

SAMSON'S DEBT TO MILTON

Allan Blondé

If Balachandre Rajan is correct in his conclusion that :

The inter-relationships created between Milton's major poems call on each poem to comment on and to help in defining the others ⁽¹⁾

it will be service to note those particulars about *Samson Agonistes* (hereafter cited as *Samson*) that are recurrences of the forms and themes that appear in the author's earlier works. To do this would not be to ignore, except for the present purpose, the growth of the poet's mind, which illustrates how Milton sought to publicize the consecutive as well as the parallel, the divergent as well as the convergent, a task which Rajan indicates belongs to the principal functions of all major artists. ⁽²⁾ This paper, therefore, will focus on outlining major rhythms in *Samson* that make their appearances throughout Milton's career as poet and author, so as to throw into bold relief the poet's principal concerns and techniques.

There has been general agreement as to the type of dramaturgy Milton presents us with in *Samson*. Parker urges us to forget all tragedy between Seneca and Shaw in order to understand Milton's play, ⁽³⁾ since this is not a play of physical action but rather a presentation of an internal conflict in the mind of the protagonist. ⁽⁴⁾ In his line by line interpretation of the play Parker comments that

The hero's body can rest...but not his mind ; in solitude he is harassed by the conflict between his past glory and present misery. ⁽⁵⁾

This internal conflict is nothing new to Milton. It can be traced at least as far back as "L'Allegro" & "Il Penseroso" which presents the psychological movement caused by conflicting states within the mind of the speaker. Similarly, the principal conflict of *Paradise Lost*, portrayed by the temptation of Eve, is one in which the exter-

nal action of the serpent elaborates upon those psychological attitudes and desires that we see already present in the mind of the character before the actual temptation scene. Arthur Barker, commenting on the setting of *Paradise Regained*, notes the parallel to *Samson* and the purpose of that fact. He states :

As the young Christ isolates himself in the wilderness of the world to engage in wholly interiorized and self-closeted meditation, so Samson...is forced by the wrath of his just God and the pains of enslaved defeat to withdraw into himself. ⁽⁶⁾

Close analysis of the characters whom Samson confronts suggests the notion of an even greater internalization than at first appears, since each character that he encounters presents him with an image of some attitude of his own self. ⁽⁷⁾ A close look at the Manoa confrontation, for example, reveals that Manoa repeats what Samson knows or has already said. Manoa's function, then, is to define Samson's own position and the structure of the episode

becomes a dialectic between Samson and Samson [sic.], as he evaluates, qualifies, and corrects the stances in his soliloquy and the assertion of the chorus. ⁽⁸⁾

In like manner, the episode with Dalila ⁽⁹⁾ and Herapha ⁽¹⁰⁾ become dialectics in which Samson confronts some position of his own, in order that he might better see it, and, through his discovery, combat it more effectively.

Raymond Waddington has brilliantly plotted the cyclical pattern of the internalized conflict that lead to Samson's regeneration and his comments are worth citing at length. He notes:

The three visitors have, each in his own way, tempted Samson's spiritual malady by opposing it with their imitations. To Samson his condition was "remediless" ; they, however, have functioned as the medicine to relieve that condition....In each encounter there has been a cyclical pattern as Samson resists the destructive image with which he is presented, rises to a new height of illumination and

resolution, then, in reaction falls back again into a depressed state. ⁽¹¹⁾

Waddington's statement suggests further comment on the nature of the redemptive process.

Among others, Parker agrees with Waddington that the dialectic is generally progressive in character. Each new episode in the drama brings Samson to a place where he has never been before. ⁽¹²⁾ Agreement also exists, however, that the process does not entail the feeling that the hero is "consistently getting better and better." ⁽¹³⁾ There is an element of regression that invades the conclusion of each episode, so that the movement is not unlike the cyclical movement of "L'Allegro" & "Il Penseroso".

The initial episode, for example, sees a new strength and advance in Samson in as much as he sees that the responsibility for his fall is his own. However, this advance involves an increase in psychological suffering that voices itself as a kind of suicidal despair. ⁽¹⁴⁾

A final element of the dialect is its irony. The very nature of dialectic movement rests on opposition ; hence, it is not surprising to find it present here. Manoa's suggestion that perhaps God has relented and intends to ransom Samson ironically renews his despair. ⁽¹⁵⁾ In general "His [God's] well meant attempts to alleviate the sufferings of his son have invariably an effect of contrary intent." ⁽¹⁶⁾ As Don Cameron Allen notes,

The irony does not diminish with this scene for it permeates the whole regenerative process, which depends not on the council of Manoa or the Hebraic chorus, Samson's friends and the children of Jehovah, but rather on the taunts of Dalila and Herapha, enemies of Israel and haters of Jehovah. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Allen's point, however, indicates a final regenerative irony of the poem; and that is that the entire poem can be read as a rising through falling ⁽¹⁸⁾ ; a concept which Milton elaborated with great care in his previous magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*.

We can summarize the foregoing, then, by stating that the dialectic process of redemption, as Milton portrays it in *Samson*, is characterized by four factors : 1.It is

internal, 2.It is cyclical, 3.It is progressive and regressive, and 4.It is ultimately re-
demptive—and that all of these factors make significant appearances in earlier works
by Milton.

The question that now presents itself is from what is it that Milton sees Samson
being redeemed? Perhaps a few remarks about Milton's source material might shed
some light on the problem. Parker has remarked that although the idea for the story
has been obviously taken from the *Book of Judges* "the actual incidents of the drama,
up to the time of the catastrophe, represent artistic inventions on Milton's part" and
he comments that the characters of both the officer and Herapha are entirely imag-
ined and, furthermore, both Dalila and Manoa "take on a reality they do not possess
in *The Bible*."⁽¹⁹⁾ In addition, we must acknowledge the extensive analysis of the drama
made by William Parker whose thesis is that *Samson* is Greek in both content and
spirit.⁽²⁰⁾ What Milton seems to be doing here, and he has done it before, is combining
the great cultures to which he was most responsive.⁽²¹⁾ However, as most scholars of
the past forty years have come to realize, Milton is using the required conventions of
Greek tragedy in order to create a new effect.⁽²²⁾

The reason for Milton's complexity and the effect he was attempting to achieve
is insightfully noted by Northrop Frye :

In Classical Literature,...there are, as Milton sees it
two elements. One is the development of natural
human ability,...outside the Christian revelation.
and, therefore, not possessing the truth of that
revelation....But Classical culture is not simply
a human development, unfortunately ; man without
revelation cannot avoid accepting some demonic vision,
which means parody of that revelation. Hence, such
forms as Homeric epic and Sophoclean tragedy are
genuine models of style, decorum, and 'ancient liberty' ;
at the same time they are also connected with something
ultimately demonic, a pseudo revelation from fallen angels. The use of the
Classical genres by a Christian
poet should show in what respects they are analogous to

the forms of Christian revelation and in what respects
they are demonic parodies of them. ⁽²³⁾

Frye concludes that

Milton intended *Paradise Lost* to be a Christian conquest of Classical epic genre, and similarly *Samson Agonistes* to be Christian conquest of the Classical genre of dramatic tragedy. ⁽²⁴⁾

The specific elements in the Classical ideal that Milton finds most troublesome, and which he critiques time and again in his works, are those of the ideal of heroic glory and the democratic ideal that denigrates into slothful repudiation of responsibility. As portrayed in *Paradise Lost* it is the pride-filled quest for glory that leads to the democratic ideal; however, in *Samson* we are intruding on an already fallen man, whose present is filled with the effects of the latter evil and whose regenerative path must lead back through the second vice to the first. Thus, our analysis of the play, which will follow both the chronology of the drama and the logic of regeneration, will begin with an analysis of the second vice, sloth.

Sloth-producing democracy is perhaps best reflected in the courtly love tradition, where its two characteristics of sensuality and relief from responsibility are both present. ⁽²⁵⁾ It is on this level that Milton treats Samson's encounter with the sensual Dalila. However, we are introduced to the subject before that in the episode of Samson's encounter with Manoa. In this episode Manoa's temptation to be saved by him for a life "Inglorious" and "unemployed" is reminiscent of Achilles' remark to Odysseus when he encounters him in Hades, and like Achilles is the result of a life formerly spent in the pursuit of glory. Manoa, who represents the alter-ego of Samson's present, characteristically suggests that a miracle might bring literal restoration of sight to Samson ⁽²⁶⁾, and this would thus relieve Samson of the responsibility of bearing the penalty for his past actions and, perhaps more importantly, relieve him of the necessity of acting to gain redemption in the present. This suggestion, along with his earlier one of literal "ransom", if heeded by Samson, would surely have plunged him deeper into sloth. ⁽²⁷⁾

Samson's encounter with Dalila is an encounter with the slothful position of his own past. Since sloth is the result of the quest for glory, it is appropriate that Dalila

conceives of herself as a heroine whose desire is for fame.⁽²⁸⁾ Equally appropriate is the fact that like Eve she sought to lower Samson to have control over him⁽²⁹⁾, since it is in the surrender of control that one is able to surrender responsibility and, thus, lead a life of sloth. David Daiches sums up the point nicely when he states :

when Dalila actually suggest that a blind Samson is better off than a seeing one, just as Eve doesn't want Adam seeing her eating the apple, as being more completely under her protection, we see clearly that Milton is attacking here a variant of the courtly love tradition which he attacked in other ways in *Paradise Lost*.⁽³⁰⁾

Dalila is thus “the prototype of the woman who wishes to reduce her lover to an object totally within her power.”⁽³¹⁾

The imagery that Milton assigns to Dalila reinforces this conclusion. She is introduced as a “thing” that only seems female, since in reality she is the glory seeking male to Samson's female irresponsibility. In addition, like Satan of *Paradise Lost* who tempts Eve to the slothful state of being democratically equal with God, Dalila is characterized as “adder's wisdom,” “serpent,” and “viper.”

Milton's analysis of sloth does not stop at the delineation of its causes. The major portion of the drama evidences the effects of sloth on its breeder. It produces a despair, the likes of which are akin to “loathed melancholy” produced by the slothful day the persona experiences in “L'Allegro.” Despair, more often than not, produces an infertile disposition⁽³²⁾ that ends in suicidal thoughts. To see that this is a situation already proposed by Milton earlier, we have only to remember that the fallen angel Moloch in *Paradise Lost* “now fiercer by despair” urges a suicidal assault on the citadel of heaven.

In addition to the already cited instances Manoa causes despair in Samson by distilling the notion that God intends to punish Samson but not to employ him.⁽³³⁾ Likewise, by warning Samson against suicide he puts the thought in his mind. Dalila, like Manoa, in her temptation to “venereal love,” is essentially a temptation to despair, but we must remember that Samson is portrayed as finally not yielding to the temptation of despair or to its consequent, suicide. Although the desire to die might be

his in the early part of the play he never contemplates suicide.⁽³⁴⁾

With respect to the regenerative effect to temptations to sloth has upon Samson it is particularly worth nothing that his encounter with Dalila “has done for Samson what neither his father nor his friend were able to do : brought him to life, made him conscious of his manhood”⁽³⁵⁾, and thus brought him out of the valley of sloth and despair.

In the cyclical chronology such as Milton often postulates it is often possible to move forward in order to grapple with the past. Thus after his repudiation of the present trials Samson is re-confronted with the sins of his past. First is the form of sloth tempting Dalila, then, in a temptation to glory by the most obvious and least complicated of self-images, Herapha.

Because he was marked from birth as a champion who would free his people and because he was reared with that knowledge Samson “had experienced a kind of religious hubris, a certainty that his own election made him indispensable to God”⁽³⁶⁾; and this, in turn, prompted a glory seeking way of life. Thus Herapha “is the strong man of the Philistines, as Samson had been of the Hebrews, a taunting braggart prize-fighter”⁽³⁷⁾ who represents Samson as he was and, indeed, still is up to the time of the repudiation of this evil.

As with sloth the quest for glory is embodied in the chivalric code. It is not surprising, therefore, that Allen notes that when Herapha says he regrets he cannot win honor from Samson in mortal duel because Samson is blind he is talking as a man conscious of the knightly code.⁽³⁸⁾ And as Samson’s growing confidence in God replaces his confidence in himself, we see the brave and knightly Herapha, Samson’s alter-ego, changing before our eyes into a coward and blusterer.⁽³⁹⁾

The transformation of interest from self-glory to glory for God points the way to Samson’s final victory over himself and his final redemptive act of self-regeneration through self-repudiation and self-destruction. Allen comments that “by his victory of Herapha, who symbolizes all that is valiant in Philistia,” which can be construed as Samson’s fallen state, “God, working through Samson, has put Dagon down.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ The destruction of the temple, which enacts the close of the drama, indicates the destruction of Samson’s own temple-body, an act which is at once payment for all past errors and repudiation of all possible recurrences of them.

The foregoing discussion of the temptation to sloth and glory in *Samson*, which

are reenactments of the temptations in “L’Allegro” and *Paradise Lost*, as well as in other earlier works not treated here, brings to a conclusion Milton’s continuing discussion of the subject. “For Milton, the romantic lady ends in Dalila and the romantic hero in Herapha.”⁽⁴¹⁾ At least, so it seems.

However, close analysis of the character of Manoa leads us to suspect that although Milton has indicated the way to redemption he has also retained the view that redemption is an individual matter. As in both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, wherein people at large are not portrayed as finding redemption, or to look still earlier, to the useless and the meaningless actions of the masses of “L’Allegro”, so also in *Samson*, Milton has Manoa retain the unregenerative view of glory that Samson has repudiated. Thus Manoa, after Samson’s death, will build a monument to inflame the valiant youth “To matchless valour, and adventurers high.”

Perhaps another way to view the entire redemptive process in Milton, which includes repudiation of self-images, is to see it as a repudiation of the visual world itself. In his insightful and seminal essay “Agon and Logos” Northrop Frye suggest that polytheism is a religious development of visual symbols because it is impossible without pictures or statues to distinguish one god from another. Furthermore, the visual image is centripetal, in a pose of static and I might add slothful obedience. In contrast to this, Frye notes that the Hebrew religion is founded on a revelation which is “the word of God” and the word is centrifugal, being primarily a call to action. Thus, Samson’s destruction of the visual temple, along with his own blindness, is indicative of Milton’s critique of the visual world in general.⁽⁴³⁾ It is certainly true, as Frye points out, that Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* misconstrue the visible paradise, thinking it to be the source of creative power; and because of that, paradise has come more and more to mean “an invisible inner state, to be brought into being by revelation through the word.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ This pattern seems to apply to Milton’s other works as well. It is a mistake of the persona in “Il Penseroso,” for example, to think that he can find happiness in the visual world envisioned in “L’Allegro;” and, similarly, it is a repudiation of the visions that Satan sets before the Son of God that moves Christ to his rightful destiny as redeemer in *Paradise Regained*.

Certain internal evidence in *Samson* corroborates this view. Frye notes that “The action of Milton’s play, like the ‘Book of Job,’ forms a visual anti-play” because there is no action other than the internal movements in Samson’s mind.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In addition

to this we must not forget that the temple of Dagon, in which Samson is asked to perform, is also a theatre, as the messenger calls it; and it is perhaps with this in mind that Milton expressly stated in his prefatory remarks to *Samson* that he was writing a drama not to be performed.

A cursory reading of the drama, as well as a focusing on the central symbol of Samson's blindness, indicates that any reading of the play would be incomplete without a discussion, however slight, of Milton's epistemological position. Here, as in the majority of his earlier works, the role that knowledge plays or is to play in the life of the individual a major significance. In *Comus* the knowledge that the lady gains about the true identity of Comus is central to the action of the story. The disruption of continued pensive vision in "Il Penseroso" leads the persona from a state of "divinest melancholy" to "loathed melancholy." In *Paradise Lost*, the action whereby the work is named, likewise, is centered around the act to gain new, albeit wrong, knowledge. Last, in *Paradise Regained* Christ's role is defined by a repudiation of those ideas offered to him by Satan and this, in turn, rests on Christ's knowledge of who Satan is.

It is therefore not surprising to see that *Samson* is a work that is much concerned with the role of knowledge in the process of redemption. Like the Christ of *Paradise Regained* Samson's redemption is won through a repudiation of those ideas which are presented to him by those he encounters. He travels along the same road with Christ to a kind of negative definition of his own identity in the same way that the persona of "Il Penseroso" knows that he does not want to be the persona in "L'Allegro" and the Lady in *Comus* knows that she is not to be hungry.

Unlike Christ, however, is the fact that preceding the first step to true knowledge Samson had blinded himself with proud desire and self-glory. Thus, he "understood" his role with the same misunderstanding that the blind serpent, Satan, has of Christ's role as deliverer of Israel.⁽⁴⁶⁾ From this fallen epistemological position Samson rises to a repudiation of "that human knowledge that the Renaissance regarded as instrumental of wisdom...to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities."⁽⁴⁷⁾ With this repudiation Samson enters a state of complete epistemological blindness supported by the play's stark setting and, more generally, by its rigid economy in the use of dramatic resources, which all "contribute to the feeling of confinement, of a limited world, a 'prison within prison,' with only limited possibilities for knowledge."⁽⁴⁸⁾ In the total darkness that follows the repudiation it does not occur to Samson that he will

complete his fated destiny in the death which he seeks. Quite simply, he has no idea of what is in store for him.

Samson's final actions, then, are not based upon any newly gained knowledge of God or his destiny, but rather are acts of a faith whose meaning and consequences he does not understand.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Appropriately, in a fallen world man must posit a faith that moves beyond the desire for rational order. It is, therefore, easy to agree with Parker who sees blind faith as a key to the play⁽⁵⁰⁾; and its blindness rests on the implicit nature of a faith that does not rely on the visible world to shape its ends.

Ironically, only action produced by blind faith is true action in God's world, which is why we must read Manoa's understanding of Samson's final act, which he sees as a visible monument to stimulate other to glory, as Manoa's true blindness and as Milton's pronouncement, not unlike those made or implied in "L'Allegro," *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*, of the deplorable epistemological condition of the vast herd of men.

The limitations conferred by the topic of this paper do not allow the development of the implications of the epistemological situation of the masses. Suffice it to say that, in the main, this seems to be the essence of Milton's tragic vision.

In conclusion, *Samson Agonistes*, in its content and principal meanings, seems to be Milton's continued and final word on matters begun at the start of and throughout his poetic career. In light of this, then, the meaning of Milton's subscription to *Samson* becomes clear:

"To Which is Added Samson Agonistes."

NOTES:

- (1) Balachandra Rajan, "To Which is Added Samson Agonistes," in *The Prison and the Pinnacle*, ed. Same, Toronto, Toronto University, 1973, pp.82-83
- (2) Rajan, p.105
- (3) William Parker, *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes*, Baltimore, John's Hopkins, 1937, p.25
- (4) Parker, p.53
- (5) Parker, p.31
- (6) Arthur Barker, "Calm Regained Through Passion Spent, The Conclusion of Miltonic Effort," in *The Prison and Pinnacle*, p.35
- (7) Raymond Waddington, "Melancholy Against Melancholy: Samson Agonistes as Renais-

- sance Tragedy,” in *Calm of Mind*, ed. J.R. Wittreich, Cleveland, Case Western Reserve University, 1971, p.269
- (8) Waddington, p.270
 - (9) Waddington, p.274
 - (10) Waddington, p.276
 - (11) Waddington, pp.277-278
 - (12) Joseph Summers, “The Movements of the Drama,” in *The Lyric and Dramatic Milton*, ed. Same, New York, Columbia University, 1965, p.160
 - (13) Summers, p.160
 - (14) Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton’s Poetry*, Baltimore, John’s Hopkins, 1970, p.87
 - (15) Parker, p.39
 - (16) Allen, p.87
 - (17) Allen, p.88
 - (18) Balachandra, p.84
 - (19) Parker, p.9
 - (20) Parker, p.9
 - (21) Marjorie Nicholson, *A Reader’s Guide to John Milton*, New York, Ferrar, Strauss, & Cudahy, 1963, p.352
 - (22) Roy Daniels, *Milton, Mannerism, and Baroque*, Toronto, Toronto University, 1963, p.209
 - (23) Northrop Frye, “Agon and Logos: Revolution and Revelation,” in *The Prison and the Pinnacle*, pp.135-136
 - (24) Frye, p.135
 - (25) C.M.Bowra, *Inspiration and Poetry*, London, Macmillan, 1955, p.118
 - (26) William G. Madsen, “From Shadowy Types to Truth,” in *The Lyric and Dramatic Milton*, p.109
 - (27) Allen, p.86
 - (28) John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, New York, Odyssey, 1957, 11.940-984
 - (29) Nicholson, p.362
 - (30) David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature, Vol.1*, New York, Ronald Press, 1960, p.456
 - (31) Summers, p.167
 - (32) Allen, p.74
 - (33) Allen, p.86
 - (34) Allen, pp.86-87
 - (35) Nicholson, p.364
 - (36) M.M.Mahood, *Poetry and Humanism*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1970, p.237
 - (37) Nicholson, p.367
 - (38) Allen, p.92
 - (39) Allen, p.92
 - (40) Allen, p.93
 - (41) George Williamson, *Milton and Others*, 2nd ed., ed. same, Chicago, Chicago University, 1965, p.25
 - (42) Frye, p.145
 - (43) Frye, pp.145-147
 - (44) Frye, p.147

- (45) Frye, p.150
- (46) Madsen, p.104
- (47) Barker, pp.9-10
- (48) Rajan, p.102
- (49) John Shawcross, "Irony as Tragic Effect: Samson Agonistes and the Tragedy of Hope,"
in *Calm of Mind*, p.291
- (50) Shawcross, p.303