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What's Murmur Got to Do with It?

Murmur is “the expression of discontent or anger in subdued tones; muttered or indistinct complaint or grumbling” (OED). Used in a religious context, murmurers “take God to task” as they “complain in response to suffering or misfortune” (Gregory 21). In the Christian sense, the idea of the murmur is explicit in many biblical passages, most of which cast the murmur as a grievous offense against God. “And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp.” (*KJV*, Num. 11). In response to these sinful murmurers, God tells Moses and Aaron, “I the Lord have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.” (*KJV*, Num. 14). There are also less explicit references to murmuring in the New Testament. For instance, “Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.” (*KJV*, 1 Cor. 10).

From a young age in early modern England, children were socialized to read the Bible “humbly, meekly, reverently, and obediently ... without murmurs or grudgings so that ‘the flock might learn thereby to observe God’s commandments and to obey their sovereign lord and high powers’” (Charlton 60 as quoted in *Women Religion and Early Modern England*). Indeed, during this time murmur was portrayed as a sure highway to hell; people believed that patience, the

direct opposition of murmur, was the virtue to be exercised in times of misfortune (Gregory 22). Some Christian murmurers were even accused of upholding a more pagan outlook because “their grudging [sought] to make a trial whether God be among them” (Hermann 9). In short, to murmur was to disobey the highest authority of all.

Originally published in 1659, Thomas Brooks’ *The Mute Christian Under a Smarting Rod* perhaps best exemplifies just how seriously early modern England took its murmurs. The entirety of this pamphlet is solely devoted to swaying Christians away from this offensive grudging. Silence, Brooks urges, is the best solution:

I charge you, O my soul, not to mutter, nor to murmur. I command you, O my soul, to be silent under the afflicting hand of God. Peace, O my soul! be still, leave your muttering, leave your murmuring, leave your complaining, leave your chafing, and vexing, and lay your hand upon your mouth, and be silent. O my soul! be quiet, be silent, else you will one day be called in question for all those inward mutterings, uproars, and passions that are in you, seeing no sufficient cause can be produced why you should murmur, quarrel, or wrangle under the righteous hand of God. (Brooks 25)

Brooks makes an important distinction between those who prescribe their afflictions to God and those who prescribe them to the devil. He underlines that the perception of God having nothing to do with one’s suffering is factitious; one must be silent with the acknowledgement God had something to do with their situation. Brooks instructs that those who see Satan at the root of their misery “will be ready enough to fall in with that mad principle of the Manichees” (10).

When we think of John Milton and murmur, we quickly associate the two with *Sonnet 19*, in which Milton’s purpose and blindness coincide in a brief complaint. In his sonnet, the poet expresses uselessness and lack of productivity as he alludes to the parable of the talents. The first

half of the sonnet describes Milton's feelings of insufficiency, culminating to the murmur in line 7. "'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?' / I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent / That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts; who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best'" (lines 7-11). The latter half of the sonnet then revokes this murmur. In his interpretation of the sonnet, Tobias Gregory concludes, "He [Milton] would think of the poem as teaching a sound moral lesson, useful for the weaken brethren as an example of how to bear up under duress and in keeping with his usual self-presentation as a saint of conspicuous virtue" (43).

The reception of Milton's God became increasingly harsh following World War II. One of the most influential twentieth century Milton critics, William Empson, expatiates in *Milton's God*, "His God has in any case an authoritarian character, just what one would expect from a usurping angel, which can be felt all the time in Heaven, even in the relations of the angels with one another" (103). Similarly, and many decades later, Michael Bryson insists that Milton's portrayal of the Father's kingship in the epics is not an image of perfect governance but a mockery of it. On the contrary, Bryson views the Son to best demonstrate Milton's idea of a perfect commonwealth. In *The Atheist Milton*, Bryson argues that there is a reason behind the lack of God in *Samson Agonistes*, a complete deviation from other Miltonic works. He concludes that, "From *Paradise Lost*, through *Paradise Regained*, to *Samson Agonistes*, all of Milton's last, greatest poetry moves from affirmation to negation, from belief to doubt, from certainty to uncertainty, from divine presence to divine absence, from theism (being with god) to atheism (being without god)" (162). On the contrary, though God does not speak explicitly in *Samson Agonistes*, he nonetheless aids the murmurous Samson later in the epic. Emily Wilson in *Mocked with Death* reads Samson and Adam through a reading of Milton's "Sonnet 7." She argues,

“Both feel that they are forced to live a kind of living death, enduring repetitive, pointless time in which they are neither able to be their true selves nor to die,” yet such an assertion is based on a murmur that we see dissipates after it is spoken. In her conclusions of what Milton intends readers to take away from *Samson Agonistes*, Wilson explains that only people who subdue their emotions have the ability to forgo “the sense of overliving,” or the idea that life is illogical and too long (163). She emphasizes that Milton’s Adam and Samson promote the suppression of emotion in the face of struggle, but she fails to consider that all these passionate emotions lead back to reason. Overall, Wilson trusts too quickly in the assumption that Milton shared the same ideas about murmur as most Christians of his time.

Despite the prevalence of murmuring characters across Miltonic epics *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, little scholarship on the topic currently exists. It appears that aside from Satan’s offensive grumbles leading him to further irrationality, Milton’s characters often engage in murmur in order to achieve that very same patience Milton indicates “prevents that murmur” in “Sonnet 19.” Rather than viewing murmuring as an egregious sin, Milton shies away from the early modern English tradition and conveys murmur as a necessary self-reflective tool for logical reasoning; we do see that what often begins with an emotional murmur turns into a rational conclusion. Such discourse transforms Adam and Samson’s initial badmouthing to a novel discovery of patience, responsibility, and acceptance. As Gregory informs, “The pattern of murmur and reply, is deeply traditional,” but neither Milton nor Milton’s God seem to think that murmur is all that awful—what we decide to do with the murmur is key. If we consider the Son’s infamous “that far be from thee” murmur in Book II of *Paradise Lost* or Adam’s less famous murmur in which he incessantly asks the Father for a mate

in Book VIII, we see that Milton's God is highly responsive to some "productive" murmur; in fact, he cherishes it.

To best understand how Miltonic murmurs pave way to patience and reason, we must inevitably look at murmurs that birth just the opposite results. As Satan's army of devils find new activities to fill their new miserably eternal existences, the more intellectually inclined find themselves in a recursive discussion from which they harvest no final answers or resolutions. In what could be supposed is a Socratic dialogue, they tackle such universal truths as "good and evil ... happiness and final misery ... passion and apathy ... and glory and shame," but ultimately find no consensus amongst each other (2.562-564). The syntactical redundancy here bolsters perpetuity and inutility of their ponderings: "In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high / Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate / Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute, / And found no end in wand'ring mazes lost" (2.558-561). From "fate" to "fixed fate," "will" to "free will," and "foreknowledge" to "foreknowledge absolute," lines 559-560 produce no new novel thoughts for the devils; they spin in relentless cognitive circles.

It is noteworthy that Milton moves on to these particular fallen angels immediately after "Others more mild ... complain that fate / Free virtue should enthral to force or chance" (2.546, 550-551). The hellish murmurers clearly feel upset over their lost battle, and especially because the outcome was "unfairly" predetermined by the Father. As the devils complain, murmur, and express their displeasure "in wand'ring mazes lost," they are incapable of accepting the responsibility for their current punishment. Such illogical reasoning only seems to have some potential benefits to the devils as it can "excite fallacious hope" or "arm the obdured breast / with stubborn patience as with triple steel" (2.568-569). As Gerald J. Schiffhorst points out, "Their vain desire for spiritual strength is a 'pleasing sorcery' and their folly is appropriately conveyed

in strong physical terms to emphasize their hopeless quest for an eternal strength. Such patience is ‘stubborn’ since it is Stoically proud and rigid” (16). Indeed, this “stubborn patience” reads far from the patience that Milton describes in *Sonnet 19*; instead, the devils are armed with a false sense of security as their backs are forever turned to their maker.

Samson’s initial speech in *Samson Agonistes* propels the tragic hero from murmur to patience, and by the time Samson destroys the Philistines, he achieves God’s redemption. Just before his murmurs, Samson’s state of mind is rattled:

Hence with leave
 Retiring from the popular noise, I seek
 This unfrequented place to find some ease,
 Ease to the body some, none to the mind
 From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
 Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone,
 But rush upon me thronging, and present
 Times past, what once I was, and what am now. (15-22)

The simile in this passage likens “restless thoughts” to “a deadly swarm of hornets armed” that rush upon Samson “*thronging*” (19-21). The word “thronging” is scarcely incorporated into Milton’s works; the present participle of “throng” is an adjective rather than a verb and is used once in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, once in *Samson Agonistes*, and twice in *Paradise Lost*. In *A Masque*, none other but the Satan-like Comus throws in this word in his failed temptation of the Lady. Likewise, in *Paradise Lost*, “thronging” appears in Book I to describe Satan’s populous army. Interestingly, in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, “thronging” appears alongside the murmurous devils: “Their song was partial, but the harmony / (What could it less when

spirits immortal sing?) / Suspended Hell, and took with ravishment / The thronging audience” (II.552-555). “Partial” is synonymous with “biased” rather than “in parts” or “polyphonic,” in fact, it seems to mean that the devils’ song is “silent as to the corrupt motive of their conduct, and [dwells] only on the sad consequences of it” (Cowper as qtd. in Milton340n552). As we find out shortly after these lines, the immortal spirits find themselves “in wand’ring mazes lost” (2. 561). Therefore, considering these two passages side by side, the new image is that of the hellish ensemble of performers like “hornets armed” along with a “*thronging* audience” dancing in Samson’s troubled head; and for some time in this speech, Samson is arguably “[taken] with ravishment” as he dwells on past, present, and future much like the intellectual devils in “wand’ring mazes lost.” Though “ravishment” in this case refers to “rapture, ecstasy, delight” or becoming “entranced or captivated,” the fact that Samson carries on murmur after murmur proves that for a moment, he loses himself. Caesuras saturate his “restless thoughts,” interrupting the syntax; and this also evokes the same discordant features of the passages in Book II of *Paradise Lost* in which the fallen angels must find new activities to occupy their time. At least for the time being, Samson’s mind operates very much the same—from one irrational thought to another.

As Brooks points out in *The Mute Christian Under the Smarting Rod*, one must not murmur “even when God touches the apple of your eye” (14). Yet, Samson must first know evil before coming to his rational senses. He continues the irrational speech with this murmurous question:

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 burned,
 As in a fiery column charioting
 His godlike presence, and from some great act
 Or benefit revealed to Abraham's race? (23-29)

Far from the Christian silence Brooks recommends in times of affliction, Samson seems to be yet far from equanimity. If we read Samson's murmuring passage through the image of Milton's devils hanging out inside of his head, then the "fiery column charioting" takes on a whole new meaning. As Samson explicitly complains that he was chosen in the first place, and therefore engages in a murmur that undermines God's plan, temptation perverts this prophecy to the reason why the song in Book II is "partial" in the first place—the Son banishing the fallen angels to the fiery hell on the Father's chariot. By incorporating this idea from Book VI in *Paradise Lost*—the battle in Heaven—Milton further accentuates Samson's confusion. Samson undermines his prophecy of greatness and turns it into nothing more than God's punishment as much as the Son punishes the devils to an eternity in hell.

Samson's ongoing psychological tension further reflects the imagery of the devils' original expulsion out of Heaven in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. In the next murmurous question Samson poses, Milton echoes the frustration of the devils as they are chained to the fiery lake:

Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed
 As of a person separate to God,
 Designed for great exploits, if I must die
 Betrayed, captive, 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 labor of a beast, debased

Lower than a bondslave! (1.30-38)

Aside from the devils in “adamantine chains” (1.48) and Samson in “brazen fetters” (35), in both instances, Milton juxtaposes what once was with what is now. The devils are subjected to a “place eternal justice had prepared” (70). Milton’s poetic speaker exclaims, “O how unlike the place from whence they fell!” (1.75). By disobeying God, just like the fallen angels did, Samson reflects on the strength he can no longer use, spurring feelings of deep shame in front of his tyrannous enemies. In his first speech, Satan asserts:

To bow and sue for grace

With suppliant knee, and deify his power,

Who from the terror of this arm so late

Doubt his empire, that were low indeed,

That were an ignominy and shame beneath

This downfall (1.111-115).

Thus, in his murmur, shamed Samson must decide whether to take on the attitude of Satan, and continue his fall from grace with God, or catch himself in the act of murmuring. He chooses to do the latter—through his murmur, Samson knows good by evil. He begins the resolution of his internal conflict: “Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt divine prediction” (43-44). As we see is the case here and in “Sonnet 19,” murmur boosts the patience of the murmurer. The Chorus indirectly declares Samson’s proper use of murmur by depicting just the opposite outcome:

Yet more there be who doubt his ways not just,

As to his own edicts, found contradicting,

Then give the reins to wand'ring thought,
 Regardless of his glory's dimunition;
 Till by their own perplexities involved
 They ravel more, still less resolved,
 But never find self-satisfying solution (300-306).

Although “wand'ring thought” does enter Samson's head, he does not allow it to rule over him (302). To Milton, murmur is a necessary means by which sinners come back to logic and rationality, a way to finding a “self-satisfying solution,” a way to making things right with God (line 306). For others in early modern England, such an impression was simply unacceptable.

In *The Atheist Milton*, Bryson reasons that *Samson Agonistes* lacks the involvement of a higher power, that unlike in Milton's previous epics, God is absent from this drama. He asserts that although Milton's epic tradition begins with God's providence, Milton ends this tradition godless (144-162). Emily Wilson in *Mocked with Death* is under a similar assumption that Samson's “rousing motions” may or may not be due to God's intervention since there is little evidence to support it (160). On the contrary, Samson learns his lesson as he denies Delila, and God in turn seems pleased—Milton purposefully opens the drama with Samson's murmurs because as we see him progress through conversations with various characters like Manoa and Delila, the murmurous notions Samson makes become less and less valid. Wilson admits that Delila has a positive impact on Samson as “his passions seem to be stirred up in response” (159). If Samson's initial murmur conjures up imagery of the fallen angels who invade his thoughts, then this sudden hopefulness reassures the proof of God's helping hand in Samson fulfillment of the prophecy. In his miraculous change of mind, Samson tells the Chorus: “Be of good courage, I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my

thoughts” (lines 1381-1383). “Extraordinary” is defined by “out of the usual or regular course or order; often in expressed opposition to *ordinary*” (OED). Throughout *Samson Agonistes*, the only truly “extraordinary” quality of Samson’s remains his strength—certainly not his genius. Aside from Milton’s prose in which he often interjects the word to promote the idea of God’s will, the remainder of the author’s extensive oeuvre lacks the word “extraordinary.”

More importantly, in Chapter 8 of *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton explains, “The extraordinary providence of God is that by which he produces some effect outside the normal order of nature or gives to some chosen person the power of producing this effect. This is what we call a miracle” (1216). Samson’s sudden change of mind to follow the Officer is the fateful decision that allows him to fulfill at least a part of his prophecy in freeing the Israelites from Philistine captivity. His destruction of the temple is due to none other than Milton’s description of God’s “extraordinary providence.” Wilson’s reading of Samson relies too heavily on the idea that we cannot tell whether God aids Samson, but it is rather unlikely that without God “rousing motions” in Samson, he would have had such an “extraordinary” epiphany. What begins with a murmur leads to patience and ends with God’s forgiveness and aid. The question whether Samson is a sympathetic character is thus without purpose—blind Samson, against “the normal order of nature,” is chosen by God to exact his divine will; rather, the question that remains is how sympathetic Milton’s God is. One way or another, Bryson and Wilson’s insecurities about God’s manifestation in *Samson Agonistes* are unfounded. The lack of direct communication between God and Samson is nothing more than a byproduct of a postlapsarian universe, an idea which stems from *Paradise Lost*. Although scholars like Bryson also question the morality of Milton’s God, the idea that Samson’s murmurs lead him back to reason and therefore God’s

grace unmasks a far more comforting divinity in comparison to the traditional portrayal of God in early modern England.

Although in the initial portion of Adam's murmurous speech from Book X of *Paradise Lost*, he clearly understands that the future doom of mankind is his own fault, he has a really difficult time with acceptance of his fateful decisions. This difficulty then leads him to murmurs not unlike Samson's. Adam is angry with the Father:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mold me man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me, or here place
In this delicious garden? (lines 743-746)

Like Samson who questions his prophecy for greatness, Adam irrationally inquires the Father's creation of him as he resorts to cynicism. Milton underlines the irrationality by packing two questions into one since the only pause Milton interjects between the two distinct questions in line 744 is a comma, not the deserved question mark. This embellishes not only Adam's emotion here, but lack of reason—he's not thinking straight, he's babbling on and on as he repetitively questions God's ways in an existential panic attack: "Why delays / His hand to execute what his decree / Fixed on this day? Why do I overlive, / Why am I mocked with death, and lengthened out / To deathless pain?" (10.771-775). Adam murmurs out of fear for the future, out of shame for his sin, out of puzzlement over death. Rather than repressing his varied emotions, Adam questions God and his plan for him; he feels as though a joke had been played on him.

Considering the shattering realization Adam must deal with as a human being, this is far from a surprising choice on Milton's part. However, this does no longer seems to be the case as Adam ends his tirade against the Father in a meek submission to his will: "Him after all disputes /

Forced I absolve: all my evasions vain, / And reasonings, though through mazes, lead me still /
But to my own conviction” (10.828-833). Thereafter, Adam describes his ultimate loss of hope,
an inability to resolve his doomed state of mind. He exclaims,

Thus what thou desir'st
And what thou fear'st, alike destroys all hope
Of refuge, and concludes thee miserable
Beyond all past example and future,
To Satan only like both crime and doom.
O conscience, into what abyss of fears
And horrors hast thou driv'n me; out of which
I find no way, from deep to deeper plunged! (10.837-844).

Wilson remarks, “Adam clutches at a series of possible endings to his emotional turmoil, but his hopes are frustrated again and again” (172). She believes Adam never comes to any “self-satisfying solution” and in fact, it is true that “the only conclusion that Adam can reach is that he can find no conclusion, either to life or to his confusion and dismay” (174). Adam’s comparison to Satan, the image of an “abyss of fears and horrors,” as well as to be “deep to deeper plunged” altogether bring us back to the banishment of Satan and the devils. Upon their arrival, they are stricken with misery, fear, and a perpetual defiance of their faults—they are in “wand’ring mazes lost” filled with false “stubborn patience” (2.302, 569). A significant difference between Adam and the devils rests upon the devils’ absence of humility. Although Adam “has beef” with God, it is only momentary, and much like Samson, he comes back to logic and repents—Adam knows good by evil. As we see is the case in Book XI, the sinners submit to Michael, and in turn, Michael brings forth hope to Adam despite his initial murmurs. The Father, pleased with the

sinners' acceptance of their less than desirable actions, directs Michael to give Adam this vision. Therefore, Milton does not recommend for his readers to abandon their emotions so that they do not murmur as Wilson suggests. Contrary to her point, Milton creates a world in which flawed characters find patience in the roughest of situations by murmuring and questioning God. Instead of a straight pathway to hell, murmur provides the humble with new logic and patience.

Milronic murmurs are not limited to dire situations as that of Adam and Samson's, nor are they limited to indirect communication with the Father. The Son of God defies authority before his exaltation as he undermines the Father's sense of justice in terms of mercy for the humankind. He tells him, "That be from thee far, / That far be from thee, Father, who art judge / Of all things made, and judgest only right" (3.153-155). Strangely enough, the comment exemplifies the Son's worry the Father may not exercise mercy for the sinners, and therefore fail to stay true to himself. In *The Tyranny of Heaven*, Bryson mentions, "In urging mercy, the Son responds to something that has only been *directly* uttered, not by the Father, but by Satan" (124). If the Father does not show mankind mercy, he will let Satan win. As Bryson astutely points out, the Father declares mercy for the humans, yet as soon as the Son communicates his concern, "the next minute [the Father] reverts to rage and bluster announcing that Man 'with his whole posterity must die' (3.209)" (125). Of course, the Father only tests the Son's own goodness here though Bryson insists he lies to the Son and is then caught. But here, Milton interjects the Son's murmur as a metaphor for the reader. Even when humans question and murmur against God, if they stay resistant to temptation, if they show perseverance, God will cherish even the murmur.

Although Milton's "Sonnet 19" is the only one which explicitly mentions murmur, one of his earliest poems "Sonnet 1" murmurs too. In it, the speaker complains of his unlucky lot regarding love as he relies on a superstitious desire to first hear the Nightingale instead of the

doomful cuckoo. According to a popular Renaissance proverb, two birds begin to sing in one month; to hear the nightingale sing first was known to bring along good fortune, but to hear the cuckoo was a bad omen (Milton 139n181). The speaker encourages the Nightingale: “O if Jove’s will / Have linked that amorous power to thy soft lay, / Now timely sing” (lines 7-9). Whereas Milton links the Nightingale to Jove, he foregoes such an explicit association with the cuckoo; Jove has a direct influence over both birds as much as he holds final influence over the speaker’s fate. The speaker then finds fault with the Nightingale, and therefore indirectly Jove: “As thou from year to year hast sung too late / For my relief, yet hadst no reason why” (lines 11-12). Unlike in “Sonnet 19,” the speaker does not recant his murmur or find patience as its result. Murmurs as a result of loneliness were never on Milton’s radar as a precursor to hell.

There is quite a gap between the creation of “Sonnet 1” in 1629 and *Paradise Lost*’s publication in 1667; however, it is apparent that in his opinion of murmurs based on loneliness, there aren’t many changes to Milton’s mentality. Simply put, such murmurs are only natural, not anything Milton’s God would detest. Much as the speaker in “Sonnet 1” questions his poor luck in love, Adam incessantly bewails to the Father that he lacks a companion: “In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?” (8.364-366). This plea does not convince the Father since Adam has so many creatures at his disposal. Instead of taking the Father’s word for it, Adam insists on his argument against him. This is, of course, reminiscent of the speaker in “Sonnet 1” as he continues to ask the Nightingale and Jove for success in love despite his misfortunes in the previous years. Adam continues: “Hast thou not made me here thy substitute, / And these inferior far beneath me set? / Among unequals what society / Can sort, what harmony or true delight?” (8.381-384). This is most certainly a murmur, and the only difference here is that this is a direct conference between God and his subject,

which is an unlikely occurrence after the fall. Milton purposefully permeates the discussion with a series of questions, because as we see with other Miltonic murmurers, they indeed question their positions in relation to divine providence.

Milton's God proves to be an enigmatic ambiguous figure that critics have and will question in the future. Although twentieth and twenty-first century criticism paints Milton's God as an authoritarian fear-inducing authority, such criticism does not stay true to the poet's beliefs. If we reconsider Miltonic murmurs, a strong case for a kind, understanding God quickly emerges. This is especially true of early modern England and its tendency to hyperbolize murmur. Milton's characters, as well as his poetic speaker, time and time again murmur in the face of equanimity but find patience in the process. As mentioned earlier, to Milton it was less important if we murmur and more important if we use it wisely.

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