

## Byron, Milton, and Psalms: Sublime Wrath, Poetic Justice

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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## BYRON, MILTON, AND PSALMS: SUBLIME WRATH, POETIC JUSTICE

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### Résumé

Dans les Psaumes, la violence et les terribles malédictions se trouvent parfois juxtaposés par le biais du langage à quelques-uns des plus beaux passages poétiques en Occident. Un aspect important de cette association est le lien entre le phénomène sublime de la colère de Dieu — dirigée soit vers le narrateur-psalmodier, soit vers les ennemies de ce dernier — et le droit poétique. Je ferai valoir qu'on retrouve souvent cette dynamique dans les œuvres de Milton et de Byron, deux auteurs dont la conscience poétique était imbue des Psaumes. De façon générale, la dette qu'avait Milton à l'endroit des Psaumes a souvent été soulignée; or, on a largement négligé l'influence de la violence de ces textes sur sa langue. Pour ce qui est de Byron, on a peu étudié ce dernier à cette lumière, peut-être parce qu'il fait peu directement référence aux Psaumes. Pourtant, sa poésie regorge de leur influence. Cet article explore, depuis la perspective de la psychologie et du langage sublime des Psaumes, la passion de Milton et Byron pour la justice sociale et la très forte croyance qu'ils avaient en leurs talents poétiques singuliers.

As a true child of English eighteenth-century literary aesthetics, Byron honed his concept of the sublime on the being and works of John Milton. I cite two of the obvious poetic examples of Byron's coupling of Milton with the sublime. In *The Vision of Judgment*, stanza 52, as Byron's cannonade of words blasts the poet Southey to hell, the entrance of Satan

is heralded Miltonically: “Let off the artillery, which Milton mentions / As one of Satan’s most sublime inventions.” Better known is the tribute to Milton in Byron’s even more wrathful damning of Southey in stanza ten of the “Dedication” to *Don Juan*:

If, fallen in evil days on evil tongues,  
Milton appeal’d to the Avenger, Time,  
If Time, the Avenger, execrates his wrongs,  
And makes the word ‘Miltonic’ mean ‘sublime’,  
He deign’d not to belie his soul in songs,  
Nor turn his very talent to a crime —  
He . . . closed the tyrant-hater he begun.

Byron in the last line refers to Milton’s prose treatises against Charles I in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Eikonoklastes* (1649); against his son Charles II in *The Readie and easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660); and against papal tyranny in *Of True Religion, Heresy, Schism, and Toleration* (1673). In this passage Byron also quotes from the proem to book 7 of *Paradise Lost* where Milton says:

. . . I Sing with mortal voice, unchang’d  
To hoarse or mute, though fall’n on evil dayes,  
On evil dayes though fall’n, and evil tongues;  
In darkness, and with dangers compast round.  
(lines 24-7)

Milton then begs his muse to “drive farr off the barbarous dissonance / Of *Bacchus* and his revellers, the Race / Of that wild Rout that tore the *Thracian* Bard / . . . till the savage clamor drown’d / Both Harp and Voice” (7. 32-7). Milton alludes here to the period of his house arrest following the restoration of 1660. At that time he was twenty-first on the list of regicides to be killed (the first twenty were). Although the allusion is Classical, the language is steeped in Psalms, especially Psalm 88 which in Milton’s translation reads: “Thou in the lowest pit profound / Has set me all forlorn / Where thickest darkness hovers round.”

Milton in the proem to book 7 still may be feeling the effects of describing the War in Heaven he has just brought to a terrifying conclusion. In his blazing defeat of Satan the Son of God appears as the sublime epitome of divine wrath:

So spake the Son, and into terrour chang'd  
His count'nance too severe to be beheld  
And full of wrath bent on his Enemies.  
.....  
... in his right hand  
Grasping ten thousand Thunders, which he sent  
Before him ...  
.....  
... th'accurst  
.....  
... [He] pursu'd  
With terrors and with furies.  
(6. 824-6, 835-7, 850, 859-60)

This passage also derives from Psalms where the Lord is repeatedly depicted in these terms. The Son is indeed his Father's child.

In Psalms the language of violence and dire imprecation often exists side by side with the most beautiful lyric poetry ever written. The best known psalm is the twenty-third with its promise of guidance though the valley of the shadow of death and the prospect of lying down in green pastures and being comforted with goodness and mercy all one's days. Those who have not read all of Psalms may assume such a tranquil tone is typical. But over half of the 150 Psalms have some reference to violence. Among these a great number portray God not as soothing but as cataclysmically wrathful.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 18 is a dramatic example:

Then the earth shook and trembled; the  
foundations also of the hills moved and were  
shaken, because he was wroth. There went up a  
smoke out of his nostrils and fire out of his mouth  
devoured: coals were kindled by it. He bowed the

heavens also . . . . The Lord also thundered in the heavens and the Highest gave his voice; hail stones and coals of fire. Yea, he sent out his arrows and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings and discomfited them. Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered at thy rebuke O LORD. (7-15)

God's wrath seems to be part of his sublime power in the creation of all that is and in his interaction with His creation. This dynamic is also apparent in Psalm 29: "The voice of the Lord is powerful . . . [it] breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. He maketh them also to skip like a calf . . . . The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire . . . [it] shaketh the wilderness."

The poet of Psalms is both awestruck and terrified by God's wrath. Sometimes he worries that he himself has provoked it: "O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me and thy hand presseth me sore" (38: 1-2). But in most Psalms he is suffering from "innumerable evils" inflicted by his violent enemies who seek to destroy him or his people (40: 12). He often depicts his misery in graphic terms, as in Psalm 22: "Many bulls have compassed me . . . they gaped upon me with their mouths as a raving and a roaring lion . . . . For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and feet" (12-16).

In response to his affliction from those who would "eat up [his] flesh" (27: 2) the poet wants to tap into God's sublime wrath. Thus he invokes it against his foes whom he assumes God also hates. I cite examples from three Psalms:

Destroy O Lord, and divide their tongues: Let death seize upon them and let them go down quickly to hell . . . . Thou O God shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction. (55: 15, 23)

Break their teeth O God, in their mouth; the righteous shall . . . wash [their] feet in the blood of the wicked. (58: 6, 10)

Consume them in wrath, consume them that they may not be; and let them know that God ruleth in Jacob onto the ends of the earth. (59: 13)

The poet implores God's mercy for himself and vengeance against his enemies in exchange for celebrating His might and majesty. This kind of "deal" is apparent in Psalm 27 where the poet eagerly anticipates God's destruction of his "enemies and foes" and the happy aftermath: "Mine head shall be lifted up above mine enemies; therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord" (6). A similar idea but more querulously expressed is in Psalm 30: "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall dust praise thee? Shall it declare thy truth" (30: 9). The motif persists throughout Psalms: "Blessed be the Lord my strength which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight . . . . Cast forth lightning and scatter them: shoot out thine arrows and destroy them. . . . Whose mouth speaketh vanity, and their right hand is a right hand of falsehood. I will sing a new song unto thee O God: upon a psaltry and an instrument of ten strings will I sing praises unto thee" (144: 1-9).

Key concepts amidst the violence in Psalms are righteousness and a powerful faith in God's value system. As George Steiner says, there is a "dignity of God's judgment — a dignity which transcends the ultimate limits of our earthly conception of the sublime." The poet of Psalms expresses hope that the righteous will be spared God's wrath and is mystified when the righteous in fact do suffer. In the face of this sometimes inscrutable wrath of God the poet aspires to achieve righteousness with his words. He hopes that if he succeeds in this goal God will mitigate both his own sufferings and those of his people. The sublime violence related to God's wrath and the faith in his ultimate plan to mete out justice toward the unrighteous provide an impetus for and affirmation of poetic creation.

In his great history *Frederick the Great*, Thomas Carlyle says that “All real poets to this hour are Psalmists . . . after their sort and have in them a divine impatience of lies” (1: 22). This quotation captures the essence of the main dynamics of Psalms on which I wish to focus in this paper, dynamics we see in Byron’s tribute to Milton in the Dedication to *Don Juan*. They are also fundamental to the poetic furor and genius of both poets. The main motifs comprising these dynamics are: 1. the vocation of the true poet; 2. the infusion of the poet with “divine impatience,” i.e. wrath; 3. the objects of divine wrath: lies and God’s and the poet’s enemies; and 4. the concept of justice / righteousness which will ultimately destroy untruth and vindicate the poet-speaker. Although Psalms influenced other major British poets, it is Milton and Byron who in their engagement with Psalms most powerfully respond to these particular motifs. I do not wish to suggest that Byron was necessarily affected per se by Milton’s translations of Psalms, but rather that he was drawn to qualities in Milton’s writings which derive their power from the poetic furor of the Davidic poetic voice and his engagement with a sublimely wrathful God.<sup>2</sup>

Milton’s indebtedness to Psalms has received considerable attention, but critics have largely ignored the influence of psalmic violence upon his language.<sup>3</sup> Byron has been little studied in terms of Psalms, partly because in his letters and journals he makes few obvious references to them.<sup>4</sup> According to Travis Looper’s *Byron and the Bible*, in frequency of citation or allusion in Byron’s poetry, Psalms comes in third (after Genesis and Isaiah). Looper documents 104 references to forty-eight different Psalms (276-7). Like the Miltonists, the few Byronists who take up Byron’s interest in Psalms tend to pass over the theme of violence. An exception is Ray Stevens, who tentatively suggests that the “wrathful God” in Byron’s *Cain* and *Heaven and Hell* derives from Psalm 139. But, seemingly uncomfortable with this view, Stevens gives more attention to the psalm’s “warm and personal God” (132).

In my opinion the poetry of neither Milton nor Byron expresses a sustained interest in such a God. It is more appropriate, I believe, to look at Milton’s and Byron’s poetry from the perspective of the sublimely wrathful God of Psalms and what I describe above as the “psalmic dynamics” generated by this figure. In *Paradise Regain’d* (1671) the Son

of God, when faced with the last of the “Temptations of the Kingdoms” in the form of Satan’s offer of all the humanistic glories of Greece and Rome, stunningly repulses his tempter by celebrating the superior virtues of biblical rhetorical models, especially Psalms:

Or if I would delight my private hours  
With Music or with Poem, where so soon  
As in our native Language can I find  
That solace? All our Law and Story strew’d  
With Hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscrib’d,  
Our Hebrew Songs and Harps in *Babylon*,  
That pleas’d so well our Victors ear, declare  
That rather *Greece* from us these Arts deriv’d.  
(4. 331-8)

During his life Milton published nineteen of the Psalms he translated (1-8; 80-88, 114, 136). He did not publish a translation of the twenty-third Psalm. Most of those he did translate include aspects of psalmic dynamics. At age fifteen Milton translated Psalm 114 which celebrates God’s power to move oceans and mountains if he chooses on behalf of his people who

After long toil their liberty had won,  
.....  
Shake earth, and at the presence be aghast  
Of him that ever was, and aye shall last.  
(lines 2, 15-16)

For Milton God is also the model for the ultimate tyrant hater. In Psalm 136 this quality inspires the poet to “warble forth / His majesty and worth.” God “doth the wrathful tyrants quell. . . . In bloody battle he brought down / Kings of prowess and renown.” Psalm 1 asserts the righteousness of the speaker and the punishment of enemies: “Bless’d is the man . . . [for whom] Jehovah’s law is ever his delight, . . . For the Lord knows th’upright way of the just, / And the way of bad men to ruin must.” Similarly in Psalm 2, to the poet’s delight, God’s wrath falls on the wicked. When kings and princes obsessed with power “lay deep their



plots together through each Land, / Against the Lord and his Messiah dear” the Lord “shall laugh” and “scoff them.” He shall “speak to them in his wrath, and in his fell / And fierce ire trouble them.” In Psalm 3 the poet bewails his extreme suffering at the hands of the “populous rout” and invokes God’s violent actions to save him as He has before: “for thou / Hast smote ere now / On the cheek-bone all my foes, / Of men abhorr’d / Hast broke the teeth.” In Psalm 4 the poet, again confident that Jehovah “will hear my voice,” imagines God’s response to those who advance themselves through deceit: “Great ones how long will ye / My glory have in scorn? / How long be thus forborne / Still to love vanity, / To love to seek, to prize / Things false and vain and nothing else but lies?”

The theme of lies continues in Psalm 5: “Thou wilt destroy that speak a lie; / The bloodi’ and guileful man God doth detest.” In Psalm 6 the poet tries in effect to strike a deal with God:

Lord in thine anger do not reprehend me  
Nor in thy hot displeasure me correct;  
.....  
. . . . O save me for thy goodness sake  
For in death no remembrance is of thee;  
Who in the grave can celebrate thy praise?

Psalm 7 has a similar theme: if God uses violence to crush the poet’s lying enemies who are violent against him, then the poet will praise Him for his justice. The poet thus begs God to “Rouze thy self amidst the rage / Of my foes that urge like fire; / And wake for me, their furi’ asswage.” He is confident that “God is a just Judge and severe” and that “his sword he whets, his bow hath bended” against him who “brought forth a Lie” and has an “ill trade / Of violence.” When his enemy falls “on his crown with ruin steep” then will the poet “sing the Name and Deity / Of Jehovah the most high.” Psalm 80 describes God’s “smoking wrath and angry brow.” He caused his people to grow like a lovely vineyard but now destroys it “with rudest violence.”

In the mid 1650s when Milton did most of his translations of Psalms he wrote a number of sonnets showing their influence. Most memorable is “On the Late Massacre in Piedmont” which thunders with the voice of Milton the tyrant hater. It begins,

Avenge, O Lord thy slaughtered Saints, whose bones  
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,  
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old  
When all our Fathers worshipt Stocks and Stones.

The poet is confident that God's wrath will fall on the "triple Tyrant" — the Pope — whose agents, the "bloody *Piedmontese*," slew "mother and Infant," then rolled them "down the Rocks."<sup>5</sup>

Not only in this sonnet but throughout his life, Milton pondered, as did the Psalmist, the relation between God's justice and the suffering of the His servants. In "Lycidas" (1638) the speaker, wracked by the death of a talented and virtuous friend, a poet preparing to be a minister, wonders if his own poetic gift will have a chance to flourish. He cites the example of Orpheus torn apart by "the rout that made the hideous roar" and sent "his gory visage down the stream" (61-2). The allusion is classical, but the language of dismemberment is also psalmic. Like the Psalmist, Milton always has faith in God's ultimate justice. Although evil speakers' "lean and flashy songs / Grate on thir scannel pipes of wretched straw" and "the grim wolf . . . Daily devours apace," "that two-handed engine at the dore / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" (123-32).

In *An Apology upon a Pamphlet* of 1642 Milton, alluding to Psalm 52, one of his favourites, justifies the violent language of satire by saying "we may safely imitate the method that God uses; . . . *the righteous shall laugh at the destruction of the ungodly.*" Like the Psalmist, Milton worries that his enemies might stone him, poison him, chew him up, and dismember him. He says God will assist him because he is not like the others who have written "unlawful prostitutions:" "It being taught us in Psalms that he who is in honor and understandeth is not as the beasts who perish." Milton, like Dante, says he has only "sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression." He then sets up a poetic standard: "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himselfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things" (2: 875, 890).

The externals of Byron's life that seem most to interest recent biographers do not suggest that Byron was "himselfe . . . a true Poem." However, in his poetic aspirations and in his being as expressed through

his work, I think he was. Like Milton, Byron had a sharp satiric voice that was grounded in the psalmic divine laughter against the wicked who will go down in ruin. Byron who reports that he studied Psalms in 1816 at the Armenian monastery on the island of San Lazzaro, perhaps chose this text because he knew it so well in English. Byron said that he had a thorough familiarity with the Bible by the time he was eight and was especially fond of the Old Testament. Hoxie Neale Fairchild discusses the “bad religious influence” of Mary Gray who read the First and Twenty-third Psalms each morning to Byron as she was squeezing his foot into “the cruel appliance.”<sup>6</sup>

Writing to Annabella Milbanke on 20 October, 1814, about his work on *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron speaks of basing his poems “on the sacred model” which included both Job and Psalms (4: 220). “By the Rivers of Babylon We Sat Down and Wept” is obviously based on Psalm 137, which the author of a recent article on Byron has called “an early model of collective political resistance.”<sup>7</sup> But psalmic echoes can be heard in most of Byron’s poems in *Hebrew Melodies*.<sup>8</sup> Foremost of these is “The Harp the Monarch Minstrel Swept.” David, “King of men, the loved of Heaven,” possesses a lyre which “grew mightier than his throne!” Although this poem is not actually a paraphrase of a specific psalm as is “By the Rivers of Babylon,” it seems like one when Byron describes David’s lyre:

It told the triumphs of our King  
It wafted glory to our God;  
It made our gladden’d valleys ring,  
The cedars bow, the mountains nod;  
Its sound aspired to Heaven and there abode!  
(lines 11-15)

The spirit of such poetry, however, “still bid[s] the bursting spirit soar.” Byron’s own poetry is witness to this sublime inspiration. Also like the Psalmist and like Milton, Byron connects God’s majesty and creative dynamism with His wrath and invokes this terrible power against tyrants. An excellent example is “On Jordan’s Banks.” Although on Sion’s hill people still pray to pagan deities, “Yet there — even there — Oh God! Thy thunders sleep” and are on the ready to avenge:

There — where thy finger scorch'd the tablet stone!

.....  
Thy glory shrouded in its garb of fire:  
Thyself — none living see and not expire!

Oh! In the lightning let thy glance appear;  
Sweep from his shiver'd hand the oppressor's spear!  
How long by tyrants shall thy land be trod?  
How long thy temples worshipless, Oh God?  
(lines 5, 7-12)

Overall, *The Prophecy of Dante* is the Byron poem most densely driven by the psalmic dynamics. Like the Psalmist, Milton, and Byron himself, Dante has suffered violence from “the vile foe,” the very countrymen he had tried to save: “Alas! How bitter is his country’s curse / To him who *for* that country would expire” (1. 69-70). There are echoes of Psalm 88 throughout this work, as when Dante says he has been “too long and deeply wreck’d / On the lone rock of desolate Despair” (138-9). Dante who believes (as Milton did) that he is “Christ’s Laureate” (3. 137) invokes God’s wrath against his enemies and wishes “they that trod / Be trampled on . . . / O’er humbled heads and sever’d necks” (1. 117-8). He trusts that “thine Almighty rod / Will fall on those who smote [him]” (120-1). Dante, like the Psalmist, is also consoled by God’s gift of “glorious vision” in his poetry (127) which will endure and vindicate him: “I am not of this people, nor this age, / And yet my harpings will unfold a tale / Which shall preserve these times” (143-5). He has not tamed his “mind down from its own infinity — / To live in narrow ways with little men” (160-1). Byron’s Dante has faith both in God’s justice in crushing his bloodthirsty and cruel enemies and in raising him up to sublime heights as a poet:

Poets shall follow in the path I show,  
.....  
But few shall soar upon that eagle’s wing,  
And look in the sun’s face with eagle’s gaze.  
(3. 64, 70-1)

Opposite is the man “who once enters in a tyrant’s hall” and thus becomes a “slave” (3. 80-1). Is Byron again thinking of Southey?

A more humble psalmic voice appears in the lines of the flood-doomed “A Mortal” in *Heaven and Earth*. His presence, not Aholibamah’s as some feminists would have it, is the most commanding in the poem, and he is its hero.<sup>9</sup> Although God’s sublime wrath of purging vengeance will obliterate most living creatures including himself, A Mortal’s response is still to “sing” and praise His creative majesty and power:

And though the waters be o’er earth outspread,  
Yet as *his* word,  
Be the decree adored!

.....  
Still blessed be the Lord,  
.....

For all are his,  
.....

Time, space, eternity, life, death —  
The vast known and immeasurable unknown.  
He made, and can unmake;  
And shall *I*, for a little gasp of breath,  
Blaspheme and groan?  
No; let me die, as I have lived, in faith.  
(1. 3. 885-7, 893, 896, 898-903)

The Byronic voice in the embittered, exiled, but supremely confident Dante is much more apparent than in that of A Mortal, but I think we should listen carefully to the Byronic nuances and psalmic dimensions here. Byron, as Bernard Beatty has repeatedly argued, was essentially a religious man.<sup>10</sup> He did not compromise his vision to orthodoxy nor “blaspheme and groan” “for a little gasp of breath,” but continued to be awestruck and poetically inspired by the inscrutable unknown.

Psalmic rhythms and echoes abound throughout *Don Juan*. The bite of Byron’s satire in this poem is the sublime bite of God’s laughter at fools in Psalm 2. Like Milton, Byron (or his poetic narrator) thinks of himself as a new Moses (9: 2). The Exodus theme recurs throughout Psalms.<sup>11</sup>

Like the psalmic voice and like that of *The Prophecy of Dante*, the narrator of *Don Juan* combines a social critique of the loved / hated native land with faith in righteousness / justice prevailing, especially in regard to the virtue of his verse. In words that recall those of *A Mortal* and like the Psalmist, the narrator keeps the reader mindful that his is a religious voice:

Some kinder casuists are pleased to say,  
    In nameless print — that I have no devotion;  
But set those persons down with me to pray,  
    And you shall see who has the properest notion  
Of getting into Heaven the shortest way;  
    My altars are the mountains and the ocean,  
Earth, air, stars — all that springs from the great Whole,  
Who hath produced, and shall receive the soul.  
(DJ 3. 104)

Furthermore, the hero as well as the narrator of *Don Juan* continually — like the Psalmist — feel threats to their physical bodies and endure as well other kinds of persecution. The narrator's sufferings garner our attention more than the titular hero's because of his confidence, which I would call psalmic, that he and his words will be vindicated. In canto 9 the narrator, after comparing himself to "Moses, or Melancthon" asks the rhetorical question, "Why do they call me misanthrope? Because / *They hate me*" (21). ("They hate me" is a recurrent motif in Psalms, e.g. 55: 5). He goes on to celebrate his enterprise and himself as a suffering outcast:

'Tis time we should proceed with our good poem,  
    For I maintain that it is really good,  
Not only in the body, but the proem,  
    However little both are understood  
Just now, — but by and by the Truth will show 'em  
    Herself in her sublimest attitude:  
And till she doth, I fain must be content  
To share her Beauty and her Banishment.  
(22)

This motif recurs later:

I have brought this world about my ears, and eke  
The other; that's to say, the Clergy — who  
Upon my head have bid their thunders break  
In pious libels by no means a few.  
(14. 10)

But the poet perseveres: “So long I've battled either more or less, / That no defeat can drive me from the Nine” (14. 12).

I contend that Byron's main muse in *Don Juan* is not one of the classical deities (alluded to in “the Nine”) but the Psalmist. At the beginning of canto 10 the narrator sings of his desire to find new worlds through his “poesy” and “skim / The Ocean of Eternity” (10. 4). The following stanza deals with his “Muses” which are “more than one.” Stanza 6 combines the motifs of muse, flying, and eternity: “ ‘Oh!’ saith the Psalmist, ‘that I had a dove's / Pinions to flee away, and be at rest!’ ” (10. 6). These lines are a direct citation of Psalm 55: 6. This psalm is filled with violent sufferings of the poet “because of the oppression of the wicked” who hate him. But he is confident that God will “destroy” these enemies and “bring them down into the pit of destruction.” The narrator of *Don Juan* in his sufferings is also confident in the ultimate vindication of the just.

Like Psalms, in *Don Juan* beautiful lyric passages and concepts of creativity alternate with images of extreme violence. For example, Byron's rapturous paean “Ave Maria” (3: 101-8) is followed by the violence caused by Lambro's return in canto 4. The image in canto 9 of a “new Creation, rising out / From our old crash” (38) follows the violence of the battle of Ismail. Throughout his epic, Byron, the true hero of his poem, draws upon the divine wrath of Psalms to depict his hatred of tyrants who inflict violence on the innocent. He introduces this theme in the Dedication's tribute to Milton. At the end of canto 8, Byron pitches his fury against the instigators of the horrors of Ismail — “mere mortals who their power abuse” (8. 123) — and distinguishes his poetic purpose from Nero's rhyming “o'er a burning city” (134): “For I will teach, if possible, the stones / To rise against Earth's tyrants” (135). At the beginning of a philosophic sequence in canto 15, the narrator declares himself “born for

opposition” and justifies the length of his poem because “tyranny of all kinds” is by no means a “*setting sun*” (22). At the end of the canto, following the description of the gluttonous banquet at Norman Abbey, the narrator again turns philosophical / political. Declaring that “To keep our holy beacons always bright, / ’Tis time that some new Prophet should appear” (90), the narrator (who we assume is this “new prophet”) gets savage against tyrants such as certain English kings: “It makes my blood boil like the springs of Hecla, / To see men let these scoundrel Sovereigns break law” (92). In Psalm 76 the poet speaks of himself when he asserts “surely the wrath of man shall praise thee.” He has faith that God is a tyrant hater: “He shall cut off the spirit of princes . . . he is terrible to the kings of earth” (10-12). In a like vein, throughout his life the wrath of Byron praised Justice and magnificently condemned political and social tyrannies.

How does one deal with the extremes of a divinity which can heave up skipping mountains of inexpressible joy and crush to dissolution his most loved (but often misbehaving) creation, humankind? The answer from Psalms is the belief that this same God supports righteousness and its most blessed manifestation in poets who through human words strive to convey the sublimity of God. Such poets are David, Dante, Milton — and Byron. As God would be known for His creativity and His wrath, so these poets tell us they would also be known for their creativity and wrath. Such qualities will justify them beyond a hostile age to an eternity of earthly remembrance.

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<sup>1</sup> The violence in Psalms made one modern reader so uncomfortable that she rewrote them leaving out all negative aspects so that they uniformly affirm a "Divine Love that opens the heart to forgiveness, reconciliation and healing" which she feels better speaks to "our wounded world." Yet Nan C. Merrill's judgmental statement that "the Psalms of the Hebrew Scripture often reflect a patriarchal society based on fear and guilt that projects evil and sin onto outer enemies" oversimplifies, and what we might call her kinder, gentler psalms are rather the stuff of self-help manuals than the tough-stuff of the sinewed true biblical poets. (*Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* [New York: Continuum, 2004]).

<sup>2</sup> Although early readers of Psalms took them to be all by King David, modern scholars recognize that even those attributed to him in biblical texts may have been written by another hand. Nevertheless, some psalms are thought truly to be by David, and his name traditionally has been associated with the psalmic mode.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Lewalski in *'Paradise Lost' and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) cites numerous allusions in Milton's works to passages from different categories of Psalms, but focuses more on treatments of lament, praise, and consolation than on violence. Similarly in *Milton's Epics and the book of Psalms* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989), Mary Ann Radzinowicz focuses not on violence but on the "enormous value" of Psalms for Milton in providing models of "intense lyricism," "comprehensive heroism," "generic multivocality" and "an intellectually unified journey toward abstract comprehensive knowledge" (6). In *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) Michael Lieb has but two footnotes to Psalms, neither of which directly concerns violence. Regina Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain: the Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) continues to explore the biblical theology of suffering that she began in her *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988). Neither study focuses on Psalms.

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- <sup>4</sup> Writing to Thomas More on 15 September, 1814, Byron mentions Sternhold and Hopkins which Marchand notes “published a collection of *Psalms*” (4: 173). In a letter of 19 December, 1816, Byron, writing from Venice, tells Hobhouse about his “lessons in the Psalms” as he studies Armenian with Father Pasqual (5: 142). In a letter to Thomas Moore of 1821 Byron, echoing the letter of 1814, compares a “joint concern of you and me” to “Sternhold and Hopkins” who are footnoted as “Sixteenth-century versifiers of the Psalms” (8: 226).
- <sup>5</sup> Jay Ruud has linked the violence in this sonnet to that in Psalm 137. See “Milton’s Sonnet 18 and Psalm 137,” *Milton Quarterly* 26 (1992): 80-1.
- <sup>6</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry. Volume III: 1780-1830: Romantic Faith* (New York: Columbia UP, 1949) 396. Although he does not specifically deal with Psalms, Nigel Spivey in *Enduring Creation: Art Pain, Fortitude* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001) analyzes the relationship between pain and creativity which may pertain to Byron’s engagement with Psalms.
- <sup>7</sup> Judith Chernaik, “The wild-dove hath her nest. What Byron admired in the leaders of the Jews,” *Times Literary Supplement* 27 February 2004: 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Besides 137 the only other Psalm Thomas L. Ashton specifically cites in his excellent edition, *Byron’s Hebrew Melodies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) is 55 with reference to “Oh! Weep for Those.”
- <sup>9</sup> Marsula Guarino, “The Tragic Sublime in Byron’s Speculative Dramas,” paper given at the 30<sup>th</sup> annual International Byron Conference on “Byron and the Romantic Sublime,” at l’Université de Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, 16 August 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> See especially *Byron’s Don Juan* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble books, 1985) and *Spilt Religion: Keats, Shelley, Byron* (forthcoming).
- <sup>11</sup> See for example 78, 81 105, 106, 114, 136.