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Between Faith and Reason

A Historical, Theological, and Political Inquiry Into the Purpose of *Samson Agonistes*

by

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Introduction

THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF *SAMSON AGONISTES*

I first encountered *Samson Agonistes* several years ago at the end of a course on the seventeenth century that began with Donne and Jonson and ended with Milton and Rochester. *Samson Agonistes* was, if I recall correctly, the last poem we read in that class; in any case, for the simple reason that it caused me to leave the course –which I enjoyed— feeling a little unsatisfied, it is the last poem I remember reading that semester. Were I less distracted in my literary studies, perhaps I could write here that a subsequent dash to investigate the mysteries of *Samson* led me on a straight path to writing this thesis. That is, regrettably, not the case, but in any event the nagging feeling I felt at the end of that semester must have stayed with me long enough that when it came time to find a topic on which to write, *Samson Agonistes* floated easily to the top of the list of works whose problems of meaning and purpose bothered me intellectually.

My experience is, I would think, not unique. *Samson Agonistes* is easy to identify as a ‘problem work’ of Milton’s, much in the same way that *Measure for Measure* or *Troilus and Cressida* might stand out as discordant and literarily ‘problematic’ works of Shakespeare’s. The story of *Samson Agonistes* is itself likely to strike readers as odd or upsetting regardless of whether they are familiar with its biblical origin text, and the entire work, which seems to straddle the genres of poem, play, and epic, somewhat resembles in its structure a strange mockery of a classical tragedy. Milton departs significantly from the story’s biblical origins, inventing conversations (and in one case, an entire character) out of whole cloth. The violent conclusion of the poem, in which Samson pulls down the temple of his Philistine enemies at cost to his own life, is never shown to readers; instead, we learn about these events from the

perspective of Samson's father Manoa as he is told about them by a chorus, immediately following a fake-out resolution in which Manoa agrees to pay Samson's ransom so that the blind warrior may retire in peace.

So why does this all matter, as a problem of literary analysis or in general? What makes *Samson Agonistes* more worth writing about than any other canonical author's 'problem works'? From where does this strange piece of literature draw its relevance?

In part, *Samson Agonistes* remains relevant because we are not simply talking about a 'problem-work' by a poet who lived and died some three and a half centuries ago (though I, at least, would stake out the position that interpretive problems with such things 'matter'). Rather, we are dealing with a piece of literary work that seems to speak to something people see in their own lives and circumstances, a phenomenon that is reflected in the scholarship (and modestly-sized public discourse) regarding Milton's poem. As an object, *Samson Agonistes* has captured the attention not just of those with an interest in literature, but that of a wide variety of people—sociologists and historians and political scientists, to be sure, but also newspaper-columnist gadflies, warmongers in the American commentariat, voices on either side of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and others who hope to read into the poem something profound (or at least personally helpful) about their contemporary situations.

In a way, this might make sense to careful readers of the poem. The questions Milton wrestles with in *Samson Agonistes* are questions that remain important: among many other things, the poem grapples with the loss and renewal of faith, the prospect of abandonment by one's creator, and when and how one might be justified in acting violently.

This interest in Samson (though it has come, as I mentioned earlier, in great part from people other than scholars of seventeenth-century English literature) has provided us with a

plethora of interpretations, explanations, and extrapolations seeking to create a theory of what meaning we might find in *Samson Agonistes*. Milton's Samson is, depending on the commentator, a paragon of Christian heroism, a proto-Israeli mass murderer wreaking havoc on Palestinian worshippers, an avatar for Milton himself, or a template from which America's enemies in the 'global war on terror' learned their craft. Leaving aside the moral and political dimensions of the character, those in the business of reading literature professionally cannot even agree on whether Milton's Samson is a lustful, loutish brute lashing out at his surroundings or a self-reflective warrior-hero playing the part of erudite lay theologian.

In the midst of all this uncertainty about what *Samson Agonistes* is trying to say—an uncertainty that is, quite certainly, grounded in the games Milton plays with thought and perspective—the poem's contents and Milton's intentions in creating them remain an open and interesting topic of historical and literary inquiry. Consider this project my addition to the long list of efforts to draw out a coherent reading of this long-discussed poem.

A NOTE ABOUT WHAT EXACTLY IS BEING DONE HERE

Readers of this study may notice a particular preoccupation not just with interpreting *Samson Agonistes*, but with interpreting Milton's authorial intent. To be clear, I am focused on such matters in part because my aim is to discern Milton's intentions in writing *Samson Agonistes*, but also because much of the scholarly discussion around the poem revolves around a similar project. I am trying to find a way to talk about this particular work; more specifically, I am trying to find a way to do so that I believe Milton would plausibly have approved of. After all, a clear source of the 'problem-work' identity of *Samson Agonistes* is the fact that it does not fit particularly neatly into Milton's oeuvre.

To that end, this thesis is first and foremost a work of literary interpretation. But it does go where questions about the poem take it, and the final product spans questions of history, theology, politics, and even psychology in its effort to outline what I believe to be a coherent way of understanding the beliefs that undergird *Samson Agonistes*.

I. Samson the Brute, Samson the Thinker, Samson the Partisan

THE ISSUE OF SOURCE MODIFICATION

Let us begin with one of the most noticeable issues with *Samson Agonistes*, and one of the first ‘problems’ a reader might notice with the poem. I am speaking, of course, of the poem’s conspicuous lack of resemblance to the biblical tale from which it draws inspiration, save the beginning and end of Samson’s story. Milton’s work with Samson is ostensibly based on a biblical narrative, but the tale told in this poem departs radically from its source text in such a way that the structure of the poem itself depends on these departures; the main body of *Samson Agonistes* consists of a set of interactions between Samson and other characters who play different or diminished roles in the Book of Judges’ account, and a crucial interaction in the poem finds Samson in conflict with a character created by Milton who has no analogue in the original story.

Given their structural nature, these changes are typically considered conscious literary-artistic decisions by critics examining *Samson Agonistes*, and their depth and significance is a frequent topic of debate. John Carey, a proponent of the Samson-as-terrorist framework, characterizes Milton’s drama as a “drastic rewriting of the Samson story,” arguing that Milton “hides” major elements of the biblical account, intentionally “leav[ing] insufficient evidence¹” to clearly interpret the tale’s theological tilt; conversely, critics such as Michael Krouse² and John Shawcross³ allege that Milton inserts a carefully selected set of additional story details to Samson’s life so as to sanitize and politicize the poem’s main character.

¹ John Carey, “A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*.” *Times Literary Supplement* (6 September 2002), pp. 15-16.

² Michael F. Krouse, *Ok n v q p ø u " U c o u q p " c p f (P f i n c j t o g , N J E P r i n c e t o n U n i v e r s i t y P r e s s) , c f k v k q p* 1949.

³ John Shawcross, ed. *The Complete Poetry of John Milton* (New York: Doubleday Anchor), 1971.

Having established the importance of this issue of Milton's modifications to the source text, the first part of this essay will examine the substance and implications of *Samson Agonistes*' departures from its biblical origins, seeking to draw out from these changes a coherent account of Milton's Samson in contrast to his counterpart in the Book of Judges.

DEPARTURES FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The biblical account of Samson's life consists of a single continuous narrative spanning four chapters in the Book of Judges, beginning with Samson's birth ("And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him⁴") and concluding – as Milton's work does— with Samson's death at the temple of the Philistines ("Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the buryingplace of Manoah his father⁵ . . ."). *Samson Agonistes* does not take the time to depict all of these events; rather, it begins in what might be assumed to be the middle of Judges 16, at a point before Samson's death in the temple but after the gouging of his eyes by his Philistine captors.

The difficulty of placing *Samson Agonistes*' opening scene in the chronology of the biblical account is itself a testament to the degree to which Milton has taken significant liberties with the original text; more importantly, attempts to pinpoint where exactly in the biblical narrative *Samson Agonistes* begins reveal significant changes not only in the structure of the Samson narrative, but also in the actual characterization of Samson as a literary figure.

At the outset of *Samson Agonistes*, its titular protagonist remains –however briefly— in Philistine captivity. Thus, the most obvious initial point of convergence between *Samson*

⁴ Judges 13:24, in the 1611 King James/Authorized Version (for clarity purposes, the spelling in all biblical quotations has been modernized, but for reasons of historical accuracy, the text is based solely on the 1611 Authorized Version and not the 1769 edition of the Authorized Version that includes modernized English).

⁵ Judges 16:31.

Agonistes and the text of Judges 16 comes during Samson’s imprisonment; specifically, the time at which, per the biblical account, the Philistines “took [Samson] and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and [made him] grind in the prison house⁶.”

We should note, however, that *Samson Agonistes* spends very little time depicting this captivity, even as the trauma of Samson’s defeat and imprisonment casts a shadow over his actions throughout the poem. By the time *Samson Agonistes* begins, Samson’s torture and forced labor at the hands of the Philistines is nearly over. Milton’s initial summary of the poem notes only briefly that Samson has been “made Captive, Blind, and [kept] in the Prison at Gaza⁷,” a condition that is quickly remedied within the first several lines of the poem proper when an invisible figure –alternately God, an angel, a figment of Samson’s imagination, or a Philistine jailer— lends “a little onward [its] guiding hand/To these dark steps, a little further on [to a] bank [that] hath choice of Sun or shade⁸.”

It should be noted in our attempt to reconcile the differences between Milton’s work and its biblical inspiration that these opening lines present us with the problem of what appears to be either an omission or an outright contradiction of Milton’s account by the Book of Judges’ text. While Judges 16 seems to imply that Samson never leaves his captivity at the hands of the Philistines until his death (Samson is “called for . . . out of the prison house⁹” directly into the temple), *Samson Agonistes* opens with Samson being freed, such that he might have time to wander the Gazan desert and contemplate the trajectory of his life. This quite significant departure, as we will observe shortly, is key to Milton’s recharacterization of Samson –the time

⁶ Judges 16:21.

⁷ John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon, The John Milton Reading Room. “The Argument.”

⁸ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1-2.

⁹ Judges 16:25.

Samson Agonistes spends focusing on the fabricated dialogue between Samson and the peripheral biblical characters Milton inserts into his work plays a vital role in Milton's exploration of Samson's internal dilemma, something that would be difficult (if not impossible) to do elegantly if *Samson Agonistes* were to stick to the Book of Judges' telling.

Immediately upon his release from the Philistine prison, Milton's Samson turns to despair, reflecting on issues of destiny and his place in God's broader designs:

Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd
 As a person separate to God,
 Design'd for great exploits; if I must dye
 Betray'd, Captiv'd, 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 strength¹⁰?"

We see in these lines the nature of the despondency experienced by Milton's Samson. They tell us, quite explicitly, that his despair stems from a sense that his notions of a heroic destiny —of a birth “order'd and prescrib'd¹¹” by God— have been disrupted, perhaps irrevocably, by some force or set of events that may well follow him to the end of his life. There is a specific sense of loss expressed here by Samson; not just of the theft of his eyes by the Philistines, but the loss of the sense of purpose granted to him by his previous assurance that his talents were “design'd for great exploits¹²” and his “Heav'n-gifted strength¹³” gifted for a purpose greater than to labor in Philistine captivity.

Samson's disturbance at his sense of disrupted destiny and wasted ability goes well beyond regret at some misinterpretation of divine will or horror at the possibility that his miserable circumstances were indeed ordained by God. Instead, he experiences his feeling of

¹⁰ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 30-36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

profound failure in a singularly personal manner—a “sense of Heav’ns desertion¹⁴,” as it is later termed—quickly moving from asking after whether God may have intended such a fate for him to contemplating that “all foretold/Had been fulfill’d but through mine own default¹⁵” and asking whether he has anyone “to complain of but [him]self¹⁶.”

In isolation, we might read this as a sort of compensatory psychological mechanism—it may, after all, be more comforting to believe that one’s failures are the result of personal ineptitude and not a God actively rooting for your demise—but Samson’s shifting of the burden of guilt from God to himself reflects a larger issue brought out by Milton’s depiction of the Samson narrative.

While the heroic fall narrative centers on the individual experience of Milton’s Samson, the weight of his failure relies on Samson’s view of himself as a servant to forces and causes much greater than him. Samson styles himself a servile follower of God—he notes that his instinct is to “not quarrel with the will/Of highest dispensation, which herein/Happ’ly had ends above my reach to know¹⁷”—but in a more particular sense, he conceives of himself as a servant of the Israelite tribe, a “great Deliverer¹⁸” whose “promise was that [he]/Should ISRAEL from PHILISTIAN yoke deliver¹⁹.” This political identification adds a certain weight to the already substantial consequence of Samson’s blindness and captivity; his personal failure is compounded by the symbolic and material blow of the Israelites seeing “the dread of [their] foes, who with a

¹⁴ Ibid., 632.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60-62.

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

strength/Equivalent to Angels walk'd thir streets²⁰” reduced to a prisoner “eyeless in GAZA at the Mill with Slaves/Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke²¹.”

In Milton’s telling, Samson’s tragedy is dual-layered; both the tragedy of an individual endowed with great ability by God lain so low as to be found “[y]ing] at random carelessly diffus’d/With languish’t head unpropt²²” and the tragedy of a cause lost and a people failed by a historically pivotal figure upon whom they pinned their hopes of liberation. Just as Samson’s fall has caused him to languish in blindness and exile, so too has it caused the Israelites to continue to languish under the yoke of Philistine domination.

One might assume that Samson’s role as a political symbol to the Israelites would be a point of convergence between the biblical account and Milton’s poem, but this is not at all the case. Not only does the biblical Samson never consider or address the issue of his relationship to the broader cause of Israelite liberation, the Samson of the Book of Judges seems remarkably devoid of any self-reflection.

The gulf between the abilities of Milton’s Samson and the biblical Samson to contemplate their own situations are not, as it might initially seem, the product of the biblical narrative declining to give Samson’s internal dialogue the time and attention Milton does. During the few instances in which readers of the Old Testament are allowed to peer into Samson’s mind, it is apparent that he is at key points unaware of the degree to which his situation has changed as a result of his sexual encounter with Delilah. From the biblical depiction of the moments immediately prior to Samson’s capture by the Philistines:

²⁰ Ibid., 342.

²¹ Ibid., 41-42.

²² Ibid., 119.

And [Delilah] said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him²³.

The biblical Samson's confusion and unawareness here make for a stark contrast with Milton's Samson. Even as the biblical Samson is warned that he has been set upon by Philistine warriors and his capture is imminent, he remains ignorant of his plight, seeking to "go out as at other times before." Lest we mistake this for a moment of disoriented foolishness, the Biblical text points out clearly that Samson, with his hair shorn, is fully unaware that "that the LORD was departed from him," a far cry from the Samson of Milton's poem, who not only understands the relationship between his "high gift of strength" and his hair, but also finds himself in an extended reflection about how the fact that such power is "lodg'd" in a part of his body so "slight" indicates his state as a weak man "liable to fall²⁴." And where the biblical Samson is too oblivious to blame Delilah for his plight, the Miltonic Samson has no such issues –he blames Delilah's "foul effeminacy" for holding the attention of his "servile mind" and reducing him to an "unmanly, ignominious, infamous . . . degenerate²⁵" state.

The biblical Samson's relative lack of awareness or concern about his distance from God does not rectify itself in the Book of Judges' account going forward. Samson's thoughts, save for a comment he makes to a Philistine servant asking to "lean upon²⁶" the pillars of the Philistine temple, are not shown until the scene of his death, and the biblical narrative does little to reveal Samson's internal monologue at the end of his life. We are, however, given a relatively detailed account of Samson's death and his last words that tell us quite a lot about his view of the significance of his final act of violence.

²³ Judges 16:20.

²⁴ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 47-59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 411-419.

²⁶ Judges 16:26.

And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life²⁷.

As depicted above, the Samson of the Bible does not seem particularly interested in any of the larger implications of his death; even in his last moments, he seems to be remarkably unconcerned with the arc of his life or his relationship to God and the Israelite tribe. The biblical Samson asks, as Milton's Samson presumably does, for God to strengthen him one final time, but not for the purpose of personal redemption, the fulfillment of divine instruction, or the liberation of the Israelite people. Instead, the biblical Samson asks for God's favor so that he might "be at once avenged of the Philistines" for his "two eyes."

We might read this line as a suggestion that the biblical Samson is, in his final act, simply engaging in an act of primitive redress, seeking to exact as much destruction as possible in retaliation for the loss of his eyesight. This reading is bolstered by the final words we here from Samson ("Let me die with the Philistines") and the fact that the biblical narration chooses to focus, in its last note about the fallen Philistine temple, upon the fact that Samson "slew at his death . . . more [men] than . . . which he slew in his life," perhaps suggesting that Samson was redeemed as a warrior (as a man with two eyes, if you will) by his final act. Uncharitable to the biblical Samson as this reading may be, it points to a fundamental difference between the biblical Samson and the Samson of *Samson Agonistes*—Milton's Samson clearly frames his life and death in terms of his service to God and a greater political cause, while the Bible's Samson seems to see his life in more individual terms. Regardless of whether the biblical Samson's destruction of

²⁷ Judges 16:28-30

the Philistine temple is only an act of retribution for his personal suffering, it is notable that this Samson's last words –to God, no less— characterize his last act as in service to the avenging of a physical injury and not some greater religious or political cause.

More concerning, it seems possible that when this version of Samson asks God to strengthen him, he does not even fully understand the fact of God's previous departure; after all, Samson asks for God to strengthen him to settle a physical score the same way he seems to have done throughout his life as a warrior. Samson is not, we should note, asking God to strengthen him so that he might be redeemed in God's sight, or so that the Israelites might see their conquerors lain low; even absent any considerations of how this reflects on the biblical Samson's view of his own legacy, there is a noteworthy lack of circumstantial awareness that goes into this request.

Nor should we take Samson's silence on the matter of Delilah as indicative of some unspoken regret; while such feelings might be read into the text, the biblical account never addresses this explicitly, and we should take care to note that the personal nature of Samson's request should be understood in the context not only of God's departure from him, but also in the context of the reason for said departure. Even if Samson fails to acknowledge that God has (at least temporarily) left his life, a man of even minimal reflective capacity should be able to understand that he has done something wrong or inappropriate with regards to Delilah. This problem is at the core of what the biblical Samson's last words tell us –a Samson that understood the depth of his fall in terms of a profound lapse in personal judgement or a fraying relationship with God might hesitate to ask for divine assistance in singularly personal terms. This Samson, we see, does not.

This again allows us to draw a contrast with the depiction of Samson in *Samson Agonistes*. It is nearly impossible to imagine Milton's Samson, who spends a substantial portion of the poem reflecting on his possible estrangement from God and another substantial portion of the poem grappling with the mistake he made in sleeping with Delilah, acting in the same manner as the biblical Samson does in the moment of his death. And indeed, Milton's Samson does not; at the moment of his death, he expresses significant concern with matters of destiny and legacy, framing his final act as an attempt to "perform . . . obeying²⁸" for an audience whose "commands [have been] impos'd²⁹" upon him. Although Milton chooses not to depict Samson's death in the direct narrative manner of the Old Testament, readers are provided with a remarkably detailed second-hand account of the destruction of the Philistine temple. A messenger tells Samson's father Manoa about Samson's last moments:

. . . Samson/Felt in his arms, with head a while enclin'd
 And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd
 Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd
 At last with head erect thus cryed aloud
 Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impos'd
 I have perform'd. as reason was, obeying
 Not without wonder or delight beheld.
 Now of my own accord such other tryal
 I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater
 As with amaze shall strike all who behold³⁰.

It is, perhaps, a mistake to label Milton's Samson 'cerebral.' But he is, as we can see here, clearly more aware of his circumstances than his biblical counterpart and interested in discerning their meaning and relating his life to them in a way that the Book of Judges' Samson simply is not. And in any case, one finds it difficult to reconcile the biblical Samson who cries

²⁸ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1641.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1640.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1635-1645.

out for God to help him “avenge[his] two eyes³¹” with Milton’s Samson standing with “eyes fast fixt . . . as one who pray’d [with] some great matter in his mind revolv[ing]³².”

ANCIENT FOLK HERO AND MODERN PARTISAN

What, then, are we to make of the contrast between the biblical Samson and the Miltonic one? Thus far, the difference between these two characters has left us with an account of the biblical Samson as a sort of brutish soldier of note, or, in the words of Paul Baum and W.C. Curry, a “sincere but unintelligent³³” figure, “granted an unwieldy strength of body [and] impotence of mind³⁴.” This biblical Samson does, however, have his defenders, who paint him as a closer relative of Milton’s Samson than this analysis has argued.

Evert Mordecai Clark makes the case that the biblical Samson, while in possession of inferior “intellectual powers” and less “humility and comeliness” than the Miltonic Samson, is in many ways similar, leaving Milton’s departure less dramatic than it might appear based on the structure of *Samson Agonistes*. The Samson of the Bible, Clark argues, shares a fundamental resemblance to Milton’s Samson –both are flawed men who “fell [to] the besotted love of Delilah [into] a prodigal [life],” but “never lost [their] faith in God” and in their final acts “expiat[e] willingly with [their] li[ves their] grievous sins . . . triumphantly accomplishing in large degree the work that [they] had been appointed to do³⁵.”

Clark’s reading is, in some ways, not fully supported by the text. While the broad strokes of each Samson’s life are similar (including their generally persistent faith and their respective declines originating from some ill-advised sexual dalliance with Delilah), it is unclear –see the

³¹ Judges 16:29.

³² Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1638.

³³ Paul F. Baum, “*Samson Agonistes* Again,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, xxxvi, 354-371.

³⁴ W.C. Curry, “*Samson Agonistes* Yet Again,” *Sewanee Review* 32 (1924), 336-352.

³⁵ Evert Mordecai Clark, “Milton’s Conception of Samson,” *Studies in English* no.8 (1928), 88-99.

above discussion about the last words of the biblical Samson— that the Book of Judges portrays Samson as ‘willingly’ expiating his sins in death instead of engaging in the kind of score-settling we might expect a warrior of antiquity to respond to a crippling injury with.

The final point Clark makes, however –that the biblical Samson “accomplish[es] the work he had been appointed to do³⁶,” is key to uncovering a more charitable reading of the Old Testament’s account that brings it more in line with Milton’s text. Though the biblical text does not depict Samson as raptly concerned with the liberation of the Israelites from Philistine oppression in the way that *Samson Agonistes* depicts Milton’s Samson as acutely aware of his role as a liberative political figure, one might read the Bible’s telling of Samson’s death as a sort of redemptive conclusion –not a knowing and direct act of penitence, but an act of vengeance that inadvertently delivers both symbolic and material gains to the Israelite cause, killing multitudes of the Israelites’ Philistine oppressors and cementing Samson’s role as a legendary figure for the people of his tribe. In this reading, the difference in intention between the two Samsons –the biblical Samson deciding at the temple that he wishes to be avenged of his two eyes and the Milonic Samson being moved by “rouzing motions³⁷” into willingly dying in a suicidal act of violence— is less pronounced; both end up being heroes of their respective people, regardless of their original intentions.

In other words, Samson’s final act, whether it was a base response to the loss of his eyes or a thought-through attempt to redeem himself and do right by his people, nevertheless ends up serving the dual purpose of advancing the goal of Israelite liberation and making Samson into the sort of mythic-heroic figure that might warrant a depiction in the Book of Judges. We see some evidence for this in the end of the Bible’s account of Samson’s life, which concludes with a

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1381.

comment suggesting a greater legacy in the history of Israel for Samson. Though he is not explicitly referred to as a hero or liberator, it is noted that he was buried not only by “his brethren” but “all the house of his father,” and that he was remembered as having “judged Israel twenty years³⁸.”

But even in this new, more generous reading, the biblical Samson’s intent and personal journey are, in effect, secondary to his role as a semi-fictionalized folk hero. The two interpretations of the biblical Samson we have discussed –Samson as warrior brute and Samson as long-remembered Israelite hero of fable— are not, in essence, incompatible. In fact, from these two readings, a coherent account emerges of Samson’s story as the tale of how a rough, loutish man became a significant historical figure and revered cultural icon for the Israelites. But we are nonetheless left with a fundamental contrast between the Miltonic Samson and the biblical one, albeit one slightly different than the one that emerged upon our first examination of the texts’ contrasts. The Bible’s Samson is, at best, notable because of how his people perceived his legacy; *Uc o u q p " C S a m s o n* on the other hand, is notable because of how he himself viewed the sum total of his actions.

This is, in effect, the key difference between Milton’s Samson and the biblical character. Milton’s Samson is less a tribal hero than a sophisticated actor in a political and religious struggle. He spends his last moments concerned with what might be referred to as the divine (or in a different reading, public, or historical) perception of his life in a way that clearly extends beyond a desire to kill Philistines or avenge himself of his lost sight. Indeed, even his desire for personal redemption is portrayed as part of a larger struggle, both the culmination of a long desire to follow the will of God and an act of symbolic political violence in service to the

³⁸ Judges 16:31

liberation of the Israelite tribe; Samson declares with his dying breath that he means to display his restored strength and “strike all who behold³⁹” with amazement at his final actions. Here there is no mention of the avenging of two eyes –or indeed, of anything, it seems. Samson engages in his suicidal attack out of a sincere belief that he is finally completing a plan ordained for his life and his people by God.

We see now that Milton’s departures from the biblical text are not simple stylistic choices –beyond changes in content and pacing, *Samson Agonistes* fundamentally restructures the story of its titular character such that Samson becomes a different character from his biblical origin entirely; a character that is, in fact, animated by a distinctly modern-seeming political and religious ethos.

These changes can be chalked up to the fact that the biblical Samson is, in foundational ways, unfit for the story Milton seeks to tell with *Samson Agonistes*. The self-identification of Milton’s Samson as a figure of political significance to the Israelites cannot be reconciled with the story of the mythic Samson of the Book of Judges, whose political status evolves largely independently of his internal journey. This is borne out by the biblical text, which as mentioned before not only declines to address much of its Samson’s internal dialogue, but focuses heavily on external harms suffered –hair torn, eyes gouged, limbs shackled— rather than on any internal sense of failure and alienation.

Milton’s Samson is far from that, tailored specifically to the poem in which he appears. From the outset of *Samson Agonistes*, we are made aware through Samson’s prolific internal monologue that he feels as if he has been displaced from his divinely ordained fate. We are aware, as Samson is, that his story is tied up not only with his own life but with the lives of his

³⁹ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1645.

people and the plans God has for all involved, and we are shown by the invented conversations that make up the majority of the poem –Samson’s rejection of Delilah, the attempts by Manoa to drag Samson back into a life of quietist complacency, the provocations between Samson and the giant Harapha— that Samson’s journey is not simply that of a hero lain low seeking revenge, but that of a “mighty Champion⁴⁰” grappling with political and religious failure and struggling to escape a “debas’t⁴¹” life.

This difference suggests that *Samson Agonistes* seeks, in effect, to drag the biblical Samson into the early modern age. To tell the story of *Samson Agonistes*, Milton must transform Samson from tribal folk hero to committed religious partisan, from an individual warrior seeking to be avenged of injuries and wrongs inflicted upon him to a man whose “restless thoughts . . . like a deadly swarm⁴²” drive him, through a process of painstaking reflection and uncertainty, to suicidal death and an act of remarkable violence.

And indeed, the pain of Milton’s Samson is a particularly modern type of pain; the angst and disappointment of someone who conceived of themselves in grand historical and religious terms facing the harsh reality of defeat, the weight of crippling injury, and the specter of irrelevance and ignominious death –an expansion of Samson’s biblical angst over his blinding and capture into a sense that such things are signs that the imposing religious, personal, and historical narrative constructed around his life is a sham. Milton designs his poem such that it begins with Samson as a defeated partisan and ends with him as what appears to be a triumphant one –a modern spin on an ancient tale.

⁴⁰ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 556.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

II. Terror, Radicalism and Divine Inspiration: the Politics of Milton's Samson

SAMSON AS RADICAL

Now that we have identified Milton's Samson as a partisan, we must spend some time identifying the specific nature of this partisanship. We will, for the time being, leave aside the issue of whether Milton expressly approves of Samson's partisan ethos and identity. For now, our task is to discern from Milton's text the general shape of his Samson's political beliefs.

As has been mentioned previously, a number of critics (especially in the wake of 9/11) have developed an interest in characterizing both the biblical and Miltonic Samsons as terrorists. This framing –though it was initially received poorly by academics⁴³— appears to have seeped into the popular discourse around Samson as a literary character (to the extent that one exists); a 2003 book on the War on Terror saw Norman Mailer calling the 9/11 hijackers a set of “Muslim Samsons⁴⁴,” and former academic philosopher Natalie Wynn cited a Northwestern professor's assertion that “ISIS was inspired by the poetry of John Milton⁴⁵” in an argument that humanities academia faced a crisis of methodological rigor.

In any case, the allegation that Samson's political actions are fundamentally terroristic is worth addressing, especially given that John Carey outlined the case that Milton's Samson is a terrorist engaging in a “morally disgusting” suicide attack in a 2002 article provocatively titled “A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*⁴⁶.”

The article itself, part of a dialogue with Stanley Fish about Milton's potential approval of Samson, has sparked a significant number of critical responses challenging its arguments, but

⁴³ Peter C. Herman, “Samson Among the Terrorologists,” in *Terrorism and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2018, ch.27.

⁴⁴ Norman Mailer, *Why are We at War?* (New York: Random House), 2003.

⁴⁵ Natalie Wynn, “Why I Quit Academia.” YouTube video, 9:01. 31 August 2016.

⁴⁶ Carey, “A Work in Praise of Terrorism?”

there have been relatively few attempts to rebut Carey's accusation that Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple is fundamentally an act of terrorism. Alan Rudrum, arguing that Samson is a straightforwardly heroic character, reframes Samson as a "justified freedom fighter" and claims that the branding of Samson as terrorist is but a sophistic "relabel[ing]"⁴⁷; similarly, some initial reader responses to Carey's article distinguished Samson's act of violence as non-terroristic based on the (dubious) assertion that Samson "killed only the Philistine aristocracy," making the act "certainly mass murder, but . . . socially selective in a way that does not apply to the tragedies of September 11, 2001"⁴⁸.

We can, with relative safety, dismiss these specific defenses of Samson; for one, Rudrum's differentiation of Samson the righteous freedom fighter from Samson the terrorist is essentially based upon a normative distinction that (without basis other than a vague sense of the contemporary stigma attached to the word 'terrorist') assumes acts of terrorism are definitionally divorced from having a political justification to attack an occupying power. Similarly, the apparently important 'social selectivity' of the attack seems both a matter of circumstance rather than intention (we receive no indication that Samson would have found the attack objectionable if the makeup of the crowd at the temple was different) as well as a misunderstanding—much like Rudrum's misunderstanding—of what terrorism fundamentally is. An act of terrorism does not cease to be an act of terrorism simply because it targets civilians who happen to be wealthy and powerful; a terrorist attack on an embassy that kills only career diplomats remains, as we shall see shortly in our discussion of the academic definition of terrorism, a terrorist attack. Moreover, a simple analysis of Milton's text dismantles the assertion that Samson's destruction of the temple was 'socially selective,' especially since we know that not only were there rank-and-file

⁴⁷ Alan Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship and the *Agon* over *Samson Agonistes*," *Literature Compass* 1.1 (2005).

⁴⁸ Peter C. Herman, "Samson Among the Terrorologists."

soldiers (“Archers, and Slingers . . . and Spears⁴⁹,” hardly the ‘aristocracy’ mentioned above) present at the temple, there was also a crowd of “people . . . clamouring thir god with praise⁵⁰.” Even if we are to assume, improbably, that all of these people are among the “vulgar . . . who stood without” and “scap’d⁵¹” the destruction, it strains credulity to believe that these people were not *targets* of Samson’s attack, an assertion that would require Samson to have a sophisticated understanding of architectural physics so as to intentionally cause the pillars to fall only on a select group of people, as well as a set of political ethics that cause him to differentiate between Philistine proles and aristocrats, values we will soon see that Samson explicitly says he does not possess.

But perhaps I am belaboring the point here. Speaking more broadly, it appears the reason why so few others have chosen to challenge Carey’s argument that Milton’s Samson is a terrorist is because that particular assertion is indeed difficult to dispute. Let us consider that academic studies of terrorism generally define the terrorist as one who commits an act of “premeditated, politically motivated violence⁵²,” often “deliberately [against] civilians,” in pursuit of “or in service [to] a political aim⁵³,” and let us leave aside issues of anachronism—we will assume here the perspective of the political scientists and historians who identify terrorism not as a contemporary 20th and 21st-century phenomenon but as a retroactive lens used to categorize a specific type of political violence that has existed since antiquity. From here, we can observe that Samson certainly fits this description of the terrorist; his act of violence is obviously premeditated (he is last seen leaving for the temple to “spread [God’s] name/Great among the

⁴⁹ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1619.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1620-1621.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1659.

⁵² 22 U.S. Code § 2656f, “Annual country reports on terrorism.”

⁵³ Antonia Ward, “How Do You Define Terrorism?” *The RAND Blog*, RAND Corporation, June 2018.

Heathen round⁵⁴”), it is plainly political in nature (even leaving aside the issue of Samson’s role as a pro-Israelite partisan, Samson’s destruction of the temple at what he believes to be God’s orders clearly constitutes an act of violence targeting the worship site of a rival deity), and it results in the death of Philistines who Samson knows not to be soldiers (we are told, among others, of Philistine servants and priests attending to the temple).

As such, Samson’s terroristic activities are not, it turns out, simply a problem of the anachronistic or ‘sophistic’ application of political labels. Milton addresses the issue of violence against civilians in Samson’s last major exchange with another character, and though Harapha the giant never calls Samson a terrorist in their conversation (the term ‘terrorist’ was not adopted from French until more than a century after Milton’s death⁵⁵), he does suggest that the Philistine “Lords [and] Magistrates” were right to “t[a]k[e] thee/As a League-breaker” for “commit[ing]/Notorious murder on those thirty men/At ASKALON who never did thee harm,” sparking a debate between giant and man about Samson’s justifications for the breaking of Philistine laws and the murder of putative innocents.

Samson is quite unapologetic about his use of violence at the wedding at Askalon, an event which is depicted in the Bible (“And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of them . . .⁵⁶”) but not *Samson Agonistes*. The discussion of the Askalon incident serves to illuminate many of Samson’s beliefs about political violence, and in fact serves as a sort of proxy for us to guess at Samson’s view of the violent incident that ends his life.

⁵⁴ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1429-1430.

⁵⁵ A.A. Markley, “Conversion and Reform in the British Novel in the 1790s: A Revolution of Opinions” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2009, 70.

⁵⁶ Judges 14:19.

Samson first attempts to justify his the killing of the Askalon wedding guests by claiming that the Philistine “Politician Lords/Under pretence of Bridal friends and guests/Appointed to await” at the wedding were not guests but “thirty spies . . . threatening cruel death,” but soon drops this pretense when he acknowledges that he “on [his] enemies, where ever chanc’d . . . us’d hostility⁵⁷.”

Rather than continuing to attempt to justify the massacre at Askalon by claiming that the murdered were enemy agents, Samson moves to arguing that his “strength sufficient” and “command from heav’n/To free [his] Countrey” gave him the right to kill the Philistine guests. Finding the giant unmoved by this line of reasoning, Samson moves to talk of liberation. “My Nation was subject to your Lords⁵⁸,” Samson tells Harapha. “It was the force of Conquest; force with force/Is well ejected when the Conquer’d can⁵⁹.”

We are treated here to a relatively rapid shift in the moral implications of Samson’s defense of the Askalon murders, but regardless, Samson eventually seems to take a maximalist position on political violence, finding multiple angles from which to support the murder of Philistines –in the span of about 10 lines, Samson goes from implying that the killings were only acceptable because they targeted enemy soldiers to saying that he is justified in using God’s gift of strength towards God’s ends before finally settling on the remarkably secular argument that the unjustly conquered should be able to retaliate with force against their conquerors. In any event, as the dialogue between Samson and Harapha regarding Askalon progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that Samson does not at least hold some terroristic sympathies.

⁵⁷ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1195-1202.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1205.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1206-1207.

Speaking more generally about Samson's politics, we can see as well the stamp of what might now be identified as political radicalism –a 'lone wolf' mentality that sees questions of whether one should engage in partisan political violence as largely divorced from the issue of whether those on whose behalf the violence is ostensibly being done approve. Tobias Gregory aptly notes that "closer modern analogues for Milton's Samson than the usual hijackers or suicide bombers would be . . . the IRA . . . or the Basque-separatist [movement]: small militant factions who claim to fight on behalf of a population [where] most . . . want nothing to do with armed resistance⁶⁰," and indeed, Samson seems unbothered by either his solitude as he leaves to the temple of Dagon or his conviction that God has asked him to die for the cause of Israelite liberation. "Like a wild Beast, I am content to go⁶¹," Samson declares proudly as he is marched off to the Philistine ceremony, remarking that "Masters commands come with a power resistless/To such as owe them absolute subjection;/And for a life who will not change his purpose? (So mutable are all the ways of men)⁶²." And just as he dies expressing his desire for God to witness his act of sacrifice, Samson closes off his case for following divine direction by citing his attitude of utter compliance towards the traditions he believes himself to be fighting for, reassuring his audience that "Happ'n what may . . . expect to hear [that I have done] nothing dishonorable, impure [or] unworthy [of] Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self⁶³." Again, radical partisanship –Samson identifies himself not only with the cause of God, but with the cause of Hebrew law and the Israelite people, demonstrating a remarkable confidence in his moral justification even as he remains essentially alone and certain to die.

⁶⁰ Gregory, "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*," 197.

⁶¹ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1403.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1404-1406.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1523-1425.

Thus we see that even if we are to argue that the label of ‘terrorist’ is largely meaningless when applied to an early modern depiction of ancient tribal conflicts, this exchange, not to mention the argument with Harapha about the Askalon murders, still leaves us with the fact that Samson holds views on political violence that appear to be quite radical within the scope of the poem. A political partisan willing to kill indiscriminately and die alone for his cause is certainly no moderate, and Samson’s conviction in his righteousness and his having heard the “power resistless⁶⁴” of a divine master’s commands similarly strengthens the case for his radicalism.

SAMSON AND MILTON’S RADICAL POLITICS

Such evidence of Samson’s genuinely radical politics raises the question of authorial endorsement. If we are to accept that Samson is by some definition a terrorist and by almost any definition a radical, we are forced to consider whether Milton himself might fall into some similar category, and failing that, whether he sought to promote or at least endorse political action in the same vein as Samson’s. In his old age and blindness, John Milton did not have, as his Samson did, the opportunity to die in a blaze of suicidal violence. But we must at least wonder whether Milton would have done so given opportune circumstances, or at least whether he would have approved of his revolutionary compatriots doing so if the time was right.

Though he contends that Samson’s actions are indeed terroristic, John Carey firmly insists that Milton –and by extension, *Samson Agonistes* as a work— is not supportive of terrorism. Carey’s objection to a pro-terrorism reading of *Samson Agonistes* seems at least in some part based on normative objections to terrorism in and of itself; he writes that if indeed Milton meant to portray Samson as a hero, *Samson Agonistes* “should . . . be withdrawn from

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1404.

schools and colleges . . . as an incitement to terrorism⁶⁵.” Nevertheless, the core of Carey’s case for Milton’s disapproval of Samson is biographical –Carey argues that since scholars of Milton’s work know him to be a “subtle-minded” poet rather than a “murderous bigot⁶⁶,” the notion of authorial support for Samson’s behavior can safely be dismissed.

Setting aside the implication that –as Feisal Mohamed deftly wrote in a criticism of Carey— “*Samson Agonistes* can only be celebrated if and only if it is nestled comfortably alongside such achievements of the human imagination as *Black Hawk Down* and *Saving Jessica Lynch*⁶⁷,” we should not be so quick to label Milton non-bigoted or non-murderous, or fall into the trap of thinking that Milton’s poetic skill precludes his politics from being distasteful to contemporary readers. Milton, after all, was a key member of and propagandist for a bloodily forged revolutionary government in England, which he continued to defend publicly up until several months before it was overthrown⁶⁸. Is it so outrageous to imagine that –for all the ‘subtle-minded’ poetry he wrote— the author of political tracts such as *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, a partisan propaganda piece advocating for the execution of Charles I⁶⁹, could have held some political views that contemporary literary critics might label “incitement to terrorism⁷⁰” or ‘murderous bigotry?’ Can we as readers in the 21st century reasonably expect John Milton –an engaged and eager participant in a civil war that to its contemporaries seemed truly, cataclysmically violent— to view the usefulness of political violence in a way that aligns perfectly or even significantly with our modern sensibilities?

⁶⁵ Carey, “A Work in Praise of Terrorism?”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Feisal G. Mohamed, “Confronting Religious Violence: Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*,” PMLA 120, no. 2 (2005), pp. 327-340.

⁶⁸ John Milton (ed. E.M. Clark), *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1915.

⁶⁹ John Milton (ed. William T. Allison). *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. New York: H. Holt, 1911.

⁷⁰ Carey, “A Work in Praise of Terrorism?”

Tobias Gregory, a scholar who has frequently made the case against “efforts to make Milton ideologically acceptable to present-day liberal opinion⁷¹,” says as much in his 2010 article “The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*,” which is construed partly as a response to Carey. “Though Milton would not have expressed the matter in these terms,” Gregory writes, “a work in praise of terrorism is precisely what *Samson Agonistes* is, the most artistically powerful such work in English literature⁷².” Gregory succinctly presents the case against Carey’s argument that Milton rejected Samson’s politics, writing that “we may exclude the possibility that Milton meant to conceal a [quietist] message under cover of a [violent] one, because in this case the [violent] message is right there on the surface . . . had Milton decided that the received understanding of Samson was wrong, he would have wanted to be . . . clear . . . in order to avoid misunderstanding . . . and because such a view would make [*Samson Agonistes*] more palatable” to mainstream audiences of the time.

A more sophisticated argument against Milton’s support of Samson—which is, in fairness, briefly addressed by Carey—relies on alleging that *Samson Agonistes* exists in a broader context of an early modern scholarly debate about whether Samson could be considered a hero. Joseph Wittreich argues that *Samson Agonistes* is informed by a “multiplicity of traditions . . . in conflict⁷³,” citing a number of early modern Bible scholars to advance the case that a “tradition concerning Samson” that could be called a “hermeneutic of suspicion” likely shaped Milton’s view of Samson’s potential heroism. Wittreich’s argument, hard to discern at times, relies on interpreting two passages about Samson’s tribe—Genesis 49:16-17 (“[the tribe

⁷¹ Tobias Gregory, “Hero as Hero,” *London Review of Books* vol. 30 no. 5 (2008).

⁷² Tobias Gregory, “The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 50 no.1 (2010), pp. 175-203.

⁷³ Joseph Wittreich, *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002.

of] Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward⁷⁴) and Revelation 7:5-8 (a list of the tribes of Israel that leaves out the tribe of Dan)— as evidence that early modern readers might have read this condemnation and exclusion as a condemnation not just of the tribe generally, but of one of its heroes, Samson, specifically.

Gregory and several other critics⁷⁵ skeptical of Wittreich's narrative address this by examining the passages Wittreich quotes and disputing the intellectual-historical work done to establish the alleged "hermeneutic of suspicion," arguing that to describe "a few seventeenth-century speculations . . . none of [which] even mention Samson" as a tradition "[does] not show that any early modern writer, let alone Milton, made the connection in the manner . . . allege[d]⁷⁶." Gregory also takes issue with the fact that Wittreich fails to provide any "early modern expressions of suspicion accompanied by citations of [the] scriptural verses [Wittreich focuses on] as proof texts," noting that this lack of expressions of suspicion extends to "anything specifically [from] Milton."

At the risk of making an argument that risks resembling one I have stated my opposition to—that is to say, John Carey's case for Milton's 'subtle-minded' disapproval of Samson—it seems worth mentioning that given what we know about Milton's career and personality, the mere establishment of an early-modern hermeneutic of suspicion in the matter of Samson's heroism is not enough on its own to establish that Milton himself subscribed to such doubts. Even if we are to begin with the premise that Wittreich's intellectual-historical work clearly establishes both a generally present skepticism in Milton's time about the righteousness of

⁷⁴ Genesis 49:16-17.

⁷⁵ Philip J. Gallagher, "On Reading Joseph Wittreich: A Review Essay," *Milton Q* 21 no. 3 (1987), 108-113.

⁷⁶ Gregory, "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*," 2010.

Samson as well as Milton's awareness of this skepticism (which, as Gregory and his colleagues have demonstrated, it does not), it is far from clear that the deeply theologically opinionated and scholastically capable Milton would have accepted this criticism of Samson simply by merit of that particular opinion being relatively popular among his contemporaries. So with regards to this particular attempt to establish Milton's opposition to Samson, we are left with several problems: a failure to clearly establish that there was indeed a hermeneutic of suspicion contemporary to Milton in reference to the biblical Samson's heroism, a similar inability to definitively demonstrate Milton's awareness of this possibly-extant scholarly view, and a general lack of evidence that Milton landed on one particular side of that debate.

Also—and in my view, more—important is the long textual history of Milton treating Samson as a hero and a figure worthy of sympathy. References to Samson and his plight abound in Milton's political tracts; Milton frequently uses Samson as a rhetorical device in his arguments against various policies and political figures.

From *Areopagitica* (1644), a tract in favor of freedom of speech where Milton compares restrictions on intellectual exchange to the enslavement of Samson by the Philistines:

Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopoliz'd and traded in by tickets and statutes, and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the Land, to mark and licence it like our broad cloath, and our wooll packs. What is it but a servitude like that impos'd by the Philistims, not to be allow'd the sharpning of our own axes and coulthers, but we must repair from all quarters to twenty licencing forges⁷⁷.

From *Eikonoklastes* (1649), a propaganda pamphlet retroactively justifying the execution of Charles I by the Parliamentarian government where Milton compares the plight of Parliament to Samson's blinding:

⁷⁷ John Milton, *Areopagitica* : a Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England. Santa Barbara: Bandanna Books, 1992.

But much neerer is it to impossibilitie that any King alone should be wiser then all his council; sure enough it was not he, though no King ever before him so much contended to have it thought so. And if the Parliament so thought not, but desir'd him to follow their advice and deliberation in things of public concernment, he accounts it the same proposition, as if Sampson had bin moved to the putting out his eyes, that the Philistims might abuse him. And thus out of an unwise, or pretended feare least others should make a scorn of him for yeilding to his Parliament, he regards not to give cause of worse suspicion, that he made a scorn of his regal Oath⁷⁸.

From *The Reason of Church-Government Urged against Prelaty* (1642), an anti-Anglican religious pamphlet written and distributed by Milton on behalf of Presbyterian partisans where Milton uses the tale of Samson and Delilah to paint decent kings as the victims of a corrupt priesthood:

I cannot better liken the state and person of a [good] King [undermined by treacherous bishops] then to that mighty Nazarite Samson; who . . . may with the jaw-bone of an Asse, that is, with the word of his meanest officer suppress and put to confusion thousands of those that rise against his just power. But laying down his head among the strumpet flatteries of Prelats, while he sleeps and thinks no harme, they wickedly shaving off an those bright and waighty tresses of his laws . . . which as those Philistims put out the fair, and farre-sighted eyes of his natural discerning, and make him grinde in the prison house of their sinister ends and practices upon him.

Similarly, Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643) compares "undelighted and servil copulation . . . the forc't work of a Christian mariage," to Samson "grind[ing] in the mill⁷⁹," an instance of Milton invoking Samson that seems to suggest some personal identification with the character. We can also observe from the above texts Milton's repeated identification of his political enemies with the Philistines, another indication of Milton's general personal sympathy towards the position of Samson.

We see clearly in all of these examples that Milton uses Samson as a positive example – and in the cases where Milton's metaphor is less obviously positive, it still manages to cast

⁷⁸ John Milton, *Eikonoklastes*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon, The John Milton Reading Room.

⁷⁹ John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon, The John Milton Reading Room.

Samson in a sympathetic light. We should consider that given all of this, it would be quite strange for Milton to, after a long history of sympathizing with Samson, suddenly cast Samson as a villain or antihero in one of his final works. It is worth mentioning, as well, that this helps us dispense with talk of the “clownish” or “unintelligent⁸⁰” Miltonic Samson of “unwieldy strength of body but impotence of mind . . . overcome by the weakest subtleties⁸¹” advanced by those critics who wish to make the argument for Milton’s disapproval of his Samson; those who read into the poem signs of Milton’s disapproval must square their interpretations with the historical reality that Milton seems to not only have approved of Samson in every instance where he mentioned the character in his prose writings, but also identified Samson with complex political beliefs he found personally appealing.

The most notable appearance of Samson in Milton’s prose work, however, comes in *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*, a 1651 Latin polemic (transl. “A Defense of the People of England”) against royalists who opposed the new revolutionary government to which Milton belonged. In this text, Milton explicitly casts Samson as a “heroic” anti-tyranny figure:

King Charles [being] a prince of our own, will make no difference in the case . . . being [an] enem[y] and [a] tyrant . . . If Ehud killed [Eglon] justly, we have done so too in putting our king to death. Samson . . . undertook a war [against the Philistines] in his own person, without any other help; and whether he acted in pursuance of a command from Heaven, or was prompted by his own valour only, or whatsoever inducement he had, he did not put to death one, but many, that tyrannized over his country, having first called upon God by prayer, and implored his assistance. So that Samson counted it no act of impiety, but quite contrary, to kill those that enslaved his country, though they had dominion over himself too; and though the greater part of his countrymen submitted to their tyranny⁸².

⁸⁰ Baum, “*Samson Agonistes* Again,” 356-357.

⁸¹ Curry, “*Samson Agonistes* Yet Again,” 336-352.

⁸² Frank Allen Patterson et al., eds., *The Works of John Milton* vol. 18, New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-38.

Here, we can observe that Samson is depicted –even devoid of the implications of Samson’s religious beliefs, which Milton seems to punt on in this reference— as an unequivocally heroic figure, someone who Milton not only claimed as a valorous example but styled as a sort of kindred spirit in the struggle against tyranny.

We see also, repeated almost word for word from Milton’s pen in the *Defensio*, an argument Samson makes himself in his conversation with Harapha about the righteousness of rebellion against conquering powers –that the conquered have a right to eject their conquerors by force. So even if we are to accept Wittreich’s premise that there indeed was a significant scholarly debate about Samson’s heroism at time of *Samson Agonistes*’ writing that Milton was aware of, the historical evidence tells us quite plainly on which side of the debate Milton would have landed.

But while we are discussing the question of the authorial perspective on Samson’s morality, it seems useful also to note the existence of a particular document of Milton’s that now resides in the special collections of Trinity College, Cambridge.

The item in question is a notebook (typically, the ‘Cambridge manuscript’ or the ‘Trinity College manuscript’) of Milton’s dated to February 1642, in which Milton has written a list of ideas for plays and other literary works. Of particular note is a brief scribbling which reads “XVII. Samson marrying, or [in battle] in Ramach-Lechi; Judges XV⁸³,” followed by a similar note –“XVIII. Samson Pursophorus, or Hybristes, or Dagonalia, Judges XVI⁸⁴.” It is not difficult to make the connection between these notes and the inception of *Samson Agonistes*; these instances (Samson in Judges 15 and Samson in Judges 16) which Milton hopes to make into a play are all referenced in *Samson Agonistes* (both Samson’s marriage and his career killing

⁸³ John Milton, *untitled manuscript*, Cambridge University CELM, 1642.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Philistines are mentioned in the poem, and the ‘Dagonalia’ that makes up the story of much of Judges 16 also comprises, as we have detailed, much of the story of *Samson Agonistes*). It is notable, too, that the stories here are all ostensibly moments of triumph on Samson’s part –his first, functional marriage; his victories in battle, and though we are in the midst of a debate about its triumphal nature, Samson’s sacrifice on behalf of the Israelites to destroy the temple of Dagon (Milton’s note that he intended to title the play “Dagonalia,” as well, suggests an emphasis on the festival of Dagon as at least a point of dramatic focus, if not an act of triumph like the others).

This manuscript, while only containing several short notes, helps us construct a clear series of events leading up to and beyond Milton conceiving of the idea of a literary work that would eventually become *Samson Agonistes* –a timeline that begins in the early 1640s with Milton’s sympathetic invocations of Samson, runs through his initial conception of a literary work about Samson, and continues through Milton’s *Defensio*, in which he almost word-for-word articulates a political position about violent rebellion that Samson later claims as his own in *Samson Agonistes*. In conjunction with the Trinity College manuscript and the poem’s non-condemnatory tone towards its titular protagonist, Milton’s previous invocations of Samson make a case for Milton’s belief in a heroic and sympathetic Samson that is so strong as to be nearly dispositive. Tobias Gregory argues that the burden of proof is on the anti-Samson critics who assert Milton held the same view as them; I would go as far as to argue that this burden of proof is almost impossible to shoulder unless we are to contend that Milton reversed both his position on Samson and his position on the ethics of rebellion (and then chose to make Samson regurgitate those sentiments) in the intervening time between the writing of the *Defensio* and the writing of *Samson Agonistes*. Assuming, as we reasonably can, that he did not do so, it seems evident now that in writing *Samson Agonistes*, Milton found his protagonist genuinely heroic.

III. Samson and the Voice of God

THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIVINE INSPIRATION

Thus far in this essay, we have, for the most part, been examining the questions of Milton's heroic portrayal of Samson and the textual origins of this portrayal. But having established that Milton's Samson is both a sophisticated, violent political partisan and—at least in the scope of the poem—a heroic figure, we must ask: to what end? What, if all of this is true, is the purpose of portraying Samson in such a manner? Or rather, what are the theological and political implications of a work like *Samson Agonistes*?

The first step of answering this question involves answering for a first-order problem in interpreting Milton's writing. We have already done some substantial work to show that in writing *Samson Agonistes*, Milton regarded his poetic subject as a hero. But now we must delve back into such work in order to demonstrate that Milton's Samson was written not just as a hero, but a divinely inspired hero. It would, after all, mean something different for Milton's heroic Samson to be a valiant partisan carrying out divine orders than it would for him to be a hero for having acted without divine sanction. In one, Milton is reaffirming the right of God's servants to act radically in his service; in the other, Milton is affirming something like a generic right to reasoned-out acts of political violence (this also, in effect, either elevates the problem of Samson-as-terrorist to become the primary issue of the poem or reduces it to a sort of afterthought that merely stands in the way of us recognizing Milton's endorsement of Samson). So the questions we must answer here are such: is Milton celebrating Samson for being able to listen to the voice of God even after so much suffering and turmoil? Or is he holding up Samson for being able to reason his way into a meaningful death during a state of distance from God? Is

Samson admirable for his faith in God, or admirable for his confidence in the power of his own conscience?

The key interlocutor in this discussion is Stanley Fish, who has emerged as the most prominent proponent of a Samson notable for listening to his conscience in some fashion (other scholars who doubt Samson's goodness or divine inspiration have stuck to citations of 'ambiguity' rather than an affirmative case for a mistaken Samson who acts out of conscience⁸⁵). Fish argues that Samson is remarkable, though not particularly heroic, by way of "being [as] inaccessible [as God]," since Samson eventually "leaves off assuming that he can decipher God's will and resolves instead to go along with whatever that will might turn out to be," becoming "as mysterious . . . as the God whose disposition he refuses to appoint⁸⁶." The only wisdom to be carried away from *Samson Agonistes*, according to Fish, "is that there is no wisdom to be carried away, and that we are alone, like Samson⁸⁷." There is, of course, a political-philosophical implication here: Samson's alone-ness and his surrender to whatever God wants to do through him is, per Fish, a sort of proto-liberalism, "like the [behavior of the] children of Israel for whom it is said in the last verse of Judges: 'and every man did that which was right in his own eyes'⁸⁸."

In his case for the liberal, liberated, and quasi-atheistic Samson, Fish draws a subtle line here between Samson being divinely inspired and Samson being capable of fulfilling God's plan. His interpretation is hung almost entirely on making the case that Samson failed to communicate with God or rationally deduce his will but nevertheless went along with divine intentions by surrendering himself to the will of God; as such, Fish is faced with the problem that Samson

⁸⁵ Tobias Gregory, "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*," 175.

⁸⁶ Stanley Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 15 no. 3 (1989), pp. 556-586, 586.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 586.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

clearly identifies several instances in which he feels as if he is being moved by God. This is quite the threat to Fish's argument: whatever changes we may allege Milton went through near the end of his life, it seems quite unlikely that Milton would have both supported Samson—as Fish and I agree he does—and also depicted Samson as being actively misled by God.

To deal with this problem, Fish asserts that because “the chorus, ever ready to protect God's honor,” regards both the marriage to Delilah and the previous marriage that Samson attributes to an ‘intimate impulse’ from God as the result of “God [having] his own good reasons [to] ‘dispense’ with the usual requirements of purity,” we must consider “not only . . . the status of either or both of the marriages” as “blurred, but blurred too . . . the status of what Samson refers to as the ‘intimate impulse’ of [divine] inspiration⁸⁹.” What follows is the subsequent discrediting of Samson's divine inspiration to pull down the temple; Fish argues that because of the issue with the ‘intimate impulse,’ “when [Samson] later reports on the ‘rousing motions’ he begins to feel, there is no way to be confident that those motions correspond to some communication that is occurring between him and God⁹⁰.”

There are several problems with this argument, the most obvious being that in a story filled with poor arguments made by characters who are not Samson, the chorus' shoddy theological reasoning is not necessarily reason to doubt Samson's own testimony. After all, Samson himself obviously does not agree with the chorus that his marriage to Delilah was divinely sanctioned; he accuses her of tempting him with her “circling wiles . . . ginns, and toys⁹¹,” and tells her to “bewail thy falshood⁹²” for “odiously pretend[ing]⁹³” in order to

⁸⁹ Ibid., 571.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 871-931.

⁹² Ibid., 955.

⁹³ Ibid., 873.

“t[a]k[e] full possession of⁹⁴” him. At the very least, this tells us that Samson places little blame for his seduction by Delilah on God –Samson’s treatment of the situation with Delilah is, as shown here, simply not comparable to his insistence that his previous marriage was based on an “intimate impulse . . . motion’d of God⁹⁵.” And while attempting to discern God’s plan for him, Samson also resists Delilah’s overtures to retire back into his marriage with her, another indication that he has not committed the theological mistake Fish identifies the chorus as making. We can see, therefore, that Fish’s argument, which relies on disproving the chorus in order to disprove the ‘intimate impulse’ so that he might disprove the ‘rousing motions’ which lead Samson to his death, finds its foundation in a premise that is poorly supported by the text.

Tobias Gregory identifies another serious problem with Fish’s argument for the mistaken Samson –a problem of textual fidelity. In a flourish of logical argumentation, Gregory points out quite succinctly that the first instance of Milton’s Samson claiming to have felt the push of divine instruction –the “intimate impulse⁹⁶” he mentions with regards to his first marriage— is “supported by what for Milton would have been the most objective evidence possible: scripture⁹⁷.” Specifically, Gregory observes that Judges 14:3-4 (“And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well. But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had domination over Israel⁹⁸”) “is explicit about the divine inspiration of the first marriage,” and at that, it is explicit in such a way that lines up perfectly with Samson’s claim to have exclusively known about God’s plan in that instance.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 869.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 223.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁷ Gregory, “The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*,” 180.

⁹⁸ Judges 14:3-4.

It should also be noted (though Gregory does not draw attention to this) that there is a neatly analogous situation between not only the biblical marriage-command ‘of the Lord’ and Milton’s ‘intimate impulse,’ but also between the biblical affirmation that God wanted to see an end to the Philistine domination of Israel and the Miltonic Samson’s repeated identification of the cause of Israelite liberation with the will of God. And since we know that in writing *Samson Agonistes*, Milton was “retelling a text that he took to be divinely inspired [and] well-known to his readers . . . as a sacred text,” we can, according to Gregory, consider Milton’s adaptation of Samson’s story to be “a different matter from Chaucer’s retelling of Boccaccio or Shakespeare’s retelling of Plutarch⁹⁹.”

Importantly, such an argument also applies to the resemblance between the biblical and Miltonic accounts of Samson’s death, striking at Fish’s attempt to discredit the ‘rousing motions’ as well as his dismissal of the ‘intimate impulse.’ In the biblical version of the story, it is clear – more so than in the Miltonic narrative, which spends less time on the issue of Samson’s hair length being causally related to his exceptional strength— that Samson’s vitality has actually been supernaturally removed from him (see the connection between “she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head . . . and his strength went from him¹⁰⁰” and the Lord was departed from him¹⁰¹”), yet Samson is able to pull down the temple with suddenly returned “might¹⁰²” after having “called unto the Lord¹⁰³” to “strengthen” him, making the argument that God restored the biblical Samson’s strength nearly unassailable. Analogously, Milton’s sequence of events is almost identical: right before destroying the temple of Dagon with a strength equal to

⁹⁹ Gregory, “The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*,” 180.

¹⁰⁰ Judges 16:19.

¹⁰¹ Judges 16:20.

¹⁰² Judges 16:30.

¹⁰³ Judges 16:28.

the “force of winds and waters pent/When mountains tremble¹⁰⁴,” Samson stands “as one who pray’d” and “cry[s] aloud . . . Lord . . . what your commands impos’d/I have perform’d . . . I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater.” And though critics (briefly mentioned by Fish) identify a strain of ambiguity in Milton’s description of Samson as appearing “as one who pray’d¹⁰⁵” rather than outright saying that Samson was praying, Samson’s “cry[ing] aloud¹⁰⁶” essentially answers the question of whom he is addressing and in what manner.

Though I do not wish to hang my interpretation of Milton’s view regarding the issue of divine instruction on an autobiographical interpretation of *Samson Agonistes*, we must address another key flaw in the argument that Samson “resolves instead to go along with whatever [God’s] will might turn out to be¹⁰⁷.” The act of ‘going along with’ God’s will is not as simple a matter as it sounds: resigning to go along with God’s will necessarily brings us back to the original problem of figuring out what God’s will is, and Fish’s argument is based on the idea that Samson gives up on attempting to do so. Because of this, Fish identifies the act of ‘going along with’ God’s will as identical to the proto-liberalism he attributes to Samson, claiming that Samson’s acquiescence to God’s plan for him to die at the temple of Dagon is equivalent to someone deciding to only do “that which [i]s right in his own eyes.” Thus, Fish’s interpretation relies on attributing a sort of soft Calvinism to Milton—a belief that if one simply does as they please, their lives, directed by God, will fall upon the path laid by divine planning.

But the problem faced by this otherwise neat theory is the scholarly consensus on Milton’s well-documented history of moving away from Calvinist beliefs towards a free-will conception of salvation. Stephen Fallon, an intellectual historian and early modernist, identifies

¹⁰⁴ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1637-1648.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1637.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1638.

¹⁰⁷ Fish, “Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*,” 586.

both *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana* (a prose tract widely attributed to Milton) as “follow[ing free-will proponent Jacobus] Arminius closely¹⁰⁸” and “clearly endor[s] the Arminian position . . . not only of the choice to believe, but of the individual’s free persistence . . . in that choice¹⁰⁹,” given that “four times in the epic, [the] perseverance [of salvation] is enjoined on human beings as a responsibility, rather than offered as a promise¹¹⁰.” Similarly, John Shawcross and John Huntley acknowledge in their work on Milton’s prose writing that changes in Milton’s political tracts indicate that Milton experienced a “philosophical conversion¹¹¹” from Calvinism to an Arminian free-will view of salvation beginning in the 1640s and ending with a set of opinions on “election, predestination, grace, and free will [that] are [recognizably] Arminian¹¹²” by 1659. This is an important fact to know –not simply because Milton’s non-Calvinist beliefs reveal the unfeasibility of Fish’s resigned, proto-liberal Samson, but also because it gives us insight into Milton’s beliefs that may help us later on when we talk about the relationship between choice, faith, and rational deduction.

All this leaves us with a strong case that Milton did not intend Samson to be anything but the divinely inspired hero that he appears to be. We can take it as axiomatic that Milton presupposes the existence of God in *Samson Agonistes*, and we know that the poem depicts Samson struggling with the problem of what God wants him to do, eventually ending with Samson’s death in an act of his own free will he believes to be divinely instructed. The case for a Samson who has misinterpreted God, or one who happens to stumble into doing God’s will by

¹⁰⁸ Stephen M. Fallon, “Milton’s Arminianism and the Authorship of *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* vol. 41 no. 2, pp. 103-127. 108.

¹⁰⁹ Fallon, “Milton’s Arminianism and the Authorship of *De doctrina Christiana*,” 114.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross, *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974).

¹¹² John T. Shawcross, “John Milton: The Self and the World (Lexington: University Press/Kentucky, 1993), 139-140.

way of conscience, is simply not well-supported by the text or Milton's own professed beliefs about the nature of divine intervention.

With that said, this wrestling with the biblical and poetic texts, as well as Milton's biographical history, might be quite convincing; as before, where we established that the (very weighty) burden of proof lies with those who seek to read Samson as a villain or antihero, it certainly appears again that it is incumbent upon critics who doubt the reality of Samson's communication with God to prove that their perspective can overcome the well-constructed arguments from biblical resemblance detailed above. But for those of us not satisfied with simply shifting the responsibility of argumentation to the other side, I would like to make a more unconventional argument for Milton's belief in Samson's divine inspiration, an argument based in contemporary social science which I believe may lead us in the direction of finally figuring out what Milton meant to do with *Samson Agonistes*.

“NOT REAL BUT MORE THAN REAL”: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TALKING TO GOD

Let us start with what we know about Milton's theology, other than his previously established belief in free will. We know that Milton certainly believed in a Christian God, and we know also that he, much like Samson, believed that this God held specific views on human affairs. Most critically, we know, not only from Milton's claim at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* that he sought to “justify the wayes of God to men¹¹³” but from his extremely well-documented career as a political operative and writer of tendentious prose, that Milton believed in his ability to discern by way of rational deduction the will of God in matters ranging from theology to ecclesiastical appointments to English politics.

¹¹³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon, The John Milton Reading Room. I, 26.

The question that follows from these premises is yet another one of Milton's authorial identification with Samson. If Milton did, as the evidence indicates, attribute to Samson a clear ability to identify the 'intimate impulses' and 'rousing motions' of divine instruction, was he writing from personal experience? And more pertinently, could a reader contemporary to Milton be expected to recognize Samson's ability as normal and rational, rather than a reason to doubt his account as Fish and the proponents of *Samson Agonistes*' 'ambiguity' do?

Relevant here is the work of Tanya Luhrmann, an anthropologist of religion who spent the better part of a decade embedded with evangelical Christians in the United States so as to develop a psychological and anthropological theory of the "striking God . . . imagined by so many American evangelicals¹¹⁴." Luhrmann's 2012 book, *When God Talks Back*, is an account of this study, which paints a vivid picture of Christians who "see [a] personally intimate" experience with God, "s[ee]king out and cultivat[ing] concrete experiences of God's realness . . . strain[ing] to hear the voice of God speaking outside their heads [and] yearn[ing] to feel God clasp their hands¹¹⁵." Or, in the words of Milton's Samson, Christians who wish to feel "the breath of heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,¹¹⁶" to find a "Godlike presence¹¹⁷" who "motion[s and] urg[es]¹¹⁸" in "intimate impulses¹¹⁹" and "rousing motions . . . which dispose/To something extraordinary [their] thoughts¹²⁰."

In the section of her study about evangelical Christian prayer, Luhrmann identifies a problem where "the belief that God speaks directly to each of us demands skepticism about

¹¹⁴ T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Random House, 2012), xv.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹¹⁶ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 10.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1381-1382.

whether any particular identification of God’s voice is really God” –a problem we have been wrestling with through Fish, Gregory, and Milton— and describes a specific resolution to this wherein which the subjects of her study felt a “not-real-but-more-than-real” presence of God. Christians who brought up experiencing this presence, Luhrmann says, “did feel as if [they] ‘saw’ [it]¹²¹.” More specifically, Luhrmann’s interviewees describe a phenomenon where “things that before [they] would have identified as coincidence [are] so specific that it ‘couldn’t be anything but God’ in their minds,” which Luhrmann attributes to a practiced ability to “integrate [their] cognitive capacity[ies] to recognize God’s presence in specific moments . . . through circumstance, through reading scripture, through identifying circumstances and thoughts and sensations” (say, an ‘intimate impulse’) “as from God¹²².” Certainly, some of these practices –the study of scripture and circumstance to somewhat rationally attempt to discern the voice of God— seem to at least resemble things that Milton and his contemporaries would have done; more pertinently, Luhrmann’s conclusion that this presence of God is a frequently encountered phenomenon derived from repeated practice might suggest something about the recognizability of Samson’s interactions with God to Milton’s contemporaries.

In bringing up Luhrmann's work, I am not attempting to exactly equate Milton's theology with that of the contemporary American evangelical Protestant; that would not be, I am inclined to believe, a comparison either party would find flattering (or for that matter, useful). But the underlying mentality that one can through careful study and practice learn to recognize God's voice and differentiate it from the echoing of stray thoughts seems to me a common experience of both the religious Roundhead partisan and the 21st-century American evangelical, one that might be particularly relevant to someone like Milton, who spent so much of his life in an

¹²¹ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 97-98.

¹²² *Ibid.*

apparent state of certitude regarding his ability to discern the correct way to worship (or otherwise interact with) God. One does not, after all, write a nearly 80,000-word epic seeking to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ without a preexisting belief in one's understanding of God's ways.

Luhrmann’s conclusion ends up being quite stark, and she argues that the phenomenon she identifies in the book is integral enough to the psychology of human religious practices that it likely has a long historical precedent. “There is something different about modernity¹²³,” Luhrmann writes. “Christians in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century America [or] Europe live in a world in which it is entirely possible to take for granted that talk of the supernatural is bunk¹²⁴.” That, she argues, “is what is modern”:

The state of mind we moderns take to be central to religious conviction –belief— is simply irrelevant to the way most human beings over the course of human history have engaged with the divine. We assume that belief is central because we assume that the person who is religious . . . must assent to a [belief] that divinity is real. But before our doubt-riddled age, force-fed with information . . . the great word was *faith*. Faith was about the way you related to reality, not an assertion of what that reality was . . . in the King James Bible, the magnificent 1611 English translation of the sacred text, the word *faith* occur[s] 233 times and the word *belief* but once . . . in 1611, *to believe* meant to hold dear, to treasure, to trust. Its meaning has changed since then. In 1611 *believe* took a person, and not a claim or a statement, as its object –‘I believe him’ rather than ‘I believe that’ . . . it would have rung oddly [then] to say of a man that you believed what he said, but you did not trust him . . . Belief [now] is no longer about a moral state but an epistemological conviction¹²⁵.

Let us consider the historical implications of this for a moment as they relate to Milton’s writing. Luhrmann is telling us, in effect, that the kind of psychological phenomenon we find frequently in evangelical American Protestants (if relatively infrequently in the general non-evangelical population) is a reaction to modernity that calls back to a once-common tradition of

¹²³ Ibid., 318.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 319.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 319-321.

faith, which is to say it is an older way of relating to reality that did not presuppose the kind of epistemic uncertainty which modern readers ascribe to the specifics of Samson's interactions with God. Does it not seem at least plausible that in the context of this cultural norm, Milton's emphasis on Samson's recognition of the voice of God might not have been a source of intentional ambiguity, but a source of intentional clarity meant to signal Samson's righteousness to those who would have recognized the 'intimate impulse' and 'rousing motions' as genuine signs of divine favor? We have already discussed the folly of ascribing modern liberal beliefs to Milton –what if we are, by assuming an attitude of doubt surrounding Samson's divine contact, ascribing our modern secularist beliefs to Milton?

Given all of this –the resemblance of *Samson Agonistes* to its biblical textual source at key points even as the rest of the poem diverges, as well as the reasonable proposition that Milton and his readers, like modern evangelical Protestants, would have recognized Samson's ability to discern the voice of God from ambient thoughts as at least semi-legitimate— we have before us a strong affirmative case for two things: that Milton thought Samson was divinely inspired, and thus, that Milton found Samson not only heroic but heroic in reference to his relationship with God (perhaps even a figure for readers to emulate).

So what does this leave us with?

THE PROBLEM OF RECONCILING FAITH AND RATIONALITY

In introducing the work of Tanya Luhrmann, I was not simply attempting to find more evidence with which to bury the argument of Stanley Fish and his colleagues; rather, I believe that this ability to clearly discern the voice of God from thoughts or mental images is key to understanding the theological and political ethos of *Samson Agonistes*.

Let us return briefly to the chronology of this essay and the poem it addresses. We have, through the course of this essay, come to learn a number of things about *Samson Agonistes* and its titular character: that Milton's intellectualizing and modernizing of Samson was done in service of making him a political partisan, that the evidence stacks strongly in favor of Milton viewing Samson as a heroic figure, and that Milton viewed Samson not just as a political hero but as a cosmically righteous one who acted intentionally and rightly in accordance with divine instruction. And we know from the text of *Samson Agonistes* the way in which Milton portrayed Samson as a righteous religious figure: Samson is a person who fails when he falls prey to the charms (or as Milton put in his prose work, 'strumpet flatteries') of Delilah and is as a result distanced from God; during this distance, he reasons through what he should do (rejecting the suggestions of his father and Delilah), experiences doubts while talking to Harapha the giant, and then is finally moved to action by the 'rousing motions' of God.

Given all of this, the primary tension here (and the remaining question standing before our emerging theory of what exactly Milton was doing with *Samson Agonistes*) concerns the interaction between all of the reasoning Samson does during the play and the final divine instruction that drives him to destroy the temple. What, we must ask, is the purpose if all of the rational analysis Samson does if, as I have suggested above in my invocation of Tanya Luhrmann's work, he could recognize the "commands impos'd"¹²⁶ upon him in the form of the 'rousing motions' for what they were immediately? Why, if God trusted Samson to destroy the temple, did He wait to communicate his will until Samson had reasoned through his options? There seems, too, to be some contradiction between Samson trusting fully in God and Samson trusting in his conscience and rationality; which are we to commend Samson for listening to?

¹²⁶ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, 1640.

REASON AND THE PATH TO GOD'S VOICE

I began this essay by treating Milton's view of Samson as an issue of literary construction, and I think it would be wise to take a similar approach here. Treating the 'rousing motions' as a legitimate source of divine instruction necessarily raises the aforementioned serious questions about why Milton (and within the poem's logic, God) allowed Samson to flail and struggle for so long before finally telling him what to do, and in fact we may initially feel a sense of pointlessness when we realize that Milton meant for Samson to really have listened to and understood God.

But perhaps we should consider the possibility that *Samson Agonistes* does not seek to pit faith and rationality against each other at all; or, in other words, that the seeming redundancy created by Samson realizing he has to destroy the temple of Dagon and God telling him to do so is not a redundancy at all. I offer that within the scope of the story, neither Samson's reasoning through his options nor his communication with God were superfluous, and that in the scope of the poem's construction, we as readers need to see both the divine and mundane justifications for Samson's actions to understand what Milton is ultimately getting at.

Were it not for Samson's work reasoning through his faults, his options, and his future – painful and at times tedious as these experiences may have been for both Samson the character and us readers— the theological conclusions of *Samson Agonistes* would be completely different. Samson begins the poem distraught and confused and feeling as if he has been abandoned by God; without the profound experience of realizing his errors in straying from God's path and reasserting his role as a sort of religious partisan, he is simply not capable of going off to his own death with the certitude that he does at the end of the poem. Put simply,

without the conversations he has with Manoa, Delilah, and Harapha, Samson would be a different –and in my view, worse— character.

A Samson who blindly follows divine instruction after emerging from captivity disillusioned with God is incoherent at best and cowardly at worst; this is quite clear if we imagine what *Samson Agonistes* would look like in a world where Milton decided to abandon the part of the poem detailing the journey of personal realization and growth Samson experiences by arguing with Delilah and his father. Such a thought experiment is not particularly difficult to conduct, in part because this theoretical rewriting of *Samson Agonistes* so resembles an interpretation of the actual poem we have discussed earlier. Specifically, this version of *Samson Agonistes* would hew quite closely to Fish's reading of Samson –that is to say, the story of a severely limited man who begins the poem feeling as if he has no ability to understand God and then decides to resignedly follow divine instruction, purpose be damned— a far cry from the tale of a thoughtful, politically aware, and self-examining hero Milton actually gives us. So we might conclude from this that there is a quite essential nature to the poem's depiction of Samson reasoning his way through his options; even if we cannot accept that the stacking of Samson's rational argumentation and God's orders is not redundant, we can at least see that the former serves a distinct literary purpose in forming Samson's character. So what of the purpose of the 'rousing motions?'

Returning to the end of the poem, we can consider Samson's certitude in his last moments as a way of signaling to us readers that there is less of a tension between obedience to God and finding one's own path; that faith and reason can indeed, coexist, the latter reassuring us of the former. If we read the 'rousing motions' as legitimate expressions of divine will, as we have shown them to likely be, the confidence they inspire for Samson in his orders gives us (and,

we can safely assume, him) a sort of relief. Readers of Milton know well the faultiness of the rational faculty, and Samson himself doubts in his ability to figure out his own destiny when the poem begins; as such, convincing as Samson's arguments against Delilah and Manoa may be, it remains deeply reassuring to know that they were correct.

As such, the purpose of Samson's trials and tribulations throughout the poem, the purpose of all of his analysis and agonizing, is to lead him to be able to make the right choice when motioned to do so by God, to carve out a path where Samson can safely obey. We are treated to a front-row view of Samson's debates with Manoa and Delilah and Harapha precisely because we know from the poem's outset that Samson is capable of being tempted by people such as this into choosing a path contrary to divine will, and as we watch him—independent of God's 'rousing'—reason his way towards something like the end he meets at the temple of Dagon, we can see him leading us, just as Milton leads him, towards understanding how and why he chooses to die at the temple. When Samson chooses to die, we might, in this reading, recognize his decision not as yet another moment of tension and ambiguity and angst, but as a moment comforting in its finality.

AN INTEGRAL VIEW OF POLITICS AND DIVINE WILL

This clarity of purpose Samson feels at his death reflects something quite important about the conception of faith and reason advanced by *Samson Agonistes*. At the end of his life, mere moments in the poem before the attack on the temple of Dagon, Samson is confident in what he is about to do—not as a mere partisan, but as a servant of God; not simply because he wants to strike a final blow against his Philistine enemies, but because he knows that God wants him to do so as well. And though *Samson Agonistes* may appear anxious and tense in its ending, we can see that at the moment of Samson's death, the poem is depicting something quite idealistic—the

perfect alignment of one man's quest for personal redemption, his temporal political goals, and his status as a servant of God.

I should note that the view of the poem I am advancing here—in which the realization of Samson's political goals is held (in a practical sense) equivalent to his obedience to God—is still predominantly a religious one. We have spent some significant part of this essay discussing the issue of Milton's apparent support for Samson's terroristic political actions, which many critics seem to have treated as an issue of Milton's support of terrorism in general. But I would argue this reading shows that while Milton's support of Samson is fixed, his support of terrorism is really not the primary issue at stake when we consider the circumstances of the poem's ending; rather, the point of focus here should be the preoccupation Milton (and Samson) have with the will of God. *Samson Agonistes* remains, in this telling, a religious poem more than a political one.

In his article, which I have thus far largely agreed with, Tobias Gregory identified *Samson Agonistes* as a work written in advocacy of terrorism; in light of the above interpretation, I would contend that Gregory's ultimate conclusion is a rather roundabout way of reading the poem. We have seen how Samson's reflections on his life, career, religion, and political goals all point towards a conclusion God eventually affirms—which is to say, a conclusion that God seems to want him to reach. Consequently, one might conceive of the poem's focus as being on at least two things before it becomes focused on the problem of 'terrorism': it is first concerned with Samson's return to the destiny God would like him to fulfill, then with Samson's moral and political redemption through some destiny-fulfilling action. That this action happens to take the form of a terroristic attack is merely a third-order problem. It is indeed true, as both Gregory and I have argued, that Milton supports Samson's actions, and so transitively supports at least one act

of terrorism. But this does not, in itself, make *Samson Agonistes* a work of terrorist advocacy; a work that was genuinely interested in promoting terrorism as its primary goal would not present it in the terms that Milton does in *Samson Agonistes*, which frame Samson's act of terrorism as righteous not simply because of its effectiveness or form, but rather because of the fact that it is divinely directed.

Lest we become too focused on the terrorism discourse, we should not miss the broader vision of politics Milton presents us with through Samson: a picture of someone whose public and personal life are constructed as an integral whole aligned towards serving God. Although it is the explicit command of God that ties together Samson's story, it is the use of reason and the presence of choice that makes Samson's life—especially in the brief moments between his deciding to go to the temple of Dagon and his death—so notable. Or rather, it is God's command and Samson's obedience that serve as the linchpin for Samson's story, but it is his reasoning and personal struggle that create the ideological, political, and theological components of his life which make him both comfortable with obeying the will of the divine and independently motivated to do so.

Earlier, we spent some time establishing that Milton was not, by the time of the writing of *Samson Agonistes*, a Calvinist; we can see now why this is so important to a coherent reading of the poem. Not only does Samson's ability to choose matter in the sense that he might—as he did before with Delilah—choose wrongly and thus distance himself from God, it also matters because the rational formation of his religious and political beliefs, a process that takes up much of *Samson Agonistes*, is a method by which Samson's specific choices become meaningful. Without a belief in the human ability to choose, such a compelling vision of Samson would not be possible.

Accordingly, we can now see, formed quite clearly from the text of *Samson Agonistes* and its construction, a clear view not only of the human relationship to God, but of human life in general. This, I would argue, is part of the unique appeal of *Samson Agonistes*—through the poem, Milton advances a view of personal and political life that is remarkably modern in its approach to rationality and personal identity while being remarkably counter-modern in the fact that it in essence points towards service to God (and at that, a quite authoritative God). In a way, we could even conceive of this as Milton’s solution for the turmoil and complexity of modernity (and in particular, the early modernity in which he lived), an attempt to explain how to adjust to a difficult and often contradictory world by providing readers with a near-exemplary picture of personal, political, and religious coherence—a promise that faith and rationality might yet be able to complement one another.

UNCERTAINTY AND CONSCIENCE

This view of human life is supported, I would argue, by Milton’s other literary writings; it serves as a coherent reading of *Samson Agonistes* not only because of its grounding in the poem’s textual and historical realities, but because its resonance with Milton’s other works. And while I cannot claim to present here a Grand Unified Theory of Milton, I do believe that just as Milton’s prose writings presaged his poetic treatment of Samson, so too do Milton’s longer poetic creations carry within them identifiable strains of the thinking outlined by *Samson Agonistes*.

Recall the words of the Archangel Michael in Book 12 of *Paradise Lost*, which describe a dynamic remarkably similar to the one I allege *Samson Agonistes* is about:

Doubt not but that sin
 Will reign among them, as of thee begot;
 And therefore was Law given them to evince
 Thir natural pravitie, by stirring up

Sin against Law to fight; that when they see
 Law can discover sin, but not remove,
 Save by those shadowie expiations weak,
 The bloud of Bulls and Goats, they may conclude
 Some bloud more precious must be paid for Man,
 Just for unjust, that in such righteousness
 To them by Faith imputed, they may finde
 Justification towards God, and peace
 Of Conscience, which the Law by Ceremonies
 Cannot appease, nor Man the moral part
 Perform, and not performing cannot live.
 So Law appears imperfet, and but giv'n
 With purpose to resign them in full time
 Up to a better Cov'nant, disciplin'd
 From shadowie Types to Truth, from Flesh to Spirit,
 From imposition of strict Laws, to free
 Acceptance of large Grace, from servil fear
 To filial, works of Law to works of Faith.
 And therefore shall not Moses, though of God
 Highly belov'd, being but the Minister
 Of Law, his people into Canaan lead;
 But Joshua whom the Gentiles Jesus call . . .¹²⁷

Here, Michael is, it seems to me, telling a story quite similar to the one I allege *Samson Agonistes* does. For Adam and Eve, the tension between the kind of ordered, rational living that arises from what Michael calls 'law' and the obedience expected by their distant God drives the drama of their banishment from Eden; for Samson, a similar tension exists for quite some time between his attempt to figure out what he should do to redeem himself in the eyes of God and the sense of abandonment he feels for much of the poem before God finally speaks to him. And for Adam, Eve, and Samson, all of them experience different, but similarly weighty intrusions by God upon their rational processes –Adam and Eve in receiving clear instructions to act against their rational instincts, and Samson in receiving clear instructions to act in accordance with his.

¹²⁷ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 285-310

We can understand these difficulties as products of the process described in the passage above, wherein Michael outlines a transition “from works of Law to works of Faith¹²⁸,” with ‘Law’ standing in for a set of rules and systems we might find analogous to Samson’s (and Adam and Eve’s) irrepressible use of the rational faculty. We discussed earlier the remarkably consistent view of his personal beliefs and God’s commands that Samson reaches by the time of his death; we might see the initial problem leading to Adam and Eve’s disobedience as an issue of failing to achieve the state that Samson eventually does –that is to say, Adam and Eve cannot match up their (seemingly rational) conclusion that they should eat from the tree of knowledge with the explicit command that they not do so. The question of whether Samson’s ability to reach this state of consistency is a product of something inherent in the human relationship with God or whether it is –like the sin that first lays low Samson— a product of the postlapsarian world is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can still see that Samson improves on the situation Adam and Eve find themselves in, and indeed, one might even say that they would rather find themselves in Samson’s place than in Adam and Eve’s, at least when comparing Samson at the moment of his death to Adam and Eve at the moment of their exile in *Paradise Lost*.

Samson has, after all, managed to align his rational faculties such that they, unlike those of Adam and Eve, point towards the will of God, giving Samson not only less in the way of temptation to disobey, but also the “free acceptance of large Grace” that comes from being able to obey God by choice rather than as a result of the “imposition of strict Laws;” a gift that delivers him “from servil fear” to a “filial¹²⁹” relationship with God.

In this view, the progression of Michael’s story ends up quite clear: the rational ‘law,’ as we might call it, is meant for the discovery of (the correct) choice. Just as Michael explains that

¹²⁸ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 306.

¹²⁹ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 304-305.

the law of Moses leads people not to salvation but to Christ (who in turn, leads to salvation), we see Milton explaining through *Samson Agonistes* a situation almost identically playing out in the pages of his poem –Samson’s rational faculty leading him to God, who in turn leads Samson to a righteous death. Without Moses, there might be no path to Christ; without Samson’s thinking, there would be no ability for him to choose the right path when presented with God’s instruction.

The theological weight of this choice carries all the way to Samson’s death; in destroying the temple on God’s orders, Samson is acting, as Michael predicted about humanity, with a “righteousness/to [him] by Faith imputed,” where he then “find[s] Justification towards God, and peace of Conscience” –which, as Michael points out, “the Law . . . cannot appease¹³⁰.”

This is all to say that Samson is, through all his reasoning, directed towards a righteous cause with divine backing, but in his final moments he is armed only with trust –or, as Tanya Luhrmann’s history of the King James Bible shows, faith. In the sense that he has reasoned his way to the thing God instructs him to do, Samson ‘knows’ what his destiny is; the disparate elements of his life, by this point, already point towards the task God will soon order him to complete and allow him to act with a certain ‘peace of conscience.’ But in a more human way, we can imagine that up until that extremely late point in the poem when he feels those ‘rousing motions’ of divine instruction, Samson feels as ambivalent and uncertain as we modern readers do in our first reading of this poem. It takes the trust in God and his plan –a sense of righteousness ‘by faith imputed’— to give Samson the kind of confidence he has marching off to the temple with the Philistines.

¹³⁰ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 294-296.

Conclusion

THE STORY OF SAMSON

Finally, as before, we can see the purpose of all of the strange literary construction of *Samson Agonistes*' ending . If Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* intending to justify the ways of God to man, we might see *Samson Agonistes* as a work that strives for a similar goal, justifying the flaws and limitations of humans to ourselves and providing us with a roadmap, however uncertain and unclear it may appear in the moment, for the redemption that Milton's later poetic works are so interested in.

I will end by drawing to our attention for one last time the construction of *Samson Agonistes*. I have argued that we should try to see Samson's death as a moment of certitude for him, but even with the knowledge that Milton's contemporaries might have recognized Samson's receipt of divine instruction as genuine, the end of the poem leaves us reeling when we find out Samson has died. The news comes suddenly and Samson's death is never shown to us in a direct manner; we are told of Samson's sacrifice in the middle of his father's speech about deciding to pay a ransom so that Samson may retire. The jolt to the plot, marked by its abrupt pacing, makes us feel, even if we did have some sense of finality when we last saw Samson, as if we have been left at least for a moment in confusion.

Once again, we, still living while Samson lays dead, are left with the same uncertainty he no doubt felt going off to his death; indeed, we might even say that all of the hesitancy and doubt we have experienced reading along with Samson are as much ours as his. This, Milton tells us, is a condition of mortality. From divine sources, we receive messages that –as we have learned from the examples of Adam, and Eve, and Samson— we are supposed to obey, knowing that divine instruction calls us to a certain end. But when we are bereft of such certainty, we are called on to

trust not just in God but ourselves, to be led by our rational minds to a state where, finally, we can in an act of faith fall into a place divinely planned.

Through *Samson Agonistes*, Milton suggests that with the right amount of diligence and self-reflection, we will someday reach a point where our thoughts, our feelings, our identities, and the plans of our God point in the same direction. At that time, we learn from Samson's story, the only thing left for us to do is to have the faith to act.

Postscript

Interpreting *Samson Agonistes* has been an engaging (if difficult) task. It should go without saying that I do not view the world the same way that John Milton did; indeed, I do not even view the world the same way that Luhrmann's evangelical Protestant analogues to Milton and his contemporaries do. It occurs to me that those of us who are not religious—or at least not religious in the same way that Milton or Luhrmann's subjects are—may be at a bit of distance from the problems of divine abandonment and God-given instruction that *Samson Agonistes* wrestles with; we are perhaps in some way disadvantaged in reading this poem.

Nonetheless, I feel as if I have found something compelling about what Milton offers us through *Samson Agonistes*, something that goes beyond the specific philosophical and religious outlook of Milton's poem. I entered this project initially thinking it to be the exploration of an interesting literary-historical problem, and found it to be much more than that. *Samson Agonistes* took me on a trek through problems of theological and philosophical and psychological significance that started with the tale of a Hebrew folk hero of antiquity, ran through the scribblings in a poet's notebook in the 17th century, and ended with questions about the form and content of Christianity in our time.

This kind of expansiveness may be why *Samson Agonistes* has become such an object of interest even for those normally not concerned with the literature of its period. In its ambition, *Samson Agonistes* manages to be a literary work that is aspirational in its portrayal of the certitude—perhaps impossible to attain in real life—that comes with having one's personal, spiritual, political, and moral goals aligned towards a genuinely righteous cause. And yet, at least to our modern sensibilities, it remains utterly abhorrent in the acts it tells us are acceptable in service to that which is divinely justified. Milton's poem presents us with a sophisticated,

compelling, and at times deeply strange mix of modern thinking and counter-modern theology, a window into a much older time and a much older way of thinking about religion which nonetheless speaks to our contemporary fascination with questions of politics and morality.

In part because of this sprawl of topics that *Samson Agonistes* touches on, the writing of this project has been in many ways quite unwieldy; the work of exploring the disparate subjects addressed by and affected by this poem, however, has been one of the more enjoyable experiences of my academic career thus far. I hope that some portion of that learning process can be reproduced through this thesis, or failing that, that its conclusions can be clearly conveyed to the readers of this paper.

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