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MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*
AND RATIONAL CHRISTIANITY

MILTON'S LAST GREAT POEM, *Samson Agonistes*, has been "studied surprisingly little and rather superficially."¹ Yet its students have always maintained that one finds in *Samson Agonistes* Milton's most intimate expression. Nevertheless, superficial criticism has discovered little more than similarities between the poet and his hero. They were both blind; they were both bound (Milton, politically) amidst enemies; they were both bitter against the nation that had used and then renounced them. Such a notion of the "figure in the carpet" deserves the retort it has been given—Milton, after all, lacked Dalila.

To read the poem as allegorized biography is ludicrous; to reject, as a consequence, the old notion that Milton is somehow in *Samson* would be mistaken. He is there, but not *in propria persona*. *Samson Agonistes* reveals the last and most telling stage in Milton's thought. And since Milton's thought is always an attempt to rationalize ideas that have dominated Western man for centuries, *Samson Agonistes* is even more important than Miltonists have contended.

II

Thought is the subject of the play. Its action is mental—the struggle to understand. Blindness and sight, darkness and light are its polarities; and Samson triumphs not when he pulls the house down (the melodramatic denouement of a Cecil B. DeMille movie) but when he again *sees* himself as the agent of God.

When the play opens the hero is blind. His eyes are useless, and he is spiritually confounded. On he comes begging guidance; if only he may rest his body and his anguished, God-rejected soul. Soon, a chorus of his people enters. Samson thinks that they are enemies come to torment him, but they have come to collaborate in his search for knowledge.

Less than two hundred lines after their entrance, the chorus is philosophizing on the plight of their champion. "Just are the ways of God", they say, "And justifiable to Men" (293-294).² The poem's purpose, the Miltonic purpose (to "justify the ways of God to men") is asserted, so the trained reader settles back with a feeling of *déjà vu*. But Miltonists who have read *Samson* as another and typical expression of Milton's rational Christianity have missed exactly those devices and assertions which make the poem so terribly revealing.

We have seen Milton's confidence that God's ways are justifiable (though what was conditional in *Paradise Lost* is here resoundingly declarative); we have known that only fools "think not God at all" (295). We remember the debating devils in *Paradise Lost* who thought of divine categories and added to their Hellish torment, confusion "in wand'ring mazes lost",³ as we read of those men,

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 diminution;
Till by their own perplexities involv'd
They ravel more, still less resolv'd,
But never find self-satisfying solution. (300-306)

All familiar. But presently there is something new. In *Paradise Lost*, God informs a perturbed Christ that, despite the inevitability of the Fall, He cannot remove Man's free will because He cannot "revoke the high Decree/Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd/Thir freedom".⁴ In *Samson*, the Hebrew chorus inveighs against those "who would confine th'interminable,/And tie him to his own pre-script,/Who made our laws to bind us, not himself. . ." (307-309). Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* is the God of laws, while in *Samson Agonistes* He is a God above the laws.

The latter assertion is part of a choral ode whose purpose is to exonerate God from the charge of moral capriciousness. It was God's solemn edict that no Nazarite marry a woman of Philistia, yet Samson insists that he married both the Timnian woman and Dalila because of divine prompting. If the chorus uphold Samson they impugn God; if they believe Samson, then God is self-contradictory. Resolving the dilemma is simple. Since only the rational test of consistency finds fault, defy consistency! God's laws bind man, not God. God may do whatever He pleases. The Milton who, in *Paradise Lost*, desired the God of Aquinas and Hooker, a God attractive to legalistic mentality, that Milton is out of court in *Samson Agonistes*.⁵

Now Milton delights in turning the intellectual screws on himself, the better to recant. The chorus continues. If the sceptic can be persuaded that God is not subject to contradiction, a difficulty still remains. We can agree that, despite the law against intermarriage, God made the "unclean" Philistine Dalila acceptable because he had some higher purpose for her; but we can also insist that God did, in fact, make Dalila clean, i.e., an acceptable Hebrew bride.

Milton did not have to raise this issue; it is certainly devilishly subtle. But he does, and in a passage of the most tormented and elliptical syntax in the poem. After maintaining that God had "just cause" (316) to permit Samson's marriage with "that fallacious Bride/Unclean, unchaste" (320-321), the chorus intones:

Down Reason then, at least vain reasonings down,
 Though Reason here aver
 That moral verdict quits her of unclean:
 Unchaste was subsequent, her stain not his. (322-325)

Like a woman in the throes of labor, Milton brings forth, in pain and constriction, his most glorious birth. The babe—a remarkably muscular anti-rationality. This is Milton's private Messiah, the virgin and miraculous birth that, as foreordained, would kill the Satanic serpent who questions the will of God and who advances such reasonable criticism that grown men, like Blake and Shelley, have actually believed him. As in *Paradise Lost*, Satan (here the Satanic argument) is made commanding the better to destroy him.

So Milton makes the chorus anticipate a fiendishly clever refutation of their argument. By some moral norm, since God had the right to reverse his own edict against "unclean" Dalila, his purpose for her effected a reevaluation. Now a vehicle for the divine plan, she is made clean. This could be maintained, but only by vain reasoning (i.e. tending to impugn God) which must be put down. She was clean enough, by the will of God, to marry Samson, but not so clean as to mitigate her guilt. Finally, her unchastity came after the marriage (God would not have chosen so objectionably even to smite his enemies) and was entirely her fault, not Samson's.

The purpose of this extraordinary speech is to utterly absolve Samson and God and to utterly blame Dalila. All this in spite of reason, which in quarrelling with God's will reveals itself vain and worthy of conquest.

Still, this is not enough for Milton. Midway in the drama he introduces the heroine of vain reasoning herself. Most commentators have agreed that the motivation for Dalila's entrance is less important than the thematic reason for bringing her on. True enough. But the best reason has not yet been explored. Dalila is brought

on so that she may again affront the Miltonic rationale with "vain reasoning", so that she may be defeated, and so that the point of *Samson Agonistes* may once more be driven home.

III

I now wish to press some arguments made by William Empson, though a little differently and to my own purpose; nevertheless, though I insist on the difference I acknowledge the debt, and the interested reader can check both by turning to Empson's indispensable book.⁶

As Empson has said, the temptation offered by Dalila is "meant to be pitched staggeringly high."⁷ It is not simply the offer of a soft lap and some of the old pleasure; critics who maintain that Dalila represents the temptation to the flesh cannot be reading Samson's lines: no athlete before the big game was ever so impervious to feminine wiles. Her excuses, which range from curiosity to a desire to keep her hero by the hearth, have as little effect on Samson as on the reader. There is no trouble at all in seeing them for what they are: "furious rage/To satisfy [her] lust" (836-837). The real temptation is intellectual. Dalila challenges the rightness of Samson's action. To Dalila's excuse that she betrayed her private love to her public duty, Samson replies most carefully.

If, as Empson has said, we once look upon the argument without prejudice, the case is anything but clear, as Samson's answers abundantly show. First, he calls her whole defence a lie; but he is not so certain that he feels no need of demonstration. He begins by arguing that she should not have married him while she deemed him an enemy. By marrying him, indeed, she became a Jew. If it were not sufficiently clear that in a contest between duty to her country and her husband she had to choose Samson, the nature of her countrymen settles the question:

if aught against my life
Thy country sought of thee, it sought unjustly,
Against the law of nature, law of nations,
No more thy country, but an impious crew
Of men conspiring to uphold thir state
By worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends
For which our country is a name so dear;
Not therefore to be obey'd. (888-895)

Their method of fighting him was so contemptible as to contradict whatever virtue they claimed.

Consider how this would all sound in a court of law, if once the whole truth were known. Dalila was not to marry Samson while he was an enemy to her; she had to take both him and his people. Yet Samson has already and quite explicitly declared (219 ff.) that he married Dalila as part of his plan to destroy the Philistines. His method of combating the enemy is, if anything, more contemptible than theirs. So far as we know, Dalila married Samson, at least, out of a healthy lust, and was only persuaded to conspire against him after their marriage and after Samson had made some little reputation for himself as a murderer of her countrymen. In contrast, Samson married Dalila only to use her. The Philistines merely struck back in kind.

Think for a moment that you are a Philistine. At least, that is what Dalila tells Samson. "Fame . . . is double-mouth'd" (971), Dalila reminds her blind husband; and one of its mouths will extol her.

Of course, the ambiguity does not exist when once one has accepted *a priori* that the Philistines and Dagon are evil and that the Hebrews (though unenergetic) and God are good. But Milton was still too much of a rationalist to base his drama on a stock response. (I am not arguing that *Samson Agonistes* is un-Miltonic, only that it represents an all-important shift.) He wanted to show that Dalila's argument was specious and that the supremacy of his principles *was* demonstrable. For this purpose he created Harapha.

It does little good to identify the blustering Philistine as a *miles gloriosus*—though Milton was certainly not above suggesting that Philistines were cowards. There is only enough time between Dalila's exit and Harapha's entrance for the chorus to hiss out its diatribe against woman. Then the discussion resumes; one has only to count the lines in the Harapha scene to see that the giant is tempting Samson not with his strength but with the strength of his arguments.

Dalila had pointed out that she could make a religio-political case for herself—just like Samson. Harapha goes a step farther. To him, Samson is a "Murderer, a Revolter, and a Robber" (1180). Now Milton is prepared to go very carefully through the legal and political ramifications of the Nazarite's behavior.

These are Harapha's charges: (a) Since the Hebrews were part of Philistia by right of conquest, Samson was liable to Philistine rule. His actions were rebellious. (b) When Samson prosecuted his rebellion through wholesale slaughter of the Philistines (after which Samson divested the bodies of their robes), the rulers

arrested Samson but did not harm his people. This argues not only that Samson rebelled but that he rebelled against mild rulers.

Samson's reply begins with a repulsive bit of hypocrisy. By taking a Philistine bride, the hero asserts, he demonstrated that he was no enemy to Philistia—this despite the reiterated claim that he married both Dalila and the woman of Timna to free the Hebrews. Arnold Stein has argued that Samson is here standing “on the timing, and not without some justification. He may have known that the rascals would respond with the first hostile move, but they did not *have* to give him the ‘occasion’ he wanted.”⁸⁸ One may surely read “argu’d me no foe” (1193) as “made me appear to be a friend.” Nevertheless, in his heart, Samson was the enemy. Mr. Stein admits that his point is “small.”

Samson's contention is a cynical quibble. But it is honourable by comparison with the argument that he next advances. Whereas he had insisted that some law of Nature and nations invalidated the task urged on Dalila by the Philistines, Samson now argues that the law of nations is consequent with the right of revolution. A ruling government had not the right to put down a known rebel and murderer (even though we can agree that its means were rather contemptible), but the rebel has full right to revolt against the government even when they abused their power neither over him or his people.

The logic of Samson's defence is shocking, but so is the language. (One has to be reminded that Milton meant the case to be good; Harapha need not have been permitted to play the prosecuting attorney.) Samson admits that the Hebrews were under Philistine jurisdiction, but he goes on:

My Nation was subjected to your Lords.
It was the force of Conquest; force with force
Is well ejected when the Conquer'd can.

Samson has already denied the Philistine right to quell his force, but perhaps he means to indicate that using Dalila was not using a permissible kind of force:

But I a private person, whom my Country
As a league-breaker gave up bound, presum'd
Single Rebellion and did Hostile Acts.

Despite the law of nations validating rebellion, Samson claims the more particular right of private rebellion.

I was no private, but a person rais'd
 With strength sufficient and command from Heav'n
 To free my Country . . . (1206-1213)

The passage is confused. After asserting the right of rebellion, Samson claims not that right as generally conceived but the more particular right of private rebellion. Then he quite inexplicably returns to the argument that he was not a private person. At the least, as Empson has pointed out, this doctrine "gave a dangerous amount of encouragement to any self-righteous fanatic. . . ."⁹ Shortly after this, Samson feels his strength return and is reconciled to the divine purpose, so that we must conclude that Milton felt satisfied with the way Samson had answered Harapha just as he had been satisfied with the retort to Dalila.¹⁰

How, then, could Milton feel safe with a rationale that gave license to a "self-righteous fanatic?" The answer is simple. (I am surprised that Empson does not state it, just as Empson is surprised that critics have taken so religiously a poem that is clearly quite political.) There is no danger of using Samson's arguments to validate self-righteous fanaticism unless one regards fanaticism as dangerous. One does not regard fanaticism as dangerous unless one insists that all political behaviour must be liable to public correction. One does not insist that all political behaviour must be liable to public correction unless one believes in law. By the time Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes* he no longer believed in law—or, rather, he no longer believed in human law. The God of Milton's last poem is a God above the laws, and the poet who tells of such a God is a poet no longer interested in making God seem humanly, rationally correct. All the elaborate attempts at carrying on an argument are simply vestigial responses. Milton is still going through the motions of a dialectical art aimed at didacticism even after he no longer believes that he has to prove anything. He hears the word of God and that is that. That is also the real fact about Milton which one can learn from *Samson Agonistes*.

IV

What does this reading make of the drama, and what does it say about rational Christianity?

Ever since Johnson's thumping denunciation,¹¹ critics who have not been interested in sources or biographical inferences have busied themselves trying to show that *Samson* has a middle and what it is. Johnson was talking about dramatic tension, but nothing so vulgarly theatrical has interested modern critics, and they have

been very psychological about their analysis. Perhaps remembering Milton's Puritan disavowal of theatrical performance, and writing in an age when psychodrama is our highest dramatic form, our contemporary critics have built impressive readings of Samson's character without meeting Johnson's observation that, after all, as a drama *Samson* is pretty dull.¹²

Attempts to show how the middle of *Samson Agonistes* develops the hero's character fail to make the piece seem exciting. They are also not very plausible. Three critics—who may be taken to represent the current interpretation of the play—have all said that the appearances of Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha represent moral temptations which the hero meets successfully, thereby rebuilding his character. Michael Krouse sees the three visitors as ease, petty humanity, and fear.¹³ D. C. Allen calls them irresponsibility, uxoriousness, and apathy.¹⁴ In his widely used edition of Milton, Merritt Hughes follows William Riley Parker in accounting for the matter in more positive terms (“the achievement of patience, achievement of faith, conquest of the weakness that led to the hero's fall, and achievement of the power to respond to the divine call to further service”).¹⁵ He feels sure that interpreting the middle of the play in terms of the growth of Samson's character is pretty much of a matter of general agreement.

Now it is theoretically plausible that Milton is most interested in showing how Samson rejects Manoa's ransom (ease, irresponsibility), Dalila's offer (“petty humanity”, uxoriousness), and Harapha's challenge (fear, apathy). Moreover, it is very difficult to show that such a contention is incorrect. But I suspect that it is. None of the temptations has the slightest effect on Samson, whose resolution is always firm. Furthermore, as Johnson recognized, Milton was very little a dramatist. Character development was probably as unimportant to him as suspense.

In *Samson Agonistes* Milton is a good deal more skilful in giving the illusion of drama than he is, say, in *Comus*; but the latter, after all, was a masque, so that he need not have tried to disguise the didacticism. If by drama one means suspenseful or developing action, interplay of character, and manipulation of the audience's emotions, then *Samson* is no more a drama than the show at Ludlow Castle.

Milton's play is really a series of dramatized debates, exactly like his other major efforts, and the characters are brought on simply so that Milton's interlocutor can score points. What chiefly develops in *Samson* is Milton's thought. Writing in the age of Sheridan, Goldsmith, and of his own *Irene*, Johnson would not have been likely to understand the play of ideas. We have no such excuse for our insistence that a change in Samson's character is meant to command our view.

Johnson was surely right. The characters have no effect on the hero, and the

audience has merely to wait until Samson gets his second divine flash and marches offstage to pull down the temple. Only when one stops to trace the ideological development can one see what the play is all about.

This is not to say that Milton does not give Samson states of feeling—his best poetry, but lyric poetry not dramatic, is fashioned for precisely this purpose. Before Manoa enters, Samson shows all sorts of feeling from which a striking character could be built: despair, shame, doubt, agony over his blindness and servitude. But at the entrance of the chorus Samson at once begins to discuss. It is not long before we know that we are not watching fully wrought characters in conflict but are rather listening to a disquisition on the reasons why a man who had believed himself at one with divine will may reaffirm that oneness after a baffling separation. The responsibility of character for Samson's alienation from God is simple and easily disposed of (too easily—how plausible is the blame placed on pride?). The true drama is Milton's presentation of all the intellectual doubts and strictures which might occur to the dedicated servant of divinity—Milton—when his plans which, after all, he *knew* were God's, suddenly went awry.

There is no question of Samson's turning from God. His first response to Manoa warns the old man: "Appoint not heavenly disposition" (373). There is no question also of Samson's accepting the offer of freedom; he is determined to expiate his sins. Manoa's function is dialectical, and his character, in the scene with his son, serves as a surrogate for the questioning of God, which Samson quickly abandons once the old man is available. The drama of the first confrontation is not how Samson withstands a tempter but how Samson argues against the easy interpretation of his plight which would criticize the will of God and set a seal on Samson's alienation.

If the drama in *Samson Agonistes* is in any measure a drama of character, its subject is the sublimation of character. Samson has to lose all sense of self so that he may become purely the tool of providence.¹⁶ But this drama does not proceed; it is never in doubt. Already, with Manoa, Samson affirms "that the strife/With mee hath end; all the contest is now/"*Twixt God and Dagon*" (460-462).

God against Dagon is the subject of the next confrontation. True, Dalila makes an offer and she is one of the characters; but there is no question of Samson's accepting it, and her character is little more than a tissue of excuses for her action, a dialectic of extenuation which Samson can refute and through which he can reaffirm the supremacy of God's plan.

As I have already indicated, both Dalila and Harapha test Samson's ideas, not his character. One is not likely to write such courtroom scenes if what one is after is

the demonstration of a change of heart. Moreover, if a writer had earlier contrived to turn a musical comedy masque into a dissertation on chastity, had written for twenty years the most brilliant religious polemics in the language, and had aspired to rationalize the deepest Christian mysteries when what he had formally taken on was the epic, then when he sits down to write a tragedy about the strong man of the Old Testament it is not surprising that he should strip the story of its physicality, make the characters into dialectical stances, and concentrate on the ideas. His catharsis is an assertion, not a sense of well-being.

V

If it will be admitted that the play is intellectual and not dramatic (even in the sense that a dramatist like Ibsen or Sartre would understand) and that the argument proceeds despite logic or in the teeth of rationality, then the true instructiveness of *Samson* can be seen.

While such scholars as C. S. Lewis see their Milton clear, less orthodox critics have emphasized libertarianism and art to escape those objectionable ideas. We have heard rather too much of Milton the liberal and Milton the aesthete whose philosophical epic could be read, indeed, as one reads the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. We need William Empson, a man who insists that Milton is pre-eminently the thinker but who is not committed to his thought. But Empson is rather inclined to think that Milton saw how awful his ideas were. If one considers *Samson* against a background of Milton's other major works, I think one can see that this is not so.

Milton always went about trying to advance the rational grounds for preferring God to the devil. In *Comus* he even becomes quite democratic about it. Comus is wrong because he wants to hoard God's bounty; the Lady's argument that divests her adversary of his glamour is that he is not for joy but for excess, and at the cost of equitable distribution. In the *Areopagitica* the libertarian façade is already beginning to crack (Milton cannot feel very uncensorious toward the papists); but he is still, inspiringly, declaring that truth is manifold and that we all have the right ourselves to know good from evil.

The decision to write *Paradise Lost*, carrying with it the obligation to rationalize the interdicted tree, marked the beginning of revelation. Revealed: in a contest between reason and faith, reason goes. The problems in the poem come from the implicit contradiction between its method and its subject, and Milton is forced, now and then, to combat evil through simple vilification. Nevertheless, *pace* Lewis,

Satan *is* more than a fool. In *Paradise Lost*, by giving the devil his due, Milton can almost persuade us that he is still arguing. In *Paradise Regained*, that last illusion is dispelled; Satan is now a musical comedy villain who goes about proclaiming his own wickedness.

Samson completes the descent from rationality. Surely, Milton tries to show us that the Philistines are wrong; he even goes so far—as I have tried to demonstrate—as to make his showing us the whole play. But the reasons are never cogent. That Milton could still be wanting to give reasons and that he should so botch the job demonstrates, I think, the slow attrition which his rationality had undergone.

Beneath all the haggling in *Samson* lies the purely partisan conviction that God is right and Dagon wrong—the sort of thing that sociologists call ethnocentrism. If one takes this view, *Samson* represents the result of Milton's long attempt to marry reason and faith, and it shows that when the couple finally requires a divorce the judge can act only on the basis of partisanship.

The critics show this very clearly. One of them argues that in Dalila's speech "it is not only self-justice that is being challenged by this parody, but the justice of Samson's God and community, which are being defeated and swallowed by a cynical relativism."¹⁷ Another is willing to "concede at the outset that Milton's Samson is preparing to serve a vengeful God" but reminds us "that he is preparing to serve God . . ."¹⁸

If one is an absolutist, relativism is necessarily cynical. If one persists in reading Milton's works as if they were scriptural, he will not need to make any concession to the opposition. The ugliness of Milton's God, the corruptness of Milton's argument, the acrimony of his partisanship—all are tolerable, if not good: this is religion talking!

If one has to read Milton this way (and I am willing to do so), another admission must also be made. No poet in English has used a powerful and brilliant mind to so relentlessly limit free and discursive reason. No English poet has ever limited reason so relentlessly in behalf of Christian faith. But no English poet ever began with so fervent a desire to make Christianity appealing to reason. When Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes* he must have felt a little like Wilde's Herod when he screamed out the order to kill Salome—furious, nearly incredulous with rage at the serpent nurtured in his own bosom.

Samson Agonistes is Milton. And Milton is our greatest example of the poetic attempt to rationalize Christianity. How instructive then that his last work

should also have been his most unlovely and irrational. And if you mean, by Christianity, mercy, it might almost be said to be un-Christian.

NOTES

1. F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's "Samson" and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton, 1949), p. 3.
2. All quotations are from "Samson Agonistes", *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York, 1957).
3. *Paradise Lost*, II, 561.
4. *Paradise Lost*, III, 126-128.
5. This, by itself, should be sufficient to corroborate the conventional view that this is Milton's last poem.
6. *Milton's God* (London, 1961). The section on Dalila was first published in the *Sewanee Review*, from which I quote.
7. "A Defense of Delilah", *Sewanee Review*, LXVIII (Spring, 1960), 255.
8. *Heroic Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1957), p. 182.
9. Empson, p. 245.
10. Significantly, the return of grace again accords with an apparent contradiction. As a Jew, Samson may not enter the arena, as he himself declares. But when God calls, edicts are irrelevant—even God's edicts.
11. The good doctor's onslaught is more headlong and dramatic than his victim. Johnson surely had more of the victory than we are now willing to admit.
12. Cf. F. R. Leavis: "How many cultivated adults could honestly swear that they had ever read it through with *enjoyment*?" (*Revaluation* [London, 1936], p. 67, italics mine.)
13. See Krouse, *op. cit.*
14. See *The Harmonious Vision* (Baltimore, 1954).
15. Hughes, p. 537.
16. Another question—too large for this paper—is whether or not this is humanly possible. Milton himself often damages his case. In the speech from which I quote, Samson foresees God's victory over Dagon as, in part, a recovery "Of all these boasted Trophies won on me" (470); and when he leaves to enter the arena he proclaims that he will bring no dishonor to "Our God, our Law, my Nation, or myself" (1425). Clearly, however, Milton wished to dramatize a subjugation of the self to the will of God.
17. Stein, p. 171.
18. Kenneth Fell, "From Myth to Martyrdom: Towards a View of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*", *English Studies*, XXXIV (1953), 148.