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An Analysis of the Objective-Subjective Elements in John Milton's Dramatic Poem Samson Agonistes

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE OBJECTIVE-SUBJECTIVE ELEMENTS
IN JOHN MILTON'S DRAMATIC POEM
SAMSON AGONISTES

BY
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Objectivity, unity, and a universality of appeal, which transcends time, nationality, and customs constitute the foundation upon which all great literature has its origin. It is universal and objective in the sense that it portrays, not the personal experience of one man, the poet, but the experiences of the human race. Despite established literary canons, however, literature, or for that matter, any of the Fine Arts, being an outward manifestation of a man's inward reflections upon life and the world about him, cannot be entirely separated from the personal influence of its creator. It is woven from the experiences which the poet has in common with the human race. Hence, there is in literature also the personal and subjective element, more or less well defined. This objective-subjective materialization reveals itself in any artistic composition, whether it be the artistry of the writer, the painter, the musician, the sculptor, or the architect.

If, for example, in spite of a strict adherence to the universally established principles of architecture, an individual architect almost of necessity reveals something of himself in his finished product, how much more readily then, is an author, and especially a poet, able to incorporate his hidden emotions and
outlook upon life and the universe about him into his written composition. Words are the ordinary medium for the expression of ideas. A writer, and especially a poet, thinking lofty thoughts and dwelling with hidden dreams, must invariably as a man color his inspired thoughts and inflame his secret dreams with a subjectivity impossible to be hidden. In a word, his work becomes as it were a spiritual autobiography.

With the above preamble we approach the problem we have set ourselves in this thesis, namely, granting an autobiographical character to John Milton's dramatic poem, Samson Agonistes, we ask whether this vitiates the poem's acceptance as a work of art. The poem is, and was intended to be the closing artistic creation of a man imbued with a crusader's conviction of his inspired role among men. Hence, in harmony with his lifelong crusading spirit, may we not logically conclude that Milton was consistent to the end? If his personal life and its vicissitudes crept into all of his previous writings, certainly this 'champion-among-men' could not cease his deep-seated practice during the final composition of his turbulent life.

Now it is precisely because in the Samson Agonistes the personal and subjective elements, to anyone academically acquainted with John Milton, obtrude themselves upon the reader's attention due to the patent parallelism in the lives of Milton and his hero, Samson, that the problem arises. Is the artistic and universal
character of the poetry diminished by this obtrusion? Because accepted Miltonic scholars are in disagreement upon the subject, we pose the problem. Some, whose names we only mention here, but whose opinions we shall consider more in detail as the occasion arises throughout this discussion, advance apodictical arguments in behalf of Samson Agonistes' autobiographical nature. Tillyard, Pattison, Grierson, Saurat, Masson, and Belloc, to name the more outstanding critics, favor this interpretation. One outstanding critic, Hanford, admits the poem's autobiographical character, but only to a degree. On the whole, all Miltonic scholars do find some autobiographical material in the poem.

In favor of the autobiographical interpretation of the Samson Agonistes is Tillyard.

Why did Milton write it? there is no one answer, but the chief is that whether months or years separate his last two poems, he had changed in the interval and sought to express what probably was his final phase of mind... By the time of Samson Agonistes Milton was far enough removed from his worst agonies to be able to survey them more calmly and to desire to express them with a directness on which he had not hitherto ventured...It expresses Milton's state of mind at the time of writing more adequately than any of the other poems did the corresponding state.1

Mark Pattison suggests that the poem be read as one would read a page of contemporary history. He pictures Milton's heroic

nature tossed about by an unrelenting fate, but none the less steadfastly accepting the situation entrenched in the unchangeable conviction of the righteousness of his cause. He refers to the parallel in the Agonistes:

The resemblance lies in the sentiment and the situation, not in the bare event. Add to these the two great personal misfortunes of the poet's life, his first marriage with a Philistine woman, out of sympathy with him or his cause, and his blindness; and the basis of reality becomes so complete, that the nominal personages of the drama almost disappear behind the history which we read through them.2

In a publication of the English Association, W. Menzies expresses his opinion which favors the autobiographical characteristics of the drama.

Hardly a line in the poem but recalls something which the writer's own situation at or before the time he wrote gave him direct occasion to feel, think, experience, remember, or resent. All his public and private cares are woven into the texture of this powerful work, his poverty, his obscurity, obloquy, his domestic trials, the lost cause, and the shameful indignities inflicted upon its champion.3

Stopford A. Brooke understood why this subject appealed to Milton in the closing years of his life. Without danger to himself and without giving anyone further offense he could allegorically express "the personal and political position, the retrospect

and the hopes of himself and his party." 4 Brooke then offers much explanatory data in which he draws out the parallels between Milton's life and the poem's theme. He concludes:

It is owing to the strong personal and historical element in this drama, and to the solemn feeling with which we cannot but listen to the last words of the greatest Englishman of his time, speaking almost alone in heroic faith, that *Samson Agonistes* has deserved to gain, even more than by its poetic excellence, the reverence and sympathy of Englishmen. 5

Grierson writes:

In *Samson Agonistes* Milton is again the creator, the mimetic poet, finding relief for his suppressed passion of disappointment, indignation, devotion to the good cause which has apparently gone under, in a dream, a 'wish-fulfilment', an imaginative creation; but he is also the critic, the thinker: and as before the two aspects of his work are imperfectly harmonized... But Milton is never merely concerned with himself. His true self is his ideals, the good cause, and the English people. 6

In her volume, *Oliver's Secretary*, D. N. Raymond says: "The days of his poetry were over. The poem that was his life went on." 7

Denis Saurat in his recognized work, *Milton: Man and Thinker*,

5 Ibid., 160.
concludes: "Milton is more intimately present in Samson Agonistes than in any other of his poems. Here he put the history of his own life." 8

David Masson, Milton's great biographer, summarizes his treatment of the Agonistes as follows:

Samson Agonistes is the most powerful drama in the English language after the severe Greek model, and it has the additional interest of being so contrived that, without any deviation from the strictly objective incidents of the Biblical story which it enshrines, it is yet the poet's own epitaph and his condensed autobiography. 9

As the closing opinion of this phase of the discussion we have the conclusions of Hilaire Belloc who was seemingly overwhelmed with the power of the poem. As he viewed the matter, "the main cause of this poem's excellence was the identity of its theme with the poet's own personal tragedy." 10 According to Belloc it was Milton's pride that turned the trick which so inspired him, "that Milton could pour his entire self into this verse, as a man fills a jar with wine...It is more utterly himself than is his main theme in any other poem." 11

Beginning with Part II, "The Man and the Poet," in his volume,

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8 Denis Saurat, Milton: Man and Thinker, Dial Press, New York, 1925, 239.
11 Ibid., 273-274.
Milton, Belloc distinguishes, in reference to Milton, between Milton the man and Milton the poet. It is at this point, which is incidentally, at the very beginning of his biography, that he asks the reader and student of John Milton to prescind from the author when studying his work as an artistic composition. It is his contention that the man as a man, a physical being of a definite stature, is of little importance when his work is read and enjoyed.

The fellow does not count; he would not have been heard of but for his verses; and his verses are not his own...Therefore it behooves us, when we attempt to put before our fellows the poet as he was and is, to present mainly what he is--the still living thing which he was given to do--his verse."12

And Belloc concludes by remarking that only after we have studied the man's verse should we attempt to trace the circumstances of his life, and "we only do it in order that we may the better understand the Word committed to him."13 Concluding his explanation he says:

But if the Poet himself and his Poetry are thus so separate, how can a study of them be approached? There is, I think, but one way of attempting the task; it is to speak first separately of the circumstances and character of the man, then of the poet; this done to follow his verse through his life, not as a commentary upon that life, but as the chief business of it. For of the man and his verse, his verse is still the greater of the two.14

12 Ibid., 32-33.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 33-34.
Belloc thus very closely approaches Tillyard's remark:

Whatever the value of Samson Agonistes as a work of art, there can be no doubt of its value in illuminating Milton's life and thought. It seems to refer to the main emotional crises in his life and to epitomize the permanent elements of his thought. Granting that Milton is a remarkable enough person to be remembered, Samson Agonistes deserves preservation as a personal document.\textsuperscript{15}

The remaining critics in this class are more cautious. Although admitting the striking similarity which exists between the events in Samson's life as portrayed in the poem and Milton's own life, "and into the representation of Samson he has undoubtedly put more of himself than into any other of his imaginative creations,"\textsuperscript{16} Hanford, a recognized student of Milton, advises:

We must beware of making the identification of Samson and Milton too complete...even where Samson's expressions of suffering are appropriate enough in their application to his own case, we must remember that all is heightened and idealized for the purposes of art...the embodiments of an aesthetic mood which owes as much to literature as it does to personal experience.\textsuperscript{17}

It is apparent that Belloc in the selections quoted above strove to express this very viewpoint, but, in this instance, lacked Hanford's precision.

\textsuperscript{15} Tillyard, 346.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 291-292.
Verity likewise disfavors any attempt which too completely identifies Samson with his creator John Milton. In the introduction to his volume which treats exclusively of the Agonistes, he states his position. For anyone familiar with John Milton's life, the personal emotion in Samson Agonistes is quite patent. Not only is there a manifest parallel between the personal experiences of Milton and his hero, but the parallel carries over into the external circumstances of their respective eras. Verity further admits that the poem "serves as a record of his deepest feelings at the most tragic point in his career."18 But, as he warns:

...the reasons for their respective failures were different: and herein lies the great distinction between them, the point in which the parallel breaks down.19

Since then, the major critics either directly or indirectly lean towards an autobiographical interpretation of the Agonistes, in our analysis we shall look into the basic arguments on which they affirm or deny the poem's autobiographical nature. The problem, therefore, presupposing the autobiographical character of the poem, principally resolves itself into the problem of demonstrating that despite the fact that the material of Milton's own experience is closely identified with the material of the historical Samson's experiences, nevertheless, the personal elements are

19 Ibid.
completely absorbed and lost sight of in the broader, more universal human type which Samson and Milton are made to represent in the character of Samson Agonistes. In other words, as we asserted at the outset, the poet legitimately universalizes and idealizes experiences which are at one and the same moment intensely personal to himself and to the historical Samson, and also common to the human race as a whole. An intensely personal experience increases rather than diminishes the artistic value of a poem, if such experience is transformed and made predicable of all the individuals of an aggregated group. Milton, a master artist, did just this in his dramatic poem. Consequently, the Agonistes may be termed a better poem for having been drawn from Milton's own life.
CHAPTER II
THE PERSONAL AND ARTISTIC ELEMENTS
IN THE AGONISTES AS OBSERVED
BY MILTONIC SCHOLARS

Critics are agreed that the parallelism which exists between the events in John Milton's own life and the events in the life of Samson compelled him to write the Agonistes as a memorial to two great heroes of their respective ages: Samson Agonistes and John Milton. Milton's prepossession with the concept of Samson as a national hero arose, no doubt, from the striking parallel which he saw between his own life and that of the Hebrew Samson's. Once this idea had taken hold of his mind, it was comparatively simple for Milton to identify himself with the ancient hero.

None of the important critics fail to note this parallelism in the Agonistes. James Hanford in A Milton Handbook, says:

The analogy between his own position and that of his protagonist must have been vividly present to his mind, and into the representation of Samson he has undoubtedly put more of himself than into any other of his imaginative creations.¹

Hanford thereupon concludes that the very expression of his

¹ Hanford, 261
emotions in Samson Agonistes "under the shield of dramatic objec-
tivity, must have been a kind of deliverance from sorrow, a means
of securing for himself the serenity of soul which...he evidently
possessed throughout his later days." 2

Masson, whose seven-volume work is a basic authority for all
who treat the life of Milton, indicates Milton's familiarity with
the Biblical hero was no spur of the moment occurrence. It was in
the background of his mind for many years before he actually
brought it into public view. Samson's very stature as well as his
personal consciousness of his importance in the plan of his Creat-
or had attracted Milton at a very early period.

The story of the Hebrew Samson had been in
his repertory for subjects for possible
dramas since 1641, when he had jotted down
Samson Pursophorus or Hybriestes, or Samson
Marrying or Ramath-Lechi as a likely subject
from Judges XVI. He had jotted down these
subjects then on mere poetic speculation,
little knowing how much of his own future
life was to correspond with the fate of that
particular hero of the Hebrews. The exper-
ience had come, coincidence after coincidence,
shock after shock, till there was not one of
all the Hebrew heroes so constantly in his
imagination as the blind Samson captive among
the Philistines. 3

The writer thereupon concludes that the writing of the tragedy
would in reality be little else than the metaphorical composition
of the events in Milton's own life. He adds, "that, therefore by

2 Ibid., 263.
3 David Masson, Life of John Milton, Macmillan and Company, London,
1880, VI, 664.
destiny as much as by choice, was Milton's dramatic subject after
the Restoration."\(^4\)

Tillyard, as already has been mentioned, looked upon the
Agonistes as an epitome of Milton's thought and life. He closed
his assertion with the words already cited in Chapter One of this
thesis, to wit, "Granting that Milton is a remarkable enough person
to be remembered, Samson Agonistes deserves preservation as a per­
sonal document."\(^5\)

The chief purpose in citing Tillyard's opinion for a second
time is based on our contention that it is possible to place too
much emphasis on the autobiographical aspects of the Agonistes to
the detriment and almost to the exclusion of the poem's objective
value as a work of art. In his volume, Milton: Man and Thinker,
Saurat writes:

Samson Agonistes is Milton's literary and
philosophical testament. It is a pure jewel,
early as splendid and much more human than
Paradise Lost. Did not the majestic propor­
tions of the epic forbid all comparison, one
might be tempted, sacrilegiously, to give
Samson the first rank among Milton's works.\(^6\)

As we shall observe somewhat later in this chapter, Belloc
likewise advances this view--and succumbs to the temptation to
which Saurat has reference.

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Tillyard, 346.
\(^6\) Saurat, 236.
In one of his earlier volumes, *Studies in Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne*, which was published approximately fifteen years before his *A Milton Handbook*, Hanford maintains that the *Agonistes* "is a work of art and not a disguised biography." He asserts in addition that one unacquainted with the poet's life readily recognizes the drama's artistic magnitude. Preconceived notions that the poem is a reflection of Milton's temperament tend to minimize the inherent artistry of the work. But, conceding this personal interpretation, Hanford logically concludes:

It should not, however, suffer from interpretation in light of the poet's characteristic moods and thoughts, if we clearly recognize the conditions of their operation in his creative work. His most intimate emotions are invariably sublimated by the imagination and so far depersonalized. The process enables him to project himself with sympathy into characters and situations which have only a partial analogy with his own. So it is with his representations of Comus, or of Satan and Adam in *Paradise Lost*. In other cases, as in those of Dalilah, Eve, or Mammon, he is capable, within a limited range, of being as objective as any artist of essentially romantic temper.

W. Menzies writing in *Essays and Studies*, remarks about *Samson Agonistes*:

...a general knowledge of the main facts of Milton's life may be presupposed in the case of most readers...Power is its leading

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8 Ibid.
characteristic. It has little of the superficial charm of poetry, scarcely any work could be cited which has more of its strength. 9

Belloc, a critic who is not too prodigal of praise towards Milton, when writing of the poet's final literary triumphs, Paradise Lost and Samson Agonistes, asserts:

The injustice on which he brooded was a stimulus and a support. To such a mood we owe the final miracle whereby in blindness, impoverished and amid the ruins of his cause, he produced the Samson Agonistes and completed Paradise Lost. Thanks to that mood he stands before us in the very last years at his full measure and even his early triumphs seem less memorable than his end. 10

Furthermore, as was mentioned at the time, Belloc's studied estimate of the drama, Samson Agonistes, is in the same vein as was that of Saurat cited earlier in this chapter. In drawing his estimate of the three closing epics of Milton's life to an end, Belloc surprisingly concludes:

The Samson Agonistes is in contrast with the two epics Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained and clearly superior to them. That it is superior to Paradise Regained need not be laboured; it will be self-evident to anyone who has spent an hour or two in reading them both. The one has passages at the summit of Milton's genius; the other is the basest thing he ever printed under the guise of poetry. What will be less freely admitted, but is none the less true, is that the Samson Agonistes is superior to the Paradise Lost. 11

9 Menzies, 84-85.
10 Belloc, 44.
11 Ibid., 272.
Thus, we conclude that neither the personal nor the artistic elements of the poem should be slighted. For an adequate appreciation of the whole, a balanced consideration of these two elements in their relationship to one another is essential. Commenting on the nature of poetry, Leishman writes in his volume, *Metaphysical Poets*:

The purpose of a poem, considered as something offered by the author to the public, is to enable the reader to recreate in himself the experience in and out of which it was born—a purpose which it seems clear, can never be completely realized, since the possibility of its realization depends on what must always be relative, the sensitiveness and sympathy of the reader, and, in some measure, the range and nature of his own experience—And although in the last analysis all poetry is universal, it is permissible to distinguish between poetry which starts from a basis of very general and widely shared experience, and poetry which starts from an experience that may be very personal and peculiar. The second kind of poetry may often be quite as valuable as the first, the region of reality which it finally illuminates and interprets may be equally extensive and important, but the starting-point may be more difficult to reach, and perhaps many readers can only reach it after a careful study of the poet's life and after sharing the experience of readers and critics who have already established communication...otherwise much that is beautiful and significant will be unperceived, and much that seems clear will be only half-understood.12

Applying Leishman's analysis to the *Agonistes*, we discover that the matter of the poem—Samson's humiliation, his cleansing

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pain, and ultimate triumph—is blended with Milton's imaginative spirit. The artistic transformation of the substance is aided by John Milton's vitally intense appreciation of a tragic action parallel to his own personal experience. Here we have the autobiographical elements. Then, his intertwining and transformation of the universal with the particular results in his elevated idealization of the historical and personal matter. Herein lies his artistic touch.

Bearing these details in mind, namely, the historical narrative as found in the Bible, the personal associations of Milton's own life, his individualistic views, and finally, the artistic recreation, blending, and synchronization of the historical and autobiographical in an artistic mode, we shall better appreciate Samson Agonistes. In the following chapter, wherein the ideas of the poem are considered more in detail, we shall observe by the comparison and contrast of Milton's own life with Samson's life as portrayed in the Agonistes, the dramatic and poetic elements of the poem.

In the Agonistes Milton will struggle to blend poetic artistry with the moral teachings of Holy Scripture as he understood them. His devotion to duty, again, as he understood it, and his constant abhorrence of inordinate passion and weakness of character will be echoed in Samson Agonistes. Milton's final testament, the work, the ideal of his lifetime, are reborn in the opening
Chorus' lament:

Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to Men;
Unless there be who think not God at all,
If any be, they walk obscure;
For of such Doctrine never was there School,
But the heart of the Fool,
And no man therein Doctor but himself. 13

CHAPTER III
THE PERSONAL AND ARTISTIC ELEMENTS
IN THE AGONISTES AS OBSERVED
IN THE POEM ITSELF

In this chapter it is our purpose to show how skillfully John Milton handled the dramatization of his theme in the *Samson Agonistes*. As evidence of this, we will treat the parallelism in Milton's life and in the life of his hero, Samson, as portrayed in the poem. The facts of the Bible story are simple enough and especially, since they are so well known, need cause us no delay. In investigating to what degree Milton's personal attitude is reflected in the poem, we shall, first of all, consider the physical and secondly, the spiritual experiences which are found to be similar or identical in Milton's life and in the life of his poetic hero.

How deeply did Milton feel his blindness? In what way did his domestic infelicity color his life and subsequent outlook upon men and the world in general? What were his political and religious loyalties? Taking each of these points in order, we shall look at Milton through the pages of his personal writings and of his biographers. Then, in order, we will indicate how his deeply hidden emotion is carried over into his description of the same
feelings in the Samson. This will be accomplished by citing relevant and powerful passages from the Agonistes.

Ordinarily, it is difficult for a writer and especially a poet to depict artistically feigned emotional reactions. If he attempts to do this, his work rarely, if ever, attains artistic standards. In his early years Milton deeply felt his blindness. His enemies cruelly taunted him with the idea and this ridicule on their part was an added burden to his dejection. For example:

For this book that he wrote against the late king that you would have me read, you should have taken notice of God's judgment upon him, who stroke him with blindness, and, as I have heard, he was fain to have the help of one Andrew Marvel, or else he could not have finished that most accursed libel. God has begun [sic] his judgment upon him here—his punishment will be hereafter in hell.1

And even after his death his enemies continued their scorn: "...but it was the justice of God that brought...to a shameful death ...blind Milton...and others of that maleficient crew."2 We shall see later how Milton reacted to such attacks.

According to Belloc, Milton's loss of sight began in 1650:

It was the Defensio which began the destruction of his sight...Before the spring of 1652 he could read no more; those who hated him told him that it was the judgment of God on one who had deliberately helped to procure the death of the Innocent and the

1 The Student's Milton, Quotation from Mrs. Sadleir to Roger Williams, xlviii-xlix.
2 Ibid., Quotation from Robert Baillie, Letters and Journals, 1.
Anointed; he himself called it a worthy sacrifice offered in defense of the cause he served.3

There is pathos and resignation in his sonnet to Cyriac Skinner:

Cyriac, this three years day, these eyes though clear
To outward view, of blemish or of spot;
Bereft of light thir seeing have forgot,
Not to thir idle orbs doth sight appear
Of Sun or Moon or Starre throughout the year,
Or man or woman.4

His famous sonnet, On His Blindness, written between the years 1652 and 1655 opens in a gentle and reflective mood:

When I consider how my light is spent,
E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless...5

And at about this same period Milton wrote in his Second Defense of the English People:

I wish I could with equal facility refute what this barbarous opponent6 has said of my blindness; but I cannot do it; and I must submit to the affliction. It is not so wretched to be blind, as it is not to be capable of enduring blindness.7

3 Belloc, 196.
6 This Second Defense was in reply to the Regii Sanguinis Clamor. Published anonymously, its author was a certain Peter du Moulin. The preface was written by Alexander More. Milton refers to him.
Tillyard, when writing of this period of Milton's life, cites a portion of a letter which the poet wrote to Emeric Bigot in March, 1657. The critic considers it important as a revelation of Milton's attitude of mind at this time.

I rejoice that you have been persuaded of my calm of mind in the midst of the calamity of blindness, and of my affability and interest in entertaining foreigners. As to bereavement of light, how should I bear it otherwise than mildly, when I have confidence that Light has not so much been lost as summoned and drawn inwards for the purpose of sharpening my mental vision.8

In addition, Tillyard then proceeds to cite the following lines from the "Hymn to Light" in Paradise Lost. He considers the resemblance to be quite striking to the thought contained in the letter to Bigot.

So much the rather thou Celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her
powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes.9

Finally, Tillyard also maintains that the second sentence of this letter likewise reminds one of a passage in the Second Defense. Although he does not expressly cite the reference, the passage in the Second Defense to which he makes reference appears to be the following:

...as long as in that obscurity, in which I am enveloped, the light of the divine presence more clearly shines, then in proportion as I am weak, I shall be invincibly strong; and in

8 Tillyard, 204.
proportion as I am blind, I shall more clearly see. O! that I may thus be perfected by feebleness, and irradiated by obscurity! And, indeed, in my blindness, I enjoy in no inconsiderable degree the favor of the Deity, who regards me with more tenderness and compassion in proportion as I am able to behold nothing but himself. 10

Hanford, when discussing Milton's blindness makes particular mention of the fact "that the most poignant allusions to it were written longest after the event itself. At the actual moment of the catastrophe Milton was silent." 11 Tillyard, too, notes how frequently references to blindness are interspersed throughout Paradise Lost, an indication of Milton's acute sensibility of his affliction. In complete accord with Tillyard, Hanford concludes that the "utterances in Paradise Lost are touched with a deeper pathos, but it is first in Samson, where they are no longer directly personal, that they become a tragic cry." 12

Thus, the gentle reflections and patient acceptance of his blindness found in the sonnets and Paradise Lost, suddenly assume dramatic suspense and tragic intensity when given form and substance in the person of Samson. Upon the occasion of his first entrance onto the scene, the once mighty Samson pathetically says:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on. 13

11 Hanford, Studies in..., 179.
12 Ibid.
Milton through the lips of Samson utters a cry of anguish. Samson's despair is so personal that Milton probably felt relief in uttering his own misery through Samson's mouth. Yet, although a complaint, the outburst is restrained and poetic.

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
Blind among enemies, 0 worse than chains,
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
Light the prime work of God to me is extinct,
And all her various objects of delight Annul'd, which might in part my grief have eased.14

And a moment later he remarks:

The sun to me is dark and silent as the moon
When she deserts the night,
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.
Since light is so necessary to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the soul,
She all in every part, why was the sight
To such a tender ball as the eye confined?
So obvious and so easie to be quench't,
And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd,
That she might look at will through every pore?
Then had I not thus been exil'd from light;
As in the land of darkness yet in light,
To live a life half dead, a living death,
And buried.15

Addressing his father, who visits him during his captivity, Samson, still twisting and squirming in the crucible of his affliction, before his soul is completely tempered, stirringly emphasizes his feelings of depression:

...these dark orbs no more shall treat with light,

14 Ibid., ll. 67-72, 407.
15 Ibid., ll. 86-101, 407.
Nor the other light of life continue long; But yield to double darkness nigh at hand. 16

Thus, in the opening verses Samson appears mirrored as an image of tragic disaster. The Chorus genuinely echoes his opening lamentation and pointedly contrasts his present miserably degraded condition with his former splendor and renown:

This, this is he; softly a while, Let us not break in upon him; 0 change beyond report, thought, or belief! See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd, With languish't head unpropt, As one last hope abandon'd, And by himself given over; In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds 0're worn and soild; Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be hee, That Heroic, that Renown'd, Irresistible Samson? 17

When Manoa sees his captive son for the first time, he exclaims:

0 miserable change! Is this the man That invincible Samson, far renown'd, The dread of Israel's foes, who with a strength Equivalent to Angels walked thir streets, None offering fight; who single combatant Duell'd thir Armies rank't in proud array, Himself an Army, now unequal match To save himself against a coward arm'd At one spear's length. 18

Later, Harapha, Philistine champion, graphically paints a strong word-picture of Samson's plight:

16 Ibid., ll. 591-593, 417.
17 Ibid., ll. 115-126, 408.
18 Ibid., ll. 340-348, 412.
To combat with a blind man I disdain,
And thou hast need much washing to be touch't. 19

And throughout the major part of the poem the reader is ever conscious of the degraded position of Samson. It is misfortune so described as to scale the heights of epic proportions. And paradoxically enough, it becomes misfortune triumphant. For, in succeeding dialogues the poet masterfully diverts the hero's attention from his actual sufferings and their cause to a calm estimate of their ingrained significance. He proposes motives which prompt Samson to bear these indignities in vindication of Almighty God's cause. The citations from the sonnets, the Second Defense, and Paradise Lost, evidenced, as we have seen, an identical reaction in Milton when the realization of his incurable blindness first overwhelmed him.

Granting, therefore, that Milton incorporated his personal feelings into Samson's laments, we must bear in mind that the poet's universalized presentation of a personal theme in his drama depended upon his complex emotional makeup. Energetic and resolute, Samson recognizes the hand of God in his blindness, and conscious of his calling, his ambition to free his people from Philistine oppression is never suppressed. Having through personal folly lost one of God's gifts, he is still determined to fulfill the Divine command. Whether Milton intended it or not, in Samson he gives mankind a hint at the significance of suffering in man's

19 Ibid., 11, 1106-1107, 426.
life. Almighty God in His Wisdom can, and as experience proves, frequently does permit a physical evil in order that moral good may result.

Hence, following his initial setback, Samson, acting in accord with man's universal nature, constantly strives to acquire internal peace. His unbridled indignation and his savage nature are inconspicuously but completely bent to conform to the Divine Will. He blames no one but himself for his affliction. It is in this interior conflict that the drama derives its power—a struggle between a human-creature will and the unbending, unchangeable will of an Almighty Creator. Once the initial struggle is ended, a contented peace pervades the poem.

Anyone acquainted with Milton's writings notices one marked trait—his harsh opinion and haughty scorn of woman. It is not surprising then, that this note finds concrete expression in Samson Agonistes, the Biblical history of which remarkably lent itself towards fostering Milton's viewpoint.

In one poignant sentence Belloc hammers at the crux of the difficulty. "For the affection of women (I mean for the receiving of it) Milton was very ill fitted, and for the giving of it not fitted at all." Saurat considers the poet's estrangement from Mary Powell of such great significance, that everything in the

20 Belloc, 45.
poet's later life must necessarily be considered in relation to it. It is natural, then, that there should be a very definite reminder of Milton's experience in the final artistic work of his life.

As a youth, Milton was apparently afraid of women. It was a reserve which either he refused or was unable to break down. One of his Latin elegies treats of what is conceded to be a personal experience: the appearance of a girl of striking beauty, and the effect it had upon him. He has appended to it a renunciation of such idle frivolity of "needless youth...straightway all flame was quenched and from that time my breast is rigid, encased in thick ice."23

Edward Philips' account of Milton's first marriage is as follows:

About Whitsuntide it was, or a little after, that he took a journey into the country... after a month's stay, home he returns a married man...some few of her nearest relations accompanying the bride to her new habitation...At length they took their leave...By that time she had for a month or two led a philosophical life...her friends, possibly incited by her own desire, made earnest suit by letter to have her company the remaining part of the summer, which was granted...Michaelmas being come, and no news of his wife's return, he sent for her by letter...he dispatched down a foot messenger with a letter desiring her

21 Saurat, 55.
23 Ibid., 94.
return. But the messenger came back... reported that he was dismissed with some sort of contempt... it so incensed our author, that he thought it would be dishonorable ever to receive her again, after such a repulse; so that he forthwith prepared to fortify himself with arguments for such a resolution and accordingly wrote two treatises. 24

We quoted Philips here to some length as his account aids in interpreting subsequent events in the poet's life.

With wounded pride Milton almost at once embarked on his divorce tracts: The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643), which attacks the English divorce laws; The Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce (1644), which embodies the pertinent chapters of the German Protestant, Martin Bucer, urging incompatibility as ground for marriage annulment; Tetrachordon (1645), which places divorce on a Biblical basis; and Colasterion (1645), which replies to the critics of the earlier divorce tracts. The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce ranks almost unparalleled as a monument of personal invective. Possessor of a proud intellect, Milton lowers himself to the level of a street urchin and screams the lesson of his folly to the world. His screaming brings only laughter and criticism from an amused populace. The laughter and amusement brings on Tetrachordon.

Milton's basic argument for divorce is the very one which is being flaunted to a ridiculous degree in the law courts of the

24 Ibid., "Biographies of Milton," xxxvii.
world today—incompatibility. To Milton marriage is merely a union of minds. There is companionship, but it is solely on the intellectual plane. As soon as this blissful union of minds becomes less than that, it is no longer marriage, but rather prostitution. He expresses this doctrine in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*:

I suppose it will be allowed us that marriage is a human society, and that all human society must proceed from the mind rather than the body, else it would be but a kind of animal or beastish meeting: if the mind therefore cannot have that due company by marriage that it may reasonably and humanly desire, that marriage can be no human society, but a certain formality; or gilding over of little better than a brutish congress, and so in very wisdom and pureness to be dissolved.  

In an earlier chapter of the same work he had defined what he understood incompatibility to mean:

That indisposition, unfitness, or contrariety of mind, arising from a cause in nature unchangeable, hindering, and ever likely to hinder the main benefits of conjugal society, which are solace and peace; it is greater reason of divorce than natural frigidity, especially if there be no children, and that there be mutual consent.

One passage, indeed, is Milton's reflection upon his personal experience with Mary Powell:

But some are ready to object that the disposition ought seriously to be considered before. But let them know again, that for

25 Ibid., "Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," 593.
26 Ibid., 583.
the wariness can be used, it may yet befall a discreet man to be mistaken in his choice; and we have plenty of examples. The soberest and best governed men are least practiced in these affairs...nor is it, therefore, that for a modest error a man should forfeit so great a happiness and no charitable means to release him.27

Belloc adequately summarizes the affair by posing the question as to just how anyone is to reach a definite conclusion according to the marriage laws proposed by Milton. Just what is a reasonable cause for divorce? "When may a man, and when may he not, get rid of his wife? Milton gives no answer."28 His additional remark causes one to smile.

All that because poor little Mary Powell had found him altogether too difficult! Yet she had not betrayed him, as she well might have done. One who reads this inflamed stuff cannot but notice how the writer of it lacks grip: plenty of sound, but no clear principle.29

In his epic, Paradise Lost, John Milton repeatedly stresses the power and superiority of man over woman. For example, immediately after Eve's betrayal of Adam, Adam says:

...Thus it shall befall
Him to worth in Women overtrusting
Lets her Will rule; restraint she will not brook,
And left to herself, if evil thence ensue,
She first his weak indulgence will accuse.30

27 Ibid., 583.
28 Belloc, 155.
29 Ibid., 154.
Admitting his transgression, Adam explains to his Creator:

Shee gave me of the Tree and I did eate.31

Almighty God replies to Adam:

Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey
Before his voice, or was shee made thy guide,
Superior, or but equal, that to her
Thou didst resigne thy Manhood, and the
Place
Wherein God set thee above her made of thee,
And for thee, whose perfection far excell'd
Hers in all real dignitie.32

Following his expulsion from Paradise, in the bleakness of an eerie night Adam laments aloud:

...O why did God,
Creator wise, that peopl'd highest Heav'n
With Spirits Masculine, create at last
This noveltie on Earth, this fair defect
Of Nature, and not fill the World at once
With Men as Angels without Feminine,
Or find some other way to generate
Mankind? This mischief had not then befall'n,
And more that shall befall, innumerable
Disturbances on Earth through Female snares,
And straight conjunction with this Sex.33

Thus, Milton and woman.

In Samson Agonistes Milton had a situation in which he might artistically condemn woman's treachery towards man. Hence, conscious of past weaknesses, cognizant of the justness of his fate, and confident of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, Samson is none the less bitter. He is irate not only with himself

31 Ibid., X, 1. 143, 315.
32 Ibid., II. 145-151.
33 Ibid., II. 888-898, 329.
because of the weakness which he has manifested, but likewise toward the snare of his weakness, Dalila. He repeatedly laments his disgrace. In his opening speech he says:

Whom have I to complain of but my self?  
Who this high gift of strength committed to me,  
In what part lodg'd, how easily bereft me,  
Under the seal of silence could not keep,  
But weakly to a woman must reveal it.  
O'recome with importunity and tears.34

Among his first words to the Chorus are these:

...and for a word, a tear,  
Fool, have divulged the secret gift of God  
To a deceitful Woman.35

He tells his father that he is one

Who have profan'd  
The mystery of God giv'n me under pledge  
Of vow, and have betray'd it to a Woman,  
A Canaanite, my faithless enemy.36

As Samson continues his confession, Manoa learns:

I yielded and unlock'd her all my heart,  
Who with a grain of manhood well resolv'd  
Might easily have shook off all her snares;  
But foul effeminacy held me yokt,  
Her Bond-slave.37

And immediately before his father's departure Samson cries out:

Then swoll'n with pride into the snare I fell  
Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,  
Softn'd with pleasure and voluptuous life;  
At length to lay my head and hallow'd pledge

36 Ibid., ll. 376-380, 413.  
37 Ibid., ll. 407-411.
Of all my strength in the lascivious lap
Of a deceitful Concubine who shore me
Like a tame Weather, all my precious fleece,
Then turned me out ridiculous, despoil'd,
Shav'n, and disarmed among my enemies. 38

As Dalila makes her entrance, Samson's exasperation reaches unbounded heights. He exclaims:

Out, out, Hyaena! 39

Belloc takes careful note of this outburst:

It makes one laugh, but it is vigorous and natural, nor is this naturalness quite on the level of the ridiculous. A tortured man, betrayed and exasperated into vivid anger, may call a lady a hyena without quite tumbling off his poetic perch; it can be read as a shriek; and if one be sufficiently excited by the tragic circumstances, one would rather stare in horror than grin. 40

The delineation of Dalila's character is particularly skillful. Real poetic mastery is manifest in Milton's portraiture of the deceitful woman. Dalila is a splendid foil to Samson. She is charming. Certainly, she is not remorseful. She is extremely cunning. Samson accuses her:

...These are thy wonted arts,
And arts of every woman false like thee,
To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray,
Then as repentent to submit, beseech,
And reconcilmeit move with feign'd remorse. 41

38 Ibid., l. 532-540, 416.
39 Ibid., 1. 748, 420.
40 Belloc, 279.
Dalila, however, cleverly and calmly reminds him that if it was her weakness which caused her to reveal his secret to the Philistines, it was also his weakness which caused his downfall.

Was it not weakness also to make known
For importunity, that is for naught,
Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?
To what I did, thou shewest me first the way.42

Samson is silenced. Having established her case, the woman with marked shrewdness then continues to play upon the Hebrew's sense of shame:

Let weakness then with weakness come to parl
So near related, or of the same kind,
Thine forgive mine; that men may censure thine
The gentler, if severely thou exact not
More strength from me, than in thy self was found.43

The woman's professions of love and guiltlessness blend to intensify Samson's grief and rage. Samson knows that Dalila, the woman whom he now despises, speaks the truth. Yet, through the entire episode, Dalila, reflecting the poet's ingrained notion, remains conscious of man's superiority over woman. At one point she says:

In argument with men a woman ever
Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause.44

Samson's distraught mind senses the possibility of his being

42 Ibid., ll. 778-781, 420.
43 Ibid., ll. 785-789.
44 Ibid., ll. 903-904, 423.
dependent upon her. He shies from the consequences of so foreboding a thought.

...How wouldst thou insult
When I must live uxorious to thy will
In perfect thralldom, how again betray me,
Bearing my words and doings to the Lords,
To gloss upon, and censuring, frown or smile.45

This speech echoes the sentiment which Milton expressed in the Second Defense, wherein he justifies his writing the divorce tracts: "For he in vain makes a vaunt of liberty in the senate or in the forum, who languishes under the vilest servitude, to an inferior at home."46 In The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce he had written:

Who can be ignorant that woman was created for man, and not man for woman, and that a husband may be injured as insufferably in marriage as a wife? What an injury it is after wedlock not to be beloved! What to be slighted! What to be contended with in a point of house-rule who shall be the head; not for any parity of wisdom, for that were something reasonable, but out of a female’s pride...it is not equal or proportionable to the strength of man, that he should be reduced into such indissoluble bonds to his assured misery.47

Then in the Agonistes, as it were in an echo of this passage, the Chorus speaks:

Therefore God’s universal law
Gave to man despotic power
Over his female in due awe,

45 Ibid., 11. 944-948.
Nor from that right to part an hour,  
Smile she or lowre:
So shall he least confusion draw  
On his whole life, not sway'd
By female usurpation, nor dismay'd. 48

Thus, Samson and Dalila. And in it all are patent evidences of Milton's thought vividly portrayed because of his personal marital unhappiness. Yet, from what has been said, it is apparent that in *Samson Agonistes* Milton permitted his imagination free reign. The disillusionment and marital disappointments which befell him throughout his stormy life undoubtedly deepened his personal inner convictions as well as his emotions. In his later years he was forced to turn to himself and to consider the lofty nature of his interior inspiration. Just as Samson by degrees overcame the hostile elements arrayed against him, so did Milton in the *Agonistes* give poetic testimony to the manner in which he himself conquered his enemies, supposed or real, as well as the adverse circumstances in which he found himself. The bombastic and withering nature of his prose citations is harsh when aligned in comparison with the expression of the very same thought in the *Samson Agonistes*. In the *Agonistes* Milton's poetic genius sublimated the matter-of-fact and sneering manner of the prose, thereby revealing the interior source of his poetic inspiration. As Masson says:

No one can study the subtle wording and curious

imagery without seeing that the secondary idea in Milton's mind was that of his own extra-ordinary self-transmutation, before the eyes of the astonished Restoration world, out of his former character of horrible prose iconoclast into that of supreme and towering poet.49

Considering the Agonistes from the aspect of the political and religious loyalties embodied therein, had not Milton as Samson been overthrown? Samson fought for his God only to see a false heathen deity rise supreme. Milton struggling in the interests of the Almighty as he conceived them, saw the upheaval of his cause by his arch-enemy, episcopacy. Samson had fought valiently to deliver the Chosen People from Philistine oppression; Milton had labored upon voluminous writings to deliver the English nation from regal oppression. Each had failed in his endeavors.

In his Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty, published some thirty years before Samson Agonistes, Milton uses the Biblical story of Samson in allegorical form to substantiate his anti-prelatical views. Thus, we have evidence that even at that early period in his life he was thinking of Samson as a patriot and political hero. The following quotation although lengthy is quite interesting. It reveals how thoroughly familiar the poet was with the Biblical history of Samson. It likewise contains the thread for the background of the Agonistes.

I cannot better liken the state and person of

a king than to that mighty Nazarite Samson; who being disciplined from birth in the precepts and the practice of temperance and sobriety without the strong drink of injurious and excessive desires, grows up to a noble strength and perfection with those his illustrious and sunny locks, the laws, waving and curling about his godlike shoulders... and while he keeps them about him undiminished and unshorn, he may with the jawbone of an ass, 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 prelates, while he sleeps and thinks no harm, they wickedly shaving off all those bright and weighty tresses of his laws, and just prerogatives, which were his ornament and strength, deliver him over to indirect and violent counsels, which, as those Philistines, put out the fair and far-sighted eyes of his natural discerning, and make him grind in the prison-house of their sinister ends and practices upon him: till he, knowing this prelatical razor to have bereft him of his wonted might, nourish again his puissant hair, the golden beams of law and right; and they sternly shook, thunder with ruin upon the heads of those his evil counsellors, but not without great affliction to himself.

Similarly, shortly before his imprisonment in 1660, Milton, as if realizing that all his efforts were in vain, wrote:

However, with all hazard I have ventured what I thought my duty to speak in season and to forewarn my country in time; wherein I doubt not but that there be many wise men in all places and degrees, but am sorry the effects of wisdom are so little seen among us. Many circumstances and particulars I could have added in those things whereof I have spoken: but a few main matters now put secretly and speedily in execution, will suffice to recover us, and set all right; and there will want at no time who are

50 The Student's Milton, "The Reason of Church Government," 539
good at circumstances; but men who set their minds on main matters, and sufficiently urge them, in these most difficult times I find not many...But I trust I shall have spoken persuasion to abundance of sensible and ingenuous men.51

Additional proof of Milton's fearlessness in expressing his thoughts to the English people is evidenced by some of his contemporaries. Their reactions are interesting. One wrote:

(Concerning Milton's state of mind after the Restoration)...He was in perpetual terror of being assassinated; though he had escaped the talons of the law, he knew he had made himself enemies in abundance. He was so dejected he would lie awake whole nights. He then kept himself as private as he could. This Dr. Tancred Robinson had from a relation of Milton's, Mr. Walker of the Temple.52

Another said:

But his Fame is gone out like a Candle in a Snuff, and his Memory will always stink, which might have ever lived in honourable Repute, had he not been a notorious Traitor, and most impiously and villainously bely'd that blessed Martyr King Charles the First.53

Like Milton, Samson had been led to mightiest deeds. Like Milton, Samson had also enraged his country's enemies. Finally, like Milton, Samson with his friends had met misfortune. And just as Milton had placed the blame for the supression of his plans

52 Ibid., Quotation from Mrs. Sadleir to Roger Williams, xlviii-xlix.
53 Ibid., Quotation from William Winstanley, Lives of the Most Famous English Poets, 1.
upon the leaders of his country, so Samson definitely places the blame for his downfall upon Israel's rulers.

That fault I take not on me, but transfer
On Israel's Governours, and Heads of Tribes.
Who seeing those great acts which God had done
Singly by me against their Conquerors
Acknowledg'd not, or not at all consider'd
Deliverance offer'd. 54

Although Samson by no means minimizes his personal negligence and sin in tumbling to his degraded condition, he emphatically emphasizes that of the two, Israel's fault is greater. Its eyes were dimmed to the issue at stake. Thus it became enslaved. He says:

Had Judah that day joined, or one whole Tribe,
They had by this possessed the Towers of Gath,
And lorded over them whom now they serve. 55

In his personal life Milton's emphasis and belief in a personal mode of action or conduct directly received from Almighty God was always quite pronounced. This inner prompting, of its very nature a species of divine election, dare not be subservient to any external authority. Once a man is aware of his divine inspiration, he becomes his own criterion for freedom of action. It was this conviction which prompted Milton's rebellious activity throughout his life. Despite public opposition he was unable to remain silent. Divine election gave him the authority (as an

55 Ibid., ll. 265-267, 411.
individual) to rebel.

In the chapter entitled, "Of Predestination," in the opening section of *The Christian Doctrine*, there is a detailed explanation of his concept of divine election. One sentence of the passage contains the core of his position. He maintains: "By that special election is here intended, which is nearly synonymous with eternal predestination."\(^{56}\)

A natural outgrowth of John Milton's assurance of divine election is his belief in a divinely-inspired freedom of action. Fundamentally, as expressed in his writings, this divine gift bestows freedom of action and choice upon the intellectually competent. It presupposes that intellectual talents automatically supply moral rectitude. Hence, according to Milton, the intellectual man alone is free. It is needless to return to Milton's age or to any preceding age to see the fallaciousness of such a belief. We need only recall to mind some of the 'intellectually endowed giants' of the present era to see how morally strong they are of themselves. That Milton was intellectually and morally strong is not in question.

As evidenced by his writings, Milton deemed pride the snare of the mentally great. Such a man's rebirth in God's favor once he has fallen is brought about through self-knowledge and a firm

and humble admission of guilt. He says in one of his writings:

And if the love of God, as a fire sent from heaven to be ever kept alive upon the altar of our hearts, be the first principle of all godly and virtuous actions in men, this pious and just honoring of ourselves is the second, and may be thought as the radical moisture and fountain-head, whence every laudable and worthy enterprise issues forth. 57

Later, in An Apology for Smectymnuus, he repeats his statement:

...a certain niceness of nature, an honest haughtiness and self-esteem either of what I was, or what I might be (which let envy call pride), and lastly that modesty, whereof, though not in the title-page, yet here may I be excused to make some beseeming profession. 58

In The Christian Doctrine, which was completed after the Samson Agonistes, Milton reiterates his ideas of what he means by man's renovation:

God's special calling is that whereby he, at the time which he thinks proper, invites particular individuals, elect as well as reprobate, more frequently, and with a more marked call than others. 59

And at this point, too, he gives his explanation of repentance:

Repentence, or rather that higher species of it called in Greek μετάφωτα, is the gift of God, whereby the regenerate man perceiving with sorrow that he has offended

57 Ibid., "Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty," 533.
God by sin, detests and avoids it, humbly
turning to God through a sense of the divine
mercy, and heartily striving to follow
righteousness.50

At this point, then, we consider the subject of Samson's
divine election. Sacred Scripture indicates that Samson was chosen
by Almighty God to effect His divine plan. For, an angel appearing to Samson's mother had said:

Because thou shalt conceive and bear a son,
and no razor shall touch his head; for he
shall be a Nazarite of God, from his infancy,
and from his mother's womb, and he shall be­
gin to deliver Israel from the hands of the
Philistines.61

Throughout the initial stages of the drama, Samson, bewailing
the misery that has befallen him, seems to forget that the angel
had said, "and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of
the Philistines."62 He forgets for the time being that he was
merely to take the first step, to start Israel's deliverance from
the oppressor. But as the play progresses, Samson, as we have al­
ready indicated, bends his human will to the divine and eventually
realizes that material dissolution need not hinder his work in
the interests of his God.

Manoa, when visiting his son, cries out:

Alas methinks whom God hath chosen once

50 Ibid., 1015.
61 Holy Bible (Douay Version), "Judges," XIII, 5, John Murphy
62 Ibid.
To worthiest deeds, if he through frailty err,
He should not so o'erwhelm, and as a thrall Subject him to so foul indignities,
Be it but for honour's sake of former deeds.63

Samson remarks in reply:

To what end should I seek it?
His pardon I implore, but as for life when in strength
All mortals I excell'd, and great in hopes
With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
Of birth from Heav'n foretold and high exploits,
Full of divine instinct, then swoll'n with pride
Into the snare I fell.64

And throughout the remainder of the play, despite an occasional burst of resentment, Samson realizes the justness of his position and gives thought to the ultimate conquest of good over evil. His anguish of soul springs from an examination of conscience and consideration of his sins. But, once seared by remorse, as Hanford says: "Henceforth we have recovery. By confronting his own guilt without evasion, and by resisting the temptation to doubt that God's ways are just"65 Samson merits the right of being tried a second time. This took place, as we have already noted, when Dalila entered the scene. Throughout this episode, despite his flashes of bitter anger embroiled in his mind and bubbling from

64 Ibid., ll. 667-684, 418.
his lips at sight of the source of all his troubles, the raging passion in Samson's mind is stilled by the belief that his cause is not even yet irrevocably lost.

In the closing verses of what may be termed the second act of the drama, the Chorus says:

God of our Fathers, what is man!
That thou towards him...
Temperst thy providence through his short course,
Not evenly...
But such as thou has solemnly elected,
With gifts and graces eminently adorned,
...changeest thy countenance.66

Time and time again Samson dramatically repeats his consciousness of guilt, his renovation of spirit from melancholy to hope. It is a gradual growth. In his opening speech he had said:

Whom have I to complaint of but myself?67

And in the same passage he continues:

O impotence of mind in body strong!
But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom, vast unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall
By weakest subtleties, not made to rule,
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.68

He greets the Chorus upon its first appearance upon the scene:

...Yee see, 0 friends,
How many evils have enclos'd me round;
Yet that which was the worst now least afflicts me,

67 ibid., 1. 46, 406.
68 ibid., ll. 52-57, 407.
Blindness, for had I sight confused with shame
How could I once look up, or heave the head,
Who like a foolish Pilot have ship-wrack't
My Vessel trusted to me from above.69

Here we have the graphic picture of the ingratitude and malice of sin when compared with the prodigal liberality of an all-loving and generous Creator.

Later, when Manoa appears to criticize the disposition of Providence, Samson admonishes him:

Appoint not heavenly disposition, Father,
Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me
But justly; I my self have brought them on,
Sole author I, sole cause.70

In reply to the taunts of the Philistine gladiator, Harapha, Samson calmly replies:

All these indignities, for such they are
From thine, these evils I deserve and more,
Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me
Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye
Gracious to re-admit the suppliant.71

It is just as if Saint Ignatius of Loyola were speaking to us in his Meditation on Personal Sin during the First Week of his Spiritual Exercises.

Samson concludes his remarks to the Philistine by saying:

I was no private but a person raised

69 Ibid., 11. 193-199, 409.
70 Ibid., 11. 373,376, 413.
71 Ibid., 11. 1168-1173, 428.
With strength sufficient and command from
Heav'n
To free my Countrey. 72

The knowledge that he is once again in heavenly favor grows
upon him gradually. He tells the Chorus of the change:

...I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts. 73

He concludes his final exhortation to them with the words:

Happen what may, of me expect to hear
Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy
Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self. 74

His command of himself; his rejuvenation is complete. And
at this point in the drama Samson departs from the scene with the
messenger sent to bring him before the Philistine noblemen. As
Hanford says:

Then, as if in answer to this final proof of
Samson's single devotedness to God's service,
comes again the inner promptings 'disposing
to something extraordinary my thoughts.' He
obeys it unhesitatingly and goes forth under
divine guidance as of old. He has, in a
sense, regained his own lost Paradise, and
in his story Milton by vindicating the power
of a free but erring will to maintain itself
in obedience and be restored to grace, has
again asserted eternal Providence and justi-
fied the ways of God to man. 75

As portrayed in Milton's Samson Agonistes, the Catholic

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72 Ibid., ll. 1211-1213.
73 Ibid., ll. 1381-1383, 432.
74 Ibid., ll. 1423-1426.
75 Hanford, Studies in..., 177.
reader must ponder the legitimacy of Samson's revenge motive. The Catholic Church's viewpoint as indicated in the Scriptural footnote to the text is clear:

Revenge myself: This desire of revenge was out of zeal for justice against the enemies of God and his people; and not out of private rancour and malice of heart.  

The words of Samson according to Holy Scripture were:

O Lord God, remember me, and restore to me now my former strength, O my God, that I may revenge myself on my enemies, and for the loss of my two eyes I may take one revenge. And laying hold on both pillars on which the house rested, and holding the one with his right hand, and the other with his left, He said: Let me die with the Philistines. And when he had strongly shook the pillars, the house fell upon all the princes, and the rest of the multitude that was there: and he killed many more at his death, than he had killed before in his life.  

From at least three counts it is hardly to be expected that in the Agonistes, the protagonist's revenge motive would have anything of a Catholic tone. First of all, Milton was writing a Greek tragedy. The artistry displayed attests to his success in maintaining both the form and the spirit of his classical models. Then, Milton being bitterly anti-Catholic could hardly be expected to adopt the Catholic Church's viewpoint on the matter. Finally, Milton, like most Protestants, is primarily an Old-Testament

76 Holy Bible, "Judges," XVI, Footnote to verse 28, 271.  
77 Ibid., 28-30, 271.
Christian, and the revenge theme is common in the Old Testament.

Nowhere in his prose writings does Milton specifically treat the subject of revenge. Yet, in the passages wherein he justifies his use of a "vehement vein throwing out indignation or scorn upon an object that merits it,"\textsuperscript{78} he gives the impression that he is being revengeful. Thus, indirectly at least, he sanctions its use. Not that he believes it will serve a good purpose, but he employs it only because his opponents have used a similar measure against him. Such a \textit{modus agendi} is hardly Christian. It arises from too exalted an esteem of personal importance, culminating in a self-created, God-inspired crusading spirit. Such an attitude enables a man to justify his deeds after they have been performed. In short, although Milton, as indicated by a passage in \textit{The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates},\textsuperscript{79} did not intend it to be such, this arbitrary action establishes a learned man's free will as the ultimate criterion of truth, weakening the force of Divine Revelation, and making the man sufficient unto himself.

It is true that revenge is immoral and that immorality spoils art. But, considered from the Old-Testament aspect mentioned above, the revenge theme in \textit{Samson Agonistes} does not vitiate the poem as a work of art. Here we have an Old Testament theme. It was only natural for Milton's severe Old-Testament background to

\textsuperscript{78} The Student's Milton, "An Apology for Smectymnuus," 552.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., "Tenure of King's and Magistrates," 754.
manifest itself in his work.

A man of Samson's caliber naturally enough would find it extremely difficult to remain condemned in the world's sight. His past glories rise in review before his mental vision; his present degradation burns into the depths of his soul. His grief-stricken speech to the Chorus aptly expresses his mentality. It is the cry of a man who knows how objectively true his thoughts about himself are, but who is hoping that through some unusual circumstance they may turn out to be false.

...tell me Friends,
Am I not sung and proverb'd for a Fool
In every street, do they not say how well
Are come upon him his deserts?80

Suffering intolerable agonies of spirit, he makes a full confession of his misdeeds to the Chorus and to Manoa. It is only after the visits of Dalila and Harapha that he grows stronger. Only then does the possibility of retribution upon his enemies dawn upon his mind:

Yet so it may fall out, because thir end
Is hate, not help to me, it may with ming
Draw thir own ruin who attempt the deed.81

While speaking to the Philistine officer, who was sent to lead him captive before the princes of his people, Samson hints of

81 Ibid., ll. 1265-1267, 429.
things to come:

Perhaps thou shalt have cause to sorrow indeed. 82

And before his final departure he tells the Chorus:

If there be aught of presage in the mind,  
This day will be remarkable in my life  
By some great act, or of my days the last. 83

Thus, he gives adequate evidence that the bloom of possibility of the triumph of his cause, the victory of Almighty God through his penitent servant, has finally blossomed.

Grierson's analysis of this aspect of the drama bears consideration. United with the passage cited in Chapter One of this thesis, in which he considers Milton as simultaneously being both an artist and a critic, but failing to combine these two opposed aspects of his work, his conclusion is significant.

Remorseful and repentent Samson certainly is; but surely the dominant note is that of revenge rather than repentence, or at least of the vindication of the good cause, the cause of God against the enemies who seem for the moment triumphant. 84

And as we have already indicated, Samson is not concerned solely with himself. His cause and its ultimate triumph is the keynote of his life.

This brings to a close our analysis of John Milton the man and of Samson Agonistes, his vibrant creation. Samson, the

82 Ibid., I. 1347, 431.
83 Ibid., ll. 1387-1389, 432.
84 Grierson, Cross Currents..., 270-271.
felicitous creation of Bible history and a poet's personal experience combined, contains all the essential elements of great drama. The matter, springing from the fonts it did, is true to life. As does all great poetry, the *Agonistes* treats of life, love, suffering and death. It conforms to the dramatic canons of plausibility and probability. The action was enhanced by Milton's selective and creative imagination. There is moderation, yet emphasis. There is accumulation, yet selection. In a word, John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is art.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Having examined John Milton's dramatic poem, *Samson Agonistes*, according to the limits set ourselves at the outset of this study, we ask ourselves what our conclusion is to be. What is to be our position regarding the autobiographical nature of the poem in relation to the universal human character which John Milton and the historical Samson are made to represent in the central character of *Samson Agonistes*?

At the outset of our discussion we considered the objective-subjective aspect of poetry in general. We based our conclusions upon the universal and the particular aspects of life as they are found blended in any of the Fine Arts.

Proceeding to our analysis of the *Agonistes*, we saw that as a man, Milton was easily moved by his experience. Throughout his literary career, regardless of the subject at hand, personal incidents colored his opinions. He wrote on marriage and divorce. He defended his conclusions by probing the depths of his personal experience. He advocated and defended freedom of speech and liberty, as he understood the concepts. His personal motives became the norms of his conduct. Hence, whether Milton intended it or
not, Samson Agonistes definitely contains autobiographical ele-
ments. All Miltonic scholars are in accord on this point.

As was to be expected, most of the significantly autobiographi-
cal passages regarding Milton were found in his prose writings. 
Again, the various attacks made upon him in answer to the prin-
ciples he advocates in his pamphlets contain autobiographical data. 
We learn much from the jottings of his contemporaries who knew him 
as well as any man was able to know him. Thus, after reading his 
autobiography, one must again read his works, both prose and poetry, 
for the full picture of the man. In these one finds that uninten-
tended and subconscious revelation of his character, which if 
understood correctly, is as trustworthy as the conscious.

The fact that Samson Agonistes is considered autobiographical 
by various critics was our starting point. Our problem was to 
show that in the Agonistes Milton universalizes and idealizes ex-
periences which are at one and the same time intensely personal 
to himself and to the historical Samson, and also (and herein 
lies his art) common to the human race at large. To reach our 
conclusion a careful reading of the lines of the poem, as well as 
a careful reading between the lines of the poem, in so far as the 
ideas hidden there were expressed in some of Milton's other writ-
ings, was necessary.

The theme of the Samson Agonistes, the conflict between 
reason and passion in man, who is possessed of freedom of choice,
is the cornerstone of Milton's entire teaching of a lifetime on
the subject of liberty. This theme, with little exception, is to
be found in all of his writings, especially those dealing with
politics.¹ We may then, reasonably conclude that Milton consid-
ered the story of Samson and Dalila as the requiem of his life-
time struggle. We noted how well acquainted he had been with the
Biblical history of the tale more than three decades before the
**Samson Agonistes** was created. Because he was an enthusiast for
"the sober, plain, and unaffected style of the scriptures,"² Mil-
ton's choice of Samson as a subject for his drama was no happy
coincidence. It was the outgrowth of a determination of many
years' standing.

After the story of the Fall consequent upon Adam's submission
to Eve—a forfeiture of his freedom by a surrender to passion—
what other scriptural story could have afforded the scope for Mil-
ton's teaching upon reason and passion, and the folly of man's
servitude to woman, than that of Samson and Dalila? In addition,
the very close of the drama gives every indication of the poet's
state of mind, now that his tumultuous life was past and old age
and death were upon him. The lines convey a spirit of optimism,
as if he realized that now that he had "fought the good fight,"

¹ A list of all of John Milton's important published writings will
be found in Appendix A of this thesis.
² The Student's Milton, "Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline
In England," 453.
there was little else for him to do. He would, then, through the mouth of Samson make his final bequest to the English nation.

All is best, though oft we doubt, 
What the unsearchable dispose 
Of highest wisdom brings about, 
And ever best found in the close. 
Oft he seems to hide his face, 
But unexpectedly returns 
And to his faithful Champion hath in place 
Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns 
And all that band them to resist, 
His uncontrollable intent, 
His servants he with new acquist 
Of true experience from this great event 
With peace and consolation hath dismist, 
And calm of mind all passion spent.³

From the physical aspect we saw that the comparisons between Samson in the poem and John Milton in actual life are quite similar. Samson portrays Milton in his essential characteristics. Milton was a man gone blind. Milton was a man, who according to his own admission, was sadly deceived by woman. Milton was a man overpowered by misfortune, apparently deserted by his Creator, certainly deserted and jeered at by the English people.

Not only from the physical aspect, but from the intellectual and spiritual aspects as well, we saw that the comparisons between Samson in the poem and Milton in actual life are likewise quite similar. The undercurrents of thought in the drama are an expression of Milton's major moral notions: the ultimate triumph of

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reason over passion; the subject of divine election; the freedom of action and personal infallibility given the intellectually competent man.

By the juxtaposition of citations from *Samson Agonistes* against those embodied in Milton's earlier poetic and prose compositions, a comparison and an evaluation of the ideas expressed in each was indicated. Stoll, in *Poets and Playwrights*, said about Milton: "Life was bitter to him, his outlook upon it was severe, and he died in his enemies' days." 4

The similarity in the majority of instances was quite obvious. The tone in which the same ideas were expressed, however, was modified. Bombastic and almost vulgar in his prose writings, calmly subdued and masterful in his sonnets, Milton was vitally dramatic in his major epics and especially in his drama, *Samson Agonistes*. And herein lies the art of the *Agonistes*.

While speaking to his father, Manoa, Samson's prayer, tinged, as it seems, with a despairing note, yet in the context, resigned and hopeful, might logically be a final pronouncement of John Milton's spirit:

This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,
No long petition, speedy death,

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The close of all my miseries, and the balm. 5

That additional intensive study of Samson Agonistes is still being undertaken and will continue to be made by Miltonic scholars cannot be denied. The subject offers too many possibilities for the opposite to be true. Menzies' closing statement of his analysis of the poem confirms this statement:

Of all Milton's works, Samson Agonistes is the one which has advanced most in contemporary criticism. A few critics, indeed, Mr. Belloc, for example, are inclined, not without exaggeration, to rank it as his strongest monument... The simplicity of its composition is in its favour with the present-day public. 6

Saurat summarizes the poem as follows. His appraisal may very well be a summary of the content of this thesis. However, he does not stress the artistic aspect sufficiently.

Samson Agonistes is Milton's literary and philosophical testament. It is a pure jewel, nearly as splendid and much more human than Paradise Lost. In Samson, Milton takes up once more all the main themes of his thinking and works them out in a simpler and broader manner than in Paradise Lost... In Samson, Milton gives a threefold picture of life: first, of man's life in general; then of the history of England...and lastly, of Milton's own life, wrecked in hope, blind and poor, and meditating and perpetrating the glorious revenge of Paradise Lost. 7

Thus, in conclusion we maintain that even though Milton did
not deliberately try to write a disguised autobiography, the poem very definitely has an autobiographical tone. Moreover, this personal element does not diminish Samson Agonistes' value as a literary work of art. Even conceding these marked personal elements, the Agonistes is not less an idealized portrayal of universal human experience. Milton universalized experiences which at one and the same time are intensely personal to himself, to the historical Samson, and likewise common to the human race at large. The more intensely personal the experience out of which an author weaves his poem, the more value does that experience have as art when it is transported to the realm of the universal and the ideal. Human nature of all ages and climes is fundamentally the same. Consequently, Samson Agonistes is a better poem for having been drawn from Milton's own life.

Written during the closing period of the poet's life, the subject, the theme, and the form of the composition were such as to enable Milton, although unintentionally, yet definitely to portray something of himself in his created character, Samson. The poem gives every indication of character insight. Successful writers accomplish this through the identification of themselves with their characters in the imaginative sphere. Just as an actor's stage role is more convincing in proportion as he develops the individuality of the character he is portraying at any given moment, so the dramatic poet's verse is more alive and humanly stirring in proportion as he vitalizes the spirit and the theme
of the characters and the situations in his drama.

    The suspense-note in the Agonistes is skillfully handled. Finally, the classical style, the pathos, the loftiness of the subject enabled Milton to present John Milton to the world as Samson Agonistes. This makes his entire treatment of the poem sympathetic and convincing. In Samson Agonistes Milton speaks as any true artist generally speaks, "ex abundantia cordis."
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APPENDIX A
SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

A list of John Milton's major poetic and prose writings according to the actual and estimated dates of publication.

Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1625</td>
<td>On the Death of A Fair Infant</td>
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<tr>
<td>1626-1639</td>
<td>Epigrams and Elegies</td>
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<tr>
<td>1627</td>
<td>At A Vacation Exercise in College</td>
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<td>1629</td>
<td>On the Morning of Christ's Nativity</td>
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<td>1630</td>
<td>On Shakespeare</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Passion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Song on A May Morning</td>
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<tr>
<td>1630-1632</td>
<td>Arcades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1630-1655</td>
<td>Psalms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1630-1658</td>
<td>Sonnets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1631</td>
<td>An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>On the University Carrier</td>
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<tr>
<td>1632-1633</td>
<td>Ode on Time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>On the Circumcision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>At A Solemn Musick</td>
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<td>1632-1634</td>
<td>L'Allegro</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Il Penseroso</td>
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65
1634 --- **Comus**

1637 --- **Lycidas**

1658-1665 --- **Paradise Lost**

1665-1667 --- **Paradise Regained**

1666-1670 --- **Samson Agonistes**

**Prose**

1626-1666 --- **Familiar Letters**

1630-1635 --- **Brief History of Moscovia**

1641 --- **Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England**

--- **Of Prelatical Episcopacy**

--- **Animadversions**

1642 --- **The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty**

--- **An Apology for Smectymnuus**

1643 --- **The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce**

1644 --- **The Judgment of Martin Bucer Touching Divorce**

--- **Of Education**

--- **Areopagitica**

1645 --- **Tetrachordon**

--- **Colasterion**

1649 --- **The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates**

--- **Eikonoklastes**

1651 --- **First Defense of John Milton, Englishman, for the People of England**

1655 --- **Second Defense of John Milton, Englishman, for the People of England**
1655-1660 --- The Christian Doctrine

1659 --- Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes

--- Considerations Touching the Likliest Means to Remove Hirelings Out of the Church

--- The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth

1660 --- The Present Means and Brief Delineation of a Free Commonwealth In a Letter to General Monk

1670 --- History of Britain

1673 --- Of True Religion and Heresy, Schism, Toleration
APPENDIX B

DIVISION OF THE SAMSON AGONISTES

For the sake of convenience the dramatic poem, Samson Agonistes, may be divided into five sections which would correspond to the division into acts of a classical drama.

PART ONE -- Lines 1-325

This section strikes the keynote of the play. It supplies background. It consists entirely of a discussion between Samson and the Chorus.

PART TWO -- Lines 326-709

This section introduces Samson's father, Manoa. His departure is followed by the second appearance of the Chorus.

PART THREE -- Lines 710-1060

This section contains the painful meeting between Samson and Dalila.

PART FOUR -- Lines 1061-1440

In this section Samson is taunted by the Philistine giant, Harapha. Following his departure, Samson leaves the stage with the messenger sent to bring him before the Philistine noblemen.

PART FIVE -- This section opens with Manoa and the Chorus on the stage. The Philistine messenger enters bearing the tidings of the tragic event which befell the Philistines through Samson's remarkable feat. The drama closes on a note of triumph as Manoa praises his son's act. The Chorus closes the poem with a tribute to the unsearchable ways of Providence through one of Its champions.
APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Louis S. Kaluzsa, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English, West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

1/9/47  
Date  

Signature of Adviser