashioning of “virtuous and gentle disposition,” an annihilation of himself and the

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disposition he has been haphazardly building as knight and gentleman across Book 1. This undoing means, too, the interruption of the reader’s mimetic identification with that virtuous ideal, and the allegory’s realignment with the momentary habitation of divine will in Redcrosse. Redcrosse becomes a vessel of that divine force—a sword of the spirit—and to become as much means that the narrative must lose him as an agent.

The transformation of Redcrosse as the organ of God’s might draws on a Renaissance iconography of the sword of the spirit. Redcrosse’s weapon—the weapon that he becomes—goes unnamed in the poem; but whether sword, lance or some other weapon, the iconographic tradition of the sword of the spirit is still at hand. Drawing most canonically from Paul’s comments on Ephesians 6:17, “And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” and from the description of the white horseman of the apocalypse in Revelations 19:15, Spenser makes use of this iconography most explicitly in the Letter to Raleigh’s prehistory of the armor a Lady brings for Redcrosse, parenthetically glossed as “that is the armour of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul v. Ephes.” Spenser’s glossing is relatively humble, given the text to which he alludes. The spirit of the sword, the armor that comes with it, is more than just the “armour of a Christian man”—it is the word of God itself (per Ephesians), but can be recast to represent apocalyptic divine violence (per Revelations) as easily as it can stand in for Scripture. The sword-of-the-spirit iconography made a wide appearance during the Reformation. While Luther made selective use of biblical

81 “Et galeam salutis adsumite et gladium Spiritus quod est verbum Dei.”
82 “And out of his mouth went out a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the heathen: for he shall rule them with a rod of iron, for he it is that treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (“et de ore ipsius procedit gladius acutus ut in ipso percutiat gentes et ipse reget eos in virga ferrea et ipse calcat torcular vini furoris irae Dei omnipotentis”).
representations of such a sword to realign the image of the sword with a secular authority, other reformers, as David Norbrook has shown, took the sword as a favorite emblem, depicting the Bible “as a sword issuing out of Christ’s mouth, an image conveying the sharpness and radical immediacy of the divine message in its vernacular form.”⁸³ Spenser turns the sword of the spirit into a figure for the unmediated violence of the Word that Redcrosse becomes as an organ of God’s might. Conflating the sword of the spirit of Ephesians (God’s Word) with the sword of Revelations (apocalyptic violence), the poem at this moment makes Redcrosse, in his transformation into holiness, both as a figural and

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⁸³ Luther, “On Secular Authority.” David Norbrook, Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [revised]), 32. It is true that the sword of the spirit was often simply a metaphor for the Word of God or the Scriptures. Spenser is renovating this figuring by putting it in an allegory that concerns itself at once with the violence of divine holiness coming into the world and about true faith vanquishing evil. But the Sword of the spirit did sometimes slide semantically between a figure for the true meaning of the Word and a weapon to destroy an infidel enemy in the period. See, for exemplary slippages: Pico Della Mirandolla, Twelve rules, and weapons concerning the spirituall battel Together with a briefe exposition vpoun the sixteene Psalme: with two most worthie epistles, written in Latin by that most worthy and noble gentleman Iohn Picus Earle of Mirandula. And translated into English for the benefite of all good Christian soldierrs in the spirituall battaile (London, 1589), 9; William Perkins, An expositon of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles according to the tenour of the Scriptures, and the consent of orthodoxe Fathers of the Church (Cambridge, 1595), 182 and 237; Charles Gibbon, A watch-voorde for warre Not so new as necessary: published by reason of the disperced rumors amongst vs, and the suspected comming of the Spanyard against vs. Wherein we may learne how to prepare our selues to repell the enemie, and to behaue our selues all the tyme of that trouble. Compendious for the memorie, comfortable for the matter, profitable for the matter, profitable for the tyme (Cambridge, 1596), 18-19; George Abbot, The reasons vvhich Doctour Hill hath brought, for the vpholding of papistry, which is falselie termed the Catholike religion: vnmasked and shewed to be very weake, and ypnon examination most insufficient for that purpose (Oxford, 1604), 172-173; Francis Bacon, The tvvo bookees of Francis Bacon. Of the proficience and advancement of learning, diuine and humane To the King (London, 1605), 112; Thomas Adams, The blacke devil or the apostate Together with the wolfe worrying the lambes. And the spiritual navigator, bound for the Holy Land. In three sermons (London, 1615), 25.
literal organ of divine might—the manifestation of God’s word in the world and the executor of divine violence as his weapon (hence the double meaning of “organ” as relating to both a sounding of the word and an instrument).

Redcrosse as an allegory of holiness is in some sense unique, as Woodhouse argued. Perhaps nowhere else in the poem do we see so direct and immediate a manifestation of divine will within the body of the poem. The divine capture that transforms Redcrosse into holiness brings to an end the epistemological problems that suffuse Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*. All through that first book, the protagonists and the readers are perpetually struggling to figure out who or what something is. But with Redcrosse’s at the end of Book 1, that poem urges us to acknowledge with certainty that he is an organ of divine might (at least until the Palmer’s comments at the start of Book II make us question further). The epistemological quests that structure Book 1 seem to subside and are nowhere near as central as we move into Book 2. But the problem of fanaticism cannot be contained to Book 1. Where else to look for traces of this synthetic divine force, which at once achieves and annihilates allegory’s procedures?

Guyon is perhaps an obvious place to look, even if to do so is momentarily to set aside Woodhouse’s description of him as an allegory of primarily neo-Aristotelian virtue. No Spenserian figure has been associated as singularly with a moment of violence meant to serve the ends of both divinity and virtue than Guyon in the Bower of Bliss. Indeed, in an attempt to show that Guyon’s violence means to serve both a Christian God and a classical model of virtue, Harry Berger has described Acrasia in the Bower of Bliss as both “the enemy of Christian temperance” and “an enemy of God, competing with the Divine creation,” thus depicting Guyon’s violence as one that is oriented towards
preserving a virtue but also towards defeating a figure who threatens to undo divine creation.  

Guyon is necessarily different than Redcrosse; the end of the Proem to Book 2 announces that holiness or divine presence does not become manifest in and through Guyon, as it did in the case of Redcrosse, but rather Guyon is the one “In whom great rule of Temp’raunce goodly doth appeare.” And yet something not altogether divergent from the end of Book 1 takes place in Guyon’s decimation of the Bower of Bliss—without a reason that is explicitly described in the narrative, Guyon moves with a newfound force to destroy what has been deemed as a threat to God’s order:

But all those pleasantaunt bowres and Pallace braue,

Guyon broke downe, with rigor pittilesse;

Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue

Them from the tempest of his wrathfulness,

But that their blisse he turn’d to balefulnesse:

Their grouse he feld, their gardins did deface,

Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinetts suppressse,

Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,

And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place (2.12.83).

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Guyon here becomes an entirely destructive force. Yet we cannot know what that force is. This moment returns us to the epistemological worries that had been so present. Whereas Redcrosse’s violence resolved the question of who he really was—for that moment, again, he was the absolute organ of divine might—Guyon’s violence only raises more question about who or what he is (or better: who or what is working through him), especially at this late moment in the canto. The “rigor pittilesse” with which Guyon wreaks havoc gestures ahead to the mechanical force we typically attribute to Talus (“Immoveable, resistslesse,” etc); having replaced the complexities of identification and desire with absolute rigor, Guyon has evacuated all pity that might urge him to mellow his might against the Bower of Bliss. Indeed, Guyon seems to have become an inhuman force: “the tempest of his wrathfulness” may be more than metaphor, returning to a rhetoric of apocalyptic encounter and violence with which we have learned primarily to associated with Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*. (Elsewhere Spenser makes use of the image of a tempest to describe Irish rebels who, “like a sudden tempest,” rage to efface all the colonizing work that the English undertake on their island.\(^\text{85}\)) The simultaneous disappearance of pronouns in the last lines of the stanza and jarring proliferation of caesuras cast Guyon’s action as an impersonal force, a violence that he executes—or that is executed through him—which “races,” “suppresses,” and “defaces” anything that had made the Bower a place of temptation.

Critics have often noted the paradox in the narrative logic of the Bower’s destruction: that the achievement of temperance is an act not of restraint or self-discipline but of sublimely rigorous violence, violence as impersonal force, purified of all human

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affection, ignorant of all the lessons about self-tempering that Book 2 was ostensibly meant to offer Guyon.\(^{86}\) In his violence Guyon achieves a more culturally approved version of the self-loss with which Acrasia tempts him: he becomes a tempest; a natural force, whether driven by divine prompting or not, overwhelms his individual capacity for affective relation to the external world he encounters.\(^{87}\) As with Redcrosse, this moment of violence functions as the achievement of allegorization—Temperance in some sense is achieved, its mission for the Book completed—even as it threatens the analytic clarity that allegory strives to offer—the intensity of the violence here, the fact that its expression seems entirely to overwhelm the reason and will of Guyon as character, makes the achievement of Temperance look like the product of (at best) overcompensation or (at worst) something resembling fanaticism, the arrival of a force that calls for a violence in which self is annihilated—however momentarily—so that a “rigor pittilesse,” a “tempest of wrathfulness” can appear in the world of the poem. The fact that the poem itself displays a marked ambivalence towards the arrival of such purifying violence, seeing it as the achievement of Temperance’s mission but also as an excess that threatens the didacticism of the allegorical narrative, is shown not only from the fact that critics have

\(^{86}\) Perhaps the most influential reading continues to be Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; Greenblatt reads Guyon’s violence in Freudian terms, as a violent suppression of the extremes of erotic desire that threaten to undo the processes of civilization. Guyon is for Greenblatt exemplary of a particular kind of self-fashioning: paradoxically, a temperate self shaped by an extreme act of violence.

\(^{87}\) For a recent account of Book 2 as “critique of an ideology of temperance” that can’t help but linger with the liquid pleasures of sexuality and aesthetics, see Joseph Campana, “Boy Toys and Liquid Joys: Pleasure and Power in the Bower of Bliss,” *Modern Philology* 106:3 (2009), 465-496; reprinted in Campana, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (New York: Fordham, 2012). Campana is often convincing in suggesting that Book 2 contains a critique of temperance, but it is hard to imagine Campana’s larger claim that Spenser in Book 2 seeks unambivalently “to release the masculine body from the constraining rhetoric of heroic, virtuous labor” (473).
struggled to know whether readers are meant to praise Guyon’s destruction, but also because the violence seems to oppose the poetry of the work itself, both the work that allegory does and the imaginative pleasures with which the Bower has often been associated. 88 We don’t have a commentary here from the Palmer. In contrast to his exchange with Redcrosse, the Palmer does not take this opportunity to attribute this tempest to Guyon’s temperate will or disciplined agency. But the anxiety remains, and the reader can’t help but feel it.

Critics have long debated whether the narrator himself or the structure of the poem as a whole seem to endorse Guyon’s violence in the Bower, 89 but one way to explain the inability to resolve this debate is to suggest that the poem takes this opportunity purposefully to obscure—and therefore perhaps more profoundly to raise—a question surrounding the source of Guyon’s violence: is he overtaken by the passion of fury, perhaps the Fury who earlier in the Book can provoke “the tempest of his passion” (2.4.11, my emphasis), 90 or is he an instrument of divine vengeance? How can figures within and readers outside of the text tell the difference? 91 Whichever reading we incline

88 See Campana, ibid. On the poem’s studied ambivalence to art as both in bono et in malo, see Kaske, Spenser’s Biblical Poetics, 67-70.
89 Greenblatt’s is the most canonical interpretation that insists on the poem’s embrace of this violence for the political, colonial, and subject-fashioning program to which he sees The Faerie Queene being overwhelmingly committed. For an influential reading that breaks with Greenblatt to assert that the poem offers “a critique of the overt politics of Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss,” see Susanne Lindgren Wofford, The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 272ff.
90 Wofford (ibid.) explores trenchantly how the return of the image of fury here works as a “metaleptic transumption of the Virgilian figure of Furor Impius” and locates in that figurative nexus the main force of the poem’s critique of the Elizabethan policies that Greenblatt takes this scene of violence to support.
91 Note Wofford’s claim that “[m]oments in which the figurative scheme of the poem must be made to have effect within the action become fictionally moments of compulsion
towards, we’re left with an uncomfortable fact that reveals in this particular scene of violence an irreducible threat to the logic of the allegorical process itself. If Guyon’s fury is a breach in his own struggle to be or become the knight of Temperance—and it would be difficult to sustain that the violence at the end of Book 2 is itself an unequivocally temperate response directed by reason, however flexible our allegorical hermeneutic has become by this point in the poem—then we have to read the end of Book 2 as a metacommentary of the allegory of Temperance’s inability to posit itself. Guyon’s violence appears as an antithetical supplement required to create a space and a world in which Temperance becomes possible. By contrast, if wrath in the Bower is the manifestation of divine retribution against Acrasia, then we must worry about whether divine violence interrupts the narrative of Temperance and ruins the consolidation of Guyon’s self-discipline in the evacuation of his will and control. One might attribute the poem’s refusal to supply a narrative of the source of Guyon’s “rigor pitilesse” to what John Guillory has called Spenser’s “critique of origins,”92 the effacement of the origination of things and especially divine things. Yet the critique of origins in this scene gains a more specific political and epistemological urgency when the focus shifts to fanaticism and the poem’s anxiety towards the emergence of God’s will and divine violence within the poem that we saw earlier celebrated with Redcrosse.

So far we have examined two figures whose violence at the end of both of the first books of The Faerie Queene raises questions about the epistemology of fanaticism and the poem’s own anxieties about its existence. But we have not had a chance to examine

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what the divine inspiration that would seal the potential righteousness of Redcrosse’s or Guyon’s violence looks like, for neither moment in the poem offers a glimpse into the process by which one is (or is not) inspired by God. Redcrosse becomes the organ of God’s might after undergoing a Christic narrative of death and resurrection, but we do not see the moment of inspiration itself; even the well of life and the “pretious Balme” (1.11.50) do not explain or even foreshadow it. Much the same could be said for Guyon, whose “tempest of wrathfulness” comes on at once to sacrifice and save Temperance without cause or explanation. The violence is a deeply ambiguous trace of the divine violence Redcrosse introduced in Book 1, and it threatens to overrun the consolidation of an Aristotelian temperance towards which Book 2 has been moving.

Perhaps the most revealing image of divine inspiration that we get is Britomart’s fit of love, at the start rather than the proper culmination of her allegorical journey through the poem:

Most sacred fyre, that burnest mightily
   In living brests, ykindled first above,
   Emongst th’eternall spheres and lamping sky,
   And thence pourd into men, which men call Love;
   Not that same, which doth base affections move
   In brutish mindes, and filthy lust inflame,
   But that sweete fit, that doth true beautie love,
   And choseth vertue for his dearest Dame,
Whence spring all noble deedes and never dying fame:
Well did Antiquity a God thee deeme,
   That over mortall mindes hast so great might,
   To order them, as best to thee doth seeme,
   And all their actions to direct aright;
   The fatall purpose of divine foresight,
   Thou doest effect in destined descents,
   Through deepe impression of thy secret might,
   And stirredst up th’Heroes high intents,
Which the late world admyres for wondrous moniments.

But thy dredd dartes in none doe triumph more,
   Ne braver proofe in any, of thy powre
   Shew’dst thou, then in this royall Maid of yore,
   Making her seeke an unknowne Paramoure,
   From the worlds end, through many a bitter stowre:
   From whose two loynes thou afterwardes did rayse
   Most famous fruities of matrimoniall bowre,
   Which through the earth have spredd their livingprayse,
That fame in tromp of gold eternally displayes. (3.3.1-3)
At the start of this canto, we receive a Neoplatonic explanation of the love for Artegall that Britomart first experiences as an “engraffed payne” (3.2.17). Though Britomart’s love would seem to be irreconcilable with the annihilation of the will that we saw with Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of God’s might, the overlaps in the structure of inspiration prove illuminating. Love, after all, seems here to imply not an erotic, romantic or marital attachment but rather catachrestically names (“which men call Love”) a force that is “ykindled” in the heavens and “thence poured into men” to become a fire, not unlike Donne’s zeal; that fire leads individuals to experience a “sweet fit,” ecstasy or madness that is the true origin of all the good done in the world, but that also empties the self in order to “fit” it to a divine will. This force or fire that men call love is itself a God—or at least Spenser’s narrator judges it proper that antiquity named love a God (“Well did Antiquity a God thee deeme”). And the experience of love itself appears to be holding something divine—that fire kindled in the heavens—noted in one’s chest. That manifestation of divine fire is more than metaphor—it has a palpable “might”; it “orders” men’s minds; it “directs” all their actions; it “effects” “fatall purpose of divine foresight.” In other words, it is a fire that burns the will and the “base affections” out of someone and, as consequence of that “sweet fit,” determines, directs, their actions in the world. In love, divine force acts through the lover, and though the world construes those actions as “wonderous moniments” that speak to the greatness of the actor (as the Palmer did Redcrosse’s “hard atchiu’ment”), it is divine love itself that is acting through these

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agents. The narrator makes clear that Britomart is exemplary of this process of inspiration; “Making her seeke an unknown Paramoure,” love moves through Britomart and forces her (“making”) to act in particular ways.

This Love is, of course, different than the holiness that Redcrosse becomes and allegorizes in the penultimate canto of Book 1; it draws more on classical mythology and Neoplatonic understandings of love than a Christian understanding of grace, surely. The third stanza here shows that love acts through Britomart in such a way as to direct her towards marriage and reproduction; love may make her into an instrument of divine will or foresight, but it is not the instantiation of divine violence in the poem. (Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of divine might may be prerequisite for his marriage to Una and thus for his nationalist mission, but, as I discussed earlier, the divine violence that makes Redcrosse holiness is absolute and cannot be entirely reduced to either the national or didactic narratives that the poem seeks to tell at the end of Book 1.) Still, the structural similarity is useful, for in each case we see a character in *The Faerie Queene* losing themselves, having their will burned out and replaced with divine direction, so that something can be performed in the world of the poem. Merlin clarifies that Britomart becomes an instrument for divine will in a manner akin to Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ:

It was not, Britomart, thy wandring eye,

Glauncing unware in charmed looking glas,

But the streight course of hevenly destiny,

Led with eternall providence, that has
Guyded thy glaunce, to bring *his will* to pas” (3.3.24, my emphasis).

Merlin’s prophecy suggests that neither chance nor Britomart’s will played a role in initiating her mission and her love; it was divine providence that “guyded” Britomart’s glance into the mirror that would shape her future, and it was “his will”—God’s will—that was thereby brought to pass.95

Despite the structural similarity, the differences require us to ask why the poem gives us access to the divine origins of Britomart’s inspiration but obscures or at least refuses to present those origins in the cases of Redcrosse and Guyon. Another way of putting this: why are we as readers assured that Britomart’s inspiration is divine and yet unable to see the evidence that would show the moment of Redcrosse’s or Guyon’s inspiration? (Redcrosse tells us after the fact that he has become an organ of God’s might, but with Britomart we actually witness, through the narrator’s mediation of course, the process by which love’s fire and darts “triumph” in her heart and direct her, which lends it a particular, if by no means absolute, narrative transparency.)

Addressing these questions allows us to clarify the poem’s ambivalence towards that divine violence that characterizes fanaticism. For the love that usurps and directs Britomart’s will, though it leaves her in potentially interminable grief until Merlin himself completes his prophecy of Britomart’s future with a “suddein fit, and halfe

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95 Merlin’s prophecy goes on to complicate this vision of providential guidance as the manifestation of God’s will in the world; the alexandrine of the following stanzas recasts the term “guide,” suggesting that men’s good endeavors “guide” heavenly causes: “the fates are firme, / And may not shrinck, though all the world do shake: / Yet ought mens good endeavors them confirme, And guide the heavenly causes to their constant terme” (3.3.25). For a reading of this tension, see Harry Berger, *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 119-120.
extatic stoure” (3.3.50), also ensures that she will pursue a path that will lead her to produce with Artegaill a progeny that will save the Britons, to secure a state. Divine inspiration is linked to genealogy and to allegory; Love’s directing Britomart and bringing divine will into the world through her will lead to her progeny, which will in turn lead to the reign of “a royal Virgin” (3.3.49), an allusion to Elizabeth as the real-world embodiment of chastity for which Britomart represents as allegorical exemplar. Wofford has argued that when

female characters [in The Faerie Queene] are overtaken by a force greater than themselves, then, the event is represented as a rape and is uniformly glossed as external aggression to be resisted. When male characters are overtaken by a force more powerful than themselves, the event is sometimes figured as allegorical compulsion […] but at other times is treated as rapture, the visionary experience that makes one ‘rapt’, that ‘ravishes’ one, and takes one out of oneself, metaphorically speaking, to a higher plane of vision.96

I am arguing the opposite here, not as a generalization but as a specific reading of the triangulation I have drawn between Redcrosse, Guyon, and Britomart. For Wofford, the poem feels much more ambivalent about the female characters being overtaken by external forces, and it inevitably tropes them as rape, which is surely true. But in this case, the poem seems less ambivalent about Britomart being overtaken by love than it does about the violence that overtakes Redcrosse and Guyon.

96 Wofford 366.
The violence that moves through Redcrosse as he becomes an organ of divine might, and that may or may not direct Guyon’s “tempest of wrathfulness,” has a more ambivalent position within the narrative of The Faerie Queene. It can perhaps not be controlled and oriented towards the ends of political and allegorical consolidation in the ways that Britomart’s can, even if it seems in some sense more desirable (Redcrosse does become holiness, after all); Britomart’s loss of will as Love inhabits her is tied to reproduction and nation more directly than with Redcrosse and Guyon. (The fact that Love’s overtaking of Britomart raises fewer worries for the poem may also have to do with the fact, as Wofford also shows, that Britomart perpetually strives for her liberty and in many ways remains the poem’s richest, most self-possessed character despite the fact that her journey is directed by the fire that love pours into her heart.) Redcrosse’s becoming an instrument of divine violence does lead to the achievement of the allegory of holiness, but it also turns Redcrosse into something beyond a tool for didactic allegory that represents a single virtue. It turns him into the violent will of God itself in all its annihilating force and therefore, as I previously discussed, potentially threatens the architecture of the allegory itself; in that moment he isn’t just an allegory of holiness—a part within a whole—but absolute divine violence itself.

The potential that Redcrosse’s transformation into holy violence releases into the poem is picked up on in the ambivalence that readers and critics necessarily take towards Guyon’s violence at the end of Book 2. In the progression from Redcrosse to Guyon to Britomart we witness a movement from what the poem unambivalently depicts as true inspiration and divine capture to the extremely equivocal case of Guyon (in which we

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97 Wofford 328.
cannot know what the tempest is that overtakes him, a divine force or an intemperate passion), finally to Britomart, who is possessed but whose possession we can only perceive insofar as the iconography shifts from biblical to classical. The first three books do not allow us to solve the problem of fanaticism. At the moment we get to see the process of inspiration take place, at the moment we witness a god being pored into a character’s soul and directing her will, the god gets relegated to a safer (because knowable) divinity from classical mythology. The epistemological difficulty that fanaticism offers here is deeper than the usual epistemological problems that critics have ably charted over the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*—deeper because the inability to know is constitutive of the problem. Fanaticism at once demands that we look back to the source of inspiration to determine whether it is genuine or false but this backward glance only reveals a deeper veiling. The origin of divine inspiration is always, it seems, a missed and inaccessible one in the poem. Spenser’s allegory does not seem to be able to penetrate its secret without shifting to a classical register. In the next section of this chapter, we’ll see how that anxiety towards divine violence is worked out in different way as the poem attempts to purge itself of figures that seem falsely to claim divine inspiration or threaten to transform the world based on access to a divine truth.

II. Spenser’s Fanatics and the Problem of False Inspiration

So far I have discussed almost exclusively the epistemological and structural problems to which *The Faerie Queene* turns (or suggestively turns away from) when it confronts fanaticism, the possibility of divine will becoming manifest without mediation in a
character that has become an organ of divine might. I have suggested that the force of fanaticism—its claim to an absolute manifestation of divine violence—threatens to undo the analytic parsing by which allegory seeks to think and to represent. I have also claimed, with the telling exception of Britomart, that when divine will overtakes a character in order to have that character become an instrument for divine violence, *The Faerie Queene* does not let us see that divine inspiration, that conversion of character to organ of divine might or tempest of wrathfulness, in part because of the anxiety that such unmediated violence introduces into the poem. In this section of the chapter, I wish to concretize the anxiety to which I have referred only generally so far. Part of the purpose and procedure of allegory, I argue, is that it offers the poem the possibility of clarifying the difference between true and false inspiration; an aspect of what *The Faerie Queene*’s allegory aims to teach, in other words, is how to learn to read and distinguish faith from feigning, grace from grandiosity, inspiration from idolatry. It aims to show us what true faith looks like, to teach us how to discriminate between an agent of divine disposal and one of deceit. Duessa is perhaps the exemplary—maybe even the hyperbolic—instance of this teaching when the poem, stripping her of disguise, exposes and makes her into a visible, obvious allegory of falsehood: “Such is the face of falsehood” (1.8.49). So, too, we will see how Orgoglio becomes an unequivocal figure not just for pride but also for false claims to inspiration even as his allegorization leaves unresolved the questions of how to see and know the difference between true and false inspiration. The threat that fanaticism poses to *The Faerie Queene* is in part a threat to the didactic clarity by which such distinctions can be known in the poem; we will analyze how the poem works to
keep these distinctions intact—to produce them through its analytic parsing—even as we start to see such distinctions threaten to dissolve.

Orgoglio enters the poem as a projection of the pride or presumption to which Redcrosse falls victim. Having abandoned Una, Redcrosse finds himself “[d]isarmed all of yron-coted Plate” (1.7.2) and, famously, “pourd out in losnesse on the grassy grownd” (1.7.7). As punishment or manifestation of his presumptuous looseness, which as many critics have noted stands in for the abandonment of his religion itself, Orgoglio is born into the poem and that birth is registered by an earthquake “[t]hat all the earth for terror seemd to shake” (1.7.7), a sort of parody of the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation that will so artfully come to determine the final cantos of Book 1. The apocalyptic imagery makes clear that Orgoglio is more than just an allegorical manifestation of the transgressions that have led to the “failure” of Redcrosse’s “manly forces” (1.7.6); he is also a figuration of bad inspiration, an instance in which a claim to being inspired by a god is entirely presumptuous and can be known as such. We see this bad inspiration in Orgoglio’s genealogy:

The greatest Earth his uncouth mother was,

And blustering Æolus his boasted syre,

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99 On Orgoglio as mythical embodiment of an earthquake, one drawn from Revelations and likely sent by God to warn of the necessity of repentance, see S. K. Henniger, Jr., “The Orgoglio Episode in *The Faerie Queene,*” *ELH* 26.2 (1959), 171-187.
Who with his breath, which through the world doth pas,
    Her hollow womb did secretly inspyre,
And fild her hidden caves with stormie yre,
    That she conceiv’d; and trebling the dew time,
In which the wombes of wemen doe expyre,
    Brought forth this monstrous masse of earthly slyme,
Puft up with emptie wynd, and fild with sinfull cryme. (1.7.9)

Perhaps a more volatile relation of the “breathing wynd” that helped to seduce Redcrosse into giving himself over to Duessa, the inspiration we see here is clearly a horrible—and horribly literalized—one. The narrator claims that Earth is Orgoglio’s mother, but then emphasizes that Orgoglio himself claims that the god of the winds, “blustring Æolus,” is his father, and this claim, whether true or not, seems itself to be part of Orgoglio’s presumptuousness (hence Æolus is “his boasted sire”). Like a parody of the Holy Spirit inspiring a believer who is able to conceive faith only through grace, Orgoglio is conceived through a corrupt inspiration, when Æolus’s breath—which seems literally to be the breath of the wind “which through the world doth pas”—“secretly inspyre[s]” the Earth’s “hollow womb.” “Secretly inspire,” not least because the overwrought condensation of assonance and consonance throughout the line feels here like the most basely material and blatantly sexual process, far from divine grace entering the soul of the believer.  

100 Corrupt inspiration at conception bears an antithetical consequence to the one we saw with Redcrosse. While Redcrosse, as an organ of divine might, was

100 Hobbes echoes this parody of inspiration almost exactly to deride the claims of fanatics to have the spirit present within them; see chapter 4.
kenotically emptied of his own will so that God’s could inspire and act through him,

Orgoglio, by contrast, is “[p]uft up with emptie wynd, and fild with sinfull cryme.”

Orgoglio, that is, is made perpetually prideful by the fact of his inspired conception, but what inspires him is entirely “emptie,” and rather than offering grace merely guarantees the continued sinfulness of all mortals made of earth.

Orgoglio as an allegory of corrupt inspiration—of the claim to inspiration as itself presumptuous and boastful in a way that precludes the humility of true inspiration\textsuperscript{101}—is clear enough. But in order further to solidify the structure of the allegory, the poem proceeds to bring Arthur into the narrative in order to confirm that grace itself inspires Arthur to kill this puffed-up exemplar of bad inspiration:

Ay me, how many perils doe enfold
The righteous man, to make him daily fall,
Were not that heavenly grace doth him uphold,
And stedfast truth acquite him out of all:
Her love is firme, her care continuall,
So oft as he thorough his own foolish pride,
Or weaknes is to sinfull bands made thrall:
Els should this Redcrosse knight in bands have dyde,
For whose deliverance she this Prince doth thether guyd. (1.8.1)

\textsuperscript{101} On presumption in this episode as a failure to follow Christ’s instructions to humble oneself (and thus as Orgoglio as a psychomachic manifestation of Redcrosse’s own rebellion against God), see Vern Torgzon, “Spenser’s Orgoglio and Despaire,” \textit{Texas Studies in Literature and Language} 3.1. (1961), 125-127.
Arthur, standing in as an agent of “heavenly grace,” is the one who is able to release Redcrosse from imprisonment by Orgoglio, from the “sinfull” bands that have made him “thrall” to his own “foolish pride.” True inspiration is able to undo the “daily falls” to which sin and presumption subject men and “uphold” them in righteousness. The antithesis in the stanza’s first lines between “enfold” and “uphold” nicely recasts the relationship between false and true inspiration as a spatial relation: to fall into presumption is to be enfolded by perils, to fold in on oneself and away from God; to experience grace, by contrast, is to be upheld before God and thereby to experience firm love and “care continuall.” This is the fate of Redcrosse himself. When enthralled by false inspiration—that boasted divine breath—he is enfolded within Orgoglio’s dungeon. When Arthur’s grace comes up against Orgoglio’s false inspiration in their battle, the poem works to secure an emblem by which we might know that Orgoglio’s was always a presumptuous claim to divine origin. After Arthur defeats Orgoglio, we witness the latter’s (literal) ex-piration:

But soone as breath out of his breast did pas,
That huge great body, which the Gyaunt bore,
Was vanisht quite, and of that monstrous mas
Was nothing left, but like an emptie blader was. (1.8.24)

Though Orgoglio’s creation was inspired by the breath of Æolus moving into the womb of Earth, his death confirms the emptiness of that inspiration, the corrupt finitude of the
breath that moved through him. His body cannot exist without that corrupt breath; it vanishes at the moment Orgoglio dies. The poem thus neatly distinguishes between Arthur’s grace, inspired by the true God, and Orgoglio’s false, “boasted” claim to inspiration. Things seem settled for the most part. The lesson, at least, seems clear; presumptuous claims to divine inspiration—the sorts of claim that figures from Luther to Hobbes will associate with one of the defining traits of religious fanaticism—is basically just hot air, not the real Holy Spirit made present in a human being but rather corrupt, material breath that is ultimately empty and will dissipate when the forces truly inspired by divine grace defeat them.

But the allegory seems to falter here for a moment, and the alexandrine makes us do a double take: “Was nothing left, but like an emptie blader was.” The line’s beginning and ending “was” makes it seem like Orgoglio is a thing of the past, but there is reason to pause here. The first part of the line, before the caesura, asserts that the “monstrous mas” of Orgoglio’s body has turned to “nothing,” confirmation that he “was vanisht quite,” but we’re still left with an image to hold in our minds, a reminder of what false, presumptuous inspiration looks like: “but like an emptie blader was.” Does this imply that Orgoglio was an empty bladder when alive (not even filled up with the empty breath of Æolus that he boasted as proof of his inspired conception) and now has altogether vanished? Or does something yet remain of Orgoglio, a mere membrane empty of the

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102 Orgoglio’s generation bears oblique reference to the scene in Book 10 of *The Odyssey*, where Æolus gives Odysseus a bag of winds, tied tightly so that the West Wind alone would remain to blow the ships in the proper direction—until, famously, the crew unleashes the winds and a storm destroys their ship. In this primal scene of Aeolian inspiration, there are some winds that need to be contained and some that are allowed to act freely within the world. How we can tell the difference between these windy spirits is a question that *The Faerie Queene* raises acutely with Orgoglio.
breath that moved through him when alive? The stanza’s conjunctives reinforce the sense that this sentence’s description is far from free of equivocation: “But…and…but.” The body disappears from the poem but also seems to remain as a tangible presence, or at least the outline of a presence—a bladder. The poem wishes to get rid of this allegory of false inspiration altogether—to turn it to nothing—but still works to produce an emblem by which we can know what false inspiration looks like.

This equivocation over what exactly happens to Orgoglio’s body reveals one of the problems that Spenser’s allegory encounters when it attempts to teach its characters and its readers how to distinguish between true and false inspiration. Yes, we have no trouble telling the difference between Arthur and Orgoglio, between grace and a boast of divine inspiration—and just in case there were any confusion, the poem quickly leads us, with Arthur, into Orgoglio’s castle, where we find the blood of innocents, guiltless babes, and true martyrs to the Christian religion. After the fact, we know, Orgoglio couldn’t ever have been confused with a true instrument of divine will and the “filth” of his castle confirms the sacrilege of his particular claim to inspiration. But there are limits to what the poem can let us see. Divine inspiration, whether from the Holy Spirit or Æolus, is not, strictly speaking, visible. Neither readers nor characters in the poem can see it with any certainty any more than they can see the breath that has emptied itself of the bladder of Orgoglio’s vanishing body. The invisibility of inspiration gives another meaning to the phrase “secretly inspyre” used to describe Æolus’s procreation with Earth that gives birth to Orgoglio. Inspiration is necessarily secret, cannot be seen, and thus allegory comes up against the limits of what it can show. Unlike with Duessa’s falsehood, say, we cannot view an image of Orgoglio’s false claim to inspiration. It vanishes, or turns into mere
empty bladder, the moment it is defeated—chora in reverse, an empty space in which becoming devolves into a void. Though the empty bladder is itself surely a symbol for the false inspiration and pride that Orgoglio is meant to be, it threatens to undo the distinction that the allegory has meant to secure. The episode leaves us with no solid way to know with certainty how to distinguish true inspiration (grace) from false inspiration (presumption) except by letting us watch Arthur’s horror at the filth of Orgoglio’s castle. But when one doesn’t have access to a castle, when those who claim divine inspiration don’t dissolve to nothing, how are you to know whether they are false fanatics or true divine instruments? Fanatic, after all, comes from fanum, temple, designating those who stay closest within sacred space. But one cannot necessarily peer into the temple to gain the power to know a fanatic, especially when remaining on the outside, convinced that one is not, after all, a fanatic too.

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Book 5 of The Faerie Queene, in many ways the product of Spenser’s panic in the face of the epistemological aporia he has repeatedly encountered in fanaticism, suggests that one way to recognize a false fanatic is to make a judgment based on what sort of political and social organization the supposedly prophetic wielder of divine violence espouses.\(^{103}\) Such is the lesson of the so-called Egalitarian Giant of 5.2, though the lesson threatens to fall apart before we even meet the Giant. Having meted out punishment to Polente and Munera in the first half of the canto and “raced” their castle not just from the geography

\(^{103}\) On Spenser and panic, see Dolven, “Panic’s Castle.”
but from the memory of the nation (5.2.28), Artega11 and Talus “measur[e] their mickle weary way” from some undisclosed time and distance until they come upon the sea, where “They saw before them, far as they could vew, / Full many people gathered in a crew; / Whose great assembly they did much admire” (5.2.29). Artega11 and Talus, having never seen such a “resort” in this place, “admire” the gathering before they know what its purpose is; they are in a state of wonder at its greatness, if only because it fills their entire field of vision. But as soon as they near the scene and view the Giant upon his rock with his balances, the momentary suspension of the structure of judgment that came with admiration disappears and the narrator diagnoses the danger that the Giant represents:

For why, he sayd they all unequall were,

And had encroached uppon others share,

Like as the sea (which plaine he shewed there)

Had wore the earth, so did the fire the aire,

So all the rest did others parts empaire.

And so were realms and nations run awry.

All which he undertook for to repaire,

In sort as they were formed aunciently;

And all things would reduce unto equality.

Therefore the vulgar did about him flocke,

And cluster thicke unto his leasings vaine,
Like foolish flies about an hony crocke,
In hope by him great benefite to gaine,
And uncontrolled freedome to obtaine.
All which when Artegall did see, and heare,
How he mis-led the simple peoples traine,
In sdeignfull wize he drew unto him neare,
And thus unto him spake, without regard or feare. (5.2.32-33)

Drawing on a discourse still very much associated in 1590s England with the Anabaptist revolt in Germany of the 1520s [discussed in chapter one], this moment in the poem describes the Egalitarian Giant’s project as one of equalization and reparation. The Giant critiques a world in which the inequality that human political life (“realms and nations”) has produced is so deeply entrenched that it has come to seem like natural forces: “Like as the sea … / Had worn the earth.” This comparison and eventual conflation of human and elemental inequality and “empairment” will come to be a central trope throughout the Giant and Artegall’s debate, but what is most significant for our purposes is that the Giant’s project is described as one meant to return the world to a state of prelapsarian grace—to a condition commensurate with that of the original divine creation (“as they were formed aunciently”). The alexandrine sums up the Giant’s work. It presupposes that the original divine creation formed a world in which “all things” were equal and that the Giant, through his and his collective’s leveling project, can repair or reduce (etymologically, from re-parare—to restore—or re-patria—to return to one’s

The next stanza works to undo this vision of revolution as prelapsarian return. It recasts the Giant’s vision of his mission as a return to divine creation’s origins as mere demagoguery meant to attract the “vulgar,” who seem like animals (“flocke,” “cluster thicke,” “foolish flies”) who have no investment in the Giant’s purported vision of the world but merely think they “benefite to gaine.” The narrator’s strategy, before we even get to Artegall’s confrontation with the Giant, is to show that both the Giant and his followers are interested only in personal gain; thus a claim to intimate knowledge of divine creation and a call to return to its “equality” is met with immediate dismissal. The simile (“Like foolish flies about an hony crocke”) suggests an even greater worry, though, raising the possibility not just that the crowd follows the Giant for purposes of self-aggrandizement but that there is some kind of instinctual attraction that the people feel towards the Giant’s ideas; his words, whether they body forth the will of God or not, are sweet and sticky, drawing people in like flies looking for honeyed sustenance. Fanatical communities form in the words that congeal them all together. The Giant’s words and ideas seem to be contagious—the people, like flies, grow stuck to the honey of his speech. (Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, honey is not always considered such a

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105 Other critics have emphasized that the Giant’s claims, and the assembly that gathers around him, most immediately evoke the Gaelic assemblies that English colonial power sought to scatter throughout Spenser’s time in Ireland. (See Annabel Patterson, “The Egalitarian Giant: Representations of Justice in History/Literature,” Journal of British Studies 31.2 (1992), and Bradin Cormack, A Power to Do Justice: Jurisdiction, English Literature, and the Rise of Common Law [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007], 167). I do not disagree; I only suggest that the specter of Anabaptism—and Anabaptist claims for commonness rooted in divine creation rather than an idealized Ovidian or Ciceronian pre-civic natural order—are equally as relevant for the threat the Giant poses.
perilous sticky thing; in Exodus 33:3, for example, the Promised Land is described as one “flowing with milk and honey.”) In their “cluster thicke,” the people here create a new multiplicity, a momentary assemblage, a communal swarm. This is, after all, one of the great fears fanaticism provokes from Luther to Hobbes—that it causes people to be drawn in to ideas and word that make them not only disobedient but also illegible or unknowable to political and religious authority alike. As I showed in chapter 1, Luther’s original term for the fanaticism of the Anabaptists he denounced was Schwärmerei, which etymologically refers to an indistinguishable swarm of flies. But despite this dismissal, Artegall goes on to engage the Giant, and the poem requires us to ask, what else does the Giant threaten in addition to the emergence of think clusters of people determined to transform earthly life? How does Arthur try to disarm him? Why doesn’t it seem to work? Why does Talus lash out with such unprompted violence?

The politics of the equalizing multitude the Giant represents is related to the threat to allegory that fanaticism poses. The Giant threatens an entire hierarchical cosmological structure and the allegorical lessons of justice that are dependent on it, as Artegall describes:

“Such heavenly justice doth among them raine,
That every one doe know their certaine bound,
In which they doe these many yeares remaine,
And mongst them al no change hath yet beene found,
But if thou now shoulst weigh them new in pound,
We are not sure they would so long remaine:
All change is perilous, and all chance unsound.

Therefore leave off to weigh them all againe,
Till we may be assur’d they shall their course retaine.” (5.2.36)

From Artega’ll’s perspective, which parts ways significantly with that espoused by the narrator in the proem to Book 5, the reign of “heavenly justice” here consists of everything knowing its place, its “certaine bound” (implying both limitation but also bondage: the fixity of place and meaning); he claims that heavenly justice itself freezes people in their places and rids the world of the possibility of changes to their position (“no change hath yet beene found”). In other words, heavenly justice in Artega’ll’s vision takes the shape of an overwrought allegory, where “every one” has its place, “remaining” stationary in time and space and thus constant in its meaningfulness within that properly proportioned world. Artega’ll complains that the Giant’s weighing risks the structure heavenly justice maintains, where everything “remains” in its proper place. The processes of weighing and measuring themselves, even more than the acts of leveling and re-distribution that would presumably follow from it, are what particularly concern Artega’ll. Artega’ll’s conservatism extends beyond his critique of weighing and re-distribution. For him, “All change is perilous, and all chance unsound”; heavenly justice seems to call for absolute stasis, a perpetual “retaining” of the course “certaine bound” of things as they are and are meant to be.

Thus the Giant threatens the order of social distribution of proper places, a cosmology that necessitates such the hierarchy that ensures those places, and the allegorical structure by which heavenly justice can be read into structural features of
political and environmental organization. The Giant, however, is not convinced by Artegał’s cosmology or his ideal of heavenly justice and responds with a re-energized call for equalization:

“Therefore I will throw downe these mountains hie,
And make them levell with the lowly plaine:
These towring rocks, which reach unto the skie,
I will thrust downe into the deepest maine,
And as they were, them equalize againe.
Tyrants that make men subject to their law,
I will suppresse, that they no more may raine;
And Lordings curbe, that commons over-aw;
And all the wealth of rich men to the poore will draw.” (5.2.38)

“Equalize againe”: with this description of the task at hand, the Giant threatens to upend Artegał’s allegory of heavenly justice. The Giant does not just threaten to instigate—or to become the instrument of instigating—a revolution that will redistribute the wealth and property on which Artegał’s hierarchy of the world depends. The Giant also demands, though through what knowledge we do not know, that this revolution is a return to a state of original divine creation and, implicitly, that such a revolution is divinely authorized. Leveling mountains; thrusting down rocks; suppressing tyrants; curbing Lordings; drawing wealth from rich to poor—all these leveling actions, whether applied to landscape or political and social organization, seek to restore a state in which all is
common, that is, in which all share in common the earth and the responsibility for political and social organization and communal care.\textsuperscript{106}

Both Artegall’s cosmology and the Giant’s project of leveling and equalizing bear a relationship the divine. Or, at the very least, each claims that his project—one for and one against change—inhere within a divine plan, a plan into which they have some insight or of which they are a part. Whether this knowledge comes from study, from empirical observation (The Giant: “Seest not, how badly all things present bee” [5.2.37]), or from gift of divine insight matters little in this particular instance; what is at stake is what that knowledge of or claim to a guiding position within divine order is meant to endorse. For Artegall, his cosmology and the heavenly justice it represents are also connected to a theory of divine sovereignty:

“Whatever thing is done, by him is done,

Ne any may his mighty will withstand;

Ne any may his soveraine power shone,

Ne loose that he hath bound with stedfast band” (5.2.42).

The “certain bound” that Arsegall earlier used to describe everyone’s just position in the world is clarified explicitly, through repetition here, as a bond that cannot be undone: “Ne loose that he hath bound with stedfast band.” God’s sovereignty appears here as a series of setting bounds and bands, but this moment also looks backward to Redcrosse’s claim that he acted merely as an organ of divine might, that the action undertaken in 1.11 was

\textsuperscript{106} For Spenser’s ideological narrowing on the concept of the common to exclude claims just like these, see Cormack, \textit{A Power to Do Justice}, chapter 3.
actually done not by Redcrosse himself but by God. Thus Artegał: “Whatever thing is
done, by him is done, / Ne any may his mighty will withstand.” God’s will is
irresistible—no one can withstand it. But Artegał’s is a more general claim. Where
Redcrosse claimed that he momentarily became an instrument of divine violence,
Artegał makes a universal claim about every action, every doing (“Whatever thing is
done…”), being ultimately reducible to God’s agency. Though the debate turns quickly to
the marvelous attempt to weigh words, the Giant never contradicts Artegał’s claim that
God’s will is irresistible or that actions done are actually done by God rather than by the
will of the person who ostensibly undertakes them in the world. What the Giant disagrees
with is that a claim for God as the ultimate agent of actions in the world should
necessarily imply the hierarchies that Artegał assumes they do. For the Giant, we might
say, the “mighty will” of God, which no one can withstand, might just as easily justify
the leveling of the world, a project to equalize it (“again’) back into a state like that
which existed when God first created the world. Artegał’s erasure of will yields a world
in which nothing can change and hierarchy must survive.107 The Giant does not speak of
will but evokes the possibility that he too has abnegated his will in order to become an
instrument of divine command, returning, reducing, and equalizing the earth to the
original state of shared plenitude.

Artegał more or less wins the argument with the Egalitarian Giant, though plenty
of critics have shown that the poem does much to discredit the idea that Artegał’s vision
of justice can be raised comfortably above the Giant’s or that Artegał appears as a very

107 Cormack sees as Artegał redefining “an ethical issue of distribution as one of judicial
and statutory interpretation” (Cormack 169), which is persuasive; I’d only add that that
redefinition takes place to uphold not just a legal order but an entire cosmology integral
to the poem’s allegorical project.
flexible thinker here. But winning the argument here is beside the point. What Artegaull’s encounter with the Giant introduces into The Faerie Queene is the possibility—one that we have already glimpsed in our discussion of Luther and Müntzer in chapter 1—that there can be two visions of God and divine order that claim to see God as the author of all actions. But while one sees the presence of divine will in every action as necessitating a world in which heavenly justice ensures the conditions in which both allegory and social hierarchy can exist, the other envisions knowledge of an original divine equality as justification for a leveling that returns the world to a equitable state like the one that God created. This latter argument was typically associated with fanaticism throughout the Reformation; fanatics like the Giant make the claim that God’s will can be the primary agent of action (whether through universal predestination or exceptional moments of divine inspiration) and that God’s will could align with the transformation of the world, a revolution in its social and political organization. These claims cannot really be argued out; they meet in the form that Jean Francois Lyotard has described as a

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108 Several critics have convincingly shown that the representation and rhetoric of the Giant upsets the allegory’s ostensible dismissal of him; both Stephen Greenblatt and Annabel Patterson have shown how peculiar it is that the Giant should have scales of justice, just like those with which Artegaull was shown to have trained in the book’s first canto, and that the Giant’s discourse of justice’s downfall echoes the narrator’s in the proem’s description of a “world runne quite out of square,” though while Greenblatt sees Spenser identifying with Talus’s violent removal of the Giant from the poem, Patterson insists that the “Egalitarian Giant destabilizes our definition of Justice” and that “the Giant opens up a larger conceptual frame for what Justice might include, one that represents popular rather than Aristotelian concepts of redistribution and fairness” (Stephen Greenblatt, “Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion,” Representations 1 (1983), 21 and Annabel Patterson, “The Egalitarian Giant: Representations of Justice in History/Literature.” See also Judith Anderson on the static, imposing rhythm of Artegaull’s language in this scene: “the ritualized rhythms of Artegaull’s paraphrase do not develop dialogue so much as they testify to the importation of meaning—literally, to its portability and imposition” (Judith Anderson, Words that Matter: Linguistic Perception in Renaissance England [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], 175).
differend, a conflict “that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments.”¹⁰⁹ Both parties claim but cannot present the recourse to a divine judgment that could adjudicate the claims about what effect knowledge of God should have in the world. Their discourses about God are entirely heterogeneous. There is no way to settle their dispute. Neither readers of the poem nor witnesses to this scene, including the crowd soon to be killed by Talus, can know which vision of the world God has authorized, and how they should act in order to live in accordance to divine “band.”

Talus realizes the problem this differend introduces both to the narrative and to allegorical design itself—it is precisely why, without a word from Artega110104, he approaches the Giant and “shouldered him from off the higher ground, / And down the rock him throwing, in the sea him dround” (5.2.49). Though the narrator in this moment shows some ambivalence towards Talus’s violence (note, in this passage, the comparison of the ruining of the Giant’s body to a “piteous” ship), and even some resistance to the allegorical tableau that such violence is meant to create,¹¹⁰ the demands of allegory—and of Artega’s vision of heavenly justice—require the expulsion of the Egalitarian Giant’s threat. The only leveling allowed to the Giant is that his “high aspiring” is met with a correspondingly “huge ruine”: “So was the high aspiring with huge ruine humbled” (5.2.50). Allegory is used as a weapon against the Giant—the weighing of words seemingly outstrips the Giant’s materialism—and the poem must violently discard the Giant in order for the allegory of justice to move forward. Fanaticism introduces a series

¹¹⁰ See Jeff Dolven (Scenes of Instruction, 214) on how the description of Talus “approaching nigh unto him cheeke by cheeke” seems to interrupt the allegory of justice with an ordinary intimacy that the poem seems to have no need for but cannot help but find delight in.
of theological, epistemological, and political problems that threaten the correlation between allegorical stability and justice’s order. The only response that the poem can show is an ambivalent unleashing of Talus’s mechanical violence, a violence so severe that the poem cannot help but worry about it. The epic simile that describes the violence (“Like as a ship, whom cruell tempest drives” [5.2.50]) obliquely compares Talus to a “cruel tempest,” alluding back to the ambiguous fanaticism of “the tempest of his wrathfulness” we witnessed overtake Guyon. Thus, the poem hints, fanaticism may threaten contagion not just to the swarming ‘rabble’ who are drawn to its leveling claims in honeyed words; fanaticism threatens to infect the machinery of justice, too. The phrase “lewdly minded” that emerges in Talus’s momentary appraisal in this passage describes the Giant, but Spenser’s syntax (“But when so lewdly mined Talus found”) leads us to apply “lewdly minded” to Talus as well, suggesting that the instrument of justice may have caught his fanaticical vulgarity. The poem makes us worry about what exactly leads Talus to act like this tempest and try to execute everyone. It forces us to worry, too, about whether his actions in fact secure heavenly justice and allegorical hierarchy, since the Giant’s multitude ultimate evades Talus’s punishment: the narrator and Talus lose track of them; we learn, in the least didactic alexandrine of the book, that they “hid themselues in holes and bushes from his vew” (5.2.53); like a “swarme of flyes” or Schwärmer, the Giant’s fanatical multitude flies away: “But here and there before his presence flew” (5.2.53). Though the poem implies that such dispersal is defeat, the fact that these fanatics have hid themselves from view—neither Talus nor the narrator seem to be able to track them—suggests just how irrepressible they are as a swarming multitude, how they resist incorporation into allegory and withdraw from the poem’s efforts to control
and contain them, to render them legible. As Peter Fenves has suggestively described of Schwärmerei, a discourse on which Spenser is surely drawing in this swarming scene:

The members of a swarm are not only impossible to distinguish from one another but cannot, for this reason, even be called members of the swarm: instead of belonging to a stable collective according to which they would be recognized and named, each one is a temporary participant in an act of swarming or Schwärmerei. Whereas the term enthusiasm refers without ambiguity, although not without irony, to something more than humankind, Schwärmerei points toward something more and less than humankind—less than human because animals, not human beings, aggregate into swarms and more than human because the only animals whose pluralities turn into swarms are those that, like the gods, are able to take leave of the earth. [...] Swarmers associate with each other because they desire something more than terrestrial society. 111

The Giant’s fanatics fly away and hide, reduced by the poem to animals, flies, but potentially carrying on the divine inspiration that the Giant imparted to them. Talus has “overthrown” their current assemblage, but they have, for now, escaped the territorial bounds of justice and allegory alike. Though the Giant himself is hugely ruined, his multitude has hidden itself away, resisted justice’s lesson about not aspiring to anything above the given order of terrestrial society (the topography of which, as the Giant shows, is inextricable from political hierarchy). Their personification as legible and unruly rabble

fails; they simply disappear from the narrative. “Here and there”—which is to say, potentially everywhere and nowhere—they hide to regroup for yet another act of momentary swarming.

When confronted with the figure of the fanatic, a purported agent of divine violence, *The Faerie Queene* tends to use allegory as an analytic strategy or tool for distinguishing between true inspiration and a false claim to divine prompting. The poem looks to separate true instances in which characters become agents of God’s will (e.g.: Redcrosse’s transformation into an organ of divine might) from false claims to inspiration (e.g.: Orgoglio) or claims to knowledge of the divine that threaten both the political order and the procedures of allegory itself (e.g.: the Egalitarian Giant). But *The Faerie Queene* must still include these fanatical figures, if only to diagnose and incorporate them into the lessons the allegory can offer. The poem must coax a structure of meaning from the threat of fanaticism. As with the example of Malengin later in Book 5, who stands in for the threat of Irish fanatics and must be lured out of the “dreadfull depth” of his unfathomable underground hiding place (“how deepe no man can tell”[5.9.6]), the fanatic must be lured out of his supposedly internal divine inspiration and shown for what he is: a false prophet, a dangerous demagogue, a guileful seducer of a gullible people. Such revelation is meant to produce lessons so that characters within the poem, and readers themselves, can discriminate between false fanatics and true organs of divine might.
Yet the problems that fanaticism raises remain: sometimes the swarming fanatics hide, as in the example of the Egalitarian Giant, and resist incorporation into the lesson, the allegory. *The Faerie Queene’s* extraordinary representational resources either refuse or do not have the capacity to offer us a sure way to know how to recognize true divine inspiration: the poem makes us linger, repeatedly, in the epistemological crisis, in the productive failures of its own didactic project. Spenser’s experimentation with allegory as a genre and a set of poetic techniques is an attempt to do justice to the complexity of the problems fanaticism raises, though we see Spenser give up this complexity, ultimately, for the sake of a “justice” whose definition he never really questioned, and one that the Giant and his multitude, anyway, would not recognize as such. Moreover, I showed with Redcrosse that the moment when the divine will overtakes the will of a character entirely—such that the Redcrosse becomes indistinguishable from the sword that acts out God’s will—is at once the achievement of the allegory of holiness and the shattering of allegory’s capacity to analyze, to parse, and to distinguish the various virtues and vices. There is good reason for the Palmer to worry about the allegory’s capacity to contain and make use of the extraordinary violence that emerges when Redcrosse becomes the organ of divine might; with the Giant and his comrades, we see divine violence, and justice’s fraught attempt to police it, can have difficult political consequences. The singularity that defines the transformation of Redcrosse into an organ of divine might, it turns out, can spread to a multitude. Inspiration—even a supposedly false claim to it—is transmittable; it threatens to move from one body to another, to cluster them thickly together, and to create a whole new “commons,” to use a favorite term of the Giant. Yet the poem has
It is for these reasons that I have focused on Spenserian allegory in this chapter—the irresistible possession that is the sign of allegorization allows *The Faerie Queene* to reveal not just the content but also the formal structure of the phenomenon of fanaticism, even as the poem works to secure, through allegory, a way to ensure that we can demystify fanatics and distinguish them from those true organs of divine might. In the coming chapters, I will turn to other forms—lyric, sermon, political-philosophical treatise, and tragedy in particular—that will allow me to deepen the inquiry into the relationship between form and fanaticism. But I end by taking the opportunity to note that there are moments in Spenser’s oeuvre where poetic making itself seems to evoke something like the threat of fanaticism.

In the “Argument” that precedes the October Eclogue in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, we read a description of poetry that resonates pointedly with our discussion so far of the relationship between possession and fanaticism: “or rather no arte, but a divine gift and heauenly instinct not to bee gotten by laboure and learning, but adorned with both: and poured into the witte by a certaine *enthusiasmos*, and celestiall inspiration.” Admittedly, the *enthusiasmos* on which the October Eclogue focuses is distinct from the fanaticism I have traced insofar as fanaticism moves—or claims to move—from the annihilation of human will to the manifestation of divine violence towards which *enthusiasmos* does not tend. But the likeness is worth dwelling on, for here Spenser describes poetry not as a labor, technique, or “arte” by which, as in allegory, analytic distinctions are creatively bodied forth in personifications that shape the author’s and
readers’ values; instead poetry is itself a “diuine gift and “heauenly instinct” that comes absolutely spontaneously. This is an even more radical claim than Skelton gave voice to in “A Replication Against Certain Young Scholars Abjured of Late” 70 years earlier, in which “divine inspiration” “kindles” a poet in such a way that the “heat” of the Holy Ghost “our pen doth lead.”\textsuperscript{112} The divine gift we witness in October is also—for a moment at least—less ambivalent than Sidney’s invocation of furor poeticus in An Apology for Poetry.\textsuperscript{113} According to the October description, one cannot actively make poetry. God does not only lead the pen. Poetry is given to one (“poured into”) and moves through one in a “celestial” inspiration. Within the body of the Eclogue, Cuddie claims, “The vaunted verse a vacant head demaundes, / Ne wont with crabbed care the Muses dwell.” Divine inspiration places a demand on the poet, a demand that overtakes his will and vacates his head, allowing the divine gift—in this case the Muses—to dwell within him.

If allegory is largely a didactic genre, then poetic making as entusiasm, as the evacuation of the will of the poet, potentially threatens the lessons allegory’s analysis is meant to teach.\textsuperscript{114} The enthusiastic state of poetic utterance is similar to the kind of self-

\textsuperscript{112} See part 3 of Skelton’s “A Replication Against Certain Young Scholars Abjured of Late” (“There is a spiritual, / And a mystical / Effect energial [energia] / (As Greeks do it call), / Of such an industry / And such a pregnancy / Of heavenly inspiration / In laureat creation, / Of poet’s commendation, / That of divine miseration / God maketh his habitation / In poets which excells, / And sojourns with them and dwells. / By whose inflammatiion / Of spiritual instigation / And divine inspiration, / We are kindled in such fashion / With heat of the Holy Ghost, / Which is God of mightiness most, / That he our pen doth lead”).
\textsuperscript{114} Compare also Calidore’s attempt to seek and see the inspirational Graces in 6.10, where his very approach makes the Graces “vanish all away out of his sight” and leads Colin to break his bag-pipe. More than just a commentary on the antithetical nature of
annihilation we see in fanaticism, the obliteration of the will so that God might transform someone into an agent of his might. And (as has been put forth at least since Plato’s *Ion*, as I suggested in the introduction) poetry may confront its readers or auditors with a contagion or a magnetism that binds them stickily to the divine. Vaunted verse may create a thick cluster in which the divine inhabits not just the poet but the readers or auditors themselves, fashioning them into a communal assemblage, not entirely unlike the gathering we see emerge around the honeyed words of the Egalitarian Giant.¹¹⁵ This is a fear, as we will see in chapter 4, to which Hobbes gave voice. Inspiration—even a supposedly false claim to it—is transmittable; it threatens to move from one body to another, to cluster them together, and to create a whole new “commons,” to use the Giant’s term—if only for a moment, it threatens a kind of sharing of divine voice.¹¹⁶

I have argued that the process of allegorization itself resembles even as it seeks to contain the potential violence of God’s will becoming present in—and therefore evacuating—a character, but I’d like to suggest in conclusion that Spenser understands this structure—the evacuation of the will and its supplanting with divine will—as immanent to the process of “vaunted” verse making itself. How does one know whether a

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¹¹⁵ For a Bourdieusian analysis of *furor poeticus* as a trope (especially in Chapman and Spenser) that allows the dominated fraction of the dominant class to “redefine their own social value by changing the ideals of poetry,” see John Huntington, “Furious Insolence: The Social Meaning of Poetic Inspiration in the 1590s,” *Modern Philology* 94.3 (1997), 305-236.

¹¹⁶ For an extended commentary on the Plato’s *Ion*, inspiration and “divine sharing,” see Jean-Luc Nancy, “Sharing Voices,” in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 211-259. On the ionic chain created by the divine magnetic pulse that the rhapsode channels, see Plato’s *Ion* 533d-536d.
poet is truly inspired or not? The question is the same for the fanatic who appears to be or claims to be an organ of divine might in sacrifice or violence. If the poet is himself inspired, or even claims to be, then we have no standard by which to know ether the allegories the poet makes will allow us to distinguish with certainty between true inspiration and the “crabbed care” of a false performance. In the next chapter, I’ll have opportunity to pose another kind of formal question about the fanaticism of sacrifice and martyrdom: What does it mean for Donne to demand in a devotional sonnet, crafted by discipline and in willful self-abnegation, that God annihilate and inhabit him?
Chapter 3: Lyric Fanaticism:
Donne’s Annihilation

Die Wahrheit kann durch ein solches Heiligen der Endlichkeit, die bestehen bleibt, nicht hintergangen werden; denn die wahre Heiligung müßte dasselbe vernichten.

-Hegel, Glauben und Wissen

I. Nothing

In the last chapter I suggested that religious fanaticism at once resembles and threatens The Faerie Queene’s allegorical project. Both fanaticism and allegory imagine a self overtaken by an external force and reshaped by an almost pathological drive that gives it meaning and purpose. And yet fanaticism threatens the allegorical consolidation of meaning, the attempt to craft and order personifications within a stable cosmos, precisely insofar as it signals the entrance of God’s infinite and undifferentiated violent will into a finite world; divine violence may unsettle the structures of meaning and justice in which the poem so deeply, but not unambivalently, invests. At the end of the chapter, I suggested that fanaticism also has a worrying kinship with poetic enthusiasm, a state in which a poet is emptied so that divine song can move through him. We glimpsed the possibility that poetry’s attempts to teach lessons and offer knowledge may be less stable than desired, due to the very process of self-emptying and self-transformation that produces it.
Donne’s exploration of the relationship between fanaticism and poetry (in particular devotional lyric) are related but decidedly different. At the beginning of the introductory chapter, I offered a partial reading of Donne’s seventh Holy Sonnet, “I ame a little World,” that argued that the poem at once proposes and defers a conceit that renders zeal identical with self-annihilation—or, more exactly, self-conflagration:

And burne me O God with a fiery Zeale
Of thee,’ and thy house, which doth in eating heale.

In the sonnet’s couplet, “Zeal” and “heale” are laced together through a rhyme that renders the fiery immolation of the speaker inextricable from his salvation; what he becomes by way of zeal is inseparable from the divine fire that destroys him and remakes him as a vessel of zeal—zeal that is of God in two senses, both divine force that moves through and burns up the self and a zeal that orients the cannibalized and healed (“in eating heale”) zealot toward God and his “house.” The poems defers this fiery Zeal precisely because the achievement of it might spell the undoing of the poem itself, or at least the self that would need to be uneaten to write it.

This chapter thus poses two interrelated questions about Donne and the zealotry and violence with which fanaticism is entangled. First, what is the phenomenology of self-annihilation—that is, how and why does one become nothing in order to be transformed into an instrument of divine violence, and can one imitate exemplars of self-annihilation? And second, can poiesis be an instrument for the self’s annihilation and transformation into an organ of divine might, or does poetic labor perpetually interrupt
enthusiastic aspirations, deferring the attainment of extreme passivity that characterizes fanaticism?

“For his art did express / A quintessence even from nothingness, / From dull privations and lean emptiness.” This is how Donne, in his 1612 “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day,” describes the divine power of love. Love can squeeze out of nothingness, from the leanest emptiness, a quintessence. Nothingness is a threat to material beings--they might cease altogether to exist--but the threat is not absolute; some things, the speaker in this lyric asserts, can be evacuated to nothingness, but then reborn into a new life: “He ruined me, and I am re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death--things which are not” (ll. 17-18).

How is one “ruined” and then “re-begot”? The relationship between ruin and re-begetting that emerges across the caesura in line 17 is not a concern limited to the realm of love in Donne’s works; it is also a central concern of the Holy Sonnets, especially the relationship between “ravishment” and being made new in “Batter my heart.” This chapter claims that it is also relevant to Donne’s concrete concerns with martyrdom and the annihilation of the will. Martyrdom and self-annihilation are limit cases for the relationship between devotion and labor; they raise the possibility that certain kinds of devotion orient themselves towards forms of passivity that require a release from labor and an evacuation of the will. Donne’s meditations on annihilation and ravishment

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explore the conditions of possibility for martyrdom and fanaticism: whether one can labor actively to annihilate and then beget oneself again through the ruining or annihilation of the self that takes place in martyrdom; whether this labor, if sufficient, can be exemplary, an action that others can follow; or whether, alternatively one can only be passively annihilated and “re-begotten” in a singular process that could never be mimetically reenacted.

It may sound paradoxical to ask what annihilation (of self, of anything) creates, since it appears as a purely destructive force (etymologically bringing a being to nothing), and yet nothingness, as metaphysical category, natural scientific phenomenon, and state towards which our decaying bodies tend, fascinates Donne throughout his life. Nothingness and re-begetting are perhaps never so strongly on his mind as in what he calls the ultimate “image of his Humiliation,” the series of meditations and prayers that Donne wrote under the title Devotions upon Emergent Occasions. At the center of this text, Donne’s tenth Meditation turns from a moving request for a divine remedy for his illness to a cosmology that introduces his theory of annihilation. Turning from his dwindling body to the nothing we are made of and the nothing to which we return, Donne longs to be “re-begot”:

This is Natures nest of Boxes; The Heavens containe the Earth, the Earth, Cities, Cities, Men. And all these are Concentrique; the common center to them all, is decay, ruine; only that is Eccentrique, which we can imagine, but not demonstrate, That light, which is the very emanation of the light of God, in which the Saints shall dwell, with which the Saints shall be appareld, only that bends not
to this *Center*, to *Ruine*; that which was not made of *Nothing*, is not threatened with this annihilation. All other things are; even *Angels*, even our *soules*; they move upon the same *poles*, they bend to the same *Center*; and if they were not made immortall by *preservation*, their Nature could not keepe them from sinking to this *center, Annihilation*.

In the Renaissance, the term annihilation could refer to a process of emptying the soul that prepares for union with God, or to an obliteration of individual reason or will that could initiate action in the world. But it could also mean, as it does most immediately in this passage, material decay or ruin. Through this elaborate image of “Natures nest of Boxes,” Donne develops a theory of “concentrique” circles in which decay or ruin is the center of them all and nothingness is that out of which they are made. In Donne’s cosmology, the pull of the center draws all material entities back to it as they orbit; the center of nothing sucks decaying souls, angels, and bodies inwards and only God’s “eccentrique” light remains “not threatened with this annihilation.” It is the realm of that light towards which Donne’s desire to be re-begotten draws him.

The “Nothing” for Donne is, then, both that which being approaches as it undergoes the process of annihilation and that from which being originates. Everything but God is created within a circle from a nothing of which God is not made, and everything within that circle is driven to decay; it is *ex* and *a nihilo*, a dark echo of “The

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119 For a contemporary example of this usage, with which Donne was likely familiar, see Benet of Canfield, *The rule of perfection contayning a breif and perspicuous abridgement of all the whole spirituall life, reduced to this only point of the vwill of God* (Roan: Cardin Hamillion, 1609), esp. 13.
First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World’s”: “We seem ambitious, God's whole work t’undo; / Of nothing he made us, and we strive too, / To bring our selves to nothing back”(155-157).

The conjunction of annihilation and martyrdom frames the ultimate concern of this chapter: whether there is in Donne a specific kind of labor by which the self in devotion or martyrdom can be evacuated to nothing and then “re-beget” itself in a new form. Martyrdom is a subcategory of fanaticism for Donne, for it requires a passivity very similar to what I have outlined in Müntzer’s “reception of divine action” and Spenser’s “organs.” Defined by being ravished by God and turned into a passive instrument of his might, genuine martyrdom in Donne paradoxically presents one way of escaping the pull of material annihilation. In other words, the annihilation associated with fanaticism (emptying the soul so that God can enter) provides one route along which Donne images the possibility of immanently escaping another definition of annihilation (decay to nothingness). This essay then reconsiders Ramie Targoff’s claim that annihilation is “inconceivable” in Donne’s writing by asserting that we might envision annihilation itself as a strategy for Donne in certain instances. The question with which we must grapple is whether this strategic overcoming can be willed and exemplary action or whether it can only take the form of singular passivity.

Donne’s interest in decay and its overcoming are vital for an understanding of annihilation and the longing for union with God. Likewise, my focus on annihilation allows us to grasp the productive, antimimetic model of martyrdom that Donne elaborates

120 Ramie Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 122: “The impulse to cancel out one's own existence, like the desire to deny God’s existence, is finally inconceivable.”
with such subtlety and that critics still have not fully appreciated. I emphasize less instances in Donne where we see a longing to look past material decay to find an incorruptible and eternal core;\textsuperscript{121} rather, I focus on moments where we witness his poetic thought seek a path--a line of flight--from the concentric to the eccentric, a path that requires a paradoxical experience of annihilation in hopes of re-begetting the self in and with God. This is why annihilation and eccentric re-begetting can teach us much about martyrdom and the complex relationship between activity and passivity in a martyr’s dying for and into God.

To address these concerns, I first survey the semantic richness of the term “annihilation” in Donne prose. Then I turn to a reading of “Batter my heart” to explore whether we can associate annihilation and ravishment with labor and work or whether we must understand them as experiences of passivity. In the final section, I address the problem of martyrdom in Donne directly by demonstrating what true martyrdom looks like in Donne’s works, particularly in \textit{Biathanatos} and Pseudo-Martyr: a passive martyrdom that arrives as an event but cannot be recommended as exemplary political action to be willfully sought or imitated. I propose that Donne’s critique of contemporary Catholic martyrdom is more valuable when seen not primarily as an anti-Catholic Protestant polemic but rather as an attempt to theorize martyrdom, not reducible to confessional division, as a product of a singular self-annihilation that Donne glosses as an “appropinquation” to divine will.

\textsuperscript{121} For a version of this reading, see David A. Hedrich Hirsch, “Donne’s Atomies and Anatomies,” \textit{Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900}, 31, 1 (1991), esp. 75.
In addition to the centripetal decay annihilation exhibits in *Devotions*, annihilation can take several other meanings for Donne. It sometimes serves as a translation for the Greek *kenosis* or Latin *exinanatio* in his sermons and *Biathanatos*. *Kenosis* occurs only once in the Bible (Philippians 2:7), despite the fact that it became central to discussions of Christology throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. In that passage, *kenosis* names the process by which Christ empties himself of his divinity in order to become incarnate in human flesh. *Exinanitio* (from *ex-* *inanire*, to empty out) is the Vulgate translation of *kenosis* and Donne, one of the first to use the term “exinanition” in English according to the OED, is sensitive to annihilation’s relationship to Christ’s own *kenosis*.

Donne is certainly not the only one in the period to link the idea of annihilation as *kenotic* self-emptying with forms of nothingness both material and metaphysical. Pierre de Béreulle, a contemporary of Donne's, differentiates three forms of *nihil* in his writings on abnegation in *Opuscules de piété* (1644): the nothingness out of which we were created; the nothingness in which we are placed because of sin; and (with reference to Philippians 2:6-11) the nothingness that we have to accomplish, in imitation of Christ’s *kenosis*, in order to transform ourselves.\(^\text{122}\) Annihilation for Béreulle is the solution to the fact that human beings are constituted by the nothingness of sin. Only annihilation can lead to union with God. In his thinking on annihilation, Béreulle found influential texts by

\(^\text{122}\) Pierre de Béreulle, *Opuscules de piété* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1997), 226ff. See also Béreulle’s first published work, *Bref discours de l'abnégation intérieure* (1597), for the centrality of annihilation in his theology.
Benet of Canfield, an English mystic who converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism before joining Recusant communities in Belgium and Paris.\textsuperscript{123} Benet of Canfield proposes that the only remedy for the non-being or nothingness of the human creature (in comparison with God’s perfect being) is to annihilate oneself and abide firmly in one’s own nothingness: “and of our owne Nothing, as hath bein shewne, examin whether yow haue duely annihilated your self.”\textsuperscript{124}

Likewise Donne, who was probably familiar with at least Benet of Canfield’s text,\textsuperscript{125} conflates the first two forms of nothingness we find in Bérulle. Bodily decline in Donne is a movement towards nothingness that is bound up with the nothingness of sin, rather than a purely material decay. But a different form of annihilation offers itself as a possible solution. In \textit{Biathanatos}, for example, Donne writes, “Christ said this now, because His passion was begun, for all His conversations here were degrees of exinanition.”\textsuperscript{126} In this instance, Donne uses annihilation—exinanition—to designate an evacuation of the self that mimics Christ’s life and language (“conversations”) as sacrifice and passion, and which might be the model for escaping the nothingness of sin and bodily decay. In another context, using alchemical terminology for the purgation, breakdown, and ultimate dissolution of matter, Donne describes something like a new humility, a declination and then clearning out of the will, at the end of Meditation 20: “I am ground even to an attenuation, and must proceed to evacuation, all waies to

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Rule of perfection}, 166.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Biathanatos}, ed. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin (New York: Garland: 1982), 171; hereafter cited in the text parenthetically as \textit{Bia}. 
exinanition and annihilation” (*Dev* 106). As Anthony Raspa has made clear in notes to his edition of *Devotions*, this passage moves from attenuation (“the first step in purgation […] , a process for slipping a patient down of his excess humoral fats”) to evacuation (“an expulsion of material from the body”) to exinanition (“complete emptying of the patient’s venomous humors”) and then finally to annihilation (“evaporating out of existence”) (*Dev* 181). (Elsewhere exinanition and annihilation are synonymous.) Though Raspa has associated this vocabulary exclusively with purgation and alchemy, it seems likely, given Donne’s own use of “exinanition” as a translation of *kenosis*, that Donne is also describing a process of mystical annihilation, an annihilation that reduces the self to nothing in order to overcome the material decay and sinfulness that “attenuation” and “evacuation” can only forestall.

In addition to decay and exinanition, moreover, “annihilation” in Donne’s sermons can designate the mere destruction of a person, either his literal loss of life or his being forgotten by God. In a Lent sermon at White-Hall (1626), Donne proclaims, “for if it were in your power to annihilate this whole world, God were no worse than when there was a world, yet if God neglect you, forget, pretermit you, it is a miserable annihilation, a fearfull malediction.”

God’s “neglect” of a person leads to a kind of annihilation, and so too does an individual’s excessive confidence in his relationship to God:

> First then, Prodigality is a sin, that destroys even the means of liberality. If a man wast so, as that he becomes unable to releive others, by this wast, this is a sinful

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prodigality; but much more, if he wast so, as that he is not able to subsist, and maintain himself; and this is our case, who have even annihilated our selves, by our profuseness; For, it is his mercy that we are not consumed. It is a sin, and a viperous sin; it eats out his own womb; [...] It is peccatum Biathanaton, a sin that murders itself (Ser, v. 1, p. 155, 1615).

In this third meaning, then, annihilation registers a forgetting by God or an improper self-dissolution. To be forgotten by God is to become nothing in sin. Prodigal sin empties out the self, but not in a positive sense; annihilation by profuseness is mere waste. Sin of this kind “eats out his own womb”; it is a self-murdering sin (peccatum Biathanatos). Annihilation can, therefore, also mean the exact opposite of kenosis: not emptying the self to nothing to make space for the divine in the soul, but rather wasting the self to nothing through sin: “There is an annihilation in sin; Homines cum peccant, nihil sunt; Then when by sin, I depart from the Lord my God, in whom only I live, and move, and have my being, I am nothing” (Ser v. 4, p. 120, Easter Monday, 1622).

These uses illustrate how “annihilation” in Donne shifts semantically from a theory of matter’s ruination to a vocabulary of kenosis, sacrifice and destruction that blurs action and passion as a person turns to nothing. “Annihilation” in Donne manifests that which we hold in common with all earthly beings, the capacity to sin and to decay into the earth of which we are made and against which we define ourselves. But “annihilation” also tears us away from our human community and identity. This sundering can signal proper or improper dissolution, the transformation of self into an instrument of God’s will or a wasteful destruction that bars the self from such grace.
III. Ravishment and Will

In “Batter my heart,” the form of annihilation the poet encounters is the slow painful decay wrought by sin and the failure to feel God’s presence. When confronted with this kind of annihilation at the hands of sin, the poet turns instead to demand another kind of annihilation (destruction and ravishment) by God. The speaker in “Batter my heart” hopes to inhabit an eccentric space of pure and chaste being. Donne’s sonnet works through a fundamental element of Christian conversion: that renunciation of oneself, dying to oneself, is prerequisite for being reborn in and as a different self. But Donne pushes beyond this understanding of conversion. By demanding that a rupturing event of God’s presence annihilate him, the poet in this sonnet labors to initiate a true re-begetting that could lead to divination. He works to achieve total self-dispossession in order to be possessed by God, to become a zealous instrument of divine force.

Batter my heart, three personed God, for you
As yet by knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurped towne, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end:
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am bethrothed unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The sonnet grapples with a paradox: that the response to domination by sin is to demand a martyrning ravishment so extreme that the speaker might attain a state of grace and eccentricity. Perhaps by way of registering this paradox formally, the sonnet initiates from its first word, “batter,” a dual track for the brutality invoked. “Batter” signifies not only violence, a repetitive striking. It can also mean to paste together or to fix, and occasionally even to exchange:¹²８ break me into nothing, the poet seems to say, but make this annihilation a re-collection of me in wholly new form.¹²⁹ Thus from the first utterance the text locates a nexus of making and unmaking, putting together and breaking apart: to unmake the sinful life bound towards annihilation is to open up the possibility of a radical new life, one that perhaps only martyrdom and “ravishment” might achieve.

¹²８ For dictionary definitions that support this paronomasia, see, e.g., the entry for muto, mutas, mutare in Thomas Cooper, Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae (London: Henrici Bynnemani 1584 [4th ed]), where “exchange” and “batter” are used as synonyms and the entry on “clinch” in Henry Mainwaring, Nomenclator Navalis (British Library Sloane MS 207, 1620-1623): “Is to batter or Ryvitt a boltes end vpon a Ringe Or turne backe the end of anie nayle soe as it make it fast att the end wch is driven through wee alsoe call that parte of the Cabell wch is seized about the Ringe of the Anchor the Clinch of the Cabell.”
¹²９ “Batter” may hint at the preparation of food to be eaten as well, as though the speaker were asking for God to eat his heart (perhaps reminiscent of Dante dreaming that Beatrice is forced to eat his “fiery” heart in Vita Nuova [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992] III)—which would further connect “Batter my heart” to the “fiery Zeale” I have discussed from “I am a little World,” which transforms the speaker by “eating.”
The sonnet makes this ravishment appear to be the achievement of a particular sort of labor—a mental and physical labor, perhaps, of self-abnegation. But the verse confronts us with the problem of whether ravishment itself can be achieved and experienced as an activity of the self or must be construed as a passion of the self’s undoing. In the idiom that Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* has so far helped us develop, we can read the speaker in Donne’s “Batter my heart” as seeking to create an eccentric self free of sin and decay and utterly “new,” by way of summoning his own “usurp[ation],” “imprison[ment],” and (sexually) violent shattering. Yet the sonnet also displays that the willful working towards martyrdom may bar the speaker from the sacred violence that would annihilate and remake him.130

Following upon this imperative to “Batter my heart,” the speaker temporalizes this violent relationship to God, stating that “as yet” God has moved but to “knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend,” the wrenching tripled accents linking lines two and four as the past and future. The speaker demands that God hereafter “break, blow, burn, and make me new,” create a “me” that would be perpetually new and not subject to sinful decay—the sonnet registers a desire not for gradual self-reform, but rather for a rupture in self so total that the self can be destroyed and completely re-made, entirely freed from the material decay and spiritual devastation of the former self. These binaries of past and future modes of being (knock/break; breath/blow; shine/burn; mend/make new) seem themselves to be ontologically linked, though, despite the emphasis on rupture; “break,

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130 Targoff comments that Donne confronts in this Holy Sonnet the self-annihilation that he so feared throughout much of his earlier poetry and prose and she canvases some of the different meanings that “nothing” takes on in Donne’s prose (Targoff 121ff.). Though I find Targoff’s reading of this sonnet very helpful, I disagree that there is no desire for annihilation in “Batter my heart”; the poem’s intense fascination with divine violence exceeds a desire for “the repair of what already exists” (122).
blow, burn” are intensified versions of “knock, breath, and shine,” rather than drastic departures in the characterization of divine action. The intensified verbs, however, mark a particular shift in divine gender from a maternal God (mending) to a paternal one (breaking). The speaker longs for a God who would no longer help mend but would break him totally. Line three evokes further the radicalness of the speaker’s demand. In order to “rise, and stand,” the speaker requests that God “o’erthrow” him.

In “Batter my heart,” we witness a wish not just to be hurled into an abyss of divine decreation, but also a desire that this eradication of selfhood allow the speaker to “rise, and stand.” The gendered language of resurrection, self-abnegation, and destruction throughout the poem is necessarily fraught with sexual overtones, intimations that will later be brutally consummated in the final line’s “ravish[ment].” The double entendres that suffuse the first quatrain soon turn into (no less eroticized) metaphors of colonial and monarchical struggle that shift figurations of the speaker, too, between feminine and masculine imagery, reinscribing the battered heart within a socio-political discourse. The subject of line five, “I,” is displaced from its action by an entire poetic line, a line that characterizes the speaker as “an usurped town, to another due” whose only action is to “Labour to admit you.” The speaker, according to this figure, is a town that has been taken over and colonized by another. The speaker wishes that he could merely genuflect in self-evacuation as God breaks into his “town” and inserts his “viceroy,” but the speaker cannot himself actively begin this process. So we light upon a possible answer to our initial question: annihilation of the will may be an activity but it cannot be actively initiated. Instead, God must destroy the very will that could initiate such self-emptying and force that annihilation on the self that cannot free itself from sin.
Donne’s demand for divine violence, in other words, seems to fail because it wills its own destruction and does not begin with a destruction of the will itself. In this beautifully disciplined poem, the speaker still remains too in control of his own annihilation, as it were—a problem nicely embodied by the elision of the “I” in line 9, “Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,” in which the pronunciation of the “I” must, for prosodic necessity, be suppressed at just the moment when the speaker describes the desired link between active and passive love (love/would be loved), willed love for God and release into divine love. If the poet can suppress the pronunciation of the “I” for prosodic necessity, perhaps abnegations of the “I” take place through self-control, the discipline of meter in this instance. This is not a criticism of the poem—it is what the poem beautifully and disturbingly reveals to us: that poetic making itself may prepare for but ultimately marks the lack of the self-annihilation required for martyrdom.\footnote{Compare Stanley Fish’s claim that Herbert’s poems “become the vehicle of their own abandonment” when we recognize that Christ is the substance of all things and the performer of all actions (\textit{Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature} [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972], 157-158).} Donne imagines elsewhere, in his prose writings on martyrdom, a divine violence so perfect that the will itself would become passive.

The former town having been broken, blown, and burned in “Batter my heart,” God would empower his own prince to make a “new” town and rule over it. But just as this strategy for self-destruction and remaking is figured metaphorically through military terms, it becomes unclear whether this rule will lead to a pure body (“town”) for the speaker, or whether the new regime will also envelop or tend toward sin (“viceroy” etymologically contains the pun of vice-roy, that is, sin-king as well as vice-king). Similarly, the passive verb in line eight (“is captived”) does not sufficiently clarify the
nature of the new regime, since this “three-personed God” is himself invoked through a ritual of sexual incursion and masochistic brutality.

This ambiguity is translated within the narrative of sexual drama that becomes especially noticeable in the third quatrain, as the speaker begs his God--since the speaker is “betrothed unto [God’s] enemy”--to “break that [matrimonial and narrative] knot again.” It is not clear, though, who is the husband and who the bride in this metaphor for the entanglement of life in the sin that makes it decay. We know from the first quatrain that the speaker’s desire for destruction and dissolution of the self is embedded within a yearning to assert himself, to “rise, and stand.” But we also read that the speaker wishes God to “batter [his] heart” and colonize his “town,” and these feminized self-presentations continue in a misogynistic mode as the speaker figures himself, “weak or untrue,” as the one who needs to be “defend[ed],” “divorce[d]” and “imprison[ed].” In the final couplet this gendered, eroticized, brutal struggle is completed, as the feminized or homoeroticized speaker closes, “for I / Except you enthral me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.” The speaker wishes to be enthralled and enslaved, seized and violated, in order to become truly “free” and “chaste.” The speaker’s desire must be beaten and broken in order that it can be pasted back together, burned until the carnal sin is scorched out of it so that such intense desire can, resurrected “new,” be re-directed exclusively toward God. To overcome this absence of God that the speaker feels, he demands the ultimate, overwhelming presence: ravishment. Ravish is likely a post-classical Latin derivation from classical Latin rapere, which, as Gordon Teskey has

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132 For the history of critical interpretations of this moment as heterosexual or homosexual sexual violence, see Richard Rambuss, Closet Devotions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 50-54.
reminded us in a discussion of allegorical violence, “is a literal translation of *harpazein* in the Chaldean Oracles and in Proclus’s commentary on the *Parmenides*, where it denotes an act of violent seizing by which beings are returned to the One.”\(^{133}\) Ravishment makes the divine present within the poet and thereby unites him with divinity.

Only through this kind of sacred violence, the sonnet offers, can life be reconciled with God. This violence does not just emerge as a “strangely directionless and unmotivated energy of articulation,” as Brian Cummings has argued;\(^{134}\) Donne is articulating such violence as a way to overcome a life defined by sinful decay, a possibility that the poem ultimately presents as tentative and in need of further revision.

Donne is considering the possibility that violence may not offer the presence of God for which the speaker hoped; violence that annihilates the self, indeed, may be recuperated within a narrative of the self. The final inability of brutal self-rupturing and remaking to salve the absence of God in “Batter my heart” in any way that might offer salvation or grace bespeaks an anxiety in the face of predetermined grace in the sonnet. The speaker “would be loved fain” by his God, but the violence summoned therefore darkly hints that such love is a kind of ‘feign,’ an invention or falsification. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurate to say that it is not sacred violence itself but rather the willful demand for such violence that the poem moves us to suspect. Such a demand makes ravishment falsely appear to be an exemplary experience one can seek out. Think back to

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\(^{134}\) Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 397. I agree with Cummings’ insightful evaluation that “the violence [in “Batter my Heart”] is over-determined, as if in compensation for the marked absence of the violent intervention of grace.”
the shock of the sonnet’s opening imperative: “Batter my heart.” How could one demand that God annihilate oneself? The poem is not expressing skepticism towards self-annihilation in general, but it makes us look awry at the will that would so confidently demand ravishment as a model for union with God. The sonnet thus negatively images a form of self-annihilation proceeding from a “prevenient violence” (to borrow a phrase from Teskey\textsuperscript{135}) that would rid the self of the will and all its labors in preparation for the unexemplary experience of ravishment in devotion. Annihilation without labor, devotional passivity that can be neither communicated nor copied, is the eccentric beyond towards which the poem beautifully and disturbingly gestures. This eccentric beyond seems to promise a release from the labor of poetic making itself, from the discipline of meter, yet it is a lesson that Donne learns—and perhaps most effectively teaches—immanently through the form of this sonnet. As with the deferred figuration of zeal as fiery self-immolation in “I am a little World,” a poetic conceit, for Donne irreducibly a product of labor rather than inspiration, can represent the passive self-annihilation required for fanaticism only negatively, by enacting a poem’s own productive failure to effect such self-annihilation for the poet.

What we see in “Batter my heart” is a movement towards the martyrdom of ravishment. Donne’s conceptualization of self-annihilation is rooted in his understanding of grace: to have the possibility of being successful—that is, to have the possibility of true self-emptying or martyrdom—one must be released from the will, must make space in the self that is passive enough to receive God. “Batter my heart” fails to be about the experience of self-annihilation; that is its greatest success, what it reveals most intimately

\textsuperscript{135} Allegory and Violence, 18.
about how it is that one becomes a fanatic or a proper martyr. In the final section, I show that Donne’s immanent critique of such false desires and demands underwrites his critique of Catholic martyrdom, but also allows him concretely to outline a model of martyrdom that he revalues positively. At the end of this chapter, we will see, in Donne’s reflection on Samson, that his revaluation of martyrdom also opens up the possibility of a revaluation of divinely inspired violence against a political entity.

IV. Passive Action

In this final section, I argue that Donne’s ultimate purpose in his prose writing on martyrdom, and especially in *Biathanatos*, is to outline a productive model of martyrdom, one that we are only in a position to understand if we grasp the relationship between passion and action that “Batter my heart” performs. John Carey recently began a review of John Stubbs’s biography of John Donne with the following past conditional: “John Donne is remembered as a great Elizabethan love poet, some would say the greatest love poet in the English language. But he might easily, had things fallen out differently, have been remembered as a Catholic martyr.”¹³⁶ We make a mistake if we do not take this counterfactual seriously. In order to distinguish more clearly the forms of martyrdom that Donne condemns and those that he finds productive, I examine first some comments by Donne in a sermon on conversion. Donne’s theory of conversion, at least in the sermon I examine, gives us a key to understanding his thinking on martyrdom, a key already glimpsed in our reading of “Batter my heart”: the homology between Christ’s passion and

our passivity. The conceptual importance of this connection will become more apparent, but I hope that my linking of conversion to martyrdom will seem something less than surprising from the start. After all, it was something like a conversion that saved Donne, unlike most of the rest of his family, from being remembered as a Catholic martyr, a fact to which Donne himself alluded in the preface to the 1610 publication of *Pseudo-Martyr*.  

In one of his last sermons preached at St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1628, Donne takes as his prooftext an isolated part of Acts 28:6: “They changed their minds, and said that he was a God” ([Ser v. 8, p. 312](#)). The “he” referenced here is Paul, and the sermon is a meditation and celebration of Paul’s conversion, but interestingly the prooftext refers to a change (the Vulgate has *converto*) not so much in Paul but in those he has encountered during his shipwreck on the island of Malta on his way to be tried in Rome. Donne’s sermon will circle around and ultimately focus in on the grammatical, narrative and theological conjugation of “change.” What does it mean to change one’s mind, to convert to a new belief, a novel structure of piety?

Donne develops a complex affective and theological description of conversion and relates it to rapture and martyrdom. Early in the sermon, Donne describes Paul’s own conversion as follows: “[God] gave him a Rapture, an Extasie, and in that, an appropinquation, an approximation to himself, and so some possession of Heaven in this

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137 *Pseudo-Martyr: Wherein out of certaine propositions and gradations, this conclusion is evicted. That those which are of the Romane religion in this Kingdome, may and ought to take the Oath of Allegiance*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 8 (hereafter cited as *PM*): “I have beene ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I believe, no family […] hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done.”
life” (313). Here, we see conversion initiated by an ecstasy that has at its core what Donne calls “appropinquation” -- Paul is approximated to himself, and whether that self is God or Paul’s true self remains purposely ambiguous, because it’s both. But this rapturous ecstasy and attendant appropinquation, this going out of oneself to become approximated to one’s true self in God, is the annihilation and re-begetting of Paul in this life.

As the sermon proceeds, Donne elaborates on the aftermath of conversion with a reference to Denys the Areopagite:

as S. Denys the Areopagite expresses it, A Deo doctus, non solum divine discit, sed divine patitur, (which we may well translate, or accommodate thus) He that is thoroughly taught by Christ, does not inely believe all that Christ says, but conforms him to all that Christ did, and is ready to suffer as Christ suffered. Truly, if it were possible to fear any defect of joy in heaven, all that could fall into my fears would be but this, that in heaven I can no longer express my love by suffering for my God, for my Saviour (320).

Rapture and ecstasy lead to a conversion, and in that conversion Paul experiences an approximation to Christ: in the wake of conversion, one’s faith is defined in part by one’s ability to “conform” to Christ. This approximation means to conform to all Christ did, to suffer like him, to give up one’s life. Appropinquation is for Donne a condition of zeal in which the uncharitable self is annihilated and opened to suffering. “Conforming” to Christ, as imitatio Christi, presents a paradox, since such conforming is fundamentally
antimimetic if we think of imitation as an activity. Conversion is defined by passively undergoing an approximation to Christ, yet Christ cannot be truly exemplary since no one can undergo this approximation by one's own will.

At the center of the sermon, Donne links his analysis of conversion and the appropinquation of Christ with his discussion of change:

“They changed, says our Text; not their mindes; there is no evidence, no appearance, that they exercised any, that they had any; but they changed their passions. Nay, they have not so much honour, as that afforded them, in the Originall; for it is not They changed, but They were changed, passively; Men subject to the transportation of passion, doe nothing of themselves, but are meerely passive (327).”

Picking up on the middle passive voice of the Greek verb that “they changed” translates, Donne insists that conversion itself is an experience of passivity. One does not choose to convert; change is not an active choice in which one exercises one’s will freely. Donne’s theory of conversion is modeled on his theory of grace as an experience of being “merely passive.”

Donne’s account of conversion’s passivity is essential for his discussion of martyrdom. After all, we should recall that Donne’s quotation from Dionysius bases our openness to being like Christ in divine patitur: to suffering divinely or like the divine. I have shown that Donne carefully considers the desire for and failure to achieve this

138 For a reading of Donne’s analysis of grace and passivity in this sermon, see Cummings, Literary Culture of the Reformation, 416-17.
passivity in “Batter my heart.” True martyrdom is rooted in conversion: one must
encounter one’s death as something one could never labor towards, choose, or will. As
with grace, Donne’s understanding of martyrdom requires the clearing of a space for a
pure passivity of reception in which the infinitude of the divine can be realized and made
present in the finite. But what does this clearing look like in Donne’s writings on
martyrdom?

This question has generally not been asked before because the majority of writing
on Donne and martyrdom, from critics as different as Deborah Shuger and Annabel
Patterson, is consistent in emphasizing Donne’s abiding skepticism towards
martyrdom. 139 Donne’s argument in Pseudo-Martyr, urging English Catholics to take the
Oath of Allegiance while retaining their inner loyalty to the spiritual authority of Rome,
has seemed like a conservative surrender to James I, a “remarkable act of submission to
the system.” 140 I argue, in contrast, that one of Donne’s main purposes in these tracts, and

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139 See Debora Shuger, Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics
and the Dominant Culture (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 159-217, and
Annabel Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and
Reading in Early Modern England (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 100-
113. For more recent versions of this argument, see Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print,
and Literary Culture in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2006), 145-179, and Rebecca Lemon, Treason by Words: Literature, Law and Rebellion
140 Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation, 103. For readings that emphasize a more
equivocal or critical Donne on the issue of martyrdom, see Nancy E. Wright, “The
Figura of the Martyr in John Donne’s Sermons,” ELH 56:2 (1989), 293-309; Susannah
Brietz Monta, Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131-50; and Adam H. Kitzes, “Paradoxical Donne:
Olga Valbuena has recently argued that Donne’s defense of casuistry in advocating for
Catholics to sign the Oath of Allegiance under James I after the Gunpowder Plot went
hand-in-hand with his redefinition of martyrdom as a “living martyrdom,” a taking up of
the cross of this life’s sufferings (“Casuistry, Martyrdom, and the Allegiance Controversy
in Donne’s ‘Pseudo-Martyr,’” Religion & Literature, 32:2 [Summer 2000], 49-80).
especially in *Biathanatos*, is to outline a true form of martyrdom rather than to dismiss martyrdom altogether. Donne’s critique of martyrdom is only directed against a martyrdom that does not glorify Christ exclusively: “I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lifes, for the glory of our blessed Saviour” (*PM* 8). In Donne’s estimation, undergoing martyrdom because of a longing to obey the authority of the church or to follow an exemplary model cannot but turn into a false form of sacrifice. This is not to say that Donne thinks that an unexemplary martyrdom free of willing is necessarily in conflict with or disconnected from questions of political efficacy or fidelity to community. It is a claim that only asserts the annihilation of the individual will as a prerequisite for true martyrdom, proposing that martyrdom itself cannot be a political action that a free individual willfully plans and executes. In Donne’s analysis, Catholic martyrdom is sullied by a Pope who “serves his own ambitions to your destruction” (*PM* 240); it thus only amounts only to a state-sponsored death, a fulfillment not of God’s will but of an institution. Institutionalized martyrdom, proposed as exemplary political intervention, serves merely to create a position of passivity to the state, not the true passivity by which God may destroy the will and the self can be approximated to the divine. Donne is unconcerned to describe this productive martyrdom as Protestant, even if its outline becomes visible through a critic of contemporary Catholic practice.

*Biathanatos* was published only after Donne’s death, and against his purported wishes; in its first printed edition from 1644, it was dedicated to Philip Herbert, whom Nigel Smith has described as “the decidedly mystical Earl of Pembroke, patron of various
brands of radical Puritanism.” It was not a text that Donne, when closest to James I, would have wanted the world to see, and the fact that it was dedicated to a radical Puritan mystic in its first printing is just one sign of why it might have disturbed the Anglican establishment. But there is also a disturbing philosophical and political problem at the core of these considerations that Donne’s writings never fully resolve: how we can consider an experience of passivity as initiation for an action in acts of martyrdom? How can we even describe the sacrifice of martyrdom or the violence of religious zealotry without using the language of will, choice and action?

In *Biathanatos*, Donne seeks to awaken “charity” in interpreting the sacrifices of martyrdom. He argues that “self-homicide” can appear in the world in a form that is not sinful or heretical (*Bia* 46). Selectively appropriating and departing from the arguments against suicide found in Augustine and Aquinas, Donne posits there is a natural inclination or drive towards self-extinction, “a desire of dying which nature had bred” (*Bia* 78). By the end of his treatise, Donne goes so far as to claim, with reference to a genealogy of arguments from Philippians 1:23, Augustine, Lombard, Serarius and Aquinas, that the desire to be dissolved—“*cupio dissolvi*”—in Christ is the greatest perfection (“that than which none can be greater”):

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142 See the helpful commentary in the introduction of Rudick and Battin edition, p. l, on Donne’s radical departure from Aquinas’s comments in the *Summa Theologiae* that “everything naturally loves itself, and it is thus proper for everything to keep itself in being and resist decay as far as it can,” though Donne will cite Aquinas twice at just the moment when he defines the desire to be dissolved.
But when he [Augustine] comes to that than which none can be greater, he says then, the Apostle [Paul] came to *cupio dissolvi*. For, as one may love God with all his heart, and yet he may grow in that love, and love God more with all his heart, for the first was commanded in the Law, and yet counsel of perfection was given to him who said that he had fulfilled the first commandment, so, as St. Augustine found a degree above that charity which made a man *paratum ponere*, which is *cupere*, so there is a degree above that, which is to do it. This is that virtue by which martyrdom, which is not such of itself, becomes an act of highest perfection (*Bia* 166-67).\(^{143}\)

_Cupio dissolvi_ is “that virtue by which martyrdom, which is not such of itself, become an act of highest perfection.” Here Donne is citing Lombard on Augustine’s concept of charity, which Lombard divides into 5 categories: beginning, proficient, perfect, more and most perfect; perfect charity is glossed as being ready to die for another, in Donne’s reading. _Cupio dissolvi_—a love for self-dissolution—has an even higher degree of perfection than willingness to die for a neighbor—it is the most perfect form of charity, and it defines true martyrdom, making it into an act of highest perfection. Within the logic of _Biathanatos_, at least, there is a natural tendency to self-murder or self-sacrifice that is in constant conflict with the institutions of state and church that require live bodies and agents, and this natural inclination is perfected in the true martyrdom that releases the

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\(^{143}\) Donne returns to this phrase, _cupio dissolvi_, throughout his sermons; Katrin Ettenhuber has located particularly large number of references in the sermons of 1625 and 1626 (Ettenhuber, _Donne’s Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation_ [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011], 145, n. 19). The phrase is a reference to the Vulgate translation of Philippians 1:23: *coartor autem e duobus desiderium habens dissolvi et cum Christo esse molto magis melius*. 
self from the will, that makes that self, through annihilating its will, into an incarnation of God’s perfection.

The illustrative instance of self-homicide as true martyrdom in *Biathanatos* is Christ himself: with the divine immanent within him, Christ had the proper inspiration to “give up his soul before he was constrained to do so,” and all who imitate this action of unconstrained self-sacrifice “imitate this act of our Saviour” (173). “Giving up his soul”—giving up his will and releasing himself into God’s—initiates martyrdom in Donne’s thinking, and any “constraining,” whether by labors of the will, by desires for mimetic similarity, or by an institution like state or church, ruins the real, passive imitation of Christ’s self-sacrifice. This is the reason, *pace* Brad Gregory’s work on early modern martyrdom, that martyrdom in Donne cannot be *exemplary*: it requires a form of passivity that any model of martyrdom based on the idea of intentional imitation of an action cannot capture. Gregory argues, “the extremity of martyrdom should be understood not as a fanaticism of the fringe, but as exemplary action”; this analysis, however, does not account for Donne’s model. We should instead think of true, charitable martyrdom in Donne as a fanaticism that seeks an unexemplary passivity so extreme it requires a violence that one cannot seek out, work towards, or advocate.

Donne analyzes many biblical examples to illustrate the paradox of martyrs who are types of Christ but not examples to be followed. For example, “the passive action of Eleazar,” Donne notes with reference to the martyr of I Maccabees 6:46 who opened himself to execution rather than eat pork, is similar to Christ’s sacrifice insofar as it is a

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self-exposure to destruction (\textit{Bia} 187). Eleazar’s martyrdom reveals an annihilation of the will; this is the only way Eleazar could achieve “passive action.”

Samson, the Jewish judge and martyr who pulls down the Temple of Dagon, provides the case of martyrdom with which Donne dwells longest after Christ. Blinded and imprisoned, Samson kills himself and his Philistine captors in the Book of Judges. Turning to commentaries that range from Augustine to Calvin and Pererius, among others, Donne argues that it was the “special inspiration from God,” the infusion of the spirit into Samson and the annihilation of Samson’s will, that made Samson a true martyr. Donne concludes that Samson died “with the same zeal as Christ, unconstrained; for in this manner of dying, as much as in anything else, he was a type of Christ” (182). Donne insists on this true, unconstrained form of martyrdom characterized by divine inspiration.

But how do we know if someone is like Samson or Christ—a martyr or religious zealot moved by truly divine inspiration—or just a person claiming to be inspired for their own political or personal reasons, a demagogue or madman? Often in the Renaissance we witness an evasion of this question, and a panicked attempt to classify all claims to inspiration as madness. Before I gesture in my conclusion towards the problems and possibilities that this view of martyrdom in Donne raises, I want to pause for a moment to examine a moment in \textit{Biathanatos} in which Donne pushes against the tendency of critics of martyrdom to view the willingness to die as a kind of madness, a tendency that refuses some of the difficult epistemological and political problems that martyrdom reveals.

As Adam Kitzes has shown, Donne finds it a real corruption of the primitive church to have turned even the proper kind of martyrdom into a sin or form of
“madness.”¹⁴⁵ By the time of the English Civil War, figures like Hobbes will label martyrdom as a kind of pathological madness; in his 1650s polemical exchange with Archbishop Bramhall, Hobbes asks “what are fanaticism and martyrdom but the actions of madmen,” a claim I will return to in my chapter on Hobbes. Hobbes’s dismissal of fanaticism and martyrdom as madness becomes an increasingly popular strategy for the demystification of all claims to inspired action, and we find references to martyrdom as madness in thinkers as different as Isaac Casaubon, Henry More, and Robert Burton.¹⁴⁶ Madness in these thinkers becomes a way of undercutting any justification for not just martyrdom, but any attempt to break with civil law on the grounds of religious belief. But Donne, in advance of the proliferation of discussions of martyrdom as madness, preempts this interpretative strategy by historicizing the church’s own shift away from considering martyrdom as sacred action:

The blood of the martyrs [...] hauing as Nicephorus sayes, allmost strangled the Deuill, he tryed by his two greatest Instruments (when they were his) the magistrate and the learned to auert them from this inclination. For suggesting to the Magistrate, that theyr forwardnesse to dy grew onely from theyr faith in the Resurrection he procur’d theyr bodyes to be burned, and theyr ashes scatter’d into Riuers to frustrate and defeat that expectation, And he raysd vp subtile Heretiques to infirme and darken the vertue and Maiestye of Martyrdome. Of which the most

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pestilently cunning Basilides [a gnostic teacher who interpreted martyrdom as
punishment for personal sin], foresuspecting that he should not easily remoue that
desire of dying which nature had bred, and custome confirmd in them, tried to
remoue that which had roote onely in theyr religion, as being yet of tenderer
growth, and more remoueable, then Naturall impressions. Therefore he offerd not
to irnpugne theyr exposing of themselfes to death in all cases, but onely sayd that
it was *madness* to dy for Christ, since he, by whose example they did it, was not
Crucified, but Symon, that bore the Crosse.\(^{147}\)

Donne in this passage charts the historical convergence of the Christian church and state
to re-interpret the widespread existence of martyrdom in the early church; by labeling
martyrdom as “madness to die for Christ,” the earlier interpreters of Christian martyrdom,
like Basilides, pushed martyrdom to the fringe of Christian piety. They made it into a
mere pathological excess of feelings that led people away from actually bearing the cross
of Christ’s suffering in this life. In Donne’s eyes, then, the description of martyrdom as
madness in his own period is rooted in these earlier debates over the original Christian
martyrs and their likeness or unlikeness to Christ. Donne’s research leads him to
conclude that “our Primitiue Church was so enamor’d of Death, and so satisfied with it,
that to vexe and torture them more, the Magistrate made Lawes to take from them the
comfort of dying, and encreasd theyr persecution by ceasing it.” So for Donne,
martyrdom has come to look like madness because church and state have aligned to save
the bodies they need to function from the death that martyrdom promises; the very

\(^{147}\) *Biathanatos*, Part I, Dist.3, Sect.3,59, emphasis added.
definition of madness circulated in this debate is the product of a contest over the political effects of martyrdom.

Though Donne is extremely critical of Catholic martyrdom in his own day, he refuses to equate martyrdom with madness, and argues that the conflation itself fails to allow us to see what proper martyrdom might look like. Using Samson and Christ as his main examples, Donne insists that there is a kind of self-sacrifice or religious violence that is proper, and it is grounded in being fully inspired by God, by having God’s will become one’s own will in “passive action.”

But by making this argument—that is, by elaborating more fully on the conditions of self-emptying necessary for proper martyrdom or religious violence—Donne leaves us with a couple of difficult questions. First, by what authority and method can such true inspiration be known? And second, how can one become a proper martyr if one’s will stands in the way of the achievement of true inspiration? In the single mention of Samson in *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne writes:

And this secret and inward instinct and moving of the holy Ghost, which the Church presumes, to have guided not onely these martyres, in whose forwardnesse these authors have observed some incongruity with the rules of Divinity, but also Sampson, and those Virgines which drowned themselves for preservation of their chastity, which are also accounted by that Church as martyres; although (I say) this instinct lie not in proofe, nor can be made evident (*PM* 35).
With these words, Donne emphasizes the problem of how one might interpret or know inspiration, how spectators to martyrdom can determine whether they have witnessed true divine inspiration or mere conceit. To return to the language of conversion, how can anyone know whether conversion has taken place, whether another person has passively been changed? This passage powerfully articulates for us a problem regarding what it would mean to prepare oneself for a death that one could never really choose and that others can never truly know. Donne’s meditations on Samson also conflate the violence of self-sacrificial martyrdom with divinely inspired violence against the state, since Samson irrevocably enacts both at once.

In his famous treatise on secular authority, Martin Luther claims that being filled with the Holy Spirit requires grace, and with this Donne would agree. But Luther continues to claim, in an oft-quoted citation: “if you want to act like Samson, then first become like Samson.”148 And here Donne’s consideration of martyrdom has led us to an essential point that we have to consider when thinking about violence to self or to state that is claimed to be God’s will: how does one become like Samson? And what would it mean to become like Samson if his martyrdom can never be exemplary? Is there an activity or labor one could undertake to annihilate one’s own will and make way for the passivity of divine inspiration? If so, does one actually become like Samson? Or does divine inspiration just happen, an event for which there can be no intellectual or physical preparation and around which similarities are projected in a retrospective narration that effaces the singularity of this martyrdom? Though Donne does not offer easy answers to these questions, he makes it clear that martyrdom for him could never be exemplary in

the sense of a model to follow. One cannot labor or train to become like Christ or Samson. One can only be opened passively to that appropinquation in which one becomes like God by losing oneself, by undergoing a conversion—a transformation of self through its annihilation—that renders the initiation of the act of martyrdom a form of passive openness. The martyr is a fanatical “organ,” as it were, of God’s ravishment.

In his final sermon, “Deaths Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body,” a sermon that some have called Donne’s own self-elegy, Donne pauses to reflect again on Samson in this context:

Still pray we for a peaceable life against violent death, and for time of repentance against sudden death, and for sober and modest assurance against distempered and diffident death, but never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken with such deaths; Domini sunt exitus mortis, to God the Lord belong the issues of death. And he received Samson, who went out of this world in such a manner (consider it actively, consider it passively in his own death, and in those whom he slew with himself) as was subject to interpretation hard enough. Yet the Holy Ghost hath moved Saint Paul to celebrate Samson in his great catalogue, and so doth all the church (Ser v. 10, p. 248, 1631).

Donne lays bear the interpretative difficulties that Samson’s death offers. This is for Donne a “subject to interpretation hard enough”: was Samson’s sudden death, and the martyrdom that death brought, the way in which Samson was “issued” into passive sacrifice and united with God by becoming his instrument yet once more? Or was
Samson being punished for a zeal that destroyed him and many others? The difficulty of this passage centers on the phrase recorded cryptically in parentheses: “consider it actively, consider it passively.” The caesura (“consider it actively, consider it passively”) gives us little help. We are left to wonder whether we must consider Samson’s sudden violence actively and then passively, in temporal progression or dialectical paradox, or whether we must hold it in our minds both actively and passively at the same time, in an irresolvable parallax. We cannot know whether Samson’s will was annihilated and he became a passive organ of God’s violence or whether he labored to achieve his action of martyrdom and destruction. Thrown back on the necessity of “interpreting” the spectacle of Samson’s martyrdom—“consider it actively, consider it passively”—we find that Donne has anticipated questions that generations after him would find of the utmost importance, most immediately looking ahead to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. In enjoining us to consider Samson, Donne presents us with an aporia, and insists of the necessary of dwelling on that aporia, not reacting against it with panic or policing; we cannot know the source of Samson’s martyrdom, but must consider it as potentially both action and passion. In that interminable consideration, we must never forget that Samson cannot be exemplary; his martyrdom, if it is true, must be considered in its passive singularity. The only way out of this aporia is to be like Paul in Donne’s description, to be released from the labor of interpretation by divine inspiration: “Yet the Holy Ghost hath moved Saint Paul to celebrate Samson.” As with martyrdom, however, one cannot work to be moved in this manner.

Donne’s insistence on the inimitability of martyrdom has (at least) two consequences: it allows him to carve out a space for true martyrdom even as it renders the
cause of fanatical acts (active will or passive inspiration) impossible to interpret definitively; at the same time, the anti-mimetic understanding of martyrdom enables Donne to resist the possible spread of fanaticism, the capacity for self-annihilation and fanatical revolt to catch on and create new forms of communal resistance, as we saw them do with Spenser’s Egalitarian Giant and his comrades, the fanatical “swarme of flyes,” in the previous chapter. Thus we see in Donne a willingness to insist on the aporetic nature of witnessing fanaticism, to encourage, as an attempt to remain faithful to that aporia, a flexible mode of interpreting it, and a recognition that poetry is intimately involved in precisely that process of interpretation even if it is productively inadequate as a machine for undergoing self-annihilation. Donne’s poems are never ultimately the products of a vacant head, an inspired vessel. At the same time, Donne attempts to contain the proper martyrdom he has so carefully illuminated from mimetic diffusion, which is not unrelated to his sense that poems, like any other kind of labor, ultimately delay the self-annihilation that drives fanaticism; the pragmatic effect of martyrdom’s anti-representational character for Donne remains that it cannot—or should not—be copied or spread like a contagion, and that no labor (even the sacred labor of poetry) can effect the transformation of a self into a ravished organ of divine might.

Thrown back on the difficult necessity of “interpreting” the spectacle of religious violence—“consider it actively, consider it passively”—we turn from Donne’s meditation on the relationship between devotional lyric, interpretation, and martyrdom to our final confrontations with fanaticism: Hobbes’s great attempt (rooted in the same fear that Donne reveals about fanaticism’s capacity to spread contagiously through mimesis) to
dismiss all martyrdom and religious violence as mere madness and Milton’s staging of
the dilemma of interpreting unverifiable fanatical action in *Samson Agonistes*. 
In “The Epistle Dedicatory” that prefaces *Leviathan, Or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (1651), Thomas Hobbes canvases in advance the possible reactions his “discourse of Common-wealth” may provoke. The single aspect of his “labour” that Hobbes states may be “decryed” is his treatment of Holy Scripture in *Leviathan*. Hobbes writes:

That which perhaps may most offend, are certain Texts of Holy Scripture, alleged by me to other purpose than ordinarily used to be by others. But I have done it with due submission, and also (in order to my Subject)
necessarily; for they are the Outworks of the Enemy, from whence they
impugne Civill Power.\textsuperscript{149}

Hobbes is aware that his use of biblical texts may cause offense—they did\textsuperscript{150}—but he
claims that every thing he has done takes place “necessarily.” This chapter examines
what defines that necessity: the threat that religious reading presents to Hobbes’s model
of the commonwealth in the figure of a fanatical enemy. In the 1650s, Hobbes claimed
that nothing “can be more pernicious to Peace than the Revelations that were by these

hereafter cited as \textit{Lev} with part, chapter, and page number in original and in Cambridge
dition. (I include for the moment only the page number because the epistolary
dedication has no part or chapter designation.)

\textsuperscript{150} For extensive discussions of the contemporary reactions to Hobbes’ writings on
religion in Leviathan, see Richard Tuck, “The ‘Christian Atheism’ of Thomas Hobbes,”
in \textit{Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment}, ed. Michael Cyril William Hunter
and David Wootton (Oxford: Oxford UP 1992), pp. 111-130 and Peter Geach, “The
explores in detail the way in which Hobbes’ earlier works, especially the extensive Latin
\textit{Elements of Law} and \textit{De Cive}, contain much more traditional Anglican views as opposed
to the more radically heterodox ideas that evolve in \textit{Leviathan}. For a contrary reading
that maintains the general consistency of Hobbes’ heretical religions ideas as they verge
on something like “Christian atheism,” which were merely concealed in works that pre-
date \textit{Leviathan} for reasons of political pragmatism, see Leo Strauss, \textit{The Political
Chicago P, 1952), 75ff: “The fact that Hobbes accommodated not his unbelief but his
utterances of that unbelief to what was permissible in a good, and, in addition, prudent
subject justifies the assumption that in the decades before the Civil War, and particular in
his humanist period, Hobbes for political reasons hid his true opinions and was mindful
of the maintenance of theological convention, even more than in the \textit{Elements}.” For an
extremely different account, which argues in fascinating ways that Hobbes’ atheism was
interpreted at times during the Restoration, by theologians as diverse as Samuel Parker of
Cambridge and Ralph Cudworth of Oxford, as a form of (or enabling influence on)
enthusiasm or gnostic emanationism, see J. G. A. Pocock, “Thomas Hobbes: Atheist or
Enthusiast? His Place in a Restoration Debate,” \textit{History of Political Thought}, 11:4
(Winter, 1990), 737-749. More generally, see Samuel L. Mintz, \textit{The Hunting of
Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of
Fanatics pretended.”¹⁵¹ I claim that the fanatic presents a limit case for the dangers of passionate devotion and biblical reading. Hobbes attempts to negate the threat of fanatics not just by rejecting all kinds of millenarianism but by condemning the forms of reading that would make such positions on divine temporality and politics imaginable. In so doing, Hobbes causes what may be perhaps his greatest offense, one with which scholars have not yet fully reckoned. In his attempt to define and condemn fanatics and, Hobbes becomes unable to disentangle the self-sacrifice of Jesus from the actions of fanatics, both of which question the law of self-preservation on which Hobbes anchored much of his philosophy.

What does it mean that Hobbes describes that texts of Holy Scripture as “the Outworks of the Enemy, from whence they impugne the Civill Power”? “Outworks” reveals Scripture as an outer defense, a site of fortification. Yet “Outworks of the enemy” is an insecure genitive: the outworks can belong to the enemy (enemy fortification), but they can also be defense against the enemy (state fortification). Scripture is the fortification that enemies (e.g., anyone who claims religious justification for disobedience) use to attack the state—hence Scripture can protect “the Enemy,” those who would use scripture in an inappropriate manner to “impugne” civil power—but Hobbes also promises to transform Scripture into something that can protect the state from enemy attack. And yet working from an outside (“outworking,” as it were), “the Enemy” attempts to work his way into civil power; Hobbes’s description of this force of attack coming from the outside as “impugne” registers etymologically that Hobbes fears

Holy Scripture is the exterior fortification from which “the Enemy” fights from within, or fights in (im-pugnare) the space that should be properly ruled by civil power. In this topography, Hobbes’s invites us to consider his political science as a physics of forces that manages dispute: in this instance, the “Enemy” threatens to rebel both from within and from without the state, a haunting presence that troubles both inside and outside. To exclude the Enemy from influence on civil power, Hobbes develops an entire scriptural hermeneutics in hopes of further identifying this fanatical Enemy as an irrational reader of Scripture whose dangerous passions are not a sign of inspiration but of madness.

Hobbes’s writings on religion are meant to render fanaticism, violence against the state rooted in religion, impossible. It is not controversial to argue that Hobbes dedicates his philosophical project to the creation and maintenance of civil order and obedience, and thus opposes all forms of religious violence. But my approach to Hobbes’s fight against the fanatics is different in two ways. I examine in detail not just Hobbes’s attempt to rid the state of religious violence, but I posit that he transforms Scripture into a text that unequivocally teaches obedience to the state. Hobbes does not just radically re-interpret large portions of Scripture to this end; he seeks to transform the very activity of reading the Scriptures to cut off the possibilities of fanaticism at its source. I show that Hobbes constructs these figures as the negative image of his obedient citizen and reader. Scholars too often conflate Hobbes’s fanatics with democrats or radicals in general or

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152 For my purposes I take this enemy to be most immediately the fanatic, since Hobbes names the fanatic as the utmost threat. But it is true this particular enemy takes many names in Hobbes’s writing: fanatic, enthusiast, zealot, martyr, madman, and prophet, among others. Hobbes sometimes differentiates between these figures, but they are often conflated. For the purpose of this essay, I will argue that Hobbes defines a fanatic as one who both disobeys the state and is willing to sacrifice his own life on the basis of divine revelation or inspiration.
focus on Hobbes’s worries about their penchant for prophecy. More powerfully perhaps than anyone before him, he thought of fanatics primarily as readers, people who encountered Scripture in such a way that it produced or expanded affects that led them to take action (sometimes violent action) against the state. Recent scholarship has pointed out convincingly that Hobbes modeled different kinds of action around various readerly positions. *Leviathan* can be interpreted, for example, as a “romance of political obligations” that chastens errant adventurers who have read too much romance and valorizes the stereotypically docile and fearful “female subject of romance.” Similarly, Hobbes develops in *Leviathan* a critique of fanatical forms of scriptural reading that would unsettle this passive readerly position. Through analysis of Hobbes’s appropriation of religion in his philological and exegetical writings on scripture, we can better

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153 See, respectively, Tomaz Mastnak, “Behemoth: Democraticals and Religious Fanatics,” in *Filozofski vestnik* 24:2 (2003), 139-68, and Kinch Hoekstra, “Disarming the Prophets: Thomas Hobbes and Predictive Power” in *Rivista di Sotria della Filosofia* 21:1 (2004), 97-154. For Mastnak: “Religious fanatics, whom Hobbes may call irreligious, and democratical gentlemen do not stand for distinct secular and religious spheres. They are hardly distinguishable in their actions and ideas.” Though Mastnak suggests that Hobbes sometimes gestures towards the relationship between religious fanatics and democratical gentleman as mere “parallelism,” he ultimately claims that fanatics and democratical gentlemen are nearly indistinguishable, and that supporters of democracy were waging a “democratic holy war” (163-64, 168). There is parallelism, but it is imprecise to say that Hobbes conflates these categories entirely. Hoekstra argues that during the decade after 1640 Hobbes’s concern with prophecy increases and that appeal of prophecy is his main worry regarding religion, *pace* Strauss’s more general emphasis on Hobbes’s concern with revelation in general: “One source of Hobbes’ greater emphasis on prophecy, therefore, may be that he increasingly sees prophecy as natural, perhaps ineliminable. […] This will, in turn, help us to understand why he increasingly sees religion, and prophecy in particular, as part and parcel of the natural condition” (98). I don’t disagree with anything in Hoekstra’s incredibly learned argument; I only claim that if we shift emphasis away from prophecy as such, we can see prophecy within a larger constellation of concerns that Hobbes constructs within the conceptual web of fanaticism.

understand his construction of the category of the fanatic, the enemy of civil society, as a
limit point where religious claims to authority and to violent resistance against state
power threaten to elude sovereign control.

In my previous chapter on Donne, I showed that, despite his critique of
institutionally sanctioned martyrdom, he still takes a profound interest in the concept of
annihilation (both mystical and material), an interest that draws his thinking closer to
discourses and practices of fanaticism than most Donne critics want to think. Even as he
attempts to render proper martyrdom passive and inimitable and thus rescue it from the
threat of mimetic circulation, he still insisted that such martyrdom was both achievable
and commendable and suggested that only divine inspiration itself allows an interpreter to
know with certainty what drives the actions of a fanatic, human or divine will. Self-
annihilation and violent revolt that emerge from divine inspiration remain tangible if
dangerous possibilities for him. I thereby demonstrated that Donne is one of a number of
poets in Renaissance England who took up the category of fanaticism to consider
devotional practice and desire in ways that trouble the distinction between proper and
improper modes of belief and being. Donne developed ideas of passive martyrdom,
sacrifice, and annihilation that theorists of fanaticism worked to contain and exclude from
state-sponsored religion. In this current chapter, then, I turn to one of the most powerful
theorists of fanaticism, Hobbes, to understand more specifically what such a process of
containment looked like from the perspective of a philosopher of sovereignty and how he
set his theory of the state against the sympathetic account of annihilation and sacrifice
that appealed not just to radical Protestants but even to an establishment preacher like
Donne.
To pursue this line of thought, I first explore what Hobbes in particular finds threatening about religion and the interpretation of Holy Scriptures. Next, I examine his philological, exegetical, and political framing of Scripture as historically embedded, mediated texts. Finally, by way of a comparison of Hobbes’s political and religious conceptions of representation and personation, I analyze in more detail the image of the fanatic, whom Hobbes defines as an inspired madman. The fanatic persists in threatening the ideal of sovereignty that Hobbes seeks to invent through redefining authority, authorship and reading as they function within the Common-Wealth. Moreover, the fanatic reveals the profound peculiarity of Hobbesian Christianity. If in Hobbes’s universe it is a law of nature that one necessarily preserve oneself, how can Hobbes account for Christ’s sacrifice as anything other than a total transgression of the laws of nature and reason? Ultimately, I contend that Hobbes’s fundamental position on self-preservation makes him incapable of identifying Jesus’s final self-sacrifice as anything other than fanaticism.

Even though Hobbes uses the term “fanatic” most frequently in texts published after the English-language Leviathan, I focus mostly on Leviathan in this chapter, rather than the later Restoration writings, because it can tell us most about Hobbes’s construction of the fanatic, even if it does not use the term as frequently, because Leviathan offers, as Strauss has shown, Hobbes’s most extensive and authoritative critique of revealed religion and the violence he thinks it can provoke against the state.155

Leviathan is also much more philosophically complex than the later writings and therefore cannot be set to the side as overly polemical or topical. The fanatic for Hobbes is a position of utmost antagonism to his vision of a politics of obedience in civil society, and therefore examining Hobbes’s general critique of religion allows us to understand more fully the position of the fanatic as enemy at the outworks of civil power in Hobbes’s thought. To understand the position of the fanatic will require our examining the other terms Hobbes’s uses for his religious enemy, such as madman, martyr, and enthusiast.

I. Against Interpretation: Religion’s Unstable Temporality

Religion for Hobbes offers a dual threat to civil order: first, as a diachronic event, religion unfolds over time, and therefore cannot be subject to the perfect knowledge of logic and geometry; second, because religion exists for Hobbes only through a series of textual forms of mediation, faith and belief are bound to the disruptive process of interpretation. Interpretation can lead to dispute, dispute into violent antagonism that the sovereign cannot control.

J. G. A. Pocock has convincingly shown that there exists in Leviathan two structures of authority, one as a-historical as the other is historical, and they will come into direct and potentially competitive coexistence once the commonwealth constituted in books I and II becomes ‘a Christian Commonwealth’ […]. The civil sovereign is set up by the a-historical processes of civil philosophy and natural reason, which among other things
declare that God exists and commands obedience to the laws of nature which the
sovereign also enjoins.\textsuperscript{156}

Hobbes disputes claims that claim divine truth as transcendent and civil authority as
bound to the temporality of the earth and the contingency of the political. By contrast,
Hobbes derives civil authority from the a-historical laws of logic and geometry; it matters
to Hobbes that these laws are not mediated by history because, once identified, they can
be known without dispute.\textsuperscript{157} He proposes that the structure of our minds bars us from
knowing the truths of religion in any other mode than their contingent and mediated
manifestations on earth. Hobbes’s position on religion starts in \textit{Leviathan} with the claim
that God is unknowable, and that all our conceptions of God capture only our inability to
know him in his boundlessness.\textsuperscript{158} As he puts it very early on in \textit{Leviathan}, “there is no

\textsuperscript{156} J. G. A. Pocock, “Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes,”
\textsuperscript{157} For the strategic reasons that Hobbes wishes to “block political historicism” and tie
sovereignty to the a-historical laws of logic (as a way of eliminating the problem of the
Conquest of England), see Michel Foucault, \textit{Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the
\textsuperscript{158} Botwinick has gone so far as to place this claim within the history of “negative
theology” and Martel follows him: see Aryeh Botwinick, \textit{Skepticism, Belief and the
Modern: Maimonides to Nietzsche} (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), 112-163, and James
Martell, \textit{Subverting the Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat}
(New York: Columbia, 2007), 68-70, 79-106. Cf. also Pocock’s claim about Hobbes’s
“radically nominalist theology,” which entails “a God of whom nothing could be known
except his existence and his infinite power” and dismisses the God of Greek and
scholastic philosophy “in favour of a purely Hebrew I AM” (Pocock, “Time, History and
radical nominalism leads him to posit a God of whom nothing can be known, but I do
not think that that Botwinick and Martel are quite justified in assuming this nominalism is
inherently a part of a discourse of negative theology. Hobbes has no patience for the
central concerns of negative theologians (divine names, theophany, apophatic language,
the annihilation of the soul). For a careful account of the relationship between
Idea, or conception of any thing we call *Infinite*. […] And therefore the Name of *God* is used, not to make us conceive him; (for he is *Incomprehensible*; and his greatnesse, and power are unconceivable;) but that we may honour him.”

Unlike the transcendent, a-historical truths of logic and science that must necessarily be ultimately knowable for Hobbes and from which civil power is derived, the God of *Leviathan* is incomprehensible as such. For Hobbes, our only access to God, outside of the revelations and miracles firmly in the past time of the prophets, is through the mediation of Scriptures, holy texts which for Hobbes are doubly mediated: they are the transcriptions of God’s words to prophets, which are then historically transmitted to us in corrupted textual form.

Hobbes writes that “to say that God hath spoken to him [man] in the Holy Scriptures, is not to say God hath spoken to him immediately, but by mediation of the Prophets, or of

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159 *Leviathan* I, 3, 11/23. See also III, 34, 208/271, where Hobbes’s repeats this idea in order to achieve a materialist “constant Signification” of the word “spirit,” countering any who would seek to prove the existence of incorporeal substances or bodies: “and our Faith therein consisteth not in our Opinion, but in our Submission; as in all places where God is said to be a *Spirit*; or where by the *Spirit of God*, is meant God himselfe. For the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is to say, we understand nothing of what he is, but only *that he is*; and therefore the Attributes we give him, are not to tell one another, *what he is*, nor to signifie our opinion of his Nature, but our desire to honor him with such names as we conceive most honorable amongst ourselves.”

160 Hobbes’s thinking on the historically mediated condition of the Bible, and the Pentateuch in particular, is generally consistent throughout his career, but specific aspects do change, especially between *De Cive* and *Leviathan*. On this evolution with a specific focus on Hobbes’s new declaration in *Leviathan* that the Pentateuch must have been written after the time of Moses, see Noel Malcolm, “Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea,” in *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 383-431.
the Apostles, or of the Church, in such manner as he speaks to all other Christian men.”

This (at least) double layer of mediation between the believer and God’s word defines for Hobbes’s the idiosyncrasy of belief in the Christian faith, since faith can never be in God as such, but must actually be a faith in the prophetic individual who speaks for God and delivers his speech in Scripture. A faith that claimed access to or inspiration from God would be fanatical in Hobbes’s view; as Kinch Hoekstra has shown, such claims to access divinity are either entirely deluded or intended to deceive and manipulate. Glossing the singularity of the ecclesiastical use of “believe in,” Hobbes writes:

When a man’s Discourse beginneth not at Definitions, it beginneth either at some other contemplation of his own, and then it is called Opinion; or it beginneth at some saying of anther, of whose ability to know the truth and of whose honesty in not deceiving he doubteth not; and the Discourse is not so much concerning the thing as the person, and the resolution is called BELEEFE, and FAITH: Faith, in the man; Beleefe, both of the man, and of the truth of what he sayes. So that in Beleefe are two opinions; one of the saying of the man; the other of his vertue. […] We are to observe that this Phrase, I believe in […] are never used but in

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161 *Leviathan* III, 32, pp. 196/256-257.
162 Kinch Hoekstra, “Disarming the Prophets: Hobbes and Predictive Power,” *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 21: 1 (2004), 127. Hoekstra argues that the only time Hobbes accepts a claim for access to divinity as something less than fanatical is for the first founder of a civil society, whose imposture is understandable if it is meant to set up a sovereign order. Hoekstra suggests that Hobbes equivocates on this issue, especially in the case of Moses, based on manuscript alterations in his discussion of Moses’s “sovereign enthusiasm.”
the writings of Divines. [...] and that this singularity of the Ecclesiastique use of the word hath raised many disputes about the right object of the Christian Faith. [...] And consequently, when wee Believe that the Scriptures are the word of God, having no immediate revelation from God himselfe, our Beleefe, Faith, and Trust is in the Church; whose word we take, and acquiesce therein. And they that believe that which a Prophet relates unto them in the name of God [in the Holy Scriptures] take the word of the Prophet, do honour to him, and in him trust, and believe, touching the truth of what he relateth, whether he be a true, or a false Prophet. And so it is also with all other History. [...] So that it is evident, that whatsoever we believe, upon no other reason, then what is drawn from authority of men onely, and their writings; whether they be sent from God or not, is Faith in men onely.¹⁶³

This passages is exemplary of Hobbes’s definition of faith as temporal and resistant to becoming an object of philosophic and scientific knowledge. Hobbes redefines the concepts of faith and belief—believing in the Scriptures does not foster a relationship between reader and God but instead counts as a “Faith in men onely” or “Trust [...] in the Church.” Hobbes pushes faith in God’s word to the margins; faith becomes a matter of mere relations between persons, of believing in the virtue of another person and the veracity of his message. Looking ahead to Spinoza’s epochal transformation of biblical hermeneutics in Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* if to

¹⁶³ *Leviathan* I, 7, pp. 31/48-49. Pocock argues that this passage signifies Hobbes’s signature late historicizing of faith that makes the system of authority constituted by faith rest “upon the transmission of words through time, words which constantly reiterate statements about previous utterances of the same words” (165-166).
quite different ends, Hobbes departs here sharply from Calvin, who claims that miracles are past but insists on sacred presence in Scriptures. Calvin claimed that the Scriptures must be treated as having “sprung from heaven” (statuant e coelo fluxisse), as “the living words of God” (vivae ipsae Dei voces), and that it was a “pernicious error” (perniciosissimus error) and an insult to the Holy Spirit to claim that the true of Scripture could “depend on the decision of men” (hominum arbitrio conceditur). For Calvin, faith is in part a matter of developing on affective relationship to Scripture that can “banish all doubt” (omnem dubitationem eximant) and “prepare our hearts to reverence” God’s word (animos praeparent ad eius reverentiam).164 By contrast, Faith as Hobbes defines it is inapplicable to the word of God since God’s word is wholly inaccessible. And Hobbes denies the possibility of imagining this inaccessibility itself as the grounds of a direct faith in God.

In his eagerness to prove the radical historicity of faith, Hobbes introduces the specter of interpretation, for if our belief in God is only ever a mediated belief in men, then this “singular” use of the phrase believe in cannot be univocal. As Hobbes remarks, belief in can give rises to “disputes” if faith concerns itself with relations: relations between men give rise to the question of whether the words in Scripture, what the prophet “relateth,” can be trusted and honored. Hobbes’s view of faith appropriates the contingency of people’s belief in Scripture under sovereignty authority. For Hobbes goes on to preclude the possibility of interpretative dispute by capturing the various mediations of prophecy within the figure of the ur-Prophet, Moses, who for Hobbes (as we will see

more extensively in the next section of this essay) is the embodiment of sovereignty par excellence. Indeed, Hobbes introduces a ban on interpretation altogether:

…whosoever in a Christian Common-wealth holdeth the place of Moses, is the sole Messenger of God, and Interpreter of his Commandments. And according hereunto, no man ought in the interpretation of the Scripture to proceed further than the bounds which are set by their severall Soveraigns. For the Scriptures since God now speaketh in them, are the Mount Sinai; the bounds whereof are the Laws of them that represent Gods Person on Earth. To look upon them, and therein to behold the wondrous works of God, and learn to fear him is allowed; but to interpret them; that is, to pry into what God saith to him whom he appointeth to govern under him, and make themselves Judges whether he govern as God commandeth him, or not, is to transgresse the bounds God hath set us, and to gaze upon God irreverently.  

Though I will examine how Hobbes distinguishes Moses from civil sovereigns in the next section of this chapter, for now see how Hobbes works to close the space in which antagonistic interpretations of prophetic speech and scriptural meaning might emerge by confining prophecy to a singular place with which no voice can conflict. Hobbes hopes to put an end to contestation over scriptural interpretation. Just as Moses is the “sole Messenger of God” and singular “Interpreter of his Commandments,” the sovereign is sole interpreter of Scripture, the texts of which Hobbes analogizes to “Mount Sinai” itself.

165 Leviathan III, 40, pp. 252/326.
in this passage. To read Scripture is to consent to the sovereign interpretation of it; the affect produce by the experience of reading Scripture should only be obedience to that singular interpretation.

Indeed, the singularity of sovereign determination goes even further than this, since it is the sovereign himself who constitutes what texts count as Holy Scripture. The sovereign is he who determines what counts as Scripture and determines, too, how Scripture is transformed into civil law.\textsuperscript{166} This sovereign canonization of Scripture as law is the only thing that makes scripture different from any other historical text:

By the Books of Holy Scripture, are understood those, which ought to be the \textit{Canon}, that is to say, the Rules of Christian life. And because all Rules of life, which men are in conscience bound to observe, are Laws; the question of the Scripture, is the question of what is Law throughout all Christiandome.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., III, 42, p. 297/374: “But if every Christian Soveraign be the Supreme Pastor of his Subjects, it seemeth that he hath also the Authority, not onlt to Preach (which perhaps no man will deny;) but also to Baptize, and to Administer the Sacraments of the Lords Supper; and to Consecrate both Temples, and Pastors to Gods service; which most men deny; partly because they use to do it; and partly because the Administration of Sacraments, and Consecration of Persons, and Places to holy uses, requireth the Imposition of such mens hands, as by the like Imposition successively from the time of the Apostles have been ordained to the like Ministry.”

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid. III, 33, 199/260. Noel Malcolm has argued that Hobbes’s desire for ultimate authority and interpretative univocity of Scripture resembles, though inversely, the rigidity of institutionalized Catholic hierarchies of scriptural interpretation: “Hobbes thus adopted a position precisely opposite to the old Protestant theory about the self-evidencing, self-authenticating nature of Scripture as divine revelation. […] Hobbes was thus adopting a version of the Catholic position—albeit one in which the authority of the Church was strictly subordinated to that of the political ruler. As some commentators on Hobbes have noted, there was a general congruence between his political theory and the Catholic theory of scriptural and doctrinal interpretation: in both, the need for an ultimate
Scripture becomes for Hobbes a supreme instance of the operation by which the civil sovereign persuades subjects that they have assented to and authored their own obedience, having made “Artificiall Chains, called Civill Lawes, which they themselves, by mutual covenants, have fastened at one end, to the lips of that Man, or Assembly, to whom they have given the Soveraigne Power; and at the other end to their own ears.”

authority was paramount” (Noel Malcolm, “Leviathan and Biblical Criticism,” Leviathan after 350 Years, ed. Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), pp. 256-257; cf. p. 261 on how Hobbes’s philology presupposes God as “unattainable and unknowable, and thus caus[es] the Scriptures to be essentially indistinguishable form any other human writing.”). See also Arrigo Pacchi, “Hobbes and Biblical Philology in Service of the State,” 233. Macpherson encompasses this doctrine of univocal interpretation—as a ban on interpretation—within his larger argument about Hobbes’s “self-perpetuating” model of sovereignty (C. B. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke, Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), pp. 90-95). Strauss (Political Philosophy of Hobbes, p. 73) has shown lucidly but controversially that this univocity of the sovereign’s interpretation of scripture is unique to Leviathan, contrasting sharply with earlier works which allowed for more equivocation if not outright “dispute”; in Elements of Law and De Cive, by contrast, Hobbes had taken lengths to defend the Episcopal constitution of the Church of England and therefore the Church’s claim to be an interpreter of scripture in potential competition with the sovereign. As Strauss shows, there are “diametrically opposed interpretations of Acts xiv. 23 in the Elements and the Leviathan,” e.g.: compare Elements, II, 7.8 (where Hobbes writes: “And Acts 14, 23, the disciples are said to ordain elders for all the congregations of the cities they have preached in”) with Lev III, 42, 290/366: “We read (Acts 14.23) that they ordained Elders in every Church; which at first sight may be taken for an Argument, that they themselves chose, and gave them their authority: But if we consider the Originall text, it will be manifest, that they were authorized, and chosen by the Assembly of the Christians of each City,” that is, by the sovereign representative. This is an evolution in Hobbes’s thinking that tends towards further and further accumulation of all interpretive power under sovereign authority, which Tuck has also mapped in “Hobbes’s ‘Christian Atheism,’” pp. 123-125: “the civil sovereign and not the Church has the right to interpret Scripture,” and “this power was essentially the same as civil sovereigns had enjoyed before the coming of Christianity.”

168 Leviathan II, 21, p. 109/147. Lev II, 21, p. 109/147. For an interpretation of this passage in light of Lucian’s fable of Hercules (in which he is leading a crowd with a chain connecting their ears to his tongue, a popular topos among writers of mid-16th-c. emblem books), see Quentin Skinner, Hobbes and Republican Liberty, 170.

With the enunciation of Scripture’s text as canonized law, convincing subjects to “fasten” the “lips” of the sovereign to their own “ears,” the state turns the fissures of dispute that the singularity of the Christian concept of believe in has created into fixed grids and pathways of desacralized scriptural text. “Religion,” as Hobbes notes, “as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole, have the vertue to cure; but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect.” Religion only cures if it is consumed in its totality, not broken down and interpreted, or vomited back up in abjection without having the medicinal effect the sovereign desires. In other words, fanatics don’t take their medicine; they chew their “pills” and thereby interpret religious texts in such a way that they are not “cured” of their resistance to the state’s monopoly on violence.

II. Philological Appropriations of Eschatology

Seeing therefore Miracles now cease, we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended Revelations, or Inspirations of any private man, nor obligation to give ear to any Doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures, which since the time of our Saviour, supply the place, and sufficiently recompense the want of all other Prophecy.\(^\text{170}\)

With this conclusion to his chapter on the “Principles of Christian Politiques,” Hobbes excludes prophetic speech from the present, marking prophecies and miracles as absent spaces, lacunae for which Holy Scriptures “supply the place” and in that supplying

\(^{169}\) Leviathan III, 32, p. 195/256.
become, as canonized by the civil sovereign, the foundation for law. Though the doctrine
despite the cessation of miracles was widespread in the Renaissance since at least Calvin,
Hobbes bends this ban to his own ends, making it a pretext for total obedience. The
canonization of Scripture as the laws of the commonwealth forecloses the possibility of
an interpretative power that might compete with that of the civil sovereign. Without such
interpretative power, fanaticism has no place from which to act. The etymology of
Hobbes’s supply, from Latin sub-plere (supplent in Hobbes’s Latin translation of
Leviathan: to fill from under), resonates evocatively with an essential scriptural
concept: fullness. Pleroma in the Greek New Testament and plentitudo in the Vulgate
refer to the “fullness” or “fulfillment” that the incarnation of Christ in corporeal form
manifests in the world; these terms also, inversely, refer to the body of believers, the
collectivity that is filled with the presence and power of Christ. But this etymological
resonance between Hobbes’s supply and the Biblical pleroma/plentitudo is perverse.

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172 See Hobbes, Opera 3:269: “Cessantibus autem iam pridem miraculis, signum, quo revelationem, aut inspirationem hominis cuiusquam privati cognoscamus, aut ad doctrinam eius recupiendam obligemur, habemus nullum, praeter Scripturas sacras, quae a temore apostolorum miraculorum locum supplent, et prophetiae cessationem satis compensant.”
173 See Colossians 2:9-10, KJV: “For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.” Vulgate: quia in ipso inhabitat omnis plenitudo divinitatis corporaliter et estis in illo repleti qui est caput omnis principatus et potestatis. Greek Bible: oti en auto katoikei pan to pleroma tes theotetos somatikos, kai este en auto pepleromenoi, os estin e kephale pases arches kai exousias. Hobbes evacuates this particular term – fulfillment – of its meaning in a reading of Mark 1:15, reducing the coming of Christ to a mere announcement of “good news”: “And our Saviour preached, saying, The Time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, Repent and Believe the Evangel, that is, the Good news that the Christ was come. Therefore to Repent, and to Beleeve that Jesus is the Christ, is all that is required to Salvation” (Leviathan III, 43, p. 329/412).
With Holy Scriptures “supplying the place” of prophetic speech and Christ’s presence, Hobbes has rendered belief a relationship not one between men and Christ but between men only: between writers, the transmitters of their texts, and readers, all of whose experience of the Holy Scriptures is defined univocally by the sovereign’s interpretation of Scripture. The fullness of an experience of Christ could not be further mediated and distanced from the reader of Scripture, and this is, as we will see, exactly how Hobbes wanted it. Christ’s presence has been evacuated from the “now.” The now (Christ’s eternal temporality) has been evacuated from Christ. And this dual evacuation has political ramifications that Hobbes was determined to use to his advantage. I focus in this section on how Hobbes, despite the analogy he draws between Moses and the civil sovereign, contrasts Moses (and all other prophets before Saul) with civil sovereigns in his history of Jewish kingship. Furthermore, I examine how Hobbes constructs eschatology in such a way that the justice Christ’s kingdom promises to bring into the world is infinitely deferred and, therefore, can render no sufficient reason for religious resistance to state obedience. In this elaboration of eschatology, Hobbes offers a negative image of fanatics as those that fundamentally misread the temporality of Christ’s return and kingship.

Hobbes understands the origin of a civil commonwealth as the consequence of a break with the Mosaic tradition in politics. Though sovereignty is derivable from the a-historical laws of science, kings come to dominate politics at a particular historical moment with the election of Saul. In Hobbes’s reading of the Jewish Holy Nation’s

174 My argument here is indebted to Pocock, who argues (with a power of attention to Hobbes’s entwining of religious and political thought with which scholars are still struggling to catch up) that “Moses becomes the lieutenant of God in a way in which the
transformation into a civil government, the lineage of prophets that follows from Moses is deposed and replaced with civil sovereigns. The key text for Hobbes here is I Samuel 8.5-8: “Now [the Jewish people demand] appoint a king to judge us, such as all the other nations have,” and God responds to Samuel:

Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.¹⁷⁵

civil sovereign can never be, since in the natural world God rules through reason and not through positive and peculiar command. […] With the death of Eli the line of the ruling high priests ended, and the misdeeds of the children of Samuel caused the people to lose faith in the prophetic succession in a way that proved irrevocable. Samuel – who was soon to pronounce the old law at an end – presided over that most controversial moment in pre-Exilic history as seen through seventeenth-century Christian eyes, the election of Saul to be king in the manner of the Gentiles. Innumerable were the emphases which could be selected in interpreting this event, and Hobbes’s treatment can be seen as it were suspended between two of them: emphasis that it constituted a ‘rejection’ and ‘deposition’ of God from his direct kingship over Israel, and insistence that this nevertheless occurred with his permission and consent, so that the authority of kings was not merely natural, but had his express positive sanction (Pocock, “Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes,” 170-171). See also Pacchi, “Biblical Philology in Service of the State,” 37, where he argues that according to Hobbes “the civil nature of this divine sovereignty was emphasized by the fact that it ended at the point when the Jews passed from the rule of Priests to a true human monarchy, after the political crisis at the time of the Judges.” Compare Schmitt’s comment about the movement away from Mosaic to earthly sovereignty: “Hobbes regarded Jews as the originators of the revolutionary state-destroying distinction between religion and politics,” in Carl Schmitt, The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), p.10.

¹⁷⁵ In the Vulgate, the term God uses to describe his rejection by the Jews in their demand for an earthly king is abiecerunt, from abicio, meaning to throw or hurl down violently.
The civil kings that follow Saul are confirmed as rulers of God’s people, but they are sovereigns only because of this forsaking of god, products of a fall into rule by kings who have no direct contact with God:

It is therefore manifest enough by this one place, that by the *Kingdome of God*, is properly meant a Common-wealth, instituted (by consent of those which were to be subject thereto) for their Civill Government [...] which properly was a Kingdome, wherein God was King, and the High priest was to be (after the death of Moses) his sole Viceroy, or Lieutenant. But there are many other places that clearly prove the same. As first (I Sam. 8.7) when the Elders of Israel (grieved with the corruption of the Sons of Samuel) demanded a King, Samuel displeased therewith, prayed unto the Lord [...] Out of which is evident, that God himself was then their King; and Samuel did not command the people, but only delivered to them that which God from time to time appointed him.\(^{176}\)

For Hobbes this is a situation in which the demand for a king is cast as an explicit rebellion against God even though God authorizes it. Speaking in the voice of the prophet, Hobbes glosses this paradoxical situation thus: “I will reign over you, and make you to stand to that Covenant which you made with me by Moses, and brake in your rebellion against me in the days of Samuel, and in your election of another King.”\(^{177}\) In Hobbes’s reading, God authorizes the election of civil sovereigns only until the second coming of Christ. In these passages Hobbes’s civil sovereign emerges historically

\(^{176}\) *Leviathan* III, 35, pp. 218/282-283.

\(^{177}\) Ibid.
through a transgression against God’s will. The king, after Saul, must of course be obeyed as fully as the direct lieutenants of God from Moses to Samuel were obeyed. Yet this sovereign is nonetheless a product of that which Hobbes most fears and disdains: rebellion. According to what Eric Nelson has described as Hobbes’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Renaissance Judaic midrash on the book of Samuel, only God was meant originally to be sovereign.

The difficulty of sovereignty’s historical origins does not end there. Not only does sovereignty originate in rebellion against God; it also embeds rebellion against sovereignty as a possibility for action grounded in religion. Hobbes repeats in several occasions his explication of these passages from I Samuel. Returning to his discussion of Jewish rebellion later in *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes:

> And afterwards when they demanded a King, after the manner of the nations; yet it was not with a design to depart from the worship of God their King; but despairing of the justice of the sons of Samuel, they would have a King to judg them in Civill actions; but not that they would allow their King to change the

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178 Cf. Pocock again, who is one of the only scholars to have attended to this aspect of Hobbes’s thought: “It would on the whole appear that a kingdom of men legitimated by nature exists only in an interlude of sin and rebellion against God. The king reigns in God’s absence, but that absence is caused by the king’s election” (Pocock, “Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes,” 172). Pocock argues Hobbes genuinely believes this history of rebellion and the origins of kingship, whereas I claim that it is a strategy on Hobbes’s part to create a vision of eschatology that undermines any attempt for religion to authorize disobedience from sovereign civil power. Admittedly, this is a different kind of rebellion than Hobbes worries about in his own age; whereas the rebellion against God is meant to institute a king as sovereign, the forms of rebellion that Hobbes battled were meant to get rid of kingship altogether – rebellion was regicide rather than the institution of a king.

Religion which they thought was recommended to them by Moses. So that they always kept in store a pretext, either of Justice, or Religion, to discharge themselves of their obedience, whensoever they had hope to prevaile.\textsuperscript{180}

Even after the rebellion against God that produces a monarchical position to which total obedience is due, the possibility of rebellion is “kept in store”; according to Hobbes, religion or justice (and he seems almost to conflate the two terms here) can still be a pretext “to discharge themselves of their obedience.” One could argue, then, that after Saul the Kings of the Hebrew Bible have not achieved sovereignty—sovereignty can only exist insofar as there is no pretext for disobedience—but the demand for a king is the historical condition of possibility for earthly sovereignty to exist. Hobbes’s mode of historicizing religion thus posits the possibility of rebellion grounded in religious reasons at the origin of civil government. Disobedience, the original sin of politics in the election of Saul, is civil sovereignty’s unsettling condition of possibility, at least in the Jewish example that remains so central for Hobbes.\textsuperscript{181}

Hobbes deciphers this original disobedience only to foreclose it, however, by redefining the concept of the second coming of Christ. The return of Christ will not bring the Messianic Age, Hobbes claims, but will instead restore the kingdom that existed from Moses’s rule through to Samuel. The return of Christ will redeem the original sin of political disobedience. It will save not souls but political order. Hobbes seldom employs

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Leviathan} III, 40.

\textsuperscript{181} The Erastian conclusions of Hobbes’s reading of Samuel are not unique for the period, but his emphasis on the sin of Israelite theocracy being in the demand for a mortal king was more or less unprecedented, and, as Nelson (\textit{The Hebrew Republic}, 25) has shown, it was met with more hostility by Hobbes’s contemporaries than just about any other passage in \textit{Leviathan}. 

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typology in his writings, but one glaring exception is the typology he draws between Moses and Christ. With this typological connection, Hobbes defines the second coming of Christ as a restoration of the form of divine, non-civil sovereign rule that existed before the rebellious election of Saul. When Hobbes asks “to what end was his [Christ’s] first coming?” he answers: “It was to restore unto God, by a new Covenant, the Kingdom, which being his by the Old Covenant, had been cut off by the rebellion of the

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182 This typology is made most explicit in Hobbes’s analogizing of the annual sacrifice of a goat required by God in Leviticus under the old Mosaic law with the sacrifice of Christ as “scape goat” (Leviathan, III, 41, pp. 261/332-333). It is a typology that also informs Hobbes’s bold recasting of the Trinity as a relationship of Moses, Christ, and Apostles (rather than father, son and holy ghost); see Leviathan III, 42, p. 267/339. “Hobbes calls Christ’s second coming “like (in Office) to Moses,” a “similitude with Moses” (Leviathan III, 41, p. 264/336). See also the passage already quoted above in Lev III, 42, p. 267/339: “Here we have the Person of God born now the third time. For as Moses, and the High Priests, were Gods Representative in the Old Testament; and our Savior himselfe as Man, during his abode on earth: So the Holy Ghost, that is to say, the Apostles, and their successors, in the office of Preaching, and Teaching, that had received the Holy Spirit, have Represented him ever since. But a Person, (as I have shewn before, chapt. 13) is he that is Represented; and therefore God, who has been Represented (that is, Personated) thrice, may properly enough be said to be three Persons.” On Hobbes’s antitrinitarianism in chapter 42 of the English Leviathan as a form of “modalisme juridique” that denies the distinctions between the persons of God (i.e., the different person are really just modes that express specific functions of God) and on Hobbes’s less heterodox revisions in his Latin translation, see Alexandre Matheron, “Hobbes, la Trinité et les caprices de la representation,” in Thomas Hobbes: Philosophie première, théorie de la science et politique, ed. Yves Charles Zarka et Jean Bernhardt, éds. Paris: Presses universitaires de France (1990), 381-390. For a defense of Hobbes as sincere Trinitarian, see A. P. Martinich, The Two Gods of Leviathan, 203-208. On how the relationship between Hobbes theory of the economic Trinity and his doctrine of representation occludes any inquiry into the immanent Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost (which would be consistent with Hobbes’s account of the unknowability of God), see George Wright, “Hobbes and the Economic Trinity,” Religion, Politics and Thomas Hobbes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 211-250. For Hobbes’s attempt to unearth a pre-Boethian definition of persona in Cicero (person not as substance but as someone acting on behalf of another that would justify) as a method of justifying his ideas about the Trinity (and to explain how these ideas do not contradict his rejection of Arianism), see Monica Brito Vieira, “Representation in Theology,” The Elements of Representation in Hobbes: Aesthetics, Theatre, Law and Theology in the Construction of Hobbes’s Theory of the State (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 209-234.
Israelites in the election of Saul.” The first coming of Christ for Hobbes has nothing to do with the redemption of mankind’s original sinfulness, still less to do with the entrance of grace and forgiveness into the world, as it did for nearly every major Reformer or Counter-Reformer of the period. What the first coming of Christ offers for Hobbes is a promise of restoration of the old covenant, the covenant that precedes the rule of men by earthly kings.

Yet this restoration of the old covenant in Christ’s first coming is marked only by the promise of Christ’s return; Hobbes brackets the entire question of the resurrection and defers it to the second coming, since Christ’s kingdom can only be the restoration of the divine monarchy that will make sovereignty unnecessary: “so that it were superfluous to say in our prayer, Thy Kingdom come, unlesse it be meant of the Restauration of that Kingdome of God by Christ, which by revolt of the Israelites had been interrupted in the election of Saul.” Hobbes goes to great length to clarify what this second coming will look like. The kingdom of Christ’s second coming will be exclusively on earth, in a prolongation of the material world as we know it, since Hobbes’s monism requires that he discredit any belief in a spiritual kingdom that is not corporeal, just as he had earlier discredited the existence of incorporeal substances even when attributed to divinity or heaven. Christ’s kingdom will take place in an indefinite extension of the time we know now, the time of material, earthly existence, rather than in a new messianic or eschatological time. Hobbes dismisses the idea of a messianic eternity, a “Nunc-stans” in

183 Leviathan, III 41, p. 263/334.
184 Ibid. III, 35, pp. 219/283-284. The radical nature of this claim that the Lord’s Prayer is superfluous should not be underestimated. For an argument for the essential nature of this prayer (“Thy kingdom come”), see Calvin’s Institutes II.xx.43.
185 Leviathan III, 38, p. 246/317.
which “eternity is the standing still of the present time,” as incoherent and absurd (“neither they [the scholastics] nor anyone else understand” what nunc stans means).\footnote{Ibid, IV, 46, p. 374/466.}

And, finally, Hobbes defers indefinitely the Christian kingdom to the time of the second coming of Christ and Resurrection: “the Kingdome of Christ is not to begin until the general Resurrection.”\footnote{Ibid, III, 41, p. 262/333.}

With this three-fold redefinition of millenarian principals, Hobbes renders the possibility of disobedience on the grounds of justice or religion a moot point, since only with the coming of the Resurrection will the end of sovereignty be in sight, and until then religion and the Scripture’s canonization as law are defined and interpreted only by the sovereign. The pretext of disobedience that had been “stored up” in the origin of sovereignty is here rendered inoperative, for citizens cannot hope to “prevail” without sovereign rule—that is, their disobedience is entirely unjustified—until the second coming of Christ creates a Christian kingdom. The first coming, therefore, promised a restoration of a prior kingdom only in an indefinitely deferred future; no action in the present could transform the world to make it a redeemed one. With this gesture, Hobbes takes a central premise of radical millenarian thinking in 17th-century England (that actions in the world could encourage the overthrow of earthly sovereignty and accelerate the coming of Christ’s kingdom) and seeks to empty it of content. In his Behemoth, Hobbes describes as fanatics those who interpreted the radical otherness of the nunc-stans of messianic time and the promise of grace as justification for disobeying political
Christ’s second coming for Hobbes turns out to be just an attempt to rethink Christ as the most perfect sovereign, a formal restoration of the “place of Moses” that precludes indefinitely any disobedience.

The extreme lengths to which Hobbes is willing to go to re-appropriate Christ to the logic of sovereignty may be perhaps best viewed in the following interpretation of the words of Jesus in Luke 18:20: “[...]our Saviour added, Sell all thou hast, give it to the Poor, and come and follow me: which was as much as to say, Relye on me that am the King” (xliii, 19). Hobbes’s gloss takes the form of an allegorical reading of Scripture common through the Middle Ages that Hobbes so despises and performs it at a parodic extreme. Christ’s demand for radical charity, the redistribution of material wealth, and his calling of disciples to organize in a movement that directly questions political power becomes, in Hobbes interpretation, confirmation of sovereignty: “Relye on me that am the King.” Hobbes brings Christ back to this earth, corrals him within earthly temporality, only to postpone his arrival into an infinitely deferred second coming that is really a return to a divine form of sovereignty. Religious radicals in Hobbes’s time often took this passage from Luke as a justification to disobey a law or practice that contradicted justice and charity. For these radicals whom Hobbes defamed as fanatics, eschatology could

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188 *Behemoth*, 291: “a great number of Sects, as Brownists, Anabaptists, Independents, Fifth Monarchy men, and Quakers, and divers others, all commonly called by the name of Fanaticks.”

189 *Leviathan* III, 43, p. 329/412.

190 For an overview of medieval allegorical exegetical strategies for uncovering the “spiritual understanding” of scripture, see de Lubac, esp. ch. 8.

justify faith in a better way of living in this world, leading many to try to make the secular world conform to the messianic one to come. The experience of reading Scripture could inspire a desire to make the world more merciful—a readerly affect that contradicts the obedience that Hobbes believes Scripture should instill. But all of this is rendered obsolete in Hobbes’s redefinition of eschatology: the second coming of Jesus is not a fulfillment of charity, forgiveness and generosity—a spiritual existence that exceeds and breaks from the justice of kings. Rather, for Hobbes, Christ’s return and his charity—in short: his love—are reduced to “relying” on a king.

Hobbes’s sovereignty may depend on subjects that are in “perpetuall solici[t]ude of the time to come”—in his genealogy of the origins of religion in Book I, section 12, Hobbes claims that the natural cause of religion is the “anxiety of the time to come”—but for Hobbes, any attempt to “care of future time,” to transform through the present political situation through ethical claims rooted in faith or scripture, will bring nothing but anxiety and the “kingdome of darkness” in which fanatics could proliferate. In our anxiety toward the time to come, Hobbes argues that we are like Prometheus, with our heart and livers “gnawed on” every day and repaired proportionally at night. For Hobbes, we must abide this suffering. If there is a way to calm it, that way is obedience. There is no possibility of soliciting effectively the time to come, or of becoming the passive instrument of God’s divine, apocalyptic violence—that is to say, there is no way

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Men”: “And when the Son of man, was gone from the Apostles, his Spirit descended upon the Apostles and Brethren, as they were waiting at Jerusalem; and Rich men sold their Possessions, and gave part to the Poor; and no man said, That ought that he possessed was his own, for they had all things Common” (Ibid. 88).

192 Leviathan I, 12
to solicit Christ’s second coming, not least because it will in fact be an extension of the time we now know, not the coming of a radically different, messianic temporality.

The fact that Hobbes envisions sovereignty as an interlude that exists from Saul till the second coming presupposes the eventual deposition of the sovereign in some undisclosed future, but in such a way that human actors can and should never participate in that deposition. In Hobbes’s vision of eschatology, citizens can never participate in the coming of the millennium by way of earthly disobedience grounded in religious principles or texts. Hobbes undercuts the spiritual premises of rendering divine will and messianism into earthly time. Any attempt to bring about the messianic end, or to reform the world to make the coming of messianic time possible, is fanaticism in its most unadulterated form. Fanaticism is reduced to a deluded, untenable position, since the return of the messiah for Hobbes is the proper fulfillment of earthly civil sovereignty, not a radical break with or spiritual transformation of it.

Fanatics in Hobbes are bad, irrational readers, readers who are affectively moved to disobey because of their ignorantly or willfully deluded interpretations of Scripture. They are the madmen at the outworks, having lost the capacity to experience in the reading of Scripture the call to obedience. The construction of the category of the fanatic in Hobbes is tied to a rational discipline: readers are shaped to be rational citizens and that reason demands that they become citizens who obey. What are the costs of Hobbes’s definition of fanaticism? Rather than considering religiously inspired disobedience as a product of modes of reading that refuse to bind themselves to state obedience, Hobbes dismisses fanatics as madmen. It is this conflation, its consequences, and the illegibility of fanatics’ motivations to which I now turn.
III. Illegible Conscience and the Passion of Thought

Despite Hobbes’s redefinition of the historical origin (if not logical derivation) of sovereignty and eschatology, Hobbes still depicts Scripture as the outworks at which the battle between sovereign and fanaticism takes place. In this last section, I explore how Hobbes returns to the topography of interior and exterior that we first glimpsed in the epistolary dedication to *Leviathan* in his attempt to settle the competition for power between religion and civil authority through his construction of the public and private spheres. This is a construction that initially seems, as it will later be reworked in Locke’s theory of an “infinite difference” or “absolute separation” between the claims of religion and the claims of the state,\(^{193}\) to reduce religion’s presence within the state to the private interiority of the subjects it produces. Yet Carl Schmitt located in Hobbes’s private/public distinction a “barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state”; it “contained the seed of death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within and brought about the end of the moral god.”\(^{194}\) Once pried further apart, this crack may lead to the development of the liberal state, at least in Schmitt’s narrative of decline. But the image of this barely visible crack in the outworks of sovereignty’s self-defense also offers an opportunity to view Hobbes’s depictions of excessive internality and private attachment

\(^{193}\) Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 33. On the privatization of religion as a form of depoliticization, see Brown, 1-47. For a Foucaultian critique of the privatization of belief in the history of liberalism that calls into question its definition of and prioritization of freedom as subjective agency, see Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*.

\(^{194}\) Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 57. On conscience as the most dangerous metaphor for Hobbes, see Feldman. See also Alan Ryan’s “Hobbes, Toleration, and the Inner Life” and Tuck, “Hobbes and Locke on Toleration.”
as failures fully to exclude the fanatic from the state. I claim that the fanatic haunts the
Hobbesian state from within; it fugitively slips into the private/public division that
Hobbes feels the need to defend.

By arguing that the religious fanatic poses a problem that Hobbes cannot quite
solve, I do not intend to say that fanaticism is an issue that simply leads Hobbes into
paradox or aporia, or that fanaticism is a problem that the rigor of his philosophical
system cannot countenance. Hobbes often seems satisfied with reasoning backward from
the evidence of a revolution to condemn fanatics, but he never seems satisfied that
fanatics can be fully contained. The fanatic becomes the site for a series of
epistemological and political problems that Hobbes continually returning to resolve about
the limits of sovereign power’s efficacy.

Hobbes’s private/public distinction emerges in his attempt to prove the non-
existence of miracles. There he claims that we may not confess belief in miracles in the
present, since confession is by necessity a matter of public reason. But in this very
exclusion, Hobbes prioritizes interiority as a site that sovereignty cannot influence:

And the question is no more, whether what wee see done, be a Miracle; whether
the Miracle we hear, or read of, were a reall work, and not the Act of a tongue, or
pen; but in plain terms, whether the report be true, or a lye. In which question we
are not every one, to make our own private Reason, or Conscience, but the
Publique Reason, that is, the reason of Gods Supreme Lieutenant, Judge; and
indeed we have made him Judge already, if wee have given him a Sovereign
power, to doe all that is necessary for our peace and defense. A private man has
always the liberty, (because thought is free,) to beleeve, or not beleeve in his heart, those acts that have been given out for Miracles, according as he shall see, what benefit can accrew by mens belief, to those that pretend, or countenance them, and thereby conjecture, whether they be Miracles, or Lies. But when it comes to confession of that faith, the Private Reason must submit to the Publique, that is to say, to Gods Lieutenant. 195

In this passage, Hobbes takes the outworks of Scripture and projects its locus onto the human heart. Impugning civil authority becomes a possibility within the heart of every believing citizen, so long as each also submits to public reason. One cannot cite a passage from Scripture to justify the existence of miracles in public, but one can believe it in one’s heart, in the space of private conscience. Witness in conscience a similar topographical ambiguity to that of the outworks: conscience is within the realm of civil authority, but it is also (uniquely in Leviathan—no other discussion of conscience has this aspect) outside of that realm insofar as it bears a “liberty” that the sovereign cannot determine or restrict. 196 While Hobbes maintains that disputes that take place at the outworks of Scripture need to be appropriated by the sovereign, he still feels that questions of belief, when restricted to the heart of “a private man,” bear a particular “liberty” that the sovereign cannot appropriate, so long as those beliefs, and the disputes

195 Leviathan III, 38, p. 238/306.
196 Hobbes’s original discussion of conscience in Elements of Law II.6 is very different; there he reduces conscience to mere opinion, opinion that is only settled insofar as it is determined by the public will. For a reading of this passage that claims there is no internal conscience in Hobbes that is not already a function of sovereign judgment, see Tuck, “Hobbes and Democracy,” esp. 175, n.11. Tuck illustrates that the people as such do not even exist until united in the sovereign (see Elements 1.19.8).
they may raise, are not turned into “public” confessions of faith. Michael Walzer has influentially read Hobbes’s concept of private judgment and belief a “secularized reduction of the Calvinist conscience.” Yet it is possible as well to see in Hobbes description of a private/public distinction a problem for sovereignty: what if interiority can become a potential site of fugitive evasion of sovereign authority? What if, despite being refused the capacity to confess in public, private individuals store up pretexts of disobedience? This is the paradox of conscience for Hobbes: conscience, by not being confessed, should have no influence on the political, and yet conscience becomes a site of potential resistance to public reason that sovereignty can neither know nor persuade to another position.

To understand conscience as a problem for sovereign authority, one that cannot be wholly reduced to the privatization of belief, it is necessary briefly to explore Hobbes’s definition of wisdom, passion, and reading in the introduction to *Leviathan*, for it is there that Hobbes calls conscience into question in advance and defines state-authorized wisdom as a mode of reading:

There is another saying not of late understood, by which they might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is, *Nosce teipsum, Read thy self*: which was not meant, as it is now used, to countenance, either the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie behaviour towards their betters; But to teach us, that for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and

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Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, feare* &c., and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and Passions of all other men, upon the like occasions. [...] the characters of mans heart, blotted and confounded as they are, with dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines, are legible onely to him that searcheth hearts.\(^{198}\)

Hobbes famously translates the Greek inscription from the Delphic oracle’s temple in an unusual way; *gnothi seauton* makes its way with fidelity into Hobbes’s Latin rendering, *Nosce teipsum*, which Hobbes then renders in English not as “know thyself” but as “read thyself.”\(^{199}\) In the earlier *Elements of Law*, Hobbes paraphrases *nosce teipsum* as “reading over orderly one’s own conceptions” (a better way to avoid error than reading books), but here in *Leviathan* Hobbes and simply translates *nosce teipsum* as “read thyself.”\(^{200}\)

Knowledge is converted to reading—or reading something (not just, not even primarily books) is the primary process by which one knows. By reading oneself and one’s experience of the passions (divorced from the objects of the passions), one can compare one’s own feelings with every other man’s. Hobbes depicts a model of drawing a “similitude of the thoughts”: by reading one’s own passions, one can know the passions every man “upon the like occasions.” Hobbes thus outlines a model of reading that evades the process of interpretation that he later shows to be so disruptive to sovereign power in his biblical commentaries. The act of reading here is an activity of the

\(^{198}\) *Leviathan* Introduction, p.2/10.

\(^{199}\) Hobbes translation was almost certainly intentional, since there is no lack of evidence to demonstrate his tremendous capacity to translate classical Latin and Greek.

\(^{200}\) See *Elements* V.14, 39.
commonwealth rather than a private, reflective act. Hobbes turns this privative reflective act of “reading oneself” into a process for recognizing what is publically known through reason. Reading thyself here is codified; Hobbes’s translation turns reading not into a revelation of self-knowledge per se (the “reading over orderly one’s own conceptions” of the *Elements*), but rather into a recognition of the position, as reasonable citizen, that the sovereign has already constituted. The inhabiting of this position makes each reader legible to the sovereign. Despite all the deceits that obscure the actual character of other humans’ passions, Hobbes’s proposes a model of reflexive reading here that can render the passions of others legible. For Hobbes, reading cannot be separated from the question of authorship itself, and the relationship between representation and sovereignty hangs on this concept of authorship. In chapter 16 especially, Hobbes refuses to differentiate between person and actor, *prosopon* and *persona*, and thereby expands theatrical space beyond the localized and objectified one of the theater itself in a model of authorship and authority that figures personhood as an unstable, mutable nexus of conflicting desires and determinations, the meaning of self-authorship always relayed out of the self bound to sovereign authority: “For it is the unity of the Representer, not the *Unity of the Represented*, that maketh the Person *One*. And it is the Representer that beareth the Person, and but one Person: And *Unity*, cannot otherwise be understood in Multitude.”

Within the series of postures that persons possess distinctively as their “own,” Hobbes’s nonmimetic notion of representation makes persons into the authors both of their own subjecthood and subjection, confounding origin and agency by turning “every one” into an author but ultimately binding each individual's self-authoring capacity to a unity that

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201 *Leviathan* I, p. 82/114.
never coincides with itself— the “Unity” of the sovereign that represents the represented as an asymmetrically disabled other who has no influence on how he is impersonated.202

Our singularity as unities, as “legible” individuals whose passions can be read by a method based on similitude, depends on this notion of nonmimetic “representation.” But what if this notion of internal unity, which is required for the public/private distinction already discussed, becomes illegible and thereby cannot be appropriated to the logic of “similitude” by which sovereignty “beareth the Person”? Hobbes raises this question in his distinction between private belief and public confession. In hopes of dismissing the possibility, he declares that it is only a figure of “madness” who exhibits an excess or illegibility of passions:

to have stronger, and more vehement Passions for any thing, than is ordinarily seen in others, is that which men call MADNESSE. […] For they will clamour, fight against, and destroy those, by whom all their life-time before, they have been protected, and secured from injury. And if this be Madnesse in the Multitude, it is the same in every particular man. For as in the middest of the sea, though a man perceive no sound of that part of the water next him; yet he is well assured, that part contributes as much, to the Roaring of the Sea, as any other part, of the same quantity: so also, though wee perceive no great unquietnesse, in one,

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or two men; yet we may be well assured, that their singular Passions, are part of
the Seditious roaring of a troubled Nation.203

Madness at the level of individual and multitude is constituted by an excess of vehement
Passions—that is, a noncoincidence of sovereign and private passions—that empty one’s
mind (vehement comes from Latin vehe-mens, lacking mind204). This excess makes an
individual or a multitude illegible in the process of analogous reading that sovereignty’s
command to “read thyself” demands. Hobbes contends that we “may be well assured”
that such individuals are part of a “Seditious roaring,” but Hobbes’s “may be well” itself
introduces a degree of doubt into the knowledge proposed, especially when it follows the
already-tentative “he is well assured” in reference to the man at sea.205 We may be well
assured, but we also may well not be: Hobbes notes that the madman, like the smallest
movement of water at sea, is ultimately imperceptible (“though a man perceive no sound
of that part of the water next him,” “though wee perceive no great unquietnesse, in one,
or two men”), despite the fact that he demands we presuppose a kind of knowledge of
these entities in their collective forms. The madman, that is to say the fanatic, too,
becomes like a wave in the sea, not perceivable in its singular unity, and likewise
illegible to a reader of hearts. The madman as a figure of passionate interiority exceeds
the model of conscience as private belief, a model that is meant to prohibit disruption or

203 Leviathan I, 8, pp. 36/54-55.
205 I do not claim with certainty that Hobbes’s “may” is meant to be at all tentative here; more likely it is meant to be an invitation to assurance. But the equivocation of the term allows us to see “may” in contrast with the certainty of is, even if that is not at all the intention we might logically project behind this sentence.
dispute. Even though his “unquietnesse” cannot be perceived, it contributes to the collective roar. Overwhelmed by passion, the madman is overtaken by a violence that cannot be reduced to action or passion; his excess or idiosyncrasy of vehement passions renders the actions he would take against the state something other than intentional and reasoned. He is, as Hobbes will shortly declare, a fanatic, and does not formally count as a person.  

In his *Answer to Archbishop* Bramhall, Hobbes asks, “What is a fanatic but a madman?” when he addresses Brahmhall’s objection that Hobbes “maketh very little difference between a prophet and a madman and a demoniac”\(^{207}\): the fanatic as madman threatens to become imperceptible to sovereign power, marshaling a force that cannot be appropriated. This is one of the shifts Hobbes makes to the paradigm of the fanatic. Instead of confronting the epistemological problem of the fanatic’s motivation and action or labeling the fanatic a heretic or a beast, as Martin Luther had a century earlier,\(^{208}\) Hobbes demands that we dismiss the fanatic as mad and, while doing so, he subtly alters the definition of madness from a Galenic humoral condition resembling melancholy to an excess of “vehement” passions that resembles ecstatic experience.\(^{209}\) In his exchange with Bramhall about fanatics, Hobbes defines a madman less as a specific condition and more

\(^{206}\) On madmen (along with children as fools) as incapable of being authors of their own actions, and therefore not fulfilling a necessary feature of Hobbes’s definition of person, see *Leviathan* I.16, p. 82/113.

\(^{207}\) *English Works*, vol. 4, p. 328.


as a form of pretense: “the pretence or arrogating to one’s-self Divine inspiration, is argument enough to show a man is mad.” But we cannot know whether the fanatic believes in his inspiration or not, whether he takes himself as divine instrument or is merely a demagogue performing a simulacrum of faith, precisely because the heart of the fanatic as madman is illegible. Hobbes admits that the fanatic’s motivations become unknowable, but at the same time he attempts to scorn these motivations as delusion or deception, as lack of mind, or an emptying of the rational self flooded with passions. Excesses of interiority, passions of fanatical or mad belief, emerge from the interior of the civil power as the figurations (or disfigurations) of singularities whose hearts, ultimately, cannot be read. Illegibility remains threat. On account of their singular vehement passions, fanatics are those whose hearts remain illegible in the fanum, a temple that civil power cannot penetrate.

Hobbes does not only leverage madness to exclude fringe fanatics who attack the state directly. He also uses this charge to condemn martyrs, and it is my claim that Hobbes cannot, by the time of Leviathan, avoid implicating Jesus in this madness. Hobbes’s thoughts on martyrs evolve throughout his writing. Up until and including De Cive, Hobbes still thought martyrdom—as an act of dying for Christ—was in certain instances acceptable. In that text, Hobbes sees martyrdom as a form of non-resistant disobedience that is only acceptable when one is ruled by a non-Christian. To be a

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210 English Works, vol 4, p. 327. Hobbes goes on to claim that he and Bramhall are in agreement about the great danger of fanaticism: “I think his Lordship was of my opinion; for he called those men, which in the late civil war pretended the spirit, and new light, and to be the only faithful men, fanatics; for he called them in his book, and did call them in his life-time, fanatics” (ibid. 328).
Christian ruler, the sovereign must believe in Christ. If he does not, then one can passively disobey, but only in a particular manner:

Are [non-Christian] princes to be resisted when they are not to be obeyed? [An principibus resistendum est, ubi obediendum non est?] Of course not! This is contrary to the civil agreement. What then must one do? Go to Christ through Martyrdom [Eundum ad Christum per martyrium]. If anyone thinks this a harsh thing to say, it is very certain that he does not believe with his whole heart that JESUS IS THE CHRIST, the Son of the living God (for he would long to be dissolved and to be with Christ [cuperet enim dissolvi, et esse cum Christo]), but is using a pretense [simulata] of Christian faith to try to slip out of [eludere] his Agreement to obey the commonwealth.211

In De Cive, Hobbes still understands martyrdom as self-death—as a desire to dissolve (cuperet enim dissolve) the self and be with Christ. Hobbes makes clear that this is not resistance to civil authority, but it is disobedience. To consider such a call to disobey “harsh” would be merely to use a simulata of Christian faith to elude one’s pact with the commonwealth. Interior belief becomes excessive—faith in Jesus makes obedience impossible—but can never translate into any other public action than the self-dissolution of martyrdom.

In De Cive, then, martyrdom is an exception to the universal rule of self-preservation that founds Hobbes’s anthropology. However, by the time Hobbes writes

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Leviathan, he alters his definition of martyrdom. In Leviathan, a martyr becomes “a Witnesse of the Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah; which none can be but those that conversed with him on earth, and saw him after he was risen. […] the word [martyr] signifieth nothing else, but the man that beareth Witnesse, whether he be put to death for his testimony, or not.” The definition of martyrdom has been transformed. The only self-dissolving martyrs in Leviathan are those who literally saw Christ’s death and resurrection. Anyone else is merely a “Martyr of Christ’s Witnesses”—someone who bears witness to the witnesses. Mediation returns to make contemporary martyrdom impossible—one can no longer dissolve into and be with Christ. But more than that, martyrdom is no longer actually defined by self-dissolution and death; it is not dissolution and death but testimony that matters.

Based on Hobbes’s uneasy relationship with the concept of martyrdom, let me explore a further claim: given the evolution of Hobbes account of martyrdom in Leviathan, and the solidification of his anthropology of self-preservation, Hobbes cannot account for Jesus as anything other than a fanatic or madman, and not only because he might claim access to divine inspiration or presence.213

212 Leviathan III, 42, pp. 272/344-345.
213 On Hobbes’s denial of the divinity of Christ despite his occasional reference to Christ as God and Man, see Strauss, Hobbes’s Critique of Religion, p. 71; this was also a charge that was made against Hobbes a number of times in his life: see, for example, Bramhall’s claim, which Hobbes quotes in his posthumously published final rebuttal, that Hobbes “knoweth no difference between one who is mere man, and one who is both God and man; between a Levitical sacrifice, and the all-sufficient sacrifice of the cross; between the blood of a calf, and the precious blood of the Son of God.” Hobbes’s response is characteristically dismissive: “Yes, I know there is a difference between blood and blood, but not any such as can make a difference in the case here questioned. Our Saviour’s blood was most precious, but still it was human blood; and I hope his Lordship did never think otherwise, or that it was not accepted by his Father for our redemption” (EW IV, p. 324).
Even as Hobbes transforms the definition of martyrdom in *Leviathan*, he makes it clear that the only time martyrdom (even if it is a martyrdom for the witnesses of Christ, not for Christ himself) becomes acceptable is if the *unum necessarium* as he defines it (that the only faith necessary to salvation is a faith that Jesus is the Christ) is contradicted by the sovereign: “‘Tis one Article onely, which to die for, meriteth so honorable a name; and that Article is this, that *Jesus is the Christ*; that is to say, He that hath redeemed us, and shall come again to give us salvation, and eternall life in his glorious Kingdome.”214 Yet Hobbes had earlier written, “A Covenant not to defend my selfe from force, by force, is always voyd”: no man, according to Hobbes, can transfer or otherwise abnegate the right to defend himself physically “from Death, Wounds, and Imprisonment.”215 In other words, the only two times when a citizen may actively disobey a sovereign is if he contradicts the claim that Jesus is the Christ or if the sovereign physically attempts to harm the citizen, in which case the citizen may not give up his right to resist.

These two propositions do not sit easily with each other. In the logic of *De Cive*, Hobbes can take recourse to the fact that martyrdom is an exception to law of self-preservation, but he does not do so in *Leviathan*. In *Leviathan*, the death that is involved in certain martyrdoms is not an acceptable exception to the law of self-preservation. Instead, in this later text, Hobbes tries to redefine martyrdom as witness, but cannot entirely elude the problem of death and self-dissolution.

Hobbes’s redefinition of martyrdom as witness does not work in the case of Jesus. Jesus bears witness to and gives testimony of the fact that he is the Christ, of course, but his redemption of humanity takes place precisely at the moment when he refuses to

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214 *Leviathan* III, 42, p. 272/345.
215 *Leviathan* I 14, p. 70/98.
defend himself from physical violence inflicted by the sovereign.\textsuperscript{216} That is, Jesus’s testimony is his death: his death—as precondition for Resurrection—\textit{is} the witness to the fact of his being Christ. Jesus sacrifices himself and allows the Roman state to imprison him and crucify his body so that humanity may be redeemed. Hobbes saw the potential conflict between these two claims—that we must resist the sovereign if he tries to harm us physically and that we may disobey if the sovereign contradicts that Jesus is the Christ—for the \textit{unum necessarium} requires that Jesus relinquish the right to self-protection, an act Hobbes claims is void even in the case of martyrdom in \textit{Leviathan}.

There is an irreducible tension, then, between the single necessary article of faith (Jesus is the Christ insofar as he is both incarnation and sacrificial victim) and Hobbes’s claim that we cannot give up our right to self-protection.

One counterargument would be that Hobbes grants that self-preservation is an inalienable right but that one could reasonably choose, given appropriate circumstance, not to exercise that right, and to sacrifice oneself. (I address another counterargument, about Christ’s singularity, below.) But that counterargument overlooks how fundamental self-preservation is to Hobbes’s anthropology. Self-preservation is not just an inalienable right that we may choose to exercise or not; it is the thing that, at root, drives us, and not to exercise that right and to release oneself into sacrifice or annihilation is a sign of madness. I do not point this out to say that Hobbes is being inconsistent but to claim that the annihilating martyrdom that defines Christ’s death (and on which fanatics and martyrs

\textsuperscript{216} For a brief survey of early modern accounts of whether or not Christ’s death counts as sacrifice, see Jonathan Sheehan, “Sacrifice before the Secular,” \textit{Representations} 105 (2009), 21-23. The Socianian counterargument would be that Christ's death is not actually a sacrifice necessary for salvation (Christ’s forgiveness is sufficient) but the sign of his benevolent nature.
model themselves) contradicts what Hobbes calls a “LAW OF NAURE (lex naturalis)”: “a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.”

Throughout the stages of his career, Hobbes is consistent in his insistence that self-preservation is a law of nature and that only through an extreme failure of reason could one release oneself into self-sacrifice or self-destruction. In the *Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes:


218 Once Hobbes gives up on the idea of martyrdom as exception, the one possible exception remaining to Hobbes’s insistence on self-preservation is his declaration that military defense of the state is necessary in *A Review*, and Conclusion to *Leviathan*: “To the Laws of Nature, declared in the 15. Chapter, I would have this added, *That every man is bound by Nature, as much as in him lieth, to protect in Warre, the Authority, by which he is himself protected in time of Peace*. For he that pretendeth a Right of Nature to preserve his own body, cannot pretend a Right of Nature to destroy him, by whose strength he is preserved: It is a manifest contradiction of himself. And though this Law may bee drawn by consequence, from some of those that are there already mentioned; yet the Times require to have it inculcated, and remembered” (*Lev*, p. 390/484). This exception – if it is one – does not hurt my argument, since Hobbes only declares that the possible self-sacrifice inherent in being a soldier in war is necessary insofar as one is protecting the sovereign who protects that very life in a time of peace. Hobbes claims that it would be a “contradiction of himself” if one did not fight to preserve the authority that protects oneself. Note how this particular form of self-sacrifice is acceptable for Hobbes precisely because it protects the sovereign. (See Deborah Baumgold, “Soldiers and Subjects: Hobbes on Military Service,” *History of Political Thought* (1983).)

Compare *English Works*, v. 180: “And whereas he saith the law of nature is a law without our assent, it is absurd; for the law of nature is the assent itself that all men give to the means of their own preservation.” On the complexity of Hobbes’s theory of “tacit and attributed consent” here, by which he can argue that all living have consented to the state that currently protects them, see Kinch Hoekstra, “The de fácto Turn in Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,” in *Leviathan after 350 Years*, ed. Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 33-73.
And forasmuch as necessity of nature maketh men to will and desire *bonum sibi*, that which is good for themselves, and to avoid that which is hurtful; but most of all that terrible enemy of nature, death, from whom we expect both the loss of all power, and also the greatest bodily pains in the losing.  

Even more forcefully, in *De Cive*:

> we cannot be blamed for looking out for ourselves; we cannot will to do otherwise. For each man is drawn to desire that which is Good for him and to Avoid what is bad for him, and most of all the greatest of natural evils, which is death; this happens by a real necessity of nature as powerful as that by which a stone falls downwards. […] Therefore the first foundation of natural Right is that each man protect his life and limbs as much as he can.

Self-preservation in Hobbes’s world is a law of nature akin to gravity; a man will protect himself—refuse to sacrifice or annihilate himself—as surely as a stone will fall. We could go so far as to say, noting the link Strauss draws between Hobbes’s critiques of revealed religion and natural reason, that Hobbes’s entire science depends on precluding

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220 *De Cive*, I.7, *On the Citizen* p.27: “Inter tot pericula igitur, quae quotidie a cupiditate hominum naturali uniuque eorum intenduntur, cavere sibi adeo vituperandum non est, ut aliter velle facere non possimus. Fertur enim unusquisque ad appetitionem ejus quod sibi malum est, maxime autem maximi malorum naturalium, quae est mors; idque necessitate quadam naturae non minore, quam qua fertur lapis deorsum. […] Itaque *juris naturalis fundamentum primum est, ut quis que vitam et membra sua quantum potest tueatur*” (*Opera Latina* II, p. 163).
the possibility of self-annihilation. Take, for example, the very first section of Hobbes’s first major work, *The Elements of Law*, which concludes with a fictional experiment about the annihilation of the world:

> For the understanding of what I mean by the power cognitive, we must remember and acknowledge that there be in our minds continually certain images or conceptions of the things without us, *insomuch that if a man could be alive, and all the rest of the world annihilated*, he should nevertheless retain the image thereof, and of all those things which he had before seen and perceived in it; every man by his own experience knowing that the absence or destruction of things once imagined, doth not cause the absence or destruction of the imagination itself.

In Hobbes’s very definition of knowledge and cognition, he posits the possibility of the annihilation of the entire world, but insists implicitly on the self-preserving capacity of the individual who can know. The world annihilated, an I remains with the images of that world. If in Hobbes’s universe it is a law of nature that one preserve oneself, how can

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221 See Strauss, 91.
222 *Elements I.1*, my emphasis.
223 On the importance of this annihilation of the world experiment for Hobbes, see Strauss, 92-103: through his analysis of Hobbes’s annihilation of the world fiction, Strauss returns to the fundamental human resistance to the possibility of self-annihilation: “If being is fundamentally resistibility, being must be radically understood from the most fundamental instance of resistance. But the most fundamental resistance is the resistance on the part of other men that threatens my life. Therefore, fear of violent death not only is the principle of right and of the state, but is at the same time the principle of all reasonable conduct, of all awakening to the understanding of being” (p. 104, n. 277). See also Yves Charles Zarka, “L’Annihilatio Mundi,” in *La Decision Metaphysique de*
Hobbes account for Christ’s sacrifice as anything other than a total transgression of the laws of nature and reason? Hobbes would clearly admit that self-sacrifice happens in the world, but for Christ self-sacrifice is in some sense constitutive. It constitutes the redemptive capacity of Christ the belief in which defines faith for Hobbes.

Christ renounces the single right that Hobbes demands we not renounce even if the sovereign requires us to: the ability to protect ourselves from physical force that would harm us. Regardless of whether it is the passion inspiring self-sacrifice or the act of exposing oneself to self-annihilation itself that Hobbes sees as a transgression of the law of nature, it is clear that he finds something illegible to sovereign power in sacrifice. In fulfilling his role as Christ, Jesus disobeys precisely this claim; Jesus “fulfills the law” by opening himself to the ultimate physical harm.224 This is the self-sacrifice of a fanatic. Jesus disobeys the demands of the law of nature for religious reasons, giving up the right to self-protection and releasing himself into annihilation.225

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224 See Mathew 26:54 (KJV): “But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?” This passage describes how Jesus’s renunciation of resistance at the moment of his arrest by agents of Roman sovereignty is precisely this fulfillment—again the word is from pleroma, plērōthōsin—of the law, with the law here being figured as Scriptures, graphe.

A second counterargument would be that perhaps it is Christ’s uniqueness—Hobbes equivocates on the divinity of Christ but also regularly says that Christ is uniquely both man and God—that enables Jesus alone to renounce what no one else could renounce: his own life. But this renunciation, grounded as it is in a private conviction that no public confession could fully disclose, makes Jesus a model for any fanatic or madman who threatens to become illegible to the logic of sovereign power, since that power requires a “similitude” between all men’s passions and each citizen’s ability to read them from his own. Jesus’s private belief cannot but make him a fanatic, releasing himself into a violence that at once resists and fulfills law. In Jesus’s martyrdom, we can see how Hobbes’s appropriation of the Scripture as outworks cannot expunge the possibilities that his preservation of the internal space of conviction leaves behind for disobedience to the state rooted in religious belief. The fanatic is already, it seems, inside us as potentiality. Jesus cannot comfortably be designated the exception that proves the rule of self-preservation. His capacity for self-emptying sacrifice, for kenosis, is that which all Christians are meant to imitate according to Philippians 2:5-8 (KJV), a passage which links both Christ’s incarnation and death to a refusal to preserve himself:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself
[heauton ekenōsen: emptied himself], and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Not preserving himself, as either God or man, is what makes Christ both incarnation and salvation; his openness to self-annihilation—emptying himself of divinity and, through death, of humanity too—is as important to who he is as his uniqueness as both God and man. That is to say, Christ is defined as much by what he loses as by what he is; self-abolition defines who he is. And it is the obedience to the formative principle of self-sacrifice that this passage sets out as exemplary, meant for readerly imitation: “Let this mind be in you.” This obedience unto death obviously stands in stark contrast to Hobbes’s investment in obedience and self-preservation and his characterization of Christ as the ultimate sovereign. And though Hobbes’s counterargument might, in fact, be that only Christ could be obedient unto death—that is, only Christ’s singular kenosis could so fundamentally question the principle of self-preservation—Paul nonetheless makes clear that this kenosis is an example to be followed, even if, as my chapter on Donne sought to illuminate, the undergoing of self-annihilation was often understood necessarily as an utterly passive experience. Self-sacrificing disobedience thus remains an irreducible possibility for followers of Christ even as Hobbes designs a state and citizenry that would make it impossible.

Our debt to Hobbes’s paradigm of fanaticism is two-fold. We inherit many of Hobbes’s characterizations of the fanatic and his project to define the fanatic as the antagonist to civil power. But more than that: we, like Hobbes, very often neglect to address the serious philosophical, theological and political problems that the so-called
fanatic raises by dismissing him as a madman. Reducing fanatics to madmen makes us unable to address the intractable issues of authority, inspiration and excessive passion that they raise—makes it impossible to think about sacrifice as something other than a transgression of reason and self-protection. Like martyrs who store up possibilities of disobedience grounded in Holy Scripture, the figures of the madman or fanatic move along lines of flight in *Leviathan* by which inner conviction and excess of passion cannot be reduced to sovereign forms of representation or personation. Hobbes cannot banish martyrs and fanatics to a realm of interior conscience that authorizes sovereign representation. Hobbes never stops worrying that fanatics (the madmen and martyrs whose specific characteristics he constructs) may well act as forces outside the appropriation of sovereignty that, from within the state, threaten to impugn civil authority.

In a passage in *De Cive*, Hobbes quotes Martial to claim that prayers themselves make gods: *Qui fingit sacros auro, vel marmore vultus, / non facit ille deos: qui rogat, ille facit.*

The prayers of fanatics, Hobbes fears, threaten to unmake that mortal God, sovereign power, whose existence is the condition of possibility of true commonwealths.

We may still not yet be able to imagine what lies before and beyond that unmaking, and it is Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* that reveals both the depth of the

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226 *De Cive* 15.15: “The one who fashions the sacred images from gold or marble does not make the Gods; he who prays makes them” (Martial 8.24.5-6).

epistemological and aesthetic conundrums that the fanatical unmaking of this mortal God introduces to modernity and the failure of the conflation of fanaticism and madness to neutralize the crises into which fanaticism leads knowledge and authority.
Chapter 5: Tragic Fanaticism:

Samson’s Passion

“Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration.”

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

I. Samson and Spirit

Before *Leviathan* begins, I showed in my last chapter, Hobbes sets his own political
theory of sovereignty in opposition to an enemy, a fanatic, who reads scripture in such a
way that propels him to resist civil power, to make self-sacrifice, self-annihilation, and
resistance exemplary models to follow. In theorizing the fanatic, Hobbes does not just
offer us a model for identifying and excluding the fanatic from discourse about politics
but actually develops a philosophy of religion, a method for biblical hermeneutics, and a
theory of obedient citizenship that reduces fanaticism to an impossibility and transfers the
monopoly of violence to the state. Hobbes also articulates a set of affects that are meant
to circumscribe the normative relationship between piety and politics, a relationship
defined by fear, self-protection, and self-authorized obedience. Hobbes’s proscription of
the religious fanatic beckons us to consider what forms of violence and extraordinary
affections fanaticism supposedly involves.

We can see an example of how Hobbes seeks to eliminate the political and
religious legibility of fanaticism in his only mention of Samson in *Leviathan*: “In the
Book of *Judges*, an extraordinary Zeal, and Courage in the defence of Gods people, is called the Spirit of God; as when it excited Othoniel, Gideon, Jephta, and Samson to deliver them from servitude, *Judg.* 3.10. 6.34. 11.29. 13.25. 14.6, 19.” Hobbes describes Samson in this way as part of his taxonomy of the different ways that the term “spirit” can be understood in Scriptures, underwritten by his claim that “spirit” can never signify something incorporeal. Hobbes limits Samson’s relationship to the “spirit” of God to terms of “extraordinary Affections”: we cannot say that Samson was inspired by the Spirit of God, as the *Judges* narrative indicated to so many Renaissance readers and as we saw Donne imply was one necessary interpretation of Samson. Hobbes uses affections in a limited sense, to refer to conceptions or feelings attributable to material stimulation. Hobbes posits that Samson’s zeal is indeed out of the ordinary, but that there is nothing about his zeal that relates to or comes directly from the divine. Hobbes’s monist materialism (his claim that everything is composed of a unitary matter) allows and requires him to foreclose the possibility of divine inspiration—Samson can only experience an extraordinary affection of zeal rather than be divinely inspired by the spirit because there is no such thing as an incorporeal divine spirit that could inhabit a human being for Hobbes. There is, therefore, also no such thing as inspiration, which is why anyone who claims it is a madman. Spirit is a bad metaphor—“bad metaphor” is for Hobbes practically a pleonasm—since nothing incorporeal can exist and God’s

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228 *Lev* III.34 209/272.
230 See *Lev* I.5 on affections as conceptions—when we have a different conception of something our affection towards it changes. For Hobbes affections are primarily individual, and they should be regulated so that individuals fit obediently within a social totality.
unknowability bars us from ever positing that God could inspire. Fanaticism is always madness for Hobbes because it claims the impossible: that God could overtake the will of a person and direct their action toward violent ends. There are no organs of divine might in Hobbes’s monist universe.

Hobbes’s settling of the relationship between Samson’s sacrifice and the Holy Spirit—there is none for Hobbes—neatly embodies his attempt to make fanaticism, religious violence against state subjection and subjectivization, in no way justifiable through Scripture. Hobbes implies that Samson’s violence does not actually threaten civil peace excessively, since it is meant to protect God’s people. And Hobbes refuses the dialectic of passion and action that Donne considered so ambivalently and decides instead that Samson’s violence is zealous action—unequivocally willful courage rather than possibly passive release into sacrifice and divine violence. Hobbes decides in advance that Samson is not an agent of God’s will with whom contemporary fanatics and enemies to the state might be compared. To claim that God acted in or through Samson, remember, would be to expose oneself as mad for Hobbes. Samson, instead, is a zealous

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232 I leave aside here the larger question of how Hobbes’s determinism recasts the question of passion and action in his own philosophy. Suffice it to say that an action is in not the expression of a free will for Hobbes.
judge liberating his people and protecting them in a way that evades questions about how religious justifications of violence might unsettle the sovereign imperative of obedience.

Not all were as comfortable as Hobbes with seeing Samson as a figure of courage and nothing more, as we saw in Donne’s complex, ambivalent account of Samson’s “passive action,” the unverifiable possibility that Samson might be an organ of divine might. Hobbes’s monist demystification of spirit and passive inspiration as active zeal polemically flattens the complexities inherent to fanaticism that Milton requires we encounter head-on in *Samson Agonistes*, the focus of this chapter. In this closet tragedy, Milton does not use his monism as a reason to dismiss the possibility of divine inspiration outright but instead sees monism as raising profound questions about the emergence of divinely inspired action within the world and about the relationship between passion and action in the event and witnessing of religious violence. For Hobbes, as we saw in chapter four, part of the danger of fanatics is that they threaten to become illegible to sovereign power through their excessive passions; this is the justification for severely policing them. By contrast, Milton inherits Donne’s “passive action” as a problem for thought, and fanaticism in his writing becomes a spur to shift the terms of inquiry about fanaticism from legibility to witness. That is, witness, for Milton, becomes an ethical problem: how does one respond to violent acts against the self or the state when one

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cannot know if a fanatic is divinely inspired or not? At the very end of his poetic and political career, at the moment when Hobbes’s attempts to expel the transgressive energies of the fanatic from civil power seem to have succeeded through the Restoration, Milton creates a dramatic representation of his fanatic-revolutionary par excellence in the figure of Samson in order to raise again the questions he inherited from Donne about whether Samson’s violence is action or passion. Rather than deciding in advance that the narrative of Samson justifies or disproves divinely inspired violence against an oppressive state, Samson Agonistes demands that we tarry with the difficulty of understanding the motions and motivations of Samson’s brutal final act, his destruction of himself and thousands of the Philistines who hoped to use him for as servant and slave laborer. In this play, Samson’s fanatical revolt against state power complicates the relationship between action and passion, action and inspiration; the figure of Samson thereby re-poses a series of problems about the motivation and force of religious violence that Hobbes had meant to foreclose.

Hobbes locates the only site of religious disobedience in the inner space of conscience and thereby attempts severely to regulate the kind of affects religion can cultivate in the readers of its scriptures. Milton’s Samson Agonistes, by contrast, by representing inspiration as an aporia of action and passion, requires a consideration of what kinds of physical and affective forms of resistance religious fanaticism may create.

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Note that in Milton’s version of the Samson story, unlike in Judges 16:30, Samson kills the Philistine leaders (“Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, and Priests”), while the general population escapes unharmed (“The vulgar only scap’d who stood without [I.1659]).
My chapter asks how Milton’s representation of Samson might be seen as reimagining the possibilities and horrors of fanaticism after Hobbes’s battle against religious insurrection. Furthermore, it attempts to explain why fanaticism requires a complex mediation on passion and action. I begin by examining how Milton’s translation and glossing of a passage from Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the prologue to *Samson Agonistes* positions the reader to encounter the concepts of action and passion, law and grace, purification and sacrifice; I furthermore show how Milton makes tragedy an exemplary medium to meditate upon state violence and religious resistance via the figure of Samson as fanatic. Next, I turn to several representations of purgation and sacrifice in the play to ask how Milton’s understanding of divine calling relates to questions of action and passion. Finally, I read the final scene of the play to revise claims about the inaccessibility of Samson’s violence and its motivations. The play figures passion as both a spur to agency and a form of radical receptivity; the duality of passion lies at the crux of the argument in this chapter that *Samson Agonistes* foregrounds unknowability as essential to our interpretation of Samson, in his final suicidal revolt, as willful actor or organ of divine might.

This chapter will then, yet once more, return to the question Milton himself raises and leaves purposefully ambiguous—whether Samson’s violence was (to quote the *Defensio Prima*) “instigated by God or by his own virtue [*sive Dei, sive propriae virtutis instinctu*].”236 But I recast this question as one about the illegibility of passion and action, the difficulty of determining whether Samson’s action is caused by his own will or by divine disposal. Bradin Cormack has recently analyzed the relationship between willed

and unwilled action with reference to a vocabulary from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* (in Samuel Heilan’s 1581 Latin edition) that resonates with my discussion. After linking virtue exclusively with voluntary action, Aristotle differentiates the voluntary act, which he later defines as one whose “origin lies in the agent [*in ipso agente*], who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting [*singulas actionis circumstantias*]” (III.i.20), from the involuntary act done under compulsion, which has “its origin from without [*foris*],” as, for example, when a person “is carried somewhere by stress of weather, or by people who have him in their power” (III.i.2). The difference between the Aristotelian and Miltonic contexts is instructive, however. The possibility that Samson’s action happens on account of divine inspiration or dispensation—that is, that it is not Samson who acts but God through Samson—radicalizes the sense in which involuntary action originates in an outside and also collapses the distinction between internal and external origination of an action, since God would have to be understood as both internal and external to Samson’s person, immanent and transcendent. Much recent work on *Samson Agonistes* continues to orient itself around whether Samson’s violent action is willed or unwilled in this radicalized sense, looking to determine whether Samson or God is the ultimate cause of the violence at the end of the play. Criticism on the play has often sought to adjudicate claims about whether Samson does or does not experience divine inspiration, setting out, for example, “to settle beyond reasonable doubt

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237 Bradin Cormack, “On Will: Time and Voluntary Action in *Coriolanus* and the Sonnets,” in *Shakespeare 5.3* [2009], 255. Later in the article (258), Cormack alludes to similarities between a lover’s will being enslaved by a beloved and Luther’s idea that human will is always bound by God’s, but the allusion remains purposefully underdeveloped and a generalized sense of human bondage to God’s will does not clarify situations in which a person’s will is supposedly annihilated and replaced by God’s.
the question as to whether Milton meant to show Samson’s final act as praiseworthy.”  

The illegibility of fanatical passion and action, which I have traced through Spenser, Donne, and Hobbes, has led to endless debate among critics who wish to claim Samson as, alternatively, a divinely inspired hero of faith or as a vengeful self-willed terrorist. Critics’ polemics about *Samson Agonistes* too often begins to resemble early modern attempts to police proper religious heroes from madmen. By contrast, my account starts from the claim that we cannot, from the material the play offers us, know whether Samson was inspired, whether he is active agent or passive organ, and that attempting to indict (or even to excuse) a work as complex as *Samson Agonistes* obscures the epistemological and aesthetic problem the play poses.

In one of the most penetrating recent additions to the arguments over whether Milton’s Samson is a terrorist or suicide bomber (which I discussed briefly in my introduction), Feisal Mohamed concludes that *Samson Agonistes* succumbs in its conclusion to Milton’s “favored cultural narrative: God’s special favor for heroes of faith and execution of justice upon His idolatrous enemies, be they the flower of Palestine or of Restoration England.” Against critics who have argued for Milton’s demystification of Samson’s claim to be God’s instrument as sheer vengefulness, Mohamed claims that Milton unambiguously valorizes Samson as an instrument of God’s vengeance. And while I certainly agree that it is possible that Milton’s Samson loses his subjective individuation and becomes a “vessel of God’s wrath”—Victoria Kahn has also argued

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238 Tobias Gregory, “The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*,“ *Studies in English Literature* 50.1 (Winter 2010), 176. Note especially the legal language of trial (“beyond a reasonable doubt”) that so often attempts to convict or exonerate Milton and his Samson.

239 *Milton and the Post-Secular Present*, 114.
that in the end of the play it is “God who acts here, bearing witness to Samson, rather than vice versa”\textsuperscript{240}—this is only one option that the play offers, and it is far from unambiguous. It is impossible for us to know anything certain about the “rousing motions” that spur Samson to his final act of destruction, for reasons this chapter will explore in detail, and Milton’s very insistence on the ambiguous causality of seemingly sacred violence emerges, as this dissertation has shown, at the end of a long line of Renaissance poets who have attempted to grapple with fanaticism’s intractable opacity. Mohamed’s classification of Samson as a “hero of faith” presupposes that Samson has become an instrument of God, a presupposition to which the play refuses to accede. Mohamed decides in advance that Milton’s play participates in a culture that immortalizes acts of religious violence—that it celebrates Samson as an organ of divine might. By attempting to read \textit{Samson Agonistes} as a “conduct manual for failed revolutionaries,” Mohamed fails to account for what makes it rich as a work of artistic tragedy\textsuperscript{241}—the fact that we cannot know the source of Samson’s violence is the problem with which Milton begins and around which he structures the entire play. Even if I also view my own work on fanaticism as unsettling assumptions with in what he labels broadly as “Western liberal humanism” and its assumptions about religious violence, I find that his reading participates in those assumptions insofar as it fails to examine labels such as religious violence and terrorism as anything more than “barbarism.”\textsuperscript{242}

In \textit{Of Reformation}, Milton writes that “every true Christian may be called to be a martyr,” but it is the ambiguity of what \textit{being called} to a be a martyr looks it that makes

\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Wayward Contracts}, 275.  
\textsuperscript{241} \textit{Milton and the Post-Secular Present}, 124.  
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid. 126.
the problem of passion and action so complex in *Samson Agonistes*. Unlike the ingenious Fishean claim that, because we cannot know whether Samson is inspired, we therefore have no basis from which to judge Samson’s actions and must see them as virtuous actions, however, I step back from the question of judgment and instead posit that this unknowingness is what makes fanaticism a political, religious, and aesthetic problem of utmost importance. I contend that the impossibility of definitively assigning Samson an identity as organ of divine might or agent of willful vengeance is a structural feature of Milton’s vision of tragedy. It requires us to reevaluate how we witness Samson’s “trial” (l. 1643) and the “clotted gore” of his body at the end of the drama. In

243 “Of Reformation,” in *The Works of John Milton*, v. 3, p. 5. See Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, 260 (“Of particular relevance to Samson is the fact that the Protestant notion of the calling could be used to justify not only the social and political status quo but also exceptions to that rule. This was because a calling hovered between vocation and work; or, rather, it made one’s work into a vocation by infusing it with faith and conscience. Like the notion of the covenant, it adjudicated between predestination and works, coercion and consent, by making one’s vocation appear to be a response to being called.”) and John Guillory, “The Father’s House: *Samson Agonistes* in its Historical Moment,” in *John Milton: Longman Critical Readers*, ed. Annabel Patterson (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 206-7 (“The texts from Perkins and the Geneva commentators, with which Milton would have been familiar, record an incapacity to fix a boundary between the two senses of vocation, as calling and as work.”) My analysis does not take up explicitly the relationship between passion and action within debates about free will and determinism, which would be another way of approaching the problem of fanaticism in *Samson Agonistes*. For parallels between Samson’s labor and that of contemporary dissenters, see Blair Hoxby, “Idleness Had Been Worse,” in *Mammon’s Music: Literature and Economics in the Age of Milton* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 205-232.

244 Fish, *How Milton Works*, esp. 426. Fish has provided us with one of the best accounts yet of the productive ambiguity at the heart of *Samson Agonistes*. Nonetheless, his readings do not address the aporia of passion and action; they are more meditations on irreconcilable modes of interpreting in general than on the political and religious difficulties that religious violence in particular poses. Though Fish briefly discusses the “difficulty of distinguishing between inspiration and inclination” in the play (430), his concerns are ultimately with Samson’s “reading of divine will” and our inability to find any other “standard” from which to evaluate the commitment that arises from that reading, and his resolution to describe Samson’s violence as “virtuous action” settles on it as an achievement of Samson’s own will.
other words, this chapter does not so much offer a new context (fanaticism) for the old claims about the ambiguity of *Samson Agonistes* (does Milton celebrate or condemn Samson’s violence act? does Milton see Samson as instrument of God or maniacal murderer?) but instead posits that Milton’s attempt to deal with the problem of action and passion inherent to fanaticism causes the ambiguity. I have argued throughout this dissertation that fanaticism figures the possibility of passion at its extreme limit—the fanatic is one who, through a process of self-annihilation that suspends the self in an indefinite state of passivity—becomes a receptacle of God’s will, an organ of divine violence. The reckoning with fanaticism—with whether Samson is vessel of divine violence or agent of his own will—is why the poem is as intractably ambiguous as it is; fanaticism as a problem generates Milton’s insistence on aesthetic and epistemological uncertainty, and demands that he give tragedy and new form. The inability to know whether Samson’s violence is motioned by God or his own virtue is an irresolvable structural necessity because of the problem (fanaticism) the play explores: fanaticism discloses that the presence of inspiration or will, divine dispensation or action cannot be fully known, and that witnesses, including readers, must nonetheless interpret and respond to the violence fanaticism unleashes, or acts against.

II. *Katharsis* to *Lustratio*: Passion and Action in the Prologue

*Tragōdia mimēsis praxeos spondaias, etc*

--Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b24 as quoted in Milton’s epigraph to *Samson Agonistes*
*Tragoedia est imitatio actionis seriae, etc. per misericordiam et metum*

*perficiens talium affectuum lustrationem* [Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, etc., by pity and fear perfecting the lustration of such affects]

-- Milton, Prologue to *Samson Agonistes*\(^{245}\)

I begin my analysis of passion and action in *Samson Agonistes*, and their effects on the form of the tragedy, by exploring how Milton himself describes the representational methods in the play’s prologue. In the face of refusing to decide whether Samson is passive organ or willful agent, Milton must transform tragedy as he inherits it. Though many have surveyed how Milton signals his attempt to synthesize ancient Greek, Italian, and Christian tragic forms (Milton notes importantly that the German Calvinist Daniel Paraeus had analyzed the Book of Revelations “as a Tragedy”), I focus my exploration of how Milton describes this transformation on a unsettling detail; Milton’s abbreviated citation of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, his partial translation of Aristotle’s Greek into Latin, and his glossing of both Greek and Latin in the English prologue to *Samson Agonistes* have proved enduring problems for interpreters trying to make sense of Milton’s theorization of tragedy no less than to those seeking to situate what Milton calls the “modeling” of his “dramatic poem” into an experimental but generically recognizable

\(^{245}\) The prologue to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, which includes Milton’s selective quotation from Aristotle and his idiosyncratic translation into Latin and commentary in English, can be found on pp. 549-550.
category.246 Even before one could approach the question of Milton’s fidelity to or creative departures from Aristotle’s textual definition of tragedy or to various Renaissance understandings of Aristotelian tragic concepts, one must note the radical interpretative changes that Milton introduces already into Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in his Latin translation, which he paraphrases again in English. Most importantly for our analysis, Milton’s translation and paraphrase foreground the relationship of action and passion in tragedy.

The first of Milton’s substantial changes to Aristotle’s Greek is his translation of the Greek praxeos as actionis. Aristotle’s conception of human activity encompasses

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246 For explicit attempts to come to terms with how Milton in the prologue to Samson Agonistes is translating and appropriating the terms by which Aristotle defines tragedy, see (among others) Paul Sellin, “Sources of Milton’s Catharsis: A Reconsideration,” The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. 60, No. 4 (Oct., 1961), pp. 712-730 and Martin Mueller, “Sixteenth-Century Italian Criticism and Milton’s Theory of Catharsis,” Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, Vol. 6, No. 1, (Winter, 1966), pp. 139-150; while the former holds that Milton’s translation of Aristotle and theory of tragedy draw most deeply from Dutch scholar and translator of Aristotle Daniel Heinsius (in particular his De tragoediae constitutione), the latter conversely argues that Milton’s theory of tragedy here is mediated through Italian thinkers such as Pietro Vettori and Lorenzo Giacomini and decidedly not through Heinsius. See also Victoria Kahn’s recent comments on Milton’s theory of tragedy as a kind of Brechtian epic theater avant la lettre, in which aesthetics becomes critique and refuses the two tendencies of Renaissance commentaries on Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, commentators who “can be divided into those who moralize catharsis as a vehicle of the ethical and political dimension of tragedy and those who emphasize the pleasure we derive from artistry of imitation (Minturno on the one hand and Castelvetro on the other)” (Victoria Kahn, Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), p. 276. For a sophisticated recent analysis of the import of Milton’s translation of Aristotle, see Russ Leo, “Milton's Aristotelian Experiments: Tragedy, Lustratio, and Secret Refreshings in Samson Agonistes (1671),” Milton Studies 52 (2011), 221-252. Though Leo mentions in passing that “[e]ven when enthusiasm is rendered as a passion, it is instructive to remember that passions are types of affects and that even John Calvin understood the faith of the Reformed in terms of a dynamic affective economy of activity and passivity, as a matter of affect and persuasion” (229), he is ultimately more interested in the play’s general economy of affect in relationship to monism than with the questions surrounding the illegibility of passion and inspiration on which my reading focuses.
three subcategories: *praxis* (related to an action that is an end in itself), *poiesis* (related to making or production), and *theoria* (related to knowledge). In his translation of Aristotle, Milton renders *praxis* as *actionis* and thus prepares the reader to encounter the imitation of an action. But Milton’s English gloss—not strictly a translation but a parsing that has important implications—transforms what might otherwise seem like a negligible difference between *praxis* and *actio*:

> Tragedy, as it was anciently compos’d, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems: therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr’d up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated” (549).

From *mimēsis praxeos* to *imitatio actionis* to “passions well imitated”: with this chain of semantic shifts, Milton underscores his act of translation as a re-interpretation and re-direction, submitting Aristotle’s concept of *praxis* to a transformation into what would seem its opposite, passion(s), a term that is essential to the poetry of *Samson Agonistes*, the final hemistich of which is “all passion spent” (593 l.1758). One of the alternations that Milton makes to tragedy in *Samson Agonistes*, then, seems to be that purgation, catharsis, is caused by witnessing a mimesis of passions rather than a mimesis of actions,

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but the inclusion of the Latin, *imitatio actionis*, leaves the nature of this transformation unclear.  

As Elizabeth Harvey has shown in her study of the play, *passion* shifted between a number of etymological resonances in the early modern period: from the Latin *patior*, to suffer, a translation of Greek *pathos*, passion can signify “a condition of intense affective receptivity” (the exemplary model of which is the passion of Christ), while at the same time containing hints of the *patho-logical* (which evokes the medical study of the emotions or, more literally, a writing or speaking of the emotions or of suffering: *patho-logos*) as well as grammatical passivity, “the syntactical position of being acted upon.”

We receive Aristotle through Milton’s translations, a movement across the clustered terms of *praxis*, *actio* and *passion*. This series of translations implies a theory of tragedy as a mimetic copy of passion, but maintains passion’s relation to *praxis* or *actio*. The prologue to *Samson Agonistes* necessarily poses—and pointedly leaves unresolved—the extent to which we (as readers) and Samson himself are witnessing a mimesis of an

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248 Note that elsewhere Milton describes the process of reformation—in particular reforming the body of the Gospel texts—in similarly purgative terms: “Sad it is to thinke how that Doctrine of the Gospel, planted by teachers Divinely inspir’d, and by them winnow’d, and sifted, from the charge of overdated Ceremonies, and refin’d to such a Spirituall height, and temper of purity, and knowledge of the Creator, that the body, with all the circumstances of time and place, were purifi’d by the affections of the regenerat Soule, and nothing left impure, but sinne” (*Of Reformation*, 1).

experience of praxis, action, or passion—of action that is an end in itself, willed activity more generally, or passive reception or suffering. The grammatical meaning of passion remains in play as well: is Samson subject or object—active agent or receptacle of action—when it comes to what he will call the “sentence” (l.1369) of his fate at the end of the play, his entanglement in the “dire necessity” that means death for both him and the Philistines who have enslaved him?

As I will argue, the question of the extent to which Samson’s “some great act” (l.1389) at the end of the dramatic poem is delivered through action or passion—that is, whether Samson is willful agent or passive organ of divine might—is one of the major and unresolvable cruces of how we read the play. I diverge from Victoria Kahn’s estimation that Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* is “about the power of mimesis or representation to turn passion into action,” since a transformational “turn” or progression between the two obscures that the play actually places a demand on us to envision passion and action as essentially and inextricably related. Milton’s substitution of passion for action or praxis in his glossing of Aristotle and his refusal to allow us to decide definitively the question of Samson’s inspiration, or divine dispensation, at the end of the play require that we consider passion and action dialectically rather than just imagine them as opposites.

And yet it is not just the slippery relationship between *praxis, actio,* and passion that should make us pause in Milton’s prologue to *Samson Agonistes*; they are not the only markers that motion us to attend to the irreducible relationship between action and

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250 *Wayward Contracts*, 272.
passion that is about to unfold in the poem, and that makes fanaticism such an intractable problem. Indeed, the triangulation of translated terms (Milton’s translation and glossing of tragic *katharsis*) is even more striking, not least because the original term (*katharsis*) that Milton translates from Aristotle has been effaced and replaced with an “etc.” In his definition of tragedy, Aristotle defines the telos of witnessing the mimesis of praxis as *katharsis*. In Aristotle’s Greek, *katharsis* can mean purging, purification, cleaning, and evacuating; in Biblical Greek, the term gains the additional meanings with which Milton must have been familiar: *katharsis* in the Christian Bible can mean purification from sin, to consecrate, or to pronounce clean in a Levitical sense, as in Hebrews 9:22: “And almost all things are by the law purged (*katharizo*/*mundatur*) with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission (*aphesis*/*remissio*)” (KJV). In the prologue to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton effaces the term *katharsis*, rendering it and the others surrounding it with an “etc.” When the concept of *katharsis* appears in the prologue, Milton translates Aristotle’s text (which refers to *katharsis* as a kind of *teleias*: the teleology of the play and its completion or fulfillment) as “*per misericordiam et metum*

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252 For a useful elaboration of the different resonances of “katharsis” in Aristotle, see Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” in *Phronesis*, 33.3 (1988), 297-326. Parenthetical references to biblical sources in my text contain the Hebrew or Greek and Jerome’s Latin from the Vulgate.

253 Milton’s translation of Aristotle’s *teleias* is *perficiens*; interestingly, *perficiens* is also a standard translation in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate of the *telias* that famously appears in the passage from 2 Corinthians 12:9, a passage which Milton took as a kind of self-applied motto: “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect [*teleitai/perficitur*] in weakness [*en astheneia/in infirmitate*].” For a reading of Milton’s identification with the Pauline motto that strength is made perfect only in weakness, with a very different emphasis than my own, see Joanna Picciotto, “Reforming the Garden: The Experimentalist Eden and Paradise Lost,” *ELH* 72 (2005), p. 48. As Barbara Lewalski notes, Milton adopted the motto “My strength is made perfect in weakness” in the 1650s, when he went completely blind (Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* [London: Blackwells, 2000], 338). Gordon Teskey reminds
perficiens talium affectuum lustrationem [by pity and fear perfecting the lustration of such affects].” Milton then proceeds to paraphrase this Latin translation in English: “by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr’d up by reading or seeing the passions well imitated” (549).

Note, even before Milton’s surprising translation of the Greek katharsis as Latin lustratio, that there are a number of peculiar features about the movement of terms from Latin to English, in particular the equivocation about what the effect of tragedy is: is it to “purge the mind” of—to cleanse out entirely—pity and fear, or terror and “such like passions”? Or is it to “temper and reduce” (to make more proportionate and draw back, re-ducere) these passions “with delight” to a “just measure,” the justness and quantity of which remain strikingly unspecified? Already in English the effect that tragedy is said to perform is ambiguous. Is it to purge, temper, or reduce? These remain open questions in Milton’s theorization of tragedy.

And yet a look at the Latin term that Milton uses to translate katharsis, lustratio, proves to be even more multivalent, and returns us again to the relationship between action and passion that we have already shown the prologue to pose. Milton had a number of terms available to him as Latin translation of katharsis at the time: purgatio, expiatio, and mundatur were all familiar translations, and in some ways might seem more

us that the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:32-34) names Samson as one of the witnesses of faith "who out of weakness were made strong” (Gordon Teskey, Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 181).  
254 For the most persuasive account of the importance of lustratio in Milton’s prologue to Samson Agonistes, with an emphasis on how lustratio transforms katharsis from a subjective or communal experience to one that the play’s monist God undergoes, see Leo, “Milton’s Aristotelian Experiments,” 248-252.
expected given Milton’s English use of “purge” in his English glossing (despite his immediate complication of that term by further glossing to purge as “to temper and reduce”). Debora Shuger has shown that a number of early modern Greek lexicons that were regularly available in England, Guillaume Bude’s Commentarii linguae Graevae (1529) and Henricus Stephanus’s Thesaurus Graecae linguae Lustratio (1572) in particular, define katharsis in terms of both lustratio (which Bude glosses via Livy as lustrationis sacro peracto, “purification by sacrifice”) and purgatio (which Bude glosses as “a cleansing or religious purification”). Lustratio in particular, these lexicons make clear, contained the sense of sacrificial expiation and a sense of personal or national salvation.255 Whereas elsewhere in Milton’s oeuvre lustratio, as Jason Rosenblatt has argued, generally evoked “pagan and Hebraic lives of abstinence and purification,”256 in

255 Debora Shuger, The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994), 130. Shuger also aptly brings together the realms of tragedy and sacrifice in a reference to Walter Burkert’s genealogy of tragedy: “Burkert’s argument that ‘tragedy’ derives from the trugos or goat sacrificed to Dionysius during ancient religious festival corresponds to the etymology preserved in all Renaissance discussions of tragedy” (132). See Burkert’s essential study, Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: UC Press, 1983). T. S. K. Scott-Craig has also shown correspondences between the worlds of sacrifice and tragedy, albeit very briefly, in his “Concerning Milton’s Samson,” in Renaissance News, Vol. 5. No. 3 (Autumn 1952), 47: “Thus Gilbery Murray long ago suggested in his introduction of Bywater’s translation of the Poetics of Aristotle, that drama had originally been itself a dromenon or ritual act to purge society of the taints of the old year. Regularly, at the end of every five-year period, a lustrum or expiatory sacrifice was offered by the censors.”

256 See “Samson’s Sacrifice,” in Renaissance England’s Chief Rabbi: John Selden (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), where Rosenblatt insists on how a “Hebraic monist” reading of Samson Agonistes would insist on “the harmony between Judaic law and the spirit” (105). I’m in agreement with Rosenblatt that a dualist reading of the play that views its “Hebraism” as an element structurally overcome by Samson’s turn to a more Pauline model of grace is misguided. It seems to me that positing a “harmony” between law and spirit—and therefore between action and passion, we might say—begs the question of their relation. In my reading, Milton is fundamentally interested in the ambiguity or undecidability of the relationship between law and grace (or, to use a more Miltonic
the prologue to *Samson Agonistes* Milton’s use of *lustratio* recalls that definition but

furthermore links it implicitly to a number of others as a translation of *katharsis*.

*Lustratio*, we see, brings with it an even larger multiplicity of references.²⁵⁷ Turning to its

idiom, divine dispensation)—how the priority of their relation to salvation or to the
political is ultimately illegible and requires not a decision but rather a maintenance of
their mutually determining, anamorphic character. Rosenblatt quotes the following
passages from Milton’s sixth elegy to elaborate on *lustratio*’s relationship to Hebraic
cleanliness and sanctity: “Let only the crystal-clear water in a beechen bowl stand near
him, and let him drink temperate draughts from the pure spring. More than this, his
youth must be chaste and free from sin, his manners strict, and his hand without stain,
even like you, O Priest, when in sacred vestment and gleaming with the waters of
cleansing [*Qualis veste nitens sacra, et lustralibus undis*] you rise as augur to face the
angry gods. After this manner, they say, wise Tiresias lived when the light of his eyes
was gone...and aged Orpheus.” (*The Latin Poems of John Milton*, tr. Walter MacKellar
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), *Elegia Sexta* ll. 60-70. For Rosenblatt
“*lustratio* evok[es] pagan and Hebraic lives of abstinence and purification, [while]
*holocaust* evok[es] the sacrifice wholly consumed that initiates the Nazarite’s renewal
of his vows and, inevitably for the Christian reader, Christ the phoenix.” However, I argue
that the dual valence of both works and grace, of law and sacrifice, is already present in
the term *lustratio* itself. Elsewhere in Milton’s writings (also cited in Leo, “Milton’s
Aristotelian Experiments,” 248-249) *lustratio* is also closely related to the *initiation* of a
process of redemption that must be sealed by the spirit: in Book I, Chapter 28 of *De
Doctrina Christiana*, under the heading “*Obsignatione foederis gratiae externa*,”
*lustratio* appears in an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12:13, in which Milton writes regarding
John’s baptism of Jesus: it “seems to have been a kind of initiation [*initiatio*] or
purification [*lustratio*] [...], rather than an absolute sealing [*absoluta obsignatio*] of the
covenant [*foederis*]: for only the Spirit seals [*Spiritus enim solus obsignat*].” (*Joannis
Miltoni, De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. Carolus Ricardus Sumner (Cantabrigiae, 1885),
322.)²⁵⁷ Aryeh Kosman has compellingly argued that the proliferation of meanings to which
I’m alluding already exists in the term *katharsis*: “Despite (or perhaps because of) the
intense and voluminous discussion it has received, the exact sense of catharsis in its
cameo appearance in [Aristotle’s] *Poetics* may well continue to elude us. But much of the
controversy, and in particular the familiar opposition between lustrative and purgative
interpretations, may be unnecessary; to stress the lustrative sense of catharsis is not per se
to deny its purgative sense, for lustration is a purging of the purified object from its
impurities and pollutions. It is certainly this lustrative sense that we find prominent in
Plato (a fact which may help to balance the antilustrative weight characteristically given
the single discussion of catharsis in the *Politics*).” See “Acting: Drama as the Mimesis of
Praxis” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton:
Princeton UP, 1992), 67. Kosman also helpfully demonstrates how Aristotle’s mention of
*katharsis* in the *Politics*—*soteria dia tes katharseos* (Politics 1341b32)—became
etymology, we see that a *lustro*, for example, is a wanderer or a vagabond, and thus
Milton’s use of *lustratio* refers also to a kind of wandering of the passions that tragedy
“raises” and “purges.” *Lustratio* also belongs to the traditions of Roman religious
sacrifice—a lustration is a ritual of purification through sacrifice—but also, in its root,
refers back to Aristotle’s technical term for denouement or ending or catastrophe, *lusis*,
which etymologically means a loosing or an undoing. In addition to being a substitution
for Aristotle’s term *katharsis*, then, *lustratio* is further brought into relationship with the
term Milton uses to refer to the telos of tragedy: *perficiens*, the perfecting of the *lustratio*
of the passions.258

Thus *lustratio* evokes multiple meanings as translation for *katharsis*: ritual
purgation, sacrifice and lustrative cleansing most immediately, but these, too, are yoked
to the term’s resonance with an ending, a *perficiens*, *telos* or fulfillment that is also an
undoing, a loosing or letting loose (*lusis*), a wandering apart at the end. *Lustratio* returns
us to the complex relation of action to passion that we glimpsed in Milton’s substitution
of passion for *praxis* and *actio*. *Samson Agonistes* foregrounds *lustratio* both as a series
of purifying works (acts) that Samson undertakes and as a certain kind of passive

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258 See Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary entry for *lustratio* for these definitions.
Substitution itself, it should be noted, is an important characteristic of sacrifice and the
discourse of lustration that Milton evokes; for more on the relationship between sacrifice
and substitution, see Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 3ff.: “the hypothesis of substitution as the basis for
the practice of sacrifice.” Cf. Also Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature
and Function* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1968), who underscore the relationship between
sacrifice and substitution—in particular sacrifice and substitutional images or
simulacra—when they quote the following from Servius’s commentary on Virgil’s
*Aeneid* 2.116: “*in sacris simulata pro veris accipit* [in sacrifice a simulation is accepted
for the real thing].”
sacrifice that Samson may undergo as divine vessel. Yet, given the last half-line of the play—“all passion spent”—what does it mean that passion is purged, deprived of strength, or fully actualized only in the play’s violence catastrophe? I turn now to the discourse of purification that Samson employs throughout the play in order to explore how it is that the play realizes both senses of *lustratio* as an active work of purification and a passive undergoing of sacrifice.

III. Separation and Sacrifice

In this sense, sinful men were called *katharmata* as being sacrificial victims (*piaculates*); that is, men consecrated for the sacrificial purification (*lustratio*) and expiation of their fatherland. The Romans also called them the Holy Ones (*Sacrī*), those whose death atoned for all the sins of the city of people and who were sacrificed (*mactare*) in order to avert the wrath of the Gods.

-- Henricus Stephanus’s *Thesaurus Graecae linguae* (1572)  

The focus on Samson’s purifying asceticism and heroic works orients the reader to attend to Samson’s body as agent of action, and yet the play renders the location and source of his strength ambiguous. In this way, the play alternates between suggesting, on the one

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hand, that Samson himself produces his strength by the work he performs on his body and, on the other hand, that his body may in fact be an organ of divine might, a receptacle for a force that is in excess of all care of the self. Through this focus on Samson’s asceticism and heroism, I show that the play offers a critique of Samson’s own self-understanding of his actions and that this critique undermines Samson’s inclination to self-deification. To clarify, the relationship between passion and action bears on law and ascetic purification in two senses. First, I explore Samson’s reflections on his separateness and how that separateness bears on his relationship to Jewish law, asking how the play alternatively casts him as exemplary actor and singular instrument. Second, I explore passion and action further through an analysis of Samson’s meditations on weakness and strength to uncover whether weakness and passivity (including the breakdown of Samson’s body and the inability willfully to conform with God’s law) threatens Samson or whether passivity offers something that he must learn to embrace.

Samson is something of a paradox for the play. As chosen exception, he is separate and singular, evincing an antinomian extravagance that is in excess of Jewish law. And yet at the same time he is—or rather he was, before the start of the play finds him imprisoned—an exemplary model of ascetic self-control and potent strength for others to imitate. At the end of the poem, which I will analyze in the final section of this chapter, Samson seems to become at once illegible, an analogue to the “unsearchability” of God’s “dispose” (l.1746), and also a monument of “matchless valor” to be worshiped (l.1740). The Chorus registers this ambiguity on first approaching Samson. Seeing him imprisoned and weakened through his grinding labors at the Philistine mill, fallen from his great potency to “This, this[...]carelessly diffused,” the Chorus addresses Samson: “O
mirror of our fickle state, / Since man on earth unparallel’d!” (ll.164-65). How Samson can be at once a mirror in which we see what the viewers are (“our fickle state”) and “unparallel’d” is a problem that remains unresolved. Samson’s separateness concentrates and extends the chosen status of the Nazarite tribe as a whole: Nazarite, as Hughes notes, comes from the Hebrew root nazir, which means separate or consecrated; it is also closely related to the Hebrew term for abstinence, nazar and the Hebrew for vow, neder. Numbers 6:1-21 makes clear that the form of separateness or consecration indicated by nazir is defined by ascetic refusal: restrictions on what to eat and drink, ban on having a razor taken to one’s head, and a prohibition on approaching a corpse.

In his initial soliloquy, Samson announces his separateness and yet signals that his separateness has failed to be a “promise” of his life’s unique “design.” As lament, this initial exclamation about an absent God precedes a series of dialogic encounters that themselves seem to purify Samson’s purpose:

O wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold

Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight

Of both my Parents all in flames ascended

From off the Altar, where an Off’ring burn’d,

As in a fiery column charioting

His Godlike presence, and from some great act

Or benefit reveal’d to Abraham’s race?

Why was my breeding order’d and prescrib’d

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As of a person separate to God,
Design’d for great exploits; if I must dye
Betray’d, Captiv’d, and both my Eyes put out,
Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;
To grind in Brazen Fetters under task
With this Heav’n-gifted strength? O glorious strength
Put to the labour of a Beast, debas’t
Lower then bondslave! 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,
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke;
Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine Prediction; what if all foretold
Had been fulfill’d but through mine own default,
Whom have I to complain of but my self? (ll.23-46)

In this passage’s first sentence, the redoubled announcement or “foretelling / Twice” of Samson’s birth, a gift from God to Manoa’s barren wife, is what seems to define Samson’s separateness. Samson’s life, or at least his “breeding,” seem to have been “order’d and prescrib’d,” that is, both arranged and pre-written in advance of his birth; he was cast even before being brought to life “As of a person separate to God / Design’d for great exploits.” For Samson, his current condition is positioned uncomfortably between a
disjoint past and present (“…and present / Times past, what once I was, and what am
now” (ll.21-2)). His breeding was ordered and prescribed “as” a person separate to God,
unique even among the Nazarites, but this “As” introduces an undercurrent of doubt that
undercuts any assurance that that prescription was real. It suggestively makes us unsure
of whether Samson is such a separate being, “designed” (chosen but also marked) as a
vessel filled with God’s strength, or just like (“as”) one. The sacrificial covenant that is
so unambiguous in Judges—Manoa and his wife must make a ritual offering to God
before they receive the gift of Samson’s birth—is obscure here. “Where an Off’ring
burned” gives no indication of the agent behind this offering, and the burning comes to be
almost indistinguishable from the angel’s flaming ascension, underscored by that earlier
use of “As,” “where an Offr’ing burn’d, / As in a fiery column charioting / His Godlike
presence.” (We will have reason to refer again to the vital importance of “as” in the play.)

Despite the ambiguity we encounter in this initial plaint, Samson locates in the
past that “Promise was that I / Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver,” but implies
that there has been a failure on the part of the God who made such a promise. But
Samson interrupts and revises this reading of “Promise” and failure: “Yet stay, let me not
rashly call in doubt / Divine Prediction; what if all foretold / Had been fulfill’d but
through mine own default, / Whom have I to complain of but myself?” What had seemed
a “Promise” potentially broken now appears to Samson in his “Yet stay” revision as his
own “default,” his own failure or imperfection. Had it not been for this “default,” that
which was “foretold” and “predicted” would have been “fulfill’d.” It is as though Samson
was meant to be a vessel for God’s word (pre-diction), the passive instrument that could
have “fulfilled” God’s will, except “through mine own default,” a default that Samson
realizes may be rooted in his persistent attachment to himself, his refusal to negate his own will and submit to God’s: “Whom have I to complain of but myself?”

Samson will continue throughout the soliloquy—indeed, throughout the play—to equivocate in his alternations between blaming God and himself for his exile and enslavement. Immediately following this shift from a narrative of broken “promise” to one of personal “default,” Samson questions the meaningfulness of God’s creation (“But what is strength without a double share / of wisdom? (ll. 53-4)) only then to refute and correct himself again (“But peace, I must not quarrel with the will / Of highest dispensation, which herein / Haply had ends above my reach to know” (ll. 60-63)).

Samson’s perpetual equivocation is itself an enactment of the complex relationship between passion and action that the prologue initiates. Is Samson’s “living death” Samson’s “default”—a consequence of his action, his investment in self rather than God—or is it a passionate station of suffering along the course of God’s unreachable “ends”? If the former, is Samson’s separateness overridden by his actions? Or is his suffering an infliction that he must undergo as God’s passive instrument?

Samson’s speech about the relationship between promise and default, about passion and action, bears on the play’s inquiry into the source of his power to undertake such impressive acts of violence, for whether we conceive of Samson’s strength as his own or as God’s shifts whether his actions are to be seen as effected by his own power or by an exterior source. Samson returns again and again to the question of how it is that he lost his power and where in his body it was “lodg’d,” and thus whether the strength itself is his or God’s:
Who this high gift of strength committed to me,
In what part lodg’d, how easily bereft me,
Under the Seal of Silence could not keep,
But weakly to a woman must reveal it,
O’ercome with importunity and tears (ll.47-51).

At this moment, even before Samson revises himself yet again to refer to his strength as a gift so “slight” that it was merely “hung” in his hair” (l. 59), we become unsure of where Samson’s gift is and what “seals” it in his body: his silence (stoic refusal to disclose the secret) or the presence of his hair? The play refuses to allow us as readers or Samson to be clear on the source and seal of the strength that keeps him separate; likewise, the play never allows us to know whether Samson is being punished for having failed to maintain the ascetic rituals that could have kept him separate.

Samson’s separateness does at times seem to be predicated upon his adherence to these ascetic rituals, however. The image of a body or mouth sealed and protected from weakness recurs throughout the poem as a mark of the failure of Samson to care sufficiently for the ascetic practices that at least seem to allow his body the strength to act according to God’s promise. Synecdoches for that body’s weakness are various: the breaking of the seal of silence, the cutting of his hair, and Dalila’s penetrating “feminine assaults, / Tongue-batteries” (ll.403-4)). The possible vulnerability of particular body parts raise questions regarding Samson’s perpetual fear of feminization, which functions
as a stand-in for Samson’s own meditations on passivity. Early in the tragedy, while contrasting his current state with the Chorus’s recollection of him as God’s “mighty Champion, strong above compare” (l.556), Samson describes Dalila’s deception as penetration of his otherwise “defended” body and mind: “What boots it at one gate to make defense, / And at another to let in the foe, / Effeminately vanquish’t?” (ll. 560-63). Desire for Dalila is imaged here as a failure of border patrol—it leads to a guerilla penetration that opens up the seemingly impenetrable Samson. This exposure “lets in” a force that vanquishes, a vanquishing that is done “effeminately”; it is effected by a being gendered feminine, of course, but it also seems to have an ‘effeminizing’ influence on Samson, whose firmness is breached. The grammatical doubleness of “effeminately” as both an adverb that modifies Dalila’s particular form of vanquishing and Samson’s own state mirrors Samson's own re-interpretations of the cause of his own weakness, which he first understands as Dalila’s fault but then reworks as his own: “of what now I suffer / She was not the prime cause, but I myself” (ll. 233-34). And yet the Chorus’s description of Samson breaking “his vow of strictest purity” by wedding Dalila’s “uncleanliness” (l. 319) alerts us to the fact that it is not just Samson’s “effeminate” weakness that renders his ability to act void; it is, indeed, his marital transgression, his failure to obey a law that guarantees his ability to act with such unique strength.

Whether Samson’s marriages constitute acts for which he is to blame or whether he is moved by God to marry remains a dilemma for the play’s interpreters. The inability to confirm whether his marriages are divinely inspired looks ahead to the inability to read

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261 For an elegant reading of touch and the attempt to expel femininity in the play, see Stevie Davies, “Words Bereft of Touch or Trust,” in Milton (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 179-205.
the “motions” that Samson claims inspire him to his final act of violence. In his first justification of marrying someone outside of the Nazarite tribe, against the law, Samson argues:

I motion’d was of God; I knew
From intimate impulse, and therefore urg’d
The Marriage on; that by occasion hence
I might begin Israel’s Deliverance, /
The work to which I was divinely call’d (ll.222-226).

We become entangled here in ambiguity yet again: is it Samson’s breaking of the vow of “strictest purity” that makes it impossible for him to fulfill the work that is his unique calling or is Samson (in a term that we will return to in our reading of the end of the play) “motion’d” by God in such a way that “intimate impulse” overrides his submission to the law in order to offer him “occasion” to deliver Israel? In other words, is his reiterated transgression of the law of tribal purity a weakness, a “letting in” or opening up of the effeminate foe and a defilement of his body, or was Samson “motion’d” to become an instrument of God who could transgress the law because of “divine calling”? Do God’s motions necessitate through “intimate impulse,” making Samson into a vessel, or does his will (“urg’d”) co-exist with God’s will? It becomes that much more unclear when Samson refers to his choice to marry Delilah with terms—“I thought it lawful from my

262 Stanley Fish argues that Samson’s first marriage to the woman of Timna takes place because he believes he is moved by “intimate impulse” but that his second marriage to Dalila is merely an act of desire, “which he reinterpreted as inspiration” (Fish, How Milton Works, 399)
former act, / And the same end”—that again leave unanswered whether the first
transgression of Nazarite law was lawful because Samson understood himself as being
“motion’d” or whether this “former act” was itself a work that violated law despite
Samson’s exceptional, separate status. Despite the ambiguity, it becomes clear at this
point in the play that Samson understands weakness as interfering with his inability to be
separate and to act, and that weakness must be overcome by a return of potency and a
purgation of weakness.

Yet the middle of the play demystifies the idea that strength lies in one bodily
organ, hair, which begins to unsettle with increasing urgency the extent to which the
strength Samson has shown was ever his to possess. Likewise, Samson’s shift away from
seeing his strength embodied in his hair crystalizes the question of whether Samson’s
attempted salvation of Israel depends upon his strength and will. Whereas earlier in the
play Samson repeatedly insists on the fact that his strength resides in his hair (e.g., is
“lodg’d” and “hung” in his hair” (l. 59)), when Harapha, the blistering Philistine hero,
accuses Samson of having “[f]eigned” the fact that his strength “was giv’n thee in thy
hair, / Where strength can least abide” (ll. 1135-36), Samson responds:

My trust is in the living God who gave me
At my Nativity this strength, diffus’d
No less through all my sinews, joints and bones,
Than thine, while I preserv’d these locks unshorn,
The pledge of my unviolated vow.
(ll. 1140-44)
Here Samson refutes the idea that his strength is located in his hair; indeed, he understands his strength as having been “diffus’d” through the entirety of his body, and his hair becomes merely the “pledge” of his “unviolated vow.” Whether the vow itself is violated when its “pledge” is remains unclear, since “my unviolated vow” could indicate either that Samson’s vow was unviolated while he “preserv’d these locks unshorn” or that the vow remains still unviolated, even though the mark of its pledge has been cut. Yet in either case, in moving from understanding his deprivation from the shearing of his locks to the disclosure of a secret and a breaking of a pledge, if not the vow itself, Samson at the same moment shifts emphasis back to his body, to its ability to perform works on account of his will, autonomous from any exterior prop, support or infusion. The question of how to read this “diffusion” as a measure of the extension of Samson’s bodily potency is a difficult one, and not least because the Chorus first spies Samson, in his blindness and bondage, as one who “lies at random, carelessly diffused” (l.118).

That the image of “[t]his strength, diffused” appears earlier in the poem thus helps us ascertain how diffusion relates to the play’s account of activity and passivity. Samson begins the play by lamenting his own blindness and envisioning it as a second form of imprisonment. But just after referring to “[m]yself my sepulcher, a moving Grave”—in which he equates his self with entombment and thus suggests that he has lost the vitality of being God’s instrument—Samson recuperates his blindness within a narrative in which

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263 For an analysis of strength infused into the gathering of Samson’s hair as suggestive of a political allegory of “diffusion of power across a multitude,” see Joanna Picciotto, “The Public Person and the Play of Fact,” in Representations 105 (Winter 2009), 102.
the diffusion of his sight, like the diffusion of his strength, could signify an even greater awareness and potency:

Since light so necessary is to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the Soul,
She all in every part; why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th’ eye confin’d?
So obvious and so easie to be quench’t,
And not as feeling through all parts diffus’d,
That she might look at will through every pore?
(ll. 90-97).

Echoing texts in Luke 11:34 (“The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, then is thy whole body light”), Augustine’s *De Trinitate* VI.6, and Milton’s own proem to Book III of *Paradise Lost*, this passage moves from a syllogism about light, the soul, and life to evoke a body that, though less “tender” in its differentiation of organs, could feel and see through every pore—vision, like strength, could look or do through a diffused yet totalized “will.” The image of an eye in every pore for Samson,

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264 Rogers calls attention to this and other biblical allusions to light and sight in Samson in his “The Secret of *Samson Agonistes*.”

265 In Augustine’s meditations on the simplicity of the soul in *De Trinitate* VI.6, he claims that the soul is not diffused over a determined amount of space but is, in each body, whole in the whole body, and whole in everyone of its parts: “Nam ideo simplicior est corpore quia non mole diffunditur per spatium loci sed in unoquoque corpore, et in toto tota est et in qualibet parte eius tota est.”
made blind by consequence of what may or may not have been the violation of his vow, at first seems like a fantasy of overcoming the weakness of a single organ’s vulnerability. John Rogers has described this as a monist fantasy in which every organ can see and thus becomes undifferentiated. Rodgers helpfully calls attention to the fact that Samson here is imagining the possibility that his strength, like his sight, could be multiplied and spread throughout every pore. It is a fantasy of self-deification, in which Samson’s “will” would gain incredible potency. If strength were diffused through the body equally and Samson could see, feel, and will in every single pore without differentiation, then the body itself would become something like light in its total union with the soul (“She all in every part” refers us back to the conflation of light and the soul) and could not be damaged. And yet, it is essential to note that the play brackets this fantasy of diffusion as fantasy—something that gives Samson hope while imprisoned but that hypertrophies the will. In the course of the play, Samson departs from fetishization of his strength and instead dwells in his blindness, accepting weakness and passivity as signals of his possible return to being an organ of divine might. In the latter part of the play, that weakness itself, as Milton so often claimed, is what perfects the subject called to do God’s works.

An example of this return of the potentiating power of weakness in the play can be seen where we might least expect it: in another one of Samson’s discussions of his own feminization at the hands of Dalila. This passage proves to cluster together a number of ambivalences:

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Again, see Rogers’ “The Secret of Samson Agonistes.”
famous now and blaz’d,

Fearless of danger, like a petty God
I walk’d about admir’d of all and dreaded
On hostile ground, none daring my affront.
Then swoll’n with pride into the snare I fell
Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,
Softn’d with pleasure and voluptuous life.
(ll. 528-534)

Though weakness seems to be the privation of masculinity that renders Samson’s action impotent in lines like these, in which the phallic “swollen pride” of Samson’s body is “soften’d” by Dalila’s domestic ensnarement, it is also true that Samson’s reference to himself as “like a petty God” evinces precisely the kind of self-deification and self-idolatry that Samson criticizes elsewhere in the poem. Hence self-fetishized puissance is precisely what Samson seems to discard later in the play; it leads him too often to define himself as “a petty God,” rather than God’s passive instrument. Likewise, we might also see what Rogers has describe as Samson’s monistic fantasy, in which sight becomes “diffus’d” in every pore of the body, as a kind of idolatry, in which the body itself is made to become ensouled light, nearly the essence of life itself.267 My reading thus departs from Joanna Piciotto’s, which posits that the “diffusion” of Samson’s strength is itself the mechanism by which Samson’s transformation from “petty God” to “public

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267 As a theory of substance, monism may not be as appropriate for thinking about what organs perform what functions for an individual character, as Rogers suggests it does.
person” takes place. Picciotto elegantly traces how Samson comes to be released from his individual, private self to become a public person, a symbol of the multitude. By contrast, my reading sees the image of Samson’s strength diffused as itself part of his fantasy of individual strength and action. As the play proceeds, it suggests that this fantasy must be overcome by a diffusion of weakness in which the will is annihilated and Samson seeks to become an instrument of God rather than a public person—even though the play will never allow us to confirm such annihilation has taken place. Though Milton embraced monism as a philosophy that informed both his theology, and his poetry and *Samson Agonistes* may be considered one of the great experiments in what a monist tragedy might look like, in this instance of the eye’s “diffusion” the play registers a worry about the misappropriation of monism for an ontology of individual strength and sight. It is the negation of the fantasy of an eye in every pore, maximizing sight’s “will,” that leads to Samson’s embrace of blindness and weakness. It is in Samson’s blindness, and in our inability to see the motions that move him to act at the end of the play, that we encounter this weakness most powerfully.

IV. Blindness and Weakness

For Samson, the monistic imagining of a sight diffused “as feeling through all parts” (l. 97—a phrase that hopes to make sight like, “as,” feeling but also gestures towards a sight that itself feels) gestures toward the achievement of an overabundance of “will”: “That she might look at will through every pore” (l. 97). Yet Samson shifts away from this

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268 Picciotto, “Public Person,” 111, 130 n.123.
269 See Russ Leo, “Milton’s Aristotelian Experiments.”
fantasy of ubiquitous sight and will toward the end of the play. Departing from the narrative that names his body as the potent instrument of his own will, Samson returns late in the play to an understanding of his own calling as a passive organ of divine might. Unlike earlier in the play, where his separateness signified his personal strength, his late revision of calling recasts his action as passion, his work as fulfillment of divine disposal. Yet the language of the poem at once tempts us to and prevents us from interpreting Samson’s action as the fulfillment of divine calling. In this final section, I focus on Samson’s understanding of being a Nazarite Hebrew and yet having been called by God for something that requires his transgression of Nazarite law. By shifting emphasis to explore Samson’s late glossings on “dispensation” and “disposal” (1375-1380), we can measure how, as agent or organ, he performs acts—including his final “strike” (l.1645)—that transgress the law.

This movement towards a new understanding of law can be glimpsed in Samson’s series of reactions to the Officer before his act of violence. When the Officer first comes to Samson to demand that he perform at the “solemn feast” dedicated to Dagon and entertain the Philistines, Samson responds: “Thou knowst I am an Ebrew, therefore tell them, / Our Law forbids at their Religious Rites / My presence; for that cause I cannot come” (ll.1319-21). In this first exchange, Samson’s relation to the law does not just underwrite but necessitates his action: “I am an Ebrew, therefore…” signifies that the law has already prescribed what Samson can and cannot do, which works are possible and which impossible. His actions proceed from this law: he acts—or refuses to act—in order

to conform his will to it. Samson almost immediately revises this “cannot come,” however, in his iterations of “I will not come” (ll. 1333/1342)—inability becomes willful refusal with a slight modal substitution. Just before the second encounter with the Officer, Samson has an exchange with the Chorus in which the question of whether he “can” or “will” go along to the festival of Dagon becomes a meditation on the nature of law and divine permission, activity and “constraint”:

*Chor.* Where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not.

*Sam.* Where outward force constrains, the sentence holds;

But who constrains me to the Temple of Dagon,

Not dragging? the Philistian Lords command.

Commands are no constraints. If I obey them,

I do it freely; venturing to displease

God for the fear of Man, and Man prefer,

Set God behind: which in his jealousie

Shall never, unrepented, find forgiveness.

Yet that he may dispense with me or thee

Present in Temples at Idolatrous Rites

For some important cause, thou needst not doubt.

*Chor.* How thou wilt here come off surmounts my reach.

*Sam.* Be of good courage, I begin to feel

Some rousing motions in me which dispose

To something extraordinary my thoughts.
I with this Messenger will go along,
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour
Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite.
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.
(ll. 1368-89)

The Chorus here initially offers a reading of the situation that disjoins “heart” from “outward action,” divides out the internal passions from the execution of action in the world: if heart (inner conscience or emotion) is not joined to the act in its outward performance, then the law is not transgressed and the self is not defiled—there is only really an “action” that can defile if the heart commits. The doing is not what defines action’s effect on the actor’s interior; instead, action depends upon the connection between those inward passions and doing in the world. The Chorus, in other words, suggests that the question of permissibility does not primarily have to do with an action’s relationship to law but with inner conscience. Samson’s response contextualizes and revises the problem in iambic so smooth that it is easy to pass over how vital this different interpretation of his situation is to become: “Where outward force constrains, the sentence holds,” which is to say that only where external constraints on the body are present does this “sentence” have “hold” over the body. Samson then qualifies this glossing of “outward constraint”—which seems radically different than the earlier constraint of “I am an Ebrew, therefore”—by differentiating subtly between “commands”
and “constraints,” such that he attaches his obedience to his freedom (“If I obey them, / I do it freely”). Samson makes freedom the condition of his obedience to the Philistines just before he makes his obedience to God a condition of an even greater freedom, and in this questioning of the bases on which freedom and subjection are evaluated Samson envisions obedience to God—becoming God’s sacrificial vessel for violence—as more important than self-preservation.

Yet what does it mean to do something “freely” if freedom in this instance is constituted by becoming an instrument of God’s dispensation and disposal? Samson’s narrative of his own transformation in this passage at the end of the play turns on these precise terms, “dispense” and “dispose”: “Yet that he may dispense with me or thee / […] Some rousing motions in me which dispose.” Coming from the Latin dispentio, the Vulgate translation of the Greek oikonomian,271 “dispense” here, as in the play’s earlier use of it in (l. 314: “For with his own Laws he can best dispense”), means at once to order and to negate, to pardon by means of grace and to do away “with me” through annihilation. “Yet that he may dispense with me or thee” suggests, on the one hand, the determination of Samson’s will and, on the other, the abolition of Samson’s capacity to will his action. This duality is signaled, too, by the unresolved “or” of Samson’s last line directly delivered to us in the play: “By some great act, or of my days the last.” God’s dispensing with Samson may lead to “some great act” (though what it is remains hidden to Samson) or his last days, the latter implying both death and a sense of apocalyptic end time, the interruption of divine will and temporality within the play. “Dispense,” directly in the middle of line 1377, is linked with the “dispose” at the end line 1382 at the level of

271 See, e.g., Ephesians 3:2, which refers to the oikonomian tes charitos tou theou (in Vulgate: dispensationem gratae Dei).
both sound and meaning: God can dispense with Samson so that—the shift in line position suggests this causality—he may dispose him to an action that breaks with the ordinary norms imposed by law: “I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To some thing extraordinary my thoughts.” His dispensation directs him to his disposal; he is motioned to become a vessel of God’s will. Samson sees himself as being positioned by God, dis-posed, for something even if that disposal may mean death. God has disposed of Samson so that he may fulfill his fatal mission—“disposed,” like “dispense,” making it impossible to know whether God has created a disposition within Samson or gotten rid of his will entirely and replaced it with God’s own.

The Chorus’s unsatisfying maxim at play’s end does nothing to resolve this ambiguity, since it implicitly links Samson’s disposition to God’s “unsearchable dispose”: “All is best, though we oft doubt, / What th’ unsearchable dispose” (1745-1746). The play gives us no solid ground on which to account for transformation from Samson’s solitary desperation to his dispensation and disposal. Like the characters in the play, readers are unsure whether God has re-infused Samson with grace and strength, turning him into a vessel of divine violence, or whether Samson has persuaded himself that he is now ready to return to his path as willful violent liberator of Israel.

Much depends on what we—and Samson himself—make of these “rousing motions.” Mediated to us by Samson without any other confirmation, these motion mark the inception of his ambiguous “some thing extraordinary.” The Chorus labels this transformation a return of the heroic, willful Samson (“the man returns” (l.1390)), but Samson describes these rousing as a novel initiation into something that will be seen as remarkable within—and thus in some sense not continuous with—the narrative of his
heroic life. This is now the second time that Samson has described his breaking of a Nazarite law as being motioned by God (cf. l. 222) and here, as before, the emphasis is on a “disposal” to something extraordinary, to a calling that is now “motioned” under the sign of God’s inspiration. The play poses in this moment the question of whether Samson himself as willful agent indeed “returns,” as the Chorus suggests, or whether God has annihilated Samson’s will so that he is guided solely by “rousing motions,” as a vessel of God’s movement to interrupt the ordinary unfolding of the world.

Seemingly a transparent term, “motion” has complex resonances in seventeenth-century English. From the Latin motus, “motion” most simply can signify physical movement or emotion. For some in the seventeenth century, physical movement is a model for emotion and the senses, as in Hobbes’s famous definition of sense as “Motion in the organs and interior parts of mans body, caused by the action of the things we See, Heare, &c.” and passion as “the interior beginnings of voluntary motions” (Lev VI).

Renaissance Latin dictionaries reveal more expansive definitions for motus: “A motion or moving; a stir, trouble, commotion or disturbance; any passion of the mind; gesture or carriage, a measure in dancing; a cause or occasion; a mutiny; the remove of an Army.” In classical rhetoric, Quintilian suggests that motus can mean not just motion or emotion or commotion but even “trope.” In scholastic philosophy, motus and dispositio were terms often used to explore whether salvation was initiated by work or by


One of the more widely read texts in seventeenth-century England (despite its decidedly Thomist bent) typically refers to “the inordinate motions of Passions, their preventing of reason, their rebellion to virtue.” Milton’s “rousing motions” evoke the multivalence of this term, for what this “some things extraordinary” is remains obscure, an effect possibly of emotion, commotion, inordinate passion, divine inspiration, or even trope.

“Extraordinary” poses another unexpected interpretive crux. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton analyzes the term “extraordinary” with regards to God’s intervention through extraordinary providence; the fact that Samson is motioned to this something extraordinary only further underscores the question of whether Samson is in fact actor or passive vessel of God’s intervention. In an analysis of the term “extraordinary,” Rogers suggests:

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton had clung to a residual orthodox belief in God’s miraculous powers of intervention, naming God’s capacity for voluntary intervention in his ‘extraordinary providence’ (*providentia Dei extraordinaria*),

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274 See, e.g., this passage from Aquinas: “[S]icut motus naturalis est ab aliquo principio intrinseco, ita motus voluntaries est ab aliquo intrinseco. Igitur si actus caritatis esset totaliter ab exteriori movente, non esset voluntaries .... Igitur est aliquis talis habitus creatus in nobis. [Just as a natural movement arises from some intrinsic beginning, so a motion of will arises from something intrinsic. And so, if the act of charity should arise completely from an exterior movement, it would not be voluntary.... Therefore there is some such disposition created in us.”] (Quoted on pp. 181-82; from Thomas Aquinas, *De caritate*, q. 1, a.1, resp. J, in *Quaestionies disputatiae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, ed. P. Bazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1953).) Quoted in D. Vance Smith, “Principium: Beginning Perfection: The Theology of Inception,” in *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 2001).

which is that power ‘whereby God produces some effect out of the usual order of nature.’ Here, however, [in Samson’s motioning toward “something extraordinary”], as if to shake off forever the vestiges of voluntarism that had shackled the argument of *Christian Doctrine*, Milton shifts this loaded adjective, ‘extraordinary,’ from God to God’s creature. 

Rogers glossing of “extraordinary” is extremely useful, but his conclusion that “extraordinary” has shifted to apply now to God’s creature rather than to God himself begs the question of whether or not Samson has become God’s instrument at this point in the play. If Samson’s will has been annihilated by these “motions” and replaced with God’s, then what is to come is still God’s extraordinary intervention, with Samson as organ of its force. Milton presents what may be Samson’s inspiration as a kind of “rousing motion,” but the various connotations of “motion” do not allow us to determine whether the motions are extrinsic (a gift from God that is required to “begin” “some great act” or that annihilate and replace Samson’s will all together) or whether they are intrinsic (such that he feels them “in me” by have gone through a series of dialogic exercises to purify his will, which have now prepared him to say “I will” to the Officer). Milton’s monism complicates things even further, for when the spiritual is itself material, how does one recognize the extraordinary interruption of divine violence?

Samson’s own description of his “rousing motions” makes it impossible for us to judge the source of Samson’s inspiration, and the question of whether his final “presage” is stirred on by a passionale experience of divine dispensation or a willful self-generated

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decision is made even more complicated by the passage’s numerous other ambiguities. Samson “feels” the motions and yet they directly “dispose … my thoughts,” which renders the motions’ influence on the senses or thoughts equivocal. It remains unclear whether the motions instantiate a chain of causality that necessitates Samson’s final act, thus making Samson into a receptacle pushed along by these motions, or whether they merely encourage him to find his will to revolt again. Likewise, Samson insists that he “Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonor / Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite” at the moment when it seems as though that law has been suspended so that he could obey the “commands” of the Philistine’s against his “prescription” as Hebrew. And, finally, the term “dispose” itself could mean either passionately ‘to place or move towards his calling’ or could be an activation of a “disposition,” a habitus of action, that Samson has now finally achieved through his ascesis of self-interrogation.

The equivocation between “dispose” as passion or action is central to what the play forces us to consider when we encounter fanaticism like Samson’s. Despite the ambiguity, Samson’s meditations late in the play suggest that he abnegates his heroic strength and embraces his weakness—the weakness of not himself being able to know the event towards which these motions dispose him. Whether or not these are God’s “rousing motions” or not, Samson seems to take on the role of passive organ of divine might. Samson goes along with the Officer despite having no knowledge of what yet will happen to him: “I with this messenger will go along,” Samson says, in an image that mirrors the blindness of Samson at the first lines of the play, in which he cannot know where he is going (“A little onward lend thy guiding hand / To these dark steps”). It is this blindness that signifies Samson’s willingness to follow what he interprets with faith, but cannot
grasp with knowledge, as God’s “motions,” a weakness that the eyewitness to Samson’s final performance describes to us in striking terms:

He patient but undaunted where they led him,
Came to the place, and what was set before him
Which without help of eye might be assay’d,
To heave, pull, draw, or break, he still perform’d
All with incredible, stupendous force,
None daring to appear Antagonist.
(ll. 1623-29)

Blind Samson must commit himself to movement, coming to this place, without knowing where he is (“where they led’’); he is “patient but undaunted” in his weakness, embracing it as the deprivation through which he tentatively “might assay” his still-unknown progress towards sacrificial destruction. He must give himself over to weakness, must dwell in his own deprivation rather than overcoming it. As Milton wrote of Jesus in his *Defensio Prima*, the embrace of weakness becomes the foundation of a different kind of freedom, in which passion and action are brought together without being synthesized: “Christ […] took upon himself […] the form of the slave, so that we might be free. I do not speak of inward freedom only [but also] political freedom.”\(^ {277} \) Even at this moment when Samson’s performance is characterized by the massive totality—the “All”—of his “stupendous force,” Samson seems to be defined as fundamentally “patient.” We only

\(^ {277} \) Milton, *Defensio Prima*, in *Collected Prose Works*, 4.1.374. See also *Of Reformation*, 5, where Milton describes martyrs as wielding the “unresistable might of Weakness.”
reach the verb “came” after the line break, which suggests that having been disposed to
this place is itself an experience of patience, passivity and suffering. Samson is not just
waiting calmly for the arrival of an unknown future, but also undergoing the suffering
that is inflicted on him. Understanding Samson’s blindness as a figure for his patience
and passivity prepares us to read the final event of Samson’s life, which entwines passion
and action, sacrifice and purgation:

He unsuspicious led him; which when Samson
Felt in his arms, with head a while enclin’d,
And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray’d,
Or some great matter in his mind revolv’d.
(ll. 1635-38)

This passage defines for us the problem of interpreting fanaticism in a way that does not
simply dismiss it as delusion. Samson is “led” here to his final passionate stance of
violent action; he gives himself over to that which he cannot know in advance. Whereas
in Judges 16:28 Samson’s prayer to God is unambiguous, here we are again confronted
by an “as” that darkens our view of the scene: Samson stands “as one who prayed / Or
some great matter in his mind revolved.” From this scene, mediated to us many times
over (the messenger tells Manoa and the Chorus “For so much such as nearer stood we
heard” (l.1631)), we cannot know—we cannot see—whether Samson is praying to God
or not; he looks like (“as”) one who prays, but might also just be considering “some great
matter,” or, if not considering, then at least having it “revolve” in his mind. Unlike many
other Renaissance martyr dramas from George Buchanan’s *Baptistes sive Calumnia* (1577) to John Dryden’s *Tyrannic Love: A Royal Martyr* (1669), in which the martyr desires and wills his own death, Milton’s play does not give us evidence that Samson’s violence is a willed expression to become a fanatic or martyr. Indeed, the Chorus observes that the only way to understand what has happened is to see that Samson has released himself from his will and been delivered into the workings of God’s necessity: “Among thy slain self-kill’d / Not willingly, but tangl’d in the fold / Of dire necessity” (ll. 1664-1666). Samson’s fanaticism here can certainly not be reduced to direct, immediate access to God that outstrips the limits of human reason; we are much closer to witnessing the realization of the will of God precisely in its unrealizability and

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278 Buchanan, *Baptistes sive Calumnia*, in *George Buchanan Tragedies*, ed. P. Sharratt and P.G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983), 1081ff. (esp, around 1093-1104: John the Baptist: “So my spirit is eager to fly free from the unbarred prison of the body to where the whole world will sooner or later pass. In my view a long life is nothing but lingering slavery in a grim prison. O death, alone the respite from harsh toil: death, harbor from grief and repose from evil, benefit which few appreciate, a source of fear for the debased but an aspiration by the good”) and John Dryden, *Tyrannic Love: A Royal Martyr* (London, 1670), end of Act IV (first performed in 1669, two years before *Samson Agonistes*), for the discussion between Catherine, Porphyrius, and Bernie about the conflicted loving life despite maintaining a resolution to die) and Catherine’s ultimate commitment to die in Act V:

To beg your life——
Is not to ask a grace of Maximin:
It is a silent bargain for a sin.
Could we live always, life were worth our cost;
But now we keep with care what must be lost.
Here we stand shivering on the bank, and cry,
When we should plunge into eternity.
One moment ends our pain;
And yet the shock of death we dare not stand,
By thought scarce measured, and too swift for sand:
’Tis but because the living death ne’er knew,
They fear to prove it as a thing that’s new.
Let me the experiment before you try,
I’ll show you first how easy ‘tis to die.
unknowability. It appears to enter the world, if it does in this moment, through Samson as vessel. Samson appears to become an instrument of divine violence, unable to know or will what he does, but the “as” also bars us from knowing that he has become God’s organ here with certainty.

Is Samson becoming in this moment what Augustine saw him as, a vessel for God’s grace, an organ of divine might (“In Samson we have a vessel [vas], in the Spirit we have what fills it. A vessel can be filled and emptied; and every vessel gets its contents from elsewhere.”279)? Or is Samson becoming yet again the vengeful hero whom Calvin envisioned, a willful hero whose “perverted prayer” God may or may not answer?280 Even if one were to believe that Samson were inspired, who then commits the final act of violence: God through a possessed Samson or Samson himself? The either/or structure of these questions confuses rather than clarifies what the play insists upon: that we cannot differentiate Samson’s passion from his action or, determine whether he is a organ or agent.

In Hobbes, the only space in which religion can be allowed to come into conflict with civil power is the internal space of conscience; conscience can only offer a privatized form of religious protest in Leviathan. The unknowability of divine disposal and action, of inspiration and insurrection, in Samson Agonistes cannot be reduced to a concept of private conscience; it blurs the topography of inclusion and exclusion on

280 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion 3.20.15. Calvin reads Samson as a vengeful hero but still maintains that God fulfills his prayer. Feisal Mohamed interprets Calvin’s analysis of Samson to show that Samson’s prayer in Judges need not exclude his return to a heroic narrative of vengeance (Milton and the Postsecular Present, 114).
which Hobbes depends for his banning of the fanatic. Samson’s final action—undertaken “of my own accord” (which, as Michael Lieb has shown, can mean either of Samson’s own will or, as this phrase is most commonly used in the Bible, of the accord of God in him281)—is represented to us as though it were a moment of divine apocalyptic violence (“As with the force of winds and water pent, / When Mountains tremble… (ll. 1647-8)), but is rendered potently as his own action: “He tugg’d, he shook.”282 “Accord” maintains in Samson’s mouth a double meaning: of my own will and of my agreement with or attunement to God as his instrument. The scene has a kind of necessity and inevitability to it (“Samson with these inmixt, inevitably / Pull’d down the same destruction on himself” (ll. 1658-59), but this moment of climax of the play represents a katharsis that embodies the meanings of lustratio as both sacrifice and purgation, as passion and action, as the suspension of law (Samson is now “immixt” with the unclean, uncircumcised) and its fulfillment as Jewish apocalyptic prophet.283 The presence or non-presence alike of God in Samson leads to the obliteration of his body and being.

281 Michael Lieb, “‘Our Living Dread’: The God of Samson Agonistes,” in Milton Studies, Vol. 33 (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburg P: 1996), p. 16ff.: “To invoke the phrase ‘of my own accord’ or ‘of his own accord’, then, is to align oneself with the discourse of God, who, more than anyone else in Scriptures, acts of his own accord (by himself) and customarily in the context of swearing an oath.” For Lieb Samson becomes in this moment “that tremendum through which ‘our living Dread’ is made manifest,” which is sharply different from his early idolatrous self-identification as a “petty God” (l. 529), since it is something more akin to a mystical annihilation of self such that union with the divine can be achieved.

282 A number of critics have commented on the parallel of this moment both to Eve’s consumption of the apple in Paradise Lost (IX, 781: “she pluck’d, she eat”) and Jesus’s defeated of Satan in Paradise Regained (IV.561: “He said and stood”).

283 For an elaboration of the dramatic representation of prophets and early modern Hebraicist debates over whether or not the behaviors of the prophet were part of their prophet gifts, see Nigel Smith, Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640-1660, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), pp. 30-31.
Samson’s singular fanatical mission works to restore the vocation of a collective; as a (indeterminate) organ of divine might, his violence and death become at once an action of purgation and a passional obedience. Samson becomes here a Hobbesian enemy who takes God’s motions, however ambivalently, as authorization to impugn civil power—or, alternatively, who himself becomes a passive instrument of God’s will. Our inability to see Samson’s internal struggle—to determine whether or not he is inspired by God or not, whether his violence is action or passion, cathartic purgation or sacrificial annihilation—mirrors Samson’s blindness (“O mirror of our fickle state”): it is our weakness, which is, too, the weakness of those who witness the violence within the play, to be unable to see Samson’s motives or motions. Our blindness becomes his vision: in rendering Samson’s refusal of what I explored in the previous chapter as Hobbes’s inalienable right of self-protection, Milton makes Samson’s conscience illegible, uncountable—we cannot read definitively Samson’s self-sacrifice as either action or passion. Samson’s resistance emerges through a particular kind of weakness, as I have argued: blind, Samson stands as a figure of submission to annihilation, in the interests of “delivering” Israel from “Philistian yoke” (ll.38-39). Whether his will is annihilated only with his body or whether the “rousing motions” themselves annihilated Samson’s will and replaced it with God’s in order for divine violence to intervene is a matter the play leaves unknowable.

284 Hobbes, in language Samson himself uses in ll. 1206-7 (“force with force / Is well ejected when the Conquer’d can”): “A Covenant not to defend my selfe from force, by force, is always voyd”: no man, according to Hobbes, can transfer or otherwise abnegate the right to defend himself physically “from Death, Wounds, and Imprisonment” (Lev I 14, p. 70/98).
With Samson’s conscience rendered illegible to us, making us unable to determine the precise relationship between action and passion, we are forced at the end of the play to encounter what it means to witness this event of violence. We cannot turn away from the illegibility of Samson’s “rousing motions.” This fact creates in those who witness Samson’s violence a feeling of horror in which passion and action come to seem indistinguishable, in which *lustratio* becomes the master trope of a play that entangles purgation with sacrifice, violent will with passional obedience.

Milton forces us to witness, at the end of the poem, how different parties—the Chorus, Manoa, the Messenger—re-construct a figure of Samson’s broken body in ways that fixes it within the kind of monumentalizing “gazes” from which Samson most wished to distance himself (“Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze” (l.34); “to visitants a gaze, / Or pitied object, these redundant locks / Robustious to no purpose clustring down, / Vain monument of strength” (ll. 567-71)). These voices interpret Samson as a willful hero or as an instrument of God, celebrate him as decidedly one or the other. In this final emphasis on the various ways figures in the play interpret Samson’s violence and death, Milton requires us to see the scene of performance—this horrific “spectacle” the source of which we are blind to—as a communal palimpsest,\(^{285}\) as when Manoa says:

> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,

\(^{285}\) Stanley Fish makes a similar point in his “Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*,” in *Critical Inquiry* 15.3 (1989), 563.
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.
Let us go find the body where it lies
Sok’t in his enemies blood, and from the stream
With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off
The clotted gore. I with what speed the while
(Gaza is not in plight to say us nay)
Will send for all my kindred, all my friends
To fetch him hence and solemnly attend
With silent obsequie and funeral train
Home to his Fathers house: there will I 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 all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame their breasts
To matchless valour, and adventures high.
(ll. 1721-1740)

The washing of the gore from Samson’s body, a misrecognition of Milton’s insistence on the lustrative power of his dramatic poem, demonstrates Manoa’s desire to dissociate Samson as an exemplary heroic self from his shattered body (“Samson has quit himself / Like Samson, and heroically hath finish’d / A Life Heroic”), to turn, thereby, a precarious
body riven, fractured, destroyed in resistance and self-sacrifice into a text on which he can “enroll” (l. 1736) his own meaning and transform Samson’s “Acts” into that which Samson most detested: a “Monument,” an idol of heroic grandeur to be exemplary and copied by “valiant youth.” Manoa hopes to turn Samson into a monumental hero, defined by his “matchless valor.”

This monumental hero offers an explanatory narrative—God gave Samson his strength back so that he could again become a hero for future generations to imitate—that does not address whether Samson underwent his violent martyrdom as heroic actor or passive instrument of God’s will. Both Manoa and the Chorus seek to regulate the horror we, as readers, experience in the face of the illegible sight of Samson’s violent resistance and death. Milton confronts us the defilement of Samson as both victim and violent insurrectionary, without allowing us to know whether he dies as heroic actor or passive vessel. Distancing us from Manoa, the play urges us to interpret Samson’s end in such a way that refuses to monumentalize the meaning of his body and passion or action.

Our response to this passionate action of violence and death are, as Judith Butler has argued elsewhere, fashioned first in affects that are “tacitly regulated by certain kinds of interpretative frameworks,”286 and acknowledging these frameworks allows us to see that one’s body, one’s passion, one’s action are never entirely one’s own, not self-enclosed and self-referential, but can be circulated in the world in ways that cannot be anticipated. We must register Samson’s violence as bound up in his trials of lustratio—at the end of the play, his body is torn between active purification and passionate sacrifice, between willful violence and a passive “entanglement” (cf. l. 1665) as God’s instrument.

Without having access to his motivations or “motions,” we recognize that his body, his action, his passion, however “spent” (l.1758), become for us a site in which history and the desire for radical vision emerge at the point where will and disposal, action and passion, become at once mutually determining and mutually obscuring. *Lustratio*, as both purification and sacrifice, wandering and undoing, action and passion, figures liberation in *Samson Agonistes* as ritual catharsis in which loss and violation must be encountered and not betrayed by monuments that capture its meaning. We cannot know the extent to which Samson’s violence in the play is an action that he performs or a passion that God performs through him. That is one of the many terrors that fanaticism presents to us, one from which Milton refuses to divert our attention.

We witness Samson’s violence as an act of revolutionary resistance that provokes horror, not simply as an act of “atrocicy” to be easily dismissed as ‘mere’ “fanaticism,” as John Carey has stated. Instead, the play raises powerful and intractable questions about what it means to witness fanaticism and how it forces viewers to re-examine how we think of passion and action, of our capacity to become organs of a divine violence and to be agents in the world.\(^\text{287}\) The state of “amaze” with which Samson’s violence strikes us—“As with amaze shall strike all who behold” (1645)—positions us as spectators who cannot know the source of the “rousing motions” that make this violence possible.\(^\text{288}\) It


also implicates us in those motions, suggesting that we too, amazed by the violence, may come to resemble Samson’s passivity (if it was that). This is the tragedy of Samson’s fanaticism: We bear witness to this revolt, its contagious dissemination of sacrificial energy, and thereby experience a horror not just at the violence but at the inability to determine whether this is divine violence or heroic attack, passive martyrdom or active “strike.” Milton’s Samson is thus not easily connected with the nationalist figure of Samson as “tough Jew” and purveyor of “mythic violence” that Talal Asad ably analyzes; to name him as national hero is to fall into the mistake that Manoa makes at the play’s ending, evading the complex, irresolvable economy of passion and action fanaticism provokes.

If fanaticism for Spenser introduces an absolute and unintelligible force that disrupts the allegorical system, and for Donne incites a formal problem of interpretability—recall how Donne hails us regarding Samson: “Consider it actively, consider it passively”—then in Milton fanaticism becomes a problem of tragic recognition, a question of how witnesses respond in the face of unknowable violence in which they are implicated. Fanaticism presents an experience in which we must dwell with a violence only intelligible in light of its abject residues of catastrophic upheaval, a dramatic experience of a body and its damage not as a monumental fact to be known but as an occasion for contingent identification and dis-identification. Not knowing whether Samson “rousing motions” initiate an annihilation through which he becomes vessel of divine force, “dire necessity,” we come to the end of Samson Agonistes with the

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289 On Suicide Bombing, 75-76. I find Asad’s definition of horror as “the result of [the] deliberate transgression of boundaries that separate the human from the inhuman, the creature from the Creator” useful for considering the horror that Samson provokes in Milton’s play.
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