

## SAMSON'S "DEATH SO NOBLE"

AKIRA ARAI\*

As the late Professor A. S. P. Woodhouse properly warned in his pregnant essay on *Samson Agonistes*, critics, "misled by the prefatory emphasis on Greek models", have too much assumed that Milton meant "not only to follow them in structure and convention but to reproduce their spirit and effect".<sup>1</sup> W. R. Parker (to take a famous example) conjectured that "the whole piece has an impressiveness which makes it truly Hellenic."<sup>2</sup> Recently Douglas Bush supported Parker's argument, observing that "no specifically Christian doctrines are admitted, no clear statement of the working of grace, not even faith in Samson's immortality. . . ."<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, numbers of critics who lay stress on the definitely Hebraic or Christian coloring of the drama—Sir Richard C. Jebb (Parker's worthy opponent), F. Michael Krouse, John M. Steadman<sup>4</sup> among many others. Aligning himself with the latter position, the writer of this essay will show that *Samson Agonistes* is not a Christian drama generally, but is rather a Christian *Puritan* drama.

## I

In the prefatory epistle to the drama, Milton makes it clear that

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\* Associate Professor at Tokyo University of Education.

<sup>1</sup> "Tragic Effect in *Samson Agonistes*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXVIII (1958-59), 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in "Samson Agonistes"* (Baltimore, 1937), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> *John Milton: A Sketch of His Life* (New York, 1964), p. 200. See also Marjorie H. Nicolson, *John Milton: A Reader's Guide to His Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Richard Jebb, "Samson Agonistes and the Hellenic Drama," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, III (1908), 1-8; F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton, 1949); John M. Steadman, "'Faithful Champion': The Theological Basis of Milton's Hero of Faith," *Anglia*, LXXVII (1959), 12-28.

though the tragedy is printed as a poem without “Division into Act and Scene” indispensable for stage production, it is constructed on the Greek dramatic principles. And editors have long cudged their brains to decide how they should divide the drama into five parts. The result has been so diverse that critics, as one prosodist playfully comments,<sup>1</sup> “concur . . . only on two points, viz., that the first act begins at the first line and the fifth concludes at the last”. Yet, practically, editors are in virtual agreement on their allocation of lines. The following is, for example, the allocation made by J. B. Broadbent who claims to use the divisions of a tragedy as Aristotle gives them in his *Poetics*.<sup>2</sup>

Prologos (1-114)

Parode (115-175)

1st Episode: Samson and Chorus (176-292)

1st Stasimon (293-325)

2nd Episode: Samson and Manoa (326-651)

2nd Stasimon (652-709)

3rd Episode: Samson and Dalila (710-1009)

3rd Stasimon (1010-1060)

4th Episode: Samson and Harapha (1061-1267)

4th Stasimon (1268-1296)

5th Episode: Samson and Officer (1297-1426)

5th Stasimon (1427-1440)

Exode (1441-1659)

Kommos (1660-1758)

Presumably no reader of the drama will find this division unnatural or unacceptable.

I shall not dwell on the allotment of lines in the drama, but would mention that the thematic announcement is repeated by the Chorus both in the 2nd Stasimon and the 4th. From the Prologos to the

<sup>1</sup> S. Ernest Sprott, *Milton's Art of Prosody* (Oxford, 1953), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Milton: Comus and Samson Agonistes* (London, 1961), pp. 39-59. Broadbent's division is almost the same as that made by H. M. Percival, *Samson Agonistes* (London, 1890), pp. xii-xiii.

2nd Episode, Samson's state of mind is at its lowest: he is a spectacle of tragic woe, bewailing his folly in divulging the secret gift of God to Dalila, his wife. The sight of Manoa, his father, wakes "another inward grief" (l. 330) to Samson. He reproves Manoa for arraigning God's providence and accepts full responsibility for his own disgrace: "Sole Author I, sole cause" (l. 376). Refusing the hope which his father holds out to him, Samson falls into a profound despondency and prays for speedy death. Feeling the depth of Samson's dejection, the Chorus abstains from inflicting upon him moral reflections: "Extolling Patience as the truest fortitude" (l. 654). This kind of message has (they consider) little effect on a suffering man "Unless he feel within / Some source of consolation from above" (ll. 663-64).

In the 3rd Episode, Dalila enters with blandishment, luxury and lust. Samson's mind is roused from the former despondency, and he bitterly dismisses her as a false hyaena. In the 4th Episode, the Chorus observes the approach of Harapha, a Philistine braggart soldier. The blind Samson is roused again and challenges the enemy giant to single combat. Samson confesses "My trust is in the living God" (l. 1140). Harapha taunts, but declining the challenge, departs. In these episodes Samson's tone is unmistakably reproving to Dalila and Harapha. Discerning Samson's rising confidence in divine dispensation, the Chorus offers to Samson two ways of delivering the oppressed from tyrannic power. One is martial valor "With plain heroic magnitude of mind" (l. 1279); the other is heroic patience under suffering. But as they perceive that Samson is, as he was not in the 1st and 2nd Episodes, now one who trusts in the living God, i.e. the "consolation from above", the Chorus unhesitatingly returns to the counsel of patience:

But patience is more oft the exercise  
Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude.  
(ll. 1287-88)

At this moment the theme of patience appears again.

With the opening of the 5th Episode the swift approach of the Philistine Officer is announced. He delivers his message: Samson is ordered in the name of the Philistine lords to exhibit his strength at the festival of Dagon. Samson refuses emphatically for religious reasons. The Chorus tries to reason with Samson in vain. His attitude of refusal is too uncompromising to anticipate a sudden change of his mind. Yet, just before the officer comes back, he unexpectedly feels "Some rouzing motions" (l. 1382), an inward prompting from above, and agrees to go with him. The Chorus blesses him as he departs, invoking some special manifestation of "the Holy One / Of *Israel*" (ll. 1427-28) on his behalf. In "a spacious Theatre" he amuses the Philistines with feats of strength. A Messenger arrives and tells Manoa and the Chorus distractedly the story of what happened next. The death of the whole Philistine lords, and of Samson himself. At the sad report Manoa stands aghast a while, but before long finds a source of consolation in his son's "life Heroic" (l. 1711) and his "death so noble" (l. 1724) as a natural consequence of God's employment. According to the Messenger, Samson "*patient* but undaunted" has submitted himself to the will of the Eternal (l. 1623. *Italics added.*). Samson will serve (the father continues) as a moral *exemplum* to the Hebrew valiant youth and virgins (ll. 1733-44). The Chorus exalts their God as He "to his faithful Champion hath in place / Bore witness gloriously" (ll. 1751-51), and withdraws in "calm of mind all passion spent" (l. 1758).

We have so far seen the three rising levels of Samson's state of mind. From the outset to the 2nd Episode the protagonist's frame of mind is at the lowest ebb, feeling deserted by divine disposition (l. 632). At the middle of the drama (Doctor Johnson must *not* be allowed to consider the drama "to want a middle"), Samson's mind is aroused—so heightened that he consistently rebukes those whom he encounters, Dalila and Harapha. T. S. K. Scott-Craig is undoubtedly right not to distinguish Dalila and Harapha decisively as successive tempters by fraud and violence: "The Fortitude and Patience of Samson are tried in the middle of

the play by the visitations of Dalila and Harapha."<sup>1</sup> Professor Don Cameron Allen takes the Harapha scene as "the most important scene of all, for it is the hinge of the tragedy".<sup>2</sup> In a sense the scene is indeed the climax of the drama: it is through his victory over Harapha that Samson is to make his way out toward the final surrender to the unknowable direction of Providence. In the 5th Episode, Samson appears as the Suffering Servant of God (as it were) who "carried our sorrow" and "was afflicted, yet opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53: 4, 7). In the final Stasimon and the concluding Exode and Kommos, Samson's death is admired as "glorious" and "victorious": Samson's whole life is glorified. He is now celebrated, being compared to "that self-begott'n bird", the Phoenix (l. 1699): he is translated from the world of death to that of life, from the level of Mutability to that of Eternity. Samson has made a heroic journey from the realm of despair to the goal of glorification through trial and suffering.

Analysing the drama on the basis of the Chorus' counsels of the virtue of patience (and of the Messenger's report of the Israelite hero as "patient"), one will notice that Milton has divided the drama *thematically* into three parts and may be permitted to surmise that this is one of the reasons why the dramatist did not indicate a clear division of lines as necessary for stage production. Moreover the three rising levels of Samson's moral pilgrimage—despair, hope and glorification—exactly coincide with the architectonics of *Lycidas*.<sup>3</sup> Both in the elegy and the drama, the first movement evinces that the protagonist lies utterly wrecked physically or mentally ("My self my Sepulcher, a moving Grave", l. 102). The second movement is that in which characters are about to overthrow the perfect control of adversity, and their voice is harshly rebuking:

<sup>1</sup> "Concerning Milton's Samson," *Renaissance News*, V (1952), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore, 1954), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> See my essay, "The Epic Element in *Lycidas*," *The Rising Generation* (Tokyo), CXIV (1969), 312-13. Abstracted in *Milton Newsletter* (Ohio University), III (1969), 32.

Camus, St. Peter and the reviving Samson against Dalila and Harapha. In the third movement both protagonists are described as eventually arriving at the highest world of bliss, the ultimate goal through ordeal and tribulation: Lycidas apotheosized as “the Genius of the shore” and Samson ritually raised to the level of moral inspiration to the nation. In *Samson Agonistes* the three movements are concluded by the successive returns to the moral of patience. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the virtue first came to the fore in the “Sonnet on his Blindness” (? 1652), and has exerted a formative influence on his post-Restoration poetic figures of Adam, Christ and Samson. In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, the poet declared that his “only Argument” would be “the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom” (IX, 31–32). *Paradise Regained* is the epic in which Christ, “patient Son of God” (IV, 420), appears to conquer Sin and Death eventually “By Humiliation and strong Sufferance” (I, 160).

## II

Most critics of *Samson Agonistes*, particularly since the publication of E. M. W. Tillyard’s *Milton* (1930), are very likely able to agree that the theme of the play is the protagonist’s spiritual growth, i.e. regeneration. This directs our attention to the theme and pattern of the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton is mainly concerned with the regeneration of Adam. As I have observed in my essay on these two books,<sup>2</sup> the future history recounted by Michael is a description of the manifestation of God’s design of salvation for those who had sinned which involved His entering into covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David

<sup>1</sup> “Milton’s Heroism in His *Sonnet XIX*,” *Research Bulletin, Dept. of General Education, Nagoya University* (Japan), XII (1968), 1–13. Abstracted in *Milton Newsletter*, II (1968), 54.

<sup>2</sup> “Adam and Redemptive History,” *Research Bulletin, Dept. of Humanities, Tokyo University of Education*, LXXVIII (1970), 1–26. Abstracted in *Milton Quarterly*, IV (1970), 33.

and finally His sending Jesus, the Messiah, into the world for the accomplishment of His will. God's order to Michael was: "intermix / My Cov'nant in the womans seed renewd; / So send them forth, though sorrowing, yet in peace" (XI, 115-17). These lines demonstrate that His envoy's duty is to inform Adam and Eve of the renewal of His redemptive will, apparant in the form of His Covenant of Grace. The last books of the epic, therefore, are to be construed as a document that was penned to show that in God's purpose the frame of history is redemptive. It is exactly within this redemptive history that Adam's experience of regeneration takes place: his regeneration results from the fact that he lives, or determines to live, in accordance with the covenant revealed in sacred history.

The idea of a covenant was of crucial importance among Puritans in the age of Milton. The Civil War, especially the latter half of it, was fought, it may be said, between the party that adhered to the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), the last line of Presbyterian and royalist defense, and the party that attached more importance to the Solemn Oath of the King's Coronation (1625). Among the Parliamentarians the story of Asa in the 14th and 15th chapters of 2 Chronicles was, as we shall see, undoubtedly one to which they referred when they discussed the meaning of a covenant. Asa was the Judaeon king who entered into a covenant with, and solely depended on, the Lord, achieved an overwhelming victory over mighty Zerah the Ethiopian, and deprived his mother Maachah of her rank as queen mother because she had made an idol for the worship of Asherah. Azariah said to Asa: "The Lord is with you, while ye be with him, . . . but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you" (2 Chron. 15: 2). The people under the reign of Asa "entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and with all their soul. . . . And the Lord gave them rest round about" (15: 12, 15). The figure of the Judah's king gave the Parliamentarians a logical basis of religious and political reforms. From the very same text Stephen Marshall (? 1594-1655) delivered a sermon on the first day of the Long Parliament (Novem-

ber 17, 1640).<sup>1</sup> And about the same time Milton entered the same text in his Cambridge Manuscript as a possible subject for a tragedy: "Asa or Æthiopes. 2 Chron. 14 with the deposing his mother, and burning her Idol".<sup>2</sup> In fact the story of Asa was often in Milton's mind, when he thought of the idea of a covenant (*Works*, V, 209-11; XV, 215; XVII, 111, etc.).

In the *De Doctrina Christiana* Milton explains the relationship of a covenant (personal as well as national) between God and man by adopting the same text of 2 Chronicles: "The Lord is with you, while ye be with him, . . . but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you" (*Works*, XIV, 113; XVI, 79). This text very well represented the general mind of those who claimed themselves to be God's elect or saints in Milton's time. "The word covenant", William Haller eloquently expounds, "stood for an idea which has often been advanced in the pulpit in mitigation of the stark determinism of the pure doctrine of predestination but not of the responsibility placed upon the elect by the gifts and opportunities granted to them."<sup>3</sup> A covenant implies certain conditions to be performed, not by one only, but by both the parties. It therefore takes for granted that (where God enters into a covenant with man) "some remnants of the divine image still exists in us" (*Works*, XV, 209). For Milton the doctrine of total depravity was a Calvinistic fable. Endued with the choice of reason man should be self-knowing, yet freely obedient to the highest dispensation so as to "justify the wayes of God to men".

In at least two parts of the *De Doctrina* Milton maintains that by eating the forbidden fruit Adam broke the covenant with God and made an irrevocable step toward sin and death (*Works*, XIV, 81; XV, 183). From this point of view, *Paradise Lost* is the epic in

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<sup>1</sup> William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of John Milton* (New York, 1931-38), XVIII, 239. Citations from Milton's prose and poetry are to this edition. Hence cited as *Works*.

<sup>3</sup> Haller, *op. cit.*, p. 18.



which Milton celebrates the progress of Adam's spiritual growth—the re-establishment of a sacred (covenant) relationship between God and Adam. This leads us to the conjecture that *Samson Agonistes*, a drama of the process through which regeneration is effected, might very well be concerned with the hero's spiritual growth from violation of the covenant to its restoration.

### III

In a memorable essay on "*Samson Agonistes* and the Geneva Bible", George W. Whiting has suggested that Milton might have been influenced by Protestant interpretations of Scripture, which were readily accessible in the marginal commentary of the popular Geneva Bible.<sup>1</sup> In one part of this essay, the author emphasizes: "In the Geneva Bible the annotations on the story of Samson . . . indicate that between Samson and God there is a spiritual relationship that does not appear in the Biblical text."<sup>2</sup> This is an acute observation, indeed. And it is Samson's breach of this very "spiritual relationship" that makes him lie down bewailing in the darkest days. Samson was a "Nazarite", who according to the Geneva commentary "shulde be separate from the worlde and dedicate to God".<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, it is not the loss of strength and fame that torments him, but the loss of that special relationship with God.

Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd  
As of a person *separate to God*,  
Design'd for great exploits; . . . ?  
(ll. 30–32. Italics added.)

The "sense of Heav'ns desertion" (l. 632) that haunts him throughout the first movement of the drama is bitter, because he (having been infatuated with Dalila, his wife) broke God's decree by di-

<sup>1</sup> *Milton and This Pendant World* (Austin, 1958), pp. 201–22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Judges 13: 5. All quotations are from the 1560 edition.

vulging His sacred gift to her. God forsook him, because Samson forsook Him. Here Samson's unique (covenant) relationship with God was irrevocably broken.

The breach of Samson's secret relationship with God is discernible in his boast of his "Heav'n-gifted strength" (l. 36) and his "worthiest deeds" (l. 276) done by it:

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, after some proof  
 Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond  
 The Sons of *Anac*, famous now and blaz'd,  
 Fearless of danger, like a petty God  
 I walk'd about admir'd of all and dreaded  
 On hostile ground, none daring my affront.  
(ll. 522-31)

Samson's words could naturally be regarded, say, as Satan's, if they were taken out of context. Samson is on the verge of the sin of pride, which Milton construes as the vice (opposed by him to "magnanimity") of which a man becomes guilty when he "values himself without merit, or more highly than his merits deserve, or is elated by some insignificant circumstance" (*Works*, XVII, 247). Samson was mighty, because "divine instinct" made him mighty, not his own "high exploits". He fell into "foul effeminacy" (l. 410) as a punishment for his self-sufficiency. We are aware that he feels remorse for having had that kind of false magnanimity, yet at the same time is not entirely exempt from self-oriented heroism, "acts indeed heroic". That he constantly returns to the self-indulgent memories of his own martial prowess implies how far he stands from the Almighty, the real source of his might. He is simply parted from God. The tide of vainglorious statement of his valor is at the climax in the first movement of the drama, and rapidly goes out when in the second his regeneration begins.

It is through his encounters with Dalila and Harapha that Samson does arouse himself from lethargy and win through to real recovery. "My trust is in the living God" (l. 1140). No such confession could he have made before. To Harapha who has come to gloat over a fallen Israelite champion, Samson retorts:

yet [I] despair not of his final pardon  
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye  
Gracious to re-admit the suppliant. (ll. 1171-73)

Here Samson's regeneration has already begun, and the motionless inertia of despair has been conquered: in the previous movement Samson did repulse Manoa's idea that God may pardon and employ one "who imploring mercy sues for life" (l. 512). Like Adam of *Paradise Lost* who in the process of regeneration feels God "Bending his eare" and "peace returnd / Home to [his] Brest" (XI, 152-54), Samson, now able to expect His ear "ever open", may most likely be assured that inner peace has returned to his breast and has brought about the change from passive to active. And when he answers Harapha:

I was not private but a person rais'd  
With strength sufficient and command from Heav'n  
To free my Countrey, (ll. 1211-13)

he regains both the conviction of his own responsibility and the proper notion of a mutual (covenant) relationship ("not private") with God.

From the outset of the last movement of the drama, Samson follows the path (one of two heroic paths) suggested by the Chorus—the path of patience, like that of the Suffering Servant. Patience means neither inaction nor stoical indifference. "Patience is", as Milton comments in the *De Doctrina*, "that whereby we acquiesce in the promises of God, through a confident reliance on his divine providence, power, and goodness, and bear inevitable evils with equanimity, as the dispensation of the supreme Father, and sent for our good" (*Works*, XVII, 67). Paul R. Baumgartner is entirely

right in writing, "For Milton . . . the patient Christian, with faith in Divine Providence, seeks to know God's will and to act according to it, leaving the results to God."<sup>1</sup>

The officer comes to summon Samson to appear before the Philistine lords and people on Dagon's festal day. He refuses point-blank: his religious laws forbid him to attend at the heathen rites.

*Officer.* Regard thy self, this will offend them highly.

*Samson.* My self? my conscience and internal peace.

(ll. 1333-34)

Samson's confession of inner peace is extremely important, because it indicates that he is now really a man of patience who bears, in the manner of the *De Doctrina*, inevitable evils with *equanimity*. Peace and real tranquillity of mind (Milton understands) proceed from a consciousness of justification (*Works*, XVI, 49). It is this patient Samson who before long feels "Some rouzing motions" (l. 1382)—the divine promptings—that suggest him charismatically to be present at idolatrous rites. "Some rouzing motions" are the divine impulse, the Spirit Who is (in Milton's words) "the earnest and seal of the *covenant*" (*Italics added. Works*, XVI, 97). That Samson feels the spiritual voice within himself means that he now stands in a special (covenant) relation with the Lord.

To Samson who decides to devote himself heart and soul to the living God and departs for the jaws of death, the Chorus give pathetic parting words beginning with the lines: "Go, and the Holy One / Of *Israel* be thy guide. . . ." (ll. 1427-28). Here the reader should not overlook that the phrase "the Holy One of Israel"—meaning God—is a favorite of Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, with whom, so far as our records go, it originates. Holiness was made absolutely ethical in Isaiah's theology. To him the idea of God's holiness was the central and most essential attribute to God, far more so than His power or majesty. And this title of God was used with special frequency by Isaiah, of course, and by Second

<sup>1</sup> "Milton and Patience," *SP*, LX (1963), 208.

Isaiah, the recorder of the famous descriptions of the Suffering Servant (Is. 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13-53: 12). Having in mind such connotation about "the Holy One of Israel", we are ready to guess that the Chorus very likely directs Samson's attention to the way of life shown by that patient Servant of the Lord who up to the last submitted himself to, and obeyed absolutely to, the will of the Supreme Being.

Obedient indeed was Samson to death: "he though blind of sight," as the Semichorus sing, "With inward eyes illuminated" (ll. 1687-89), i.e. regenerated. After a long silence during which Manoa has barely overcome sorrow, he checks the villagers' outburst of grief and finds a source of consolation in the sublime manner of his son's "life Heroic" (l. 1711) and his "death so noble" (l. 1724), which would ennoble him (the father expects) into a moral *exemplum* to Judaeon people. Yet to Manoa

which is best and happiest yet, all this  
With God not parted from him, as was feard,  
But favouring and assisting to the end.

(ll. 1718-20)

This is *the* reason why he sees consolation in his son's death: Samson died to be restored to harmony with God. The father is able to find a sacred (covenant) relationship re-established between God and his son. Samson has returned to this relationship which really mattered to him and cost his whole life. As the Geneva commentary asserts, "Yet had [Samson] not his strength againe, til he had called vpon God, and reconciled himselfe."<sup>1</sup> Again one may well remember Azariah's advice to Asa: "The Lord is with you, while ye be with him. . . ." Toward the close of the drama Manoa is encouraged by his full admission that God entered into a covenant with the chosen individual and that "*Samson* hath quit himself / Like *Samson*" (ll. 1709-10) in his conviction of personal responsibility to God. Consecrating his life, Samson has

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Judges 16: 22.

undergone his mental evolution from a breaker of the covenant to its observer, and was finally received into the world of eternal bliss.

## IV

As A. S. P. Woodhouse has warned some ten years ago, commentators of *Samson Agonistes* have (even in the last decade) too much emphasized the relationship between the drama and Greek tragedies. And they have investigated sources of Milton's idea of catharsis in the drama in foreign models, ancient and contemporary.<sup>1</sup> But taking into account our assumption that the theme of the drama might very well be Samson's mental restoration as an adherent to the covenant with the Eternal, Milton's idea of catharsis, despite his Aristotelian avowal in his prefatory note, must be Protestant, even Puritan. It is noteworthy that in the very same epistle Milton admits he has been interested in the commentaries of the then popular German Calvinist theologian, David Paraeus (1548-1622), whose work on the Revelation was published in 1628 and was translated into English in 1644. Milton writes, "*Paraeus*, commenting on the *Revelation*, divides the whole Book as a Tragedy into Acts. . . ." His concept of the Revelation is in exact accordance with Protestant exegetes which often linked, as Barbara K. Lewalski recently pointed out, the Samson story typologically with the Book of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> "At times his [i.e. Paraeus's] use of the term 'tragic' refers", Mrs. Lewalski argues, "to the defeat and final overthrow of Antichrist and his empire. . . ."<sup>3</sup> It is quite natural, then, that Milton should stand in line with Protestant ex-

<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Sellin, "Sources of Milton's Catharsis: A Reconsideration," *JEGP*, LX (1961), 712-30; Martin E. Mueller, "Pathos and Katharsis in *Samson Agonistes*," *ELH*, XXXI (1964), 156-74, and "Sixteenth-Century Italian Criticism and Milton's Theory of Catharsis," *Studies in English Literature* (Houston), VI (1966), 139-50.

<sup>2</sup> "*Samson Agonistes* and the 'Tragedy' of the Apocalypse," *PMLA*, LXXXV (1970), 1050-62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1051.

egesis of the Revelation and lay stress on Samson's final victory over the Philistines in the form of a "tragedy".

If the concept of the "tragedy" of the apocalypse was accepted by Milton as I think it was, it is proper to consider that his concept of catharsis was also influenced by the Protestants' redemptive (or providential) theory of history. God advises Michael to give Adam His promise of intermixing His "Cov'nant in the womans seed renewd" and to send forth Adam and his wife "though sorrowing, yet in peace" (*P. L.*, XI, 116-17). This is God's demonstration that the Angel's duty is to inform the Parents of the renewal of His redemptive will. In these words of promise there is a curious coupling of two important words: "Cov'nant" and "peace". Michael is to talk to Adam that the rainbow appearing to Noah is a sign "Betok'ning peace from God, and Cov'nant new" (XI, 867). In reference to this coupling I should mention Milton's own invocation to God in the closing part of *Of Reformation in England* (1641): "O thou . . . of thy *free grace* didst motion *Peace*, and termes of Cov'nant with us . . . , stay us in this felicitie. . . ." (*Works*, III, 77) The Israelite people under the guidance of Asa "entered into a covenant", we remember, "to seek the Lord God. . . . And the Lord gave them *rest* round about" (2 Chron. 15: 12, 15. Italics added.). Peace resides where man meets his Creator and is deprived of every chance of alienating himself from Him, and where things are reduced to order. The basic thought in the covenant theory is, as Gottfried Quell has written, "that God is willing to set His covenant partner in a *shalom* status".<sup>1</sup>

In the depth of sorrow and distress, Manoa feels "what may quiet us in a death so noble" (l. 1724). And the Chorus is dismissed "With peace and consolation . . . / And calm of mind all passion spent" (ll. 1757-58). This catharsis is not simply a purgatory alleviation of emotions: "not merely aesthetic or even didactic", as Sherman H. Hawkins has admirably said, "it is redemp-

<sup>1</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (tr. G. W. Bromiley), II (1964), 122.

tive.”<sup>1</sup> Catharsis of this kind becomes effective in the life of one of the elect who has developed from a self-motivated agent to a humbled instrument of the divine will. “Catharsis must imply . . .,” as B. Rajan argues, “the rediscovery of the image of God in man”.<sup>2</sup> For Milton catharsis was the peace of mind granted by the living God to those who entered into a unique relationship, that is, a covenant, with Him: “From a consciousness of justification proceed peace and real tranquillity of mind” (*De Doctrina: Works*, XVI, 47).

In the Puritan imagination of the spiritual life as pilgrimage and battle, what happened to every human life was formalized by the process: election, vocation, justification, sanctification, and glorification.<sup>3</sup> This paradigmatic Christian experience is discernible, it is now clear, in the threefold pilgrimage of Samson: despair, hope and glorification. And his pilgrimage was quietly closed as his final return to the covenant with God was fully realized. *Samson Agonistes* arose out of the Puritan theology of covenant that had consistently supported the Puritan saga of spiritual life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In a well-quoted passage of *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642) Milton lists five functions of a serious national poet: (1) to instill virtue into the nation, (2) “to allay the perturbations of the mind”, (3) to celebrate the glory of God, (4) to deplore the relapses of England (*Works*, III, 238). All qualities listed here are mixed, amalgamated, and made whole in *Samson Agonistes*. Toward the end of his life<sup>4</sup> Milton arrived at the realm of poetical, as well as

<sup>1</sup> “Samson’s Catharsis,” *Milton Studies*, ed. James D. Simmonds, II (Pittsburgh, 1970), 216.

<sup>2</sup> *The Lofty Rhyme: A Study of Milton’s Major Poetry* (London, 1970), p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1938), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> William R. Parker, in “The Date of *Samson Agonistes*,” *PQ*, XXVIII (1949), 145–66, put the date of composition to “the period between 1647–33”; Allan H. Gilbert, in “Is *Samson Agonistes* Unfinished?” *PQ*, XXVIII (1949), 98–106, to an earlier time, perhaps not much later than the Trinity Manuscript in which Milton’s five sketches of the Samson story are collected. But Ernest Sirluck’s attempt, in



ethical, accomplishment. And a full generation had elapsed since he first aspired to be a serious national poet after being "Church-outed by the Prelats".

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"Milton's Idle Right Hand," *JEGP*, LX (1961), 773-81, to rebuff these arguments for an early date, is convincing enough. John Shawcross's endeavor for an early date, "The Chronology of Milton's Major Poems," *PMLA*, LXXVI (1961), 345-58, in defense of his honored teacher, Parker, has not gained wide acceptance. A marked exception would be John Carey's edition of *The Poems of John Milton* (London, 1968).

The fact that the theme and pattern of the drama is undoubtedly characterized by the Puritan theology of covenant and the Christian virtue of patience will indicate to justify the traditional date of the drama. It is safe to say that the theme of Christian patience was adopted by Milton for the first time in the "Sonnet on his Blindness" (?1652). Therefore the moral that "patience is more oft the exercise / Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude," seems not to have appeared before the composition of the sonnet. Moreover since the covenant theology (in the form of poetry) first appeared in Michael's instruction of future history in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, it is most unlikely that *Samson Agonistes*, in which the theology plays an indispensable role, was produced before the grand epic. *Paradise Regained* is in theme and structure linked directly with the longer epic. The drama is, therefore, no doubt one of Milton's last poems, more probably the last.