

that its author was not. Perhaps we are reading the works of two different authors.

David Gay. *The Endless Kingdom: Milton's Scriptural Society*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. 220 pp. \$43.00. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

Gay's *Endless Kingdom* challenges the idea that after the Restoration, Milton withdrew from politics and wrote his three great poems (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*) without specific reference to the Royalist regime. For Gay, Milton sought a connection between the social world of England and the textual world of the Bible. When the Restoration broke that connection, Milton proclaimed the kingdom of God within the context of his poetry: "In 1644, when Milton published *Areopagitica*, the dynamic correspondence of textual and social vitality seemed almost possible to achieve. The Restoration of 1660 destroyed this correspondence for Milton, and so he chose to proclaim the endless kingdom primarily in the textual and critical space of the poetry he bequeathed to future generations" (31). The three major poems are, according to Gay, "radically counterhistorical in their critical engagement with, and opposition to" the Royalist discourses that connect the Restoration with providential statements in the Bible (12).

Gay also claims that "the Bible is initially a broken and incomplete text. Its texture is aphoristic, consisting of sayings, precepts, and isolated teachings" (10) that generate wisdom. Gay finds a similar "structure" in *Areopagitica*: "The pieces of its scattered body are verbal units comprised of maxims and aphorisms, or short, pithy, and memorable phrases that strike the reader as forms of wisdom . . . The writer's task of linking these aphorisms in prose provides a model for the reader's interpretive task of gathering up the scattered body of truth" (36). Wisdom is the common thread that binds together Gay's interpretation of the three great poems: as perception in *Paradise Lost* (chapter 2), as opposi-

tion in *Samson Agonistes* (chapter 3), and as revelation in *Paradise Regained* (chapter 4).

It is obvious and understandable that the Royalists would celebrate the restoration of Charles II by searching for biblical texts that would connect that event with the workings of Divine Providence. That point, as Gay makes plain, was loudly preached from Royalist pulpits. Indeed, even before the Restoration, Clement Ellis preached a sermon supporting the restoration of Charles II with a gloss on Proverbs 24:21: "My son, fear God, and the King, and meddle not with them that be seditious, or desirous of change" (cited 28).

It is, however, quite another matter to demonstrate a "counterhistorical" thesis that runs through Milton's three major poems. Since Milton did not announce any such plan, it can only be intuited through a close reading of his poetry against the background of sacred scripture. Such a reading must be based on *our* understanding of *Milton's* understanding of sacred scripture, and then applied to a particular interpretation of the poetry itself. And as Gay himself admits, "the Bible was amenable to the defense and destruction of monarchy" (30). Gay can never be sure that Milton would draw the same implications from a scriptural passage that he does, or that his reading of the poetry in the light of scripture parallels Milton's. For example, in commenting on the disappearance and discovery of the Son in *Paradise Regained*, and how that episode is held in memory by both Mary and Satan, Gay makes the following claim:

The Gospels present the life of Christ, not as a continuous biography, but in pericopes, which are discontinuous sequences of episodes; moreover, Gospel pericopes frame the teaching of a specific precept or parable. In *Paradise Regained*, discontinuous, aphoristic "sayings" present a rhetorical counterpart to the discontinuous narrative pericopes recreated in the poem . . . Discontinuity both invites and resists an interpretive synthesis. (182)

In other words, aphorisms or wise sayings are scattered throughout the poem in some kind of meaningful pattern that it is the reader's task to discover (see *Areopagitica*, above). Even if this were

the case, it would be almost impossible to demonstrate; thus the statement is an unproveable assertion and does not advance the argument.

Gay also claims that while the Royalists connected scripture with external events (the Restoration in particular), authentic readers of the Bible focused inwardly on the encoded message of liberty: "The voices that celebrated the Restoration emphasized the outwardness rather than the inwardness of liberty. They did so by identifying scriptural precepts with the material displays of monarchy. For Milton, this identification led the English people from an active envisioning of a reformed society to the passive reception of a political idol" (10-11). Thus in *Samson Agonistes* "the destruction of the temple of Dagon attacks a political culture of material display with an intensity equal and opposite to the violent spectacles of punishment and retribution that accompanied the celebratory pomp of the Restoration" (139). This is an interesting statement, but since Gay cannot point to any direct allusion to "the celebratory pomp of the Restoration," in *Samson Agonistes*, it does not advance the argument.

Gay's readings of Milton's three great poems are situated within the hostile context of Restoration pamphlets, some of them calling for Milton's own blood in vengeance for the execution of Charles I: "this Murther [of King Charles I] I say, and these Villanies were defended, justified, nay extolled and commended, by one Mr. John Milton" (21—by George Starkey, in his *Dignity of Kingship Justified*, London, 1660). Gay also notes the irony of the royalist regime's simultaneous condemnation and practice of blasphemy. After the Quaker James Nayler was tried for blasphemy because he reenacted the ceremony of Palm Sunday in Bristol, he was whipped, mutilated, and imprisoned for life without the means to continue his writing. At the same time, a Royalist poet blasphemously identified Christ with the new king and received no punishment at all. "George Starkey's poem '*Britain's Triumph*,' in contrast [to Nayler], celebrates Charles II's triumphant return to London using the imagery of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The messianic aura surrounding Charles' return is an

ironic counterpart to the trial and punishment of James Nayler. Taken together, the two events demonstrate the polarity of cultural and political images Milton responds to his in his major poems" (75-76).

This is a beautifully written book filled with interesting insights about Milton's great poetry. Unfortunately, those scattered insights do not cohere into a defensible thesis. In this respect, *Milton's Scriptural Society* imitates the discontinuous structure that Gay attributes both to the Bible and to *Areopagitica*.

Derek N. C. Wood. *Exiled from Light: Divine Law, Morality and Violence in Milton's "Samson Agonistes."* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. xxii + 247 pp. \$ 55.00. Review by STEPHEN M. BUHLER, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN.

To a great extent, this book has been commandeered by recent history. Just two months after its initial publication, the multiple assaults on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an unknown target of yet another hijacked jet brought the reality of political violence home to North Americans in ways they had not yet experienced. In such a context, Derek Wood's *Exiled from Light* and its call to reconsider triumphalist readings of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* resonates profoundly—if in ways the author could not have foreseen.

Wood endeavors to rescue Milton's tragedy (for so the author himself categorized it) from interpretations—largely influenced by strains in Christian doctrine, it must be noted—that unequivocally celebrate the devastation that Samson visits upon the Philistines. He offers, instead, a sense of the text as deeply ambiguous and ambivalent; not only does the inability of the Israelites to take advantage of Samson's victory come into question, but so too does Samson's perhaps desperate attempt to redeem himself and the Israelite cause. As Wood rightly notes, Samson had unwisely presumed on divine sanction before, with Dalila. Milton's text sur-