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An evaluation of the autobiographical interpretation of Samson Agonistes

Edward P. Crockett

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An Evaluation of the Autobiographical Interpretation of Samson Agonistes

By Edward P. Crockett

A Thesis
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and the
Department of English

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Edward Pepel
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I conceived my self to be now not as mine own person, but as a member incorporate into that truth whereof I was persuaded, and whereof I had declared openly to be a partaker.

(Milton, An Apology for Smectymnuus)
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Certainly, every reader of *Samson Agonistes* who is at all familiar with the circumstances of Milton's life, his thought, and the history of his times has been attracted by obvious parallels between the poet and certain aspects of his dramatic creation, and he may understandably assume that the presentation of the sufferings of Samson constitute intentional, hidden autobiography. To assume even the obvious, however, is something too blithely done. A little research into this area of Miltoniana will reveal to him that scholarly opinion concerning *Samson Agonistes* and autobiography is greatly varied and that some scholars are inclined not only to deny the personal content but to place the date of the composition of the drama as early as the middle of the 1640's. Of course, this dating in itself bespeaks a non-autobiographical interpretation because most of the pertinent events and conditions in the life of Milton are of post-Restoration times. The reader may then reconsider the parities upon which he has based his autobiographical theory, and he will most likely find that they are aspects which are perfectly in keeping with the traditional Biblical character of Samson—blind, surrounded by his evil captors, and betrayed by his countrymen and his wife. He will then realize that before he can turn his opinion of autobiography
into a respectable thesis, he must make a scrupulous, verse-by-verse analysis of the poem to discover whether or not there are any instances of strong similarity between Milton and his own Samson which do not easily apply to the Biblical or hermeneutic Samson. Only upon such instances (termed "pure autobiography" in this paper) can be founded the conclusion that Samson Agonistes is an autobiographically significant work.

Such has been my progress in the study of this issue. My thesis is that while the poem is by no means a full allegorical representation of Milton's life or of any particular epoch in his life, it does contain conscious and palpable nuances and overtones which are topical and pertinent to Milton's life, his philosophy and ideals, and the history of his times. After considering the possible sources for Milton's treatment of the Samson story (Chapter I) and a summary of the representative scholarly opinion concerning the autobiographical interpretation and the date of composition (Chapter II), I have comprehended two major purposes in this paper: First, I have pointed out and given an exposition of every instance of autobiographical significance that I have been able to discover in the drama. (Chapter III) Finally, I have given an evaluation of the nature and extent of this subjective incorporation. (Chapters III and IV)

It would be ungrateful of me not to include here an
expression of gratitude to Dr. Nathaniel Henry for the friendly and generous way in which he has given me his time and advice during the academic year of 1965-1966. Not only has he given me valuable ideas concerning this particular project, but he has been ever attentive to imbue all of his graduate students with the methods and proprieties of scholarly research.
CHAPTER I

The most concise literary description of Samson Agonistes is given to us by the poet himself in his Preface, referring to it as "That Sort of Dramatic Poem Which Is Called Tragedy." Throughout this paper, it is necessary to remain conscious of the components of this description. It is a drama; it is poetry; and it is tragedy. Before going into an analysis of the poem and what has been said about it, it is well to consider briefly its construction and content. Although William R. Parker has given a structural delineation according to the traditional Greek drama,¹ I prefer to follow the more general outline of the action as it is presented by Professor Hanford in his Milton Handbook.²

First, we have Samson alone and with the Chorus (lines 1-325): The play begins in medias res, with Samson in bondage under the Philistines, who have put out his eyes and forced him to toil in chains at a mill in Gaza. On this particular day, however, he is allowed to rest while the Philistines celebrate his capture with a holiday and a feast to their idol-god, Dagon. Samson expresses profound grief over his plight, lamenting his fallen condition and, most of all, his blindness.

As he thus complains, a group of Danites—the Chorus in

the play—enters at a distance and comments on the fallen hero and the mutability of fortune, adding to his plaint. After revealing itself to Samson, the group functions as a sounding board for his expressions of disillusionment and his violent outbursts of inward agony. The Chorus contributes to the progress of the drama by supplementing Samson's analysis of his fallen state and by leading him into further reckonings of a more abstractly philosophical nature.

Mr. Hanford's second division concerns Samson and Manoa (lines 326-709): At this point in the play, Manoa, Samson's old father arrives, witnesses his son's abject condition, speaks a panegyric on the warrior's past deeds, and questions the justice of God in the manner of rewarding his faithful servants. Samson reproaches the old man for his opinion and proceeds to tell Manoa of the shameful disclosure of his strength to Dalila, whereupon Manoa makes one of the many ironic statements characteristic of the Greek drama:

\[
\text{I cannot praise thy marriage choises, son,}
\text{Rather approve them not. . . .}
\]  
(S.A. 420-421)  

Manoa tells of the victory feast which the heathens are holding for their god, and he reproaches Samson for the glory which his fall has brought to Dagon.

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3 Douglas Bush, ed. The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton (Boston, 1985). This is my primary source for all of Milton's poetry used in this paper. The three major poems will be documented in the above manner, using the initials of the titles followed by the line numbers.
Manoa's purpose in coming to Gaza is to attempt to gain Samson's release by paying a ransom to his captors, but Samson exlores him to forego that plan and to allow him to remain in his condition of servitude in renumereration for his sins. Thus, Samson reaches his nadir in the drama:

So much I feel my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat; nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself;
My race of glory run, and race of shame,
And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

(S.A. 594-598)

After Manoa leaves to negotiate the ransom, Samson further beemoans his condition, citing physical as well as mental agony, until the Chorus cries, "God of our fathers, what is man!" (S.A. 687) and solicits a divine mitigation of such a harsh sentence.

The third "act," the meeting between Samson and Dalila (lines 710-1060): The approach of Dalila is announced by the Chorus in an extended simile, having as its vehicle a gaily decked sailing-ship. This image of trivialness and frivolity is another of the instances in which Milton uses dramatic irony to point out the full import of Samson's errors. With suppliant tears she comes to implore Samson's forgiveness and to attempt to get him to agree to live with her once again. Samson tries to dismiss her in a burst of temper:

Out, out, hyaena! these are thy wonted arts,
And arts of every woman false like thee. . . .

(S.A. 748-749)
She attempts to offer excuses for her betrayal of his secrets to the Philistines, but he spurns them all and forces her to leave. Samson and the Chorus then exchange ideas on the inferiority of women (S.A. 999-1060).

The next division pictures Samson with Harapha and then with the Philistine officer (lines 1061-1440): Samson is visited by the Philistine giant, Harapha, who boasts of his physical prowess and expresses regret that Samson is blind and can no longer meet him on the field of combat. Despite this, Samson challenges him to mortal combat three times, but Harapha finds excuses and finally departs, as the Chorus describes, "somewhat crestfallen." The Chorus eulogizes Samson as the chosen deliverer of the Israelites. He is praised for his "invincible might," and his "magnitude of mind," but he is told that in his particular situation, patience must be his crowning virtue, indicating that his days of corporeal antagonism against the Philistines are over (another instance of the undercurrent of dramatic irony which runs throughout the play).

An officer of the enemy comes to summon Samson to participate in the games at Dagon's feast, but the hero shows his fortitude by refusing to honor their god. After the officer leaves, however, Samson is suddenly inspired to comply with the wishes of the Philistines:

"...I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.
(S.A. 1381-1383)

The fifth "act" tells of Samson at the feast to Dagon..."
(lines 1441-1758): After Samson's departure, old Manoa returns to the group of Danites with high hopes of redeeming his son (further tragic irony). As he and the Chorus talk of the time when Samson will finally return home, a sound of great calamity and destruction pierces the sky. From a Danite messenger, the group receives an account of the destruction of the temple (or theater) housing the feast and the annihilation of the flower of the population of Gaza wrought by Samson's feat of strength. The Semichorus likens the hero to the immortal phoenix, and Manoa sets the closing tone:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,  
Nor much more cause; Samson hath quit himself  
Like Samson, and heroically hath finished  
A life heroic, on his enemies  
Fully revenged. . . .  

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise, or blame; nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

(S.A. 1708-1712, 1721-1724)

The ultimate source for the story of Samson is Judges XIII-XVI, telling of his divinely inspired birth, his abortive marriage to the woman of Timnath, his warring with the Philistines, his involvement with Dalilah and her wresting from him the secret of his strength, her betrayal of Samson, the binding and enslavement of the Nazarite by the Philistines, and his final destruction of the building housing the feast to Dagon. With the entire action of the drama in mind, however, we must notice that the comparable material in the
Bible is comprised of merely eight verses! These are Judges XVI, 23-30. There is nothing in the Bible about a rest period for Samson; nothing about the visits of the Danite friends, old Manoa, Dalilah, or Harapha; and nothing of the delivering of the summons by the Philistine officer. Even more significant, there is nothing in Judges that gives the remotest hint of Samson's inward thought—nothing to indicate a reflective cast of mind. 4 In fact, he is really seen in the Biblical account as somewhat of a blockish, overgrown boy—a divinely inspired puppet, who kills frequently for personal gain and for revenge (Judges XIV, 19), and who is cuckolded by the woman of Timnath and deceived by Dalila by wiles so obvious that they would make any fool suspicious. His final act is in no way presented as any sort of atonement to God for his personal failures; there is but one reason for the destruction:

And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, 0 Lord God, remember me, I pray Thee, and strengthen me, I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.

(Judges XVI, 28)

Hanford's statement that Milton is dependent on the story in Judges for the "material" of Samson Agonistes is too general and tends to give an illusion of a greater dependency than

actually exists. In reality, all that Milton uses from Judges are the motive of the play, three characters (Samson, Dalilah, and Manoa), and the catastrophe, as well as some background history of Samson's life, which is alluded to in retrospect, rather than presented directly in the drama. Nowhere in his other writings does Milton give us any statement concerning the sources of the drama outside of the Biblical episode. For this reason, many readers and critics have assumed with too much readiness that, except for the scriptural suggestions, the play is a whole-cloth fabrication of the mind of Milton, highly colored by the vicissitudes of the poet's life and by the abortive attempt to establish an English republic in the 1650's. Before he makes such assumptions of autobiography, however, the reader should at least be aware of the number of extra-Biblical redactions and interpretations of the history and the character of Samson which were probably accessible to Milton in the middle of the seventeenth century.

It is not within the province of this paper to discuss at length these ante-Miltonic treatments of Samson, but it is necessary to mention here the possible tributaries of influence which may have played a part in the shaping of Milton's drama. The most wieldy and doubtless, the most influential branch of these secondary sources is that of the Scriptural

5Hanford, Handbook, p. 279.
hermeneutics. No student today can hope to form a conclusive theory concerning the autobiographical nature of Milton's presentation of Samson without availing himself of the scholarship that is embodied in the study by F. Michael Krouse entitled *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton, 1949). This study is of vital importance because it clearly shows that most of the apparent innovations in the character of Samson according to Milton's drama can be traced to a possible source in the vast body of patristic, scholarly, and Renaissance Biblical exegesis. There are numerous expositions of the Samson story therein, both literal (historical) and non-literal (allegorical), and the interpretations are by no means unified and consistent. Taking the suggestion from the Epistle to the Hebrews XI, 32-34, where he is mentioned along with Gedeon, Barak, Jephthae, David, Samuel, and the prophets, many exegetes treated Samson as a saint and a martyr, an exemplar of supreme faith and devotion to God, and one who gave his life in the struggle to deliver his people from the domination of the Philistines. Others, however, used Samson as a moral illustration of the downfall of a man brought on by inordinate lust after womankind. Both of these attitudes toward the figure of Samson came down to the Renaissance writers and scholars.

There were also some controversial issues which came

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6Krouse, pp. 33-38.
with the tradition, such as whether or not Samson's sins were justified by his ultimate faith, whether or not his loss of strength was brought on by his inordinate desire for Dalilah, whether or not Dalilah was Samson's wife, and whether or not Samson's actions were divinely motivated. The tradition continued on into the seventeenth century in the forms of expository and exemplary prose, poetry, and drama, not only in England, but throughout Europe. It is important to note that by the seventeenth century there was a tendency to emphasize the latter part of Samson's life—especially the personal aspects of his blindness and his mental anguish—and to consider his story as one highly congenial to tragedy. In a summary explanation of Milton's debt to previous extra-Biblical interpretations, Krouse says, "Even when Milton seems to the casual reader to have invented something which is not prominent in the tradition, it is usually found that the invention is not really new, but rather something implicit in the tradition which becomes explicit when Milton sets forth Samson as a living person." The knowledge which we get from this study obligates us to keep in mind that Samson Agonistes is not only creative seventeenth-century drama, but it is also part of this

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7 Krouse, pp. 74-76.
8 Ibid., pp. 84ff.
9 Ibid., p. 101.
extensive body of hermenutic tradition.

One particular element of the more literary types of Biblical interpretation needs separate consideration here. Prior to the publication of Samson Agonistes in 1671, there were several other dramatizations of the Samson theme, not only in English, but in Dutch, German, Spanish, French, and Italian as well. Two of these deserve special attention for the strong resemblance which they bear to Milton's play, especially in various characteristics of expression in the dialogues. The first of these is Simson, Tragoedia Sacra, written about 1600 by Marcus Andreas Wunstius. The following passage is spoken by Samson after he has been blinded and set to work in the mill:

O Father of the universe, to whom
Except to Thee shall I, in anguish set,
Direct the darkened sockets of mine eyes?
Thou seest with how dread a weight of ills
I am oppressed. With wheel how changeable
Dost Thou, O God, alter the fates of mortals!
Only an hour since, in all respects
Most happy, blest, unconquerable in strength,
I now, in sudden lapse, have fallen on ill.
Bereft of mine eyes, with torn and livid cheeks,
Helpless in chains, a mockery to my foes,
I am thrust deep in nameless slavery;
And to this woe no day assign an end
Except the end of long awaited death.

Note some of the similarities of expression in the following

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10 For a numerical listing of sixteen important aspects of the Samson story extant before Milton's treatment, see the Appendix to this paper.

lines from Samson Agonistes:

Manoa: Select and sacred, glorious for a while,
The miracle of men; then in an hour
Ensnared, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy foe's derision, captive, poor, and blind. . . .

(S.A. 363-366)

Samson: But now he hath cast me off as never known,
And to those cruel enemies,
Whom I by his appointment had provoked,
Left me all helpless with the irreparable loss
Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated
The subject of their cruelty and scorn.
Nor am I in the list of them that hope,
Hopeless are all my evils, all remediless;
This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,
No long petition--speedy death,
The close of all my miseries, and the balm.

(S.A. 641-651)

Chorus: God of our fathers, what is man!
That thou towards him with hand so various--
Or might I say contrarious?--
Temper'st thy providence through his short course,
Not evenly, as thou rul'st. . . .

(S.A. 667-671)

The lines from both Wunstius and Milton clearly stress the humiliation of Samson's abject condition, the mutability of God's providence, and the hero's wish for death as the resolution of all his afflictions.

Here is a shorter statement by Wunstius's Samson:

With conscience as my witness, I confess
That I myself, myself alone am cause
Of this unspeakable calamity.12

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Again, notice the similarity in the phrasing in these lines by Milton's Samson:

Nothing of all these evils hath befallen me
But justly; I myself have brought them on,
Sole author I, sole cause.

(S.A. 374-376)

Another of these precedent dramatic treatments of the story is Joost van den Vondel's Samson tragedy, written in 1660. This, too, has noticeable resemblances to Milton's version. Many of Samson's laments are similar in tone, though somewhat less charged with passion. Samson's diatribe of Dalilah also has certain striking parallels to that of Milton in the dialogue, or manner of expression. Here is a lament by Vondel's Samson over his blindness:

No man, no prince, can give me back my eyes.
With sight one loses more than half of life.
The day has gone forever. I await
The ruddy flush of dawning nevermore.
Here is eternal night.13

There is some analogy of expression in Milton's more tumultuous cry:

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse.
Without all hope of day!

(S.A. 80-82)

Vondel's Samson also exhibits the desire for death as the ultimate relief of his misery, just as do the protagonists of Wunstius and Milton. The most outstanding parallel in the dialogues of Milton and Vondel, however, is the reaction of the Chorus (in Vondel) and of Manoa (in Milton) to the tumult of the catastrophe. Here is Vondel:

Mercy, O God have mercy! Help us now! Comfort us in this need! We cry from earth To Thy high throne. Oh, what a crash was that! Alas, where are we. That terrific fall Deafens our ears.\(^{14}\)

And here is Milton's Manoa:

I know your friendly minds and—O what noise! Mercy of Heaven, what hideous noise was that!

(S.A. 1509-1510)

What is the significance of these other versions? Milton never mentions them in his writings, and it is certainly impossible to make any statement of fact concerning indebtedness until further evidence is discovered by the scholars. Is it not possible, though, that Milton had read some of these earlier dramas and that some of the subtleties of phraseology were implanted permanently in his extraordinary memory? At times the similarities are really too strong to be imputed to chance.

Another source-area that has pertinence to Samson

Agonistes is that of the prototypic Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Because he wrote Samson Agonistes as a Greek tragedy, and because he was thoroughly familiar with the conventions of Greek tragedy, we may agree that, aside from the ideas of the Christian hero, Milton patterned his Samson also after his ideas of the hero of the Greek tragedy. The student who works in this area of Samson research, however, will find that what seems to be a manifest characteristic of classical tragedy will frequently bear analysis as a characteristic of the exegetic treatments of the Samson tradition. Thus, Professor Parker notices in Milton's presentation of Samson the Sophoclean tendency to aggrandize the magnanimity of the hero, at the same time glossing over his defects. Yet Krouse has shown throughout his study that it was a common practice among the exegetes to make Samson's character more sanctified and heroic than the impression of it that we get from reading the Old Testament story. Among the tragic heroes which have been cited for their similarities to Samson are the Heracles and the Oedipus of Sophocles and the Prometheus of Aeschylus, but, as is always the case when we attempt to trace literary influences, prototypes, and archetypes, it is one thing to notice a parallel and entirely another to say that the latter writer made conscious or even

15 Parker, Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy, p. 115.
subconscious use of the first. Milton could not have avoided being influenced by the character presentation in all of the Greek tragedy which he studied, but it cannot be certainly stated how much of the influence is manifested in his treatment of Samson.

In his jottings on proposed subjects for literary treatment found in the Trinity Manuscript of 1642, topic number Nineteen of the Old Testament subjects contains five possible titles dealing with the Samson story: "Samson Pursophorus" (the bringer of firebrands), "Samson Hybristes" (the vainly boastful), "Samson Marrying" (probably concerning some episode centered around his experience with the woman of Timnath), "Ramath-Lechi" (probably intending to tell of the slaughter of the Philistines with the jaw-bone of an ass), and "Dagonalia." The last topic, though not specific in reference, may have proposed to encompass the approximate action of the drama as we have it today. Nevertheless, critics have consistently over-emphasized the importance of this topical listing. The fact that these proposed themes or titles are based on the format of the Old Testament should in no way be interpreted to signify that Samson Agonistes is derived entirely or "in the main" from the Book of Judges, nor should it lead us to believe that Milton had at that early

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17 See the topical listing of the manuscript in David Masson, The Life of John Milton, Narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesical, and Literary History of his Time (London, 1871), II, 11c.
time conceived of the plan of *Samson Agonistes* as we have it today. A general perusal of the listings in the Trinity Manuscript should reveal to us that Milton had gone through the Bible from front to back and had noted sixty-one scriptural topics which had possibilities for literary interpretation. Only a slight hint of the idea of *Samson Agonistes* exists in this document, and the most that we can say for its significance is that by 1642 Milton had recognized the history of Samson as containing some potential aspects for literary development. Certainly, nothing else definite concerning the sources for Milton's drama can be said with the limited knowledge that the scholars have given us to this time.
CHAPTER II

The present-day student of Milton who is investigating the autobiographical theory of *Samson Agonistes* will find that the majority of the commentators upon the drama are not of any great assistance to his investigation, and they frequently tend to be misleading in their comments, rather than helpful. Many of them are generous in admitting what *seems* to be obvious—that *Samson Agonistes* has substantial autobiographical significance. They are reluctant, however, to get down to specific details and to point out words, phrases, and verses which bear out such a theory. They are also reticent in describing the exact nature of these subjective qualities of the play. Instead, there is an irritating tendency to stand off at a safe distance from the work of minute analysis and to quote exemplary extracts from the drama which have become mere banalities in the illustration of a "manifest truth."

This chapter proports to provide a general summary of what the scholars have written about *Samson Agonistes* and autobiography. It is arranged in the fashion of a linear scale, which progresses from those who regard the poem as a sort of quasi-autobiographical or quasi-allegorical work of multi-level significance, to those who believe that it will not support an autobiographical interpretation at all. There is also included a discussion of the conjectured date of composition of the drama, as this controversy has a direct bearing on any
estimate of the subjective nature of Milton's play. It is intended that the chapter serve as a general bibliography for the student who is researching in this area of Miltoniana.

We shall begin at one end of this scale, which can be called the positive end. Some scholars have seen a bi-fold or even a tri-fold meaning to various elements of the drama over and above the actual history of Samson. Denis Saurat says, "In Samson Milton gives us a three-fold picture of life: first, of man's life in general; then of the history of England, Samson representing the fallen Puritan party, when the royalist Philistines triumph in debauch and revelry, the end being a prophecy of justice to come; and lastly, of Milton's own life, wrecked in hope, blind and poor, and meditating and perpetuating the glorious revenge of Paradise Lost." Again, Saurat says, "Milton is more intimately present in Samson Agonistes than in any of his other poems. Here he put the history of his life."

Another three-level interpreter of the poem is the Samson editor, A.W. Verity. He comments that besides serving as "a record of Milton's deepest feelings at the most tragic point in his career," the drama can be interpreted on the political and religious level as seventeenth-century England and on the anagogical level as prophecy of the soon-to-be-realized


\[19\] Ibid., p. 200.
downfall of the Royalists. This same essential conception of the different levels of meaning has also been expounded by Richard Garnett in his Life and Writings of John Milton, wherein he says, "The English nation is to [Milton] the enslaved and erring Samson—a Samson, however, yet to burst his bonds and bring down ruin upon Philistia."

Miss Dora Neil Raymond and Sir Herbert J.C. Grierson have both noted two levels of meaning to the character of Samson. Grierson makes this analytical comment: "...Milton is never merely concerned with himself. His true self is his ideals, the good cause, and the English people had passed through the fire to perish in the smoke because they had not understood in what true liberty consists."

Though still interpreting on this multi-strata basis, Mark Pattison shows an interesting mitigation in his conception of the literalness of the allegorical applicability of the play: "It is of little moment that the incidents of Samson’s life do not form a strict parallel to those of Milton’s life, or to the career of the Puritan cause. The resemblance lies in the sentiment and the situation, not the bare event."

22 Dora Neil Raymond, Oliver’s Secretary: John Milton in an Era of Revolt (New York, 1932), p. 278.
The two words, "sentiment" and "situation," are key words to be remembered when considering the subjective nature of the poem, for they envelop much of the personal element that is to be found therein, as will be further shown in Chapter IV.

Moving away from the multiple-level interpretations, we come to several reputable critics who have seen a more simple allegorical parity between only the history and character of Samson and those of Milton. The most rash and violent proponent is Hilaire Belloc, who gives his discussion of the subjectivity of Milton's poetry the tone of an arraignment: "He put a lot of himself into Satan, in both the epics, and especially in Paradise Regained; and something of himself, of course, into everybody else including Eve; but Samson is altogether Milton, without overlap and without exception. He is Milton in every particular. . . ." Although this is outlandish, it is a good example of the lack of restraint which characterizes many of the critical statements about this aspect of Samson Agonistes. A serious attempt to support such assertions would require an appreciable volume of meticulous analysis.

Professor Hanford is another heavy-handed interpreter of the autobiographical nature of the poem. Although he cites some of the more belabored illustrations from the dialogue,

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he does give some less obvious expressions which tie in with the life of the poet and which are somewhat less in decorum with the traditional Biblical Samson. He becomes overly bold, however, when he states that the conversation between Manoa and Samson can, "without too much straining," be considered as "an imaginary one between Milton and his parent." Where is there to be found any authentic description of a dialogue between the poet and his father which would allow us to arrive at such a conclusion? Furthermore, where is there to be found any account that indicates that the elder Mr. Milton had such attitudes toward his son's marriage or career that would have made this kind of dialogue between them likely? The most interesting part of Hanford's interpretation of Samson is his discussion of the concept of catharsis as taken from the conventions of Greek tragedy and applied to this drama. Milton described the purpose and intended effect of catharsis in the introductory statement appended to the play ("Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem Which Is Called Tragedy"), and certainly we must feel that the catharsis had more than its normal effect upon one who had so much in common with Samson. Hanford has given us some interesting and helpful ideas about the essence of the poem, but many of them which concern the autobiographical content are little more

28 Ibid., pp. 226-227.
than generalized conjecture which probably cannot be supported.

Some of the critics, while expounding a general positive attitude toward the autobiographical interpretation, include precautionary or limiting statements. Thus, although he considers *Samson Agonistes* as highly personal literary art, A.S.P. Woodhouse says that it is a mistake to form an impression of the drama as merely concealed autobiography: "It is the story of Samson but touched to deeper and finer issues, not by Milton's art alone, but by his experience and reflection." 23

Masson, too, while delivering essentially an autobiographical analysis, makes an important reservation: "...it is impossible to point out a single particular in which, having chosen for his subject Samson's dying revenge, he has overstretched it for personal purpose." 30 As we shall see in Chapter IV of this paper, Masson's qualification is somewhat too restrictive, and there are, in fact, some relatively rare instances in which the poet seems to have allowed the topical to dominate over the historical context.

Very similar to Masson's statement are the ideas of Douglas Bush. He does not admit, in the way of subjectivity, to

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30 Masson, VI, 670.
anything more than a general infusion of Milton's despair as it was in the 1660's, and he regards any parallels between the hero and the poet as "overtone." He takes a long step toward the negative end of our "scale" when he says, "There is not a detail of sentiment which does not belong to the story of Samson, and the poet's emotions, whatever they may have been, were wholly sublimated."

With statements which deny "single particulars" and "details of sentiment" that are foreign to the objective, historical context of a dramatization of Samson's story, we have passed, as it were, from the positive into the negative area of our "scale." Just as we found to be the case with some of the positive expositors, there are unfounded negative arguments which deny any autobiographical pertinence. The blue-ribbon example of this is William R. Parker's assertion that the poem does not intend any impersonation or suggestion of the life of the poet because Milton would not have wanted the reading public to adopt the notion that his blindness was, in effect, God's punishment for his literary advocacy of the execution of Charles I and his support of the interregnum governments. Now, the "Samson equals Milton" assumption (regardless of whether or not we believe it to be solidly

32 Ibid.
33 William R. Parker, "The Date of Samson Agonistes" in Philological Quarterly, XXVIII (October, 1949), 150.
founded) seems to be generally adhered to by readers who know anything of the history of Milton's life. Needless to say, Milton was aware of the similarities himself, and he surely must have realized that the readers of his day would see them, too. This begs the question—if Milton would not have wanted his readers to adopt the personal parallels, why did he publish the drama at all? The fact that he did publish the work after the Restoration, when the similarities between himself and his hero were so obvious, seems to give the lie to an assertion that Milton was anxious not to be equated to Samson.

Although this article ("The Date of Samson Agonistes") by Parker is primarily directed toward the thesis of an early date of composition for the play, much of it is concerned with the autobiographical controversy. Many of the observations that he makes seem to be "handy-dandy," according to his purpose at the time that they are made. For example, after taking a basically non-autobiographical stand early in the article, he later espouses a positive stand to ornament his argument for an early date, observing that the passages concerning blindness "have about them the eloquence and conviction of newly-met reality."

The controversy among the Milton scholars concerning the date of composition of Samson Agonistes is of vital importance

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Parker, "The Date of Samson Agonistes," p. 163.
to the evaluation of the autobiographical interpretation because frequently the arguments for an early date imply the negative attitude toward a subjective Samson. Naturally, if this conjectured time is placed before 1660, or even more drastically, before 1650, the traditional opinions of the autobiographical significance of Samson's condition—blind, fallen into the hands of evil foes, beset by physical and mental torment—are held up to question by the very act. Samson's fallen state could not very well represent John Milton of the 1660's if the play had been penned in the 1640's or the 1650's.

Probably the most unsound argument for an early date is the previously-discussed article by Parker. Here are some of his main points for assuming it to be an early work: Milton nowhere mentions a date for the composition; the early biographers are noticeably reticent on the matter; because Edward Phillips (Milton's nephew and one of the early biographers) says that three years after the publication of *Paradise Lost* was a "wonderful short space" in which to have composed *Paradise Regained*, it is not likely that Milton could have composed *Samson* in the same interval; because Milton censured the use of rhyme in the little note entitled "The Verse" appended to the printings of *Paradise Lost* after 1668, and because this drama contains some scattered rhyme (a mere 154 out of 1758 lines, and all spoken by the Chorus), *Samson* is not likely to have been
written close to that time; because the theme of God choosing a few select men to perform his great deeds was more prevalent in the period from 1648 to 1654, the composition of the drama is most logically placed in those years; because Samson Agonistes is dramatic prophecy, which was most prevalent in the years of the pamphlet warfare, it is likely that Samson Agonistes is a product of the ideas of the poet during that epoch. The upshot of this study is Parker's placing the composition of the drama between 1647 and 1653. Before the reader makes any conclusive opinions based on this article by Parker, however, he should Ernest Sirluck's point-by-point refutation of it, entitled "Some Recent Changes in the Chronology of Milton's Poems."

Another perpetrator of the early-date theory is John T. Shawcross in his meticulous comparative analysis of Comus, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes. On the basis of the frequency and infrequency of such prosodic characteristics as strong pauses, terminal pauses, enjambment, and polysyllabic word location, he has arrived at the following order of composition for the four works: All of Comus; all of Samson Agonistes; Paradise Regained, II,

36 See Ernest Sirluck, "Some Recent Changes in the Chronology of Milton's Poems" in Journal of English and German Philology, XL (1961), 749ff. The bulk of this article is also in Hone's edition of Samson Agonistes and Samson criticism.
IV, and III; *Paradise Lost* VIII, IX, X, I, III, XII, and XI; *Paradise Regained* I; and *Paradise Lost* V, VII, IV, II, and VI. Here we have an elaborate and detailed study of the chronology of Milton's poems based on the prior assumption, doubtless erroneous, that prosodic intricacies are in such an ordered progression that would allow us to rely upon them as a measure for chronology. Long before Shawcross's study was ever dreamed of, the Milton critics were pointing out the mercurial nature of the prosody in *Samson*. Verity's caution furnishes us with a good example: "No one, of course, should presume to tie Milton down to rigid principles of prosody, and scan his lines as though they were a schoolboy's copy of much-toiled iambics. A poet like Milton makes his own laws..." Robert Bridges, in his complete book on Milton's prosody, explains that *Samson Agonistes*, as well as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, must be taken as *sui generis* in a study of their verse characteristics, and he further states that the variance in both *Paradise Regained* and *Samson* show a rejection on behalf of the poet of many of the more strict rules that he practised in the epic poem. A more general explanation of the nature of the verse

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38 Verity in *Hone's edition*, p. 130.
of the poem was given by Sir Walter Raleigh: "In the Chorus of *Samson Agonistes*, where he reaches the top of his skill, Milton varies even the length of the line. So he hardly has a rule left, save the iambic pattern, which he treats merely as a point of departure or reference, a background or framework to carry the variation imposed upon it by the luxuriance of a perfectly controlled art."  

Another aspect of the play which Shawcross's analysis seems to ignore is the fact that *Samson Agonistes* purports to be modeled extensively on the conventions of the ancient Greek tragedy. Thus, Milton has told us himself in the prefatory note to the play that "The measure of the verse used in the chorus is of all sorts. . . ." To recapitulate, then Shawcross has founded his conclusions on at least two faulty assumptions. First, his theory would necessitate *a priori* that a poet's verse always progresses in one direction steadily with respect to each individual prosodic device—that a poet never consciously adopts a style that is regressive or bizarre. Second, his theory would have to depend on the poet's unconsciousness of his own prosody. Once we admit to the truth—that all great verse stylists are keenly aware of what they are doing with verse, meter, and rhyme at all times—there is no occasion for Shawcross's conclusions.  

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times—then we must concede that Milton chose a style, whatever the reason might have been, that bears some resemblance to his earlier works. The crowning irony of the study is the guess that he makes for the date of composition: 1646 to 1648. The ode To John Rouse was written in 1647. As Milton tells us in the statement attached to the poem, it is a Latin poem in partial imitation of the ancient practitioners, and, just as Samson Agonistes, this appended statement explains the irregularities of form and prosody. Does it not seem strange that in arbitrarily assigning our dramatic poem a date by such criterion it should happen to end up at the same time that we find another poem which is avowedly irregular?

Alan H. Gilbert, in his article entitled "Is Samson Agonistes Unfinished?" has presented a theory that the play is an early work in its inception which Milton revised (though not with enough care) and published in 1671. The study is based on discrepancies which he has found in the drama and in the Argument as it relates to the action of the drama. Most of the discussion is founded on mere straws, however, and some of them are actually misrepresentations. In the first place, he says that the Argument is not a balanced representation of the play. The visits to Samson by Harapha and Dalila are represented by the clause "who in the meanwhile is visited by other persons." Gilbert states that 555 lines of the drama are consumed by the visits of these
two, and that this is out of proportion to the slight mention in the Argument. Either he has included more here than is actually encompassed by the two visits, or he has a bad head for numbers. Even including the introductory remarks made by the Chorus at the separate approaches of these two characters, their visits occupy a total of 468 lines, Dalila's consuming lines 710 to 996, and Harapha's consuming lines 1061 to 1243. I do not find anything in the article which mentions that the 222 lines of Book II of Paradise Lost, which tell of Satan's encounter with Sin and Death, (lines 648 to 870--more than one-fifth of the whole Book) are represented in the Argument by the clause "and who sat there to guard them" (less than one twenty-fourth of the whole argument by word count). Gilbert stresses that Dalila and Harapha are not named in the Argument, and he sees that as a reason for assuming that the Argument is an early work composed for an early Samson drama which did not include these characters. I do not find mention of the fact that on numerous occasions in the Arguments to the Books of Paradise Lost (such as the very one cited in reference to Sin and Death) the full proper name of the referent is not given. According to Gilbert's ideas, this would contribute to a theory that the Arguments of Paradise Lost, too,

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44 Ibid.
are essentially earlier compositions, when, as a matter of fact, they were composed after the first printing of the poem and were appended to the 1668 printing for the first time.

These and other similar details, in addition to some "unrhetoric" and "un-Miltonic" qualities which he finds in the poem, lead Gilbert to the assumption that Samson Agonistes is essentially an early work (following soon after the Trinity Manuscript) which Milton failed to fully revise for the publication in 1671.

A more reasonable attitude toward the dating of Samson is that of A.S.P. Woodhouse in his article, "Samson Agonistes and Milton's Experience." He visualizes a progress that runs throughout the major poems: "temptation, disobedience, repentance, obedience, and restoration." The series is shared by Adam and Christ in the two larger works combined, and the entire gamut is found in Samson Agonistes. Besides this organic affinity which it has to the other two major poems, Woodhouse suggests a better and more profound reason for placing the tragedy in the 1660's: "...when disaster overtook his cause and sent him into hiding, a fugitive.

45 Masson, VI, 624.
46 Professor Gilbert, along with Parker, receives animadversions in Sirluck's examination of the "re-dating" of Milton's poetry. (See page 26 above.)
47 Woodhouse, p. 160.
from his enemies, Milton may well have turned or returned to
the theme of Samson as the perfect vehicle for his emotions
... it appears to offer an occasion wholly adequate to
call into being the profound passion of the play." Wood-
house, in estimating the date of composition to be 1660 or
1661, brings the tragedy more into focus according to rea-
son, "sentiment," and "situation" rather than the shreds
and patches of questionable technical matter and insig-
nificant flaws upon which many of the "early date" critics
are wont to base their theories.

The more "traditional" dating of *Samson Agonistes* is
in the middle or the late 1660's, following *Paradise Lost*
and probably following *Paradise Regained*. James H. Fanford,
Douglas Bush, and David Masson are some of the better-known
scholars who have supported this dating.

The first thing to notice throughout this compendium
is that the scholars who pursue the non-traditional dates
for the drama have the most ambitious and detailed argu-
ments. They need them, though, as they have placed them-
selves at a disadvantage from the very start by bucking
pure reason and disregarding the profound sentiments of
expression in the dialogue, as well as the organic unity
which binds it to the other two major poems. Certainly,
these reasons are not to be overlooked merely because

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^{48}Woodhouse, p. 159.
they are less tangible than the evidence which the "early datists" have thrown up.

In the final analysis, I find four reasons for assigning the period of 1660 to 1670 as the time for the composition of *Samson Agonistes* as we have it today. As we have no certain statements by the poet or his contemporaries giving us any more specific information about the date, it seems to me that it is futile to attempt to narrow the period down within this decade. First, two of the early biographers of Milton, Richardson and the "anonymous biographer" (who Miss Helen Darbishire believes to be John Phillips, the poet's nephew), state the opinion that *Samson Agonistes* came after *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. This, of course, would place it in the second half of the 1660's. Although the early biographers can not be thoroughly relied upon today, this is the closest thing to any sort of contemporary evidence that we have.

Second, the overall sentiment of the tragedy and the degree of passion in many of the utterances bespeak a deep personal emotional involvement of the poet with his creation, and it is doubtful that these heights could have been reached until Milton had passed through the experiences which made him a kindred spirit. Nowhere do Satan's speeches

capture the human suffering that Samson’s do because there was not the degree of affinity between Satan and Milton that exists between Milton and Samson. This homogeneity could have been but partially possible before the Restoration.

Third, since no really conclusive evidence has been offered that would insist on an early date, we are left with the recourse of assuming a time close to the date of publication as being more reasonable than a time which is inexplicably remote from that date.

Fourth, Samson Agonistes is not only similar to Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained in the wisdom and maturity of recurrent Miltonic ideas, but it should be regarded as a sequel to the two longer poems. In all three we can see an upward progress in the relationship of God to man: First, Adam fails God by breaking his decree and succumbing to temptation, and he undergoes punishment. Next, Christ takes man’s burden and atones for man’s failure by resisting temptation, demonstrating supreme faith and obedience, and triumphing over Satan. Finally, Samson Agonistes applies the test once again to man, and man fails. He falls to the temptation of Dalila’s charms and divulges the secret of his strength in disobedience to God’s will. Like Adam, he is punished for this disobedience; like Adam, he repents and undergoes spiritual regeneration. Then, like Christ in the wilderness, Samson triumphs over evil and disobedience.
in the name of God. The progress is unquestionably humanistic (in the more modern sense of the term), placing man in the final triumph through patience, magnanimity, and supreme faith.
CHAPTER III

Before turning to a detailed analysis of the autobiographical content of *Samson Agonistes*, it is in order to indulge in an introductory digression to seek a better understanding of the work in relation to Milton's ideas and his other literary works of the post-Restoration period—to recognize its true raison d'être.

In seeking to explain the essence of *Samson Agonistes*, many readers and scholars would have it that the poem should be studied as a quasi-allegorical account of the poet's life after the return to the monarchy in 1660. Samson, blind at the mill in Gaza and surrounded by the evil and immoral Philistines is taken to be a perfect surrogate for Milton during this epoch, the blind man who was forced to flee into hiding because of the avenging wrath of the heinous executions by the Royalist mob. Other critics will tell us, however, that *Samson* is best interpreted as Milton's attempt to render a more modern form of the classical Greek tragedy, especially since he took such pains as to preface the work with a detailed explanation of this aspect. Still others will insist that it is an autotelic work—a dramatization pro se of the last hours of the Israelite martyr.

*Samson Agonistes* actually embodies all of these purposes to a limited degree, but not any one of them offers
a convincing explanation for the thought in the drama, and it is the thought—the philosophy, as well as the spiritual regeneration of Samson—that is of most moment therein. (Thus, Samuel Johnson criticized the play because "the immediate parts have neither cause nor consequence, neither hasten nor retard the catastrophe.")

Once we agree that it is the thought that is of most importance in Samson, it remains for us to arrive at an understanding of just what the germ of the thought is in the play. In the closing of my discussion of the date of composition of the play, I indicated that it is of an organic unity with Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. This unity is derived through the relationship that each of the works bears to the Christian Doctrine. In his Dedication to this work, Milton explains that it is the product of his personal meditations upon the word of God as it is found in the Holy Scriptures alone. It is an attempt to arrive at a more perfect conception of eternal salvation—especially the salvation of John Milton. It is an attempt to understand more precisely the true nature of the relationship of God to man—especially to John Milton. More important for us,

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51 The Christian Doctrine is Milton's prose exposition of the Scriptures. Although the work was not gathered into its present form until the middle and late 1650's, it may be considered as the poet's theological, moral, and ethical beliefs that had taken shape throughout his life.
however, it is a vector to the thought in Milton's three great poems of the 1660's. All of these works are concerned primarily with the relationship of God to man (both universally and as individuals). Thus, we have in the Christian Doctrine:

There can be no doubt that for the purpose of vindicating the justice of God, especially in his calling of mankind, it is much better to allow to man...some portion of free will in respect of good works, or at least of good endeavours, rather than in respect of things which are indifferent. For if God be conceived to rule with absolute disposal all the actions of men...he appears to do nothing which is not right, neither will anyone murmer against such a procedure.\(^5^2\)

In Paradise Lost:

...what is in me dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

(P.L. I, 22-26)

And in Samson Agonistes:

Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to men

(S.A. 293-294)

This, then, is the essence of Samson Agonistes—its true raison d'être.

Having recognized the generic basis for the poem, we can now turn to the final analysis of its autobiographical infusion, perhaps the foremost of Milton's secondary intentions. The term "autobiography" is customarily used with more than its usual latitude by critical commentators when referring to a work such as Samson, which appears to be extremely personal and subjective. Thus, before going into the exposition of this aspect of the poem, an explanation is necessary to inform the reader of the comprehensiveness of the term as I use it in this paper. First, there is that which I call "primary" autobiography—words, phrases, and verses which are interpreted as having reference to some event or epoch in the life of the poet or in the political and ecclesiastical history of his times. Also, there is "secondary" autobiography—examples of Miltonic theology, morals, ethics, and political theory and the solving of metaphysical problems in Miltonic fashion by Samson and the Chorus. These secondary elements are, I believe, legitimately included within the scope of autobiography because Samson and the Chorus may be considered as having been tabula rasa with regard to philosophical concepts and ratio- cинative problem solving until taken up by Milton and depicted as we have them, yet Milton has confronted them with issues and problems and has made them to solve these by methods which are usually characteristic of his personal
reasoning and philosophy that he employed in other of his writings of contemporary application. In short, Samson and the Chorus have been frequently made to reason and speak like Milton himself had done on many occasions in his life and writings.

Within these two categories of primary and secondary autobiography, it is necessary, in addition, to make a further distinction between what I call "two-level" and "pure" autobiography. The two-level autobiography indicates a parallel to Milton's life, philosophy, or self-concept which is also probable and germane to the character of Samson. The pure autobiography, as the name implies, is that which is easily applicable to Milton, but not so to the character of Samson.

It seems to be the custom among most Samson expositors to cite too many of the two-level parallels alone in support of an autobiographical interpretation. If, in truth, nothing more than these can be found in the poem, then the assertion of autobiography can be hardly better than a mere guess, although that guess were expressed universally. If, on the other hand, we can find and support several of these examples of pure autobiography, then the guess can be raised to the category of a respectable thesis.

In order to make the study convenient for the reader to follow with his edition of Samson Agonistes, the method here is to go through the drama in its natural order,
stopping at each pertinent verse or passage as it appears. Thus, the paper may be used in the office of a gathering of specialized footnotes in reference to what are considered to be the autobiographical elements in the work.

As the play opens, Samson describes how he is beset by mental torment over his fallen condition:

...hence with leave
Retiring from the popular noise, I seek
This unfrequented place to find some ease,
Ease to the body some, none to the mind
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone,
But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, what I once was, and what am now.

(S.A. 15-22)

If one were to write a dramatization of Milton's situation immediately after June, 1660, he could insert this passage into the play, and it would really be more probable and recognizable biographically than it is in its present context in Samson. Surely during the months spent in hiding at Bartholomew Close he sought relief from the "popular noise" and the danger that was presented by the avenging Royalists to a blind and helpless defender of the regicidal act and the Protectorate. Doubtless, he was beset by "restless thoughts" over "times past," what he and the Good Old Cause once were and the condition into which they had fallen.

The Biblical Samson was a Nazarite whose birth had been

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53 Masson, VI, 162-163.
specially effected by God and who was specially selected to carry out the will of God as a great warrior. Thus, in the drama, he questions his fate:

Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed
As of a person separate to God,
Designed for great exploits, if I must die
Betrayed, captived, and both my eyes put out? . . .

(S.A. 30-33)

Very much like Samson, Milton, from his early years, was set apart from the average individual in his training and his education. The following passage from the Second Defense gives us an idea of the tenor of this formative era:

My father destined me from a child for the pursuits of polite learning, which I prosecuted with such eagerness, that after I was twelve years old, I rarely retired to bed from my lucubrations till midnight. 54

Milton speaks further of his development in The Reason of Church Government, indicating rather clearly that he felt himself to be headed in the direction of "great exploits" in literature:

... it was found that whether aught was imposed on me by them that had the overlooking, or betaken to of mine own choice in English, or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly the latter, the style by certain vital signs it had, was likely to live. 55

Upon occasion, Milton could be quite grandiose in the descriptions of his role in life, as in the letter written to his friend Charles Diodati in 1637:

You ask what I am thinking of? So may the good Deity help me, of immortality. And what am I doing? Growing wings and meditating flight.56

Milton's letters, his prose, and his poetry abound in references like the ones which have been cited here. In this particular passage in Samson Agonistes, as well as in many more throughout the drama, as we shall have cause to note, Milton may have incorporated something of his ideals and his self-concept.

Samson realizes that he no longer has the power to carry out the mission for which he was intended—the great deliverer of the Israelites from the Philistine domination (S.A. 38-42). Milton, too, believed himself to be a deliverer of the English people, showing the way from tyranny to political and religious liberty. Here we have a statement from the Second Defense which shows Milton's conception of the singularity of his role:

That I was the only one found to defend the cause of the people of England, if I consider the interests of the commonwealth, it is a subject of real concern to me; if I consider the glory, it is not unwillingly that I should suffer any one to share it with me.57

56Hanford, John Milton, Englishman, p. 69.
And here is Milton's conception of the progress that he was making as a "great deliverer" in the early 1650's:

...it seems to me, that, from the columns of Hercules to the farthest borders of India, that throughout this vast expanse, I am bringing back, bringing home to every nation, liberty so long driven out, so long in exile. ... 58

There will be other occasions throughout Samson Agonistes where Milton more manifestly incorporates himself and his personal ideals into this facet of Samson's character.

Samson indulges in some self-analysis concerning the reason for his fall:

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.

(S.A. 52-57)

Here is an example of secondary autobiography in a familiar expression of Miltonic philosophy and Miltonic analysis of such a plight as Samson's. He used the idea in some of his political writing when he cautioned all Englishmen that true liberty begins at home and in the individual's conduct of his personal life. He spoke of wisdom most characteristically in the divorce pamphlets, however, using the term in this sense:

frequently this cool unpassionate mildness of positive wisdom is not enough to damp and astonish the proud resistance of the carnal.\(^5^9\)

In the *Christian Doctrine* we find a precise description of this kind of wisdom in which Samson has proven to be deficient:

> Wisdom is that whereby we earnestly search after the will of God, learn it with all diligence, and govern all our actions according to its rule.\(^6^0\)

Throughout his life, Milton sought to understand and live according to this wisdom based on the will of God. More extensive treatment of the Miltonic idea of wisdom will be given as it appears upon other occasions in the drama.

Among the many afflictions that Samson cites in this introductory syliloquy, the foremost is his blindness (S.A. 66-100). Of course, the parallel between Samson and Milton needs no more than acknowledgement here. The important thing to notice about this long complaint is the intensity of the emotional expression therein. That Milton could have prevented his personal emotions from becoming a part of such an expression seems impossible; nor is there any reason to assume that he would have sought to avoid the infusion. A very similar passage to this one in *Samson Agonistes* in

subject and tone is the Invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost*. A comparison of the similarities between these two passages leads to the logical conclusion that although the lines from *Samson* were written for the purpose of an artistic portrayal of the hero in his sufferings, the true source for the emotional experience expressed therein was the same as that of the openly autobiographical lines in *Paradise Lost*.

Within the long excerpt just considered, Samson cites other ills which he suffers at the hands of the Philistines:

...I, dark in light, exposed
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong.

(S.A. 75-76)

This passage seems to have been influenced by Milton's domestic situation in the Jewin Street house during the year 1662. His three daughters were residing with him at the time, and he employed them in the disagreeable task of reading to him in foreign languages which they did not understand. The poet is reputed to have told a witness before his death that his daughters and a maid-servant cheated him in his household expenditures and disposed of some of his books in a fraudulent manner. Masson has also shown us that Milton suffered great financial losses due to the change of the government.

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61 Masson, VI, 448.
Thus, when we consider carefully the circumstances of both Samson and Milton, we can see that the word fraud in verse 76 has valid application only in the case of the poet. Had Samson any money in his pockets when he was taken captive in Gaza? Had he any form of investments or real estate that were cheated away from him? This seems to me to be one of the prime examples of autobiographical overtones in the drama, and I take the word fraud here to be an example of pure autobiography, slight as it may seem. Milton appears to have drawn, consciously or unconsciously, upon some situation other than that of Samson in Gaza for this phrase, the most applicable and most likely source being his own experience. Whether or not it was intentional on the part of the poet at the time of composition is only a subject for guess, but it is unlikely that he could have failed to recognize the implication upon hearing it read back to him by his amanuensis.

At this point in the play, the Chorus enters at a distance, sees Samson as he rests, and expresses amazement over his fallen condition:

Can this be he,
That heroic, that renowned,
Irresistible Samson? whom, unarmed,
No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand;
Who tore the lion, as the lion tears the kid,
Ran on embattled armies clad in iron,
And, weaponless himself,
Made arms ridiculous, useless the forgery

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Masson, VI, 445.
Of brazen shield and spear, the hammered cuirass, Chalybean-tempered steel, and frock of mail Adamantean proof; But safest he who stood aloof, When insupportably his foot advanced, In scorn of their proud arms and warlike tools, Spurned them to death by troops.

(S.A. 124-138)

This passage is very similar in tenor and phraseology to various expressions especially in his prose tracts wherein he depicts himself as a kind of heroic, quasi-militant warrior in behalf of political, religious, and ethical liberty for the English people. The strongest direct voiceings of this self-concept are to be found in the prose Defences of the 1650's. In the First Defense he speaks of the deeds which had been wrought by him in The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates and in Eikonoklastes:

Even as successfully and piously as those our glorious guides to freedom crushed in battle the royal insolence and tyranny uncontrolled . . . even as easily as I, singlehanded lately refuted and set aside the king himself when he, as it were, rose from the grave. . . .

In the Second Defense he tells of the defeat of his famous literary opponent, Salmasius:

... that I even so completely routed my adversary, though of the most audacious order, that he retired with his spirit broke, his reputation shattered; and for the three years which

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he afterward lived, much as in his rage he
threatened, he gave us no further trouble. ...64

As Milton speaks further of his "duel" with Salmasius, he
becomes more and more the warrior-hero, saying that al-
though his foe had been "hitherto deemed invincible," he
"engaged him in single combat" and defeated him with "the
weapon of his choice."

The Chorus tells us that Samson fought "weaponless,"
that he "made arms ridiculous," and that he had "scorn of
their proud arms and warlike tools." Notice the striking
similarity to Milton's description of his own function as
a literary defender:

Yet such is the office which the most emi-
nent men of our commonwealth have by their in-
fluence prevailed upon me to undertake, and have
wished this next best task assigned to me of de-
fending their deeds from the envy and calumny,
against which steel and the furniture of war
avail not--of defending, I say, with far other
arms and other weapons, the works which under
God's guidance they had gloriously wrought.66

Here not only the idea, but the phraseology at one point
is practically the same. Such a parity between the artistic
portrayal and the open self-description indicate that the
poet very likely had a thought to himself when he composed

65 Ibid., p. 15.
this description of the warrior, Samson.

After the Chorus reveals itself to Samson, the hero tells them of the many "evils" which surround him (S.A. 194). Milton also mentions in the Invocation to Book VII of Paradise Lost the "evils" which beset him in post-Restoration days:

More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;

(P.L. VII, 24-26)

A comparison should also be made with this excerpt from Paradise Lost to verses 15-22 and verses 75-76 of Samson.

Samson disparages himself for the lack of wisdom which allowed him to become a victim of the wiles of Dalila; the Chorus offers some placation:

. . . wisest men
Have erred, and by bad women been deceived;
And shall again, pretend they ne'er so wise.

(S.A. 210-212)

Not only is this a familiar statement of Miltonic philosophy with regard to poor marriage choices, but it has striking applicability to his own life. As far as we know, Milton had no relationships with women until 1642, when he was thirty-three years old. Yet, at that time, into the Oxfordshire countryside went the scholar-celibate, and home he came with the former Mary Powell, his sixteen-year-old bride. Within about
a month, she had returned to her parents' home in the country. Although she was to have stayed there for the remainder of the summer season only, she remained for about three years. Meanwhile, the unfortunate lover stirred up excitement among the London readers (especially the clergy and Parliament) with *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, *The Judgement of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce, Tetra-chordon*, and *Colasterion*, all pleading for and supporting with scriptural exegesis the institution of legal divorce. It is next to certain that when he wrote these tracts he had his own marital situation in mind and that it served as a contributing impetus to their birth, although, as was usually the case with Milton, even when his issues were germane to his own life, he was writing for the general betterment of mankind. The following passage from one of the divorce pamphlets comments upon a poor marriage choice.

Notice the strong similarity in idea and phraseology to the lines quoted above from *Samson Agonistes*:

*...it being an error above wisdom to prevent, as examples of wisest men so mistaken manifest:* 67

As this idea is more fully expressed in verses 1034-1045 of the drama, a further treatment of it will be found in reference to those lines (pages 72-74).

Samson tells briefly of the unsuccessful marriage

to the woman of Timna (Timnath). The sole purpose of the union was to better enable him to effect

...Israel's deliverance,
The work to which I was divinely called.

(S.A. 225-226)

Milton also believed that he was selected by God to contribute to the deliverance of the English people from the tyranny to which they had fallen prey, and he expressly stated that God was working through him, as can be seen in the following two extractions from the Defenses of the 1650's:

...I conceived these fortunate, and even great events to have happened to me from above. ...

And upon a similar occasion:

It is a singular favor of the divinity toward me, that I, above others, was chosen out to defend the cause of liberty. ...

The Chorus discusses with Samson his actions against the Philistines, and it is recognized that, although these actions were praiseworthy, they were ineffectual. Samson is quick to reply:

That fault I take not on me, but transfer
On Israel's governors and heads of tribes,

Who, seeing those great acts which God had done
Singly by me against their conquerors,
Acknowledged not, nor at all considered,
Deliverance offered:

(S.A. 241-246)

Here Samson expresses a sentiment which Milton himself had felt and voiced on more than one occasion when his ideas for the social advancement of the English people went practically unheeded. Probably the most famous example of this feeling of "I have given my best, but it has gone for naught" is the following portion of "Sonnet XII,"

Milton's reaction to the reception of his ideas in the divorce pamphlets:

I DID but prompt the age to quit their clogs
By the known rules of ancient liberty,
When straight a barbarous noise environs me
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes, and dogs;
As when those hinds that were transformed to frogs
Railed at Latonia's twin-born progeny,
Which after held the sun and moon in fee.
But this is got by casting pearl to hogs,
That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when truth would set them free.

The careful reader of the prose works of the 1650's will notice certain passages which indicate that Milton foresaw the ultimate failure of the people to grasp the nearest way to political freedom. The following example from the Second Defense is almost a perfect parallel to the above expression from Samson Agonistes:

As for myself, to whatever state things may
return, I have performed... the service which
I thought would be of most use to the common-
wealth... If our last actions should not be
sufficiently answerable to the first, it is for
themselves to see it, I have celebrated, as a
testimony to them... actions which were glo-
rious, lofty, which were almost above all praise;
and if I have done nothing else, I have assuredly
discharged my trust.70

This same tone prevails throughout The Ready and Easy Way
to Establish a Free Commonwealth, Milton's final exhorta-
tion to the English people before the reestablishment of
the monarchy in 1660. There seems to be a definite sympa-
thetic identification here between the poet and his crea-
tion, and it is likely—even probable—that Milton drew
upon his own emotions and his own previous literary ex-
pression for the portrayal of Samson's sentiment.71

Further along in this same speech, Samson gives his
analysis of one of the reasons why the Israelites still
suffer the domination by the Philistines:

But what more oft in nations grown corrupt,
And by their vices brought to servitude,
Than to love bondage more than liberty

(S.A. 268-270)

The first thing to notice about this excerpt is that it
seems somewhat strange and lacks strict propriety with the

71 For a further autobiographical interpretation of
these verses, see Henry J. Todd, ed., The Poetical Works
of John Milton With Notes of Various Authors (London,
1852), III, 242.
usual conception of the character of Samson. Although he understandably castigates his people for not taking notice of and giving support to his deeds, it is improbable that he would charge them with vices. The charge is much more Miltonic than Samsonian, and what is more important, the analysis of vices among the populus as a reason for the failure to achieve national freedom is Miltonic political theory which had formerly been expressed in reference to the English people now put into the mouth of Samson in reference to the Israelites. Milton believed that unless the English people could lead virtuous private lives within their own households, they could never hope to succeed in any effort to attain their liberty. A vicious private life precluded these higher and more pervasive goals at their very inception. Milton also believed that the common route of the English people were too much beset by such corruption to make it possible for any sort of democracy, and it is therefore characteristic of his political theory that the government must be a type of republican commonwealth entirely in the hands of the upper middle-class aristocracy. When seeking a plausible source for Samson's criticism, we might turn to this passage in Milton's early prose work, Of Reformation:

Well knows every wise nation that Liberty consists in manly and honest labors, in sobriety and religious honor to the Marriage Bed, which in both sexes should be bred up from chast
to loyal enjoyments; and when the people slacken, and fall to looseness, and riot, then do they as much as if they laid down their necks for some Tyrant to get up and ride. 72

Even closer to the expression in Samson Agonistes is this passage from The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates:

But being slaves within doors, no wonder that they strive so much to have the public state comfortably governed to the inward vicious rule by which they govern themselves. For indeed none can love freedom heartily but good men; the rest love not freedom but licence. . . . 73

This secondary autobiography is really more near the pure than the two-level; in other words, it has more pertinence to Milton and the English people than it does to Samson and the Israelites.

The dialogue between Samson and the Chorus turns to a discussion of the ways of God to men, and the Chorus states that Samson was prompted to seek Dalila as a bride "Against his vow of strictest purity" (S.A. 315-321).

This appears to be an instance of pure autobiography. The term "purity" here is unquestionably intended to mean chastity, but there is nothing in the Biblical account to indicate that Samson made a vow of chastity. Furthermore, there appears to be nothing in the Nazarite law as delivered

73 The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, Columbia Edition, V, E.
to Moses (Numbers VI, 1-21) that requires this kind of purity of one who is under the vow. Milton, however, was preoccupied with the idea, and from his earliest school days he extolled and lived the life of chastity. In "Elegy VI," written in 1629, he claimed chastity as a necessity in the life of a young poet who proposes to sing the highest measures. In An Apology for Smectymnuus (April, 1642), he plainly declared that male chastity is to be expected even more than female chastity, for man is "both the image and glory of God." Expressions of chastity in the abstract and as a personal attribute can be found throughout Milton's prose and poetry, but once again, it seems as though the inclusion of himself and his personal ideals in the story of Samson has taken him slightly out of his proper context.

At this point in the drama, Manoa, Samson's father, joins the group of his fellow countrymen and remarks upon the "miserable change" that Samson has undergone:

...is this the man,
That invincible Samson, far renowned,
The dread of Israel's foes, who with a strength Equivalent to Angels' walked their streets,
None offering fight; who, single combatant,
Duelled their armies ranked in proud array,
Himself an army....

(S.A. 340-346)

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Here we have another description of the proud warrior, a posture which Milton was wont to assume at times, especially with reference to his function in the polemics of the 1650's. For a more complete treatment of this characteristic as it relates to Samson, see the discussion of verses 124-138 on pages 47-49 of this paper.

After Samson's failure to the will of God has been fully acknowledged, Manoah tells of his plan to have his son freed by submitting a ransom to the Philistines, who can really do hardly any more harm to a prisoner with the many afflictions that Samson has. (S.A. 478-487) In the writing of these lines, Milton may well have had in mind a phase of his own experience. During the summer of 1660, when he was concealed at Bartholomew Close, his friends Andrew Marvell, Sir William Davenant, Sir Thomas Clarges, Arthur Annesley (later Earl of Anglesey), and possibly others worked within Parliament and the Junto to procure Milton's pardon.

Samson indulges in a long speech of self-castigation concerning the way that he so easily betrayed his divine secret to Dalila, and the Chorus seeks to offer some comfort by praising aspects of the Nazarite vow that he had observed throughout his life:

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Masson, VI, 184-192.
Desire of wine and all delicious drinks,
Which many a famous warrior overturns,
Thou couldst repress, nor did the dancing ruby
Sparkling outpoured, the flavor, or the smell,
Or taste that cheers the hearts of gods and men,
Allure thee from the cool crystalline stream.

(S.A. 541-546)

This is another example in which the poet appears to be identifying with his hero and describing him in terms of his own personal ideals and self-concept. Temperance is a virtue that was characteristic of Milton's life and his philosophy. As a student at Cambridge he was punningly known as "the Lady of Christ's" because he was somewhat lacking in physical hardiness, tending to be rather effeminate in appearance, and because he was notably virtuous. Here is a portion of his own analysis from the sixth Prolusion:

Doubtless it was because I was never able to gulp down huge bumpers in panctic fashion. . . .

In "Elegy VI," among the qualities that must be exhibited by a poet who thinks to soar to the heights, is found this qualification:

Such a poet must live sparingly, after the manner of the Samian teacher, and take plain herbs for his food. He should have beside him a little beechen bowl of crystal water and drink sober draughts from the clear spring.

In 1654 he exhorted the English people to the observance of temperance as one of the requisite virtues in the realization of their liberty:

And as for you, citizens, it is of no small concern, what manner of men ye are, whether to acquire, or to keep possession of your liberty. Unless your liberty be of that kind, which can be neither gotten, nor taken away by arms; and that alone is such, which, springing from piety, justice, temperance, in fine, from real virtue, shall take deep and intimate root in your minds.

Several additional references to temperance can be found in Comus, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained (where Christ is a paragon of the temperate man according to Milton's ideals), and in various other passages of the prose and shorter poems.

Samson works toward the nadir of the drama in the dialogue with Manoa by further citing the many ills, physical and mental, that prey upon him, and among these ills:

Sleep hath forsook me and given me o'er
To death's benumbing opium.

(S.A. 629-630)

Here Milton has probably allowed one of the circumstances of his own physical condition to find its way into the portrait of Samson. Although it is a probable affliction according to the depiction that Milton has given as of the tormented fallen hero, the idea for the inclusion of it as

may have stemmed from his own condition in the summer of 1660, when, as we are told by the early biographer, Richard­
son, he "was in perpetual terror of being assassinated" and was "so dejected that he would lie awake whole nights." 78

Although Samson at one point earlier in the play told Manoa to "A point not heavenly dispensation," he now begins to question it himself:

Abstemious I grew up and thrived amain;
He led me on to mightiest deeds
Above the nerve of mortal arm
Against the uncircumcised, our enemies.
But now hath cast me off as never known,
And to those cruel enemies,
Whom I by his appointment had provoked,
Left me all helpless with th' irreparable loss
Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated
The subject of their cruelty or scorn.

(S.A. 637-646)

This is not a hidden reproach of divine dispensation on the part of Milton for the condition in which he found himself in 1660, although it is not unreasonable to think that he derived some cathartic effect by allowing his hero, whose situation was so similar to his own, to "kick against the pricks" of his fate. That Milton used as a reference for this passage his own plight after the Restoration I believe probable, however, because of the strict parallels to his own history that we find therein: "Abstemious I grew up. . . /
He led me on to mightiest deeds/ . . . Against. . . our en­
emies./ But now. . . / to those cruel enemies,/ Whom I by

78 Masson, VI, 214.
his appointment had provoked, [I am left] all helpless
with th' irreparable loss/ Of sight, reserved alive to be
repeated/ The subject of their cruelty or scorn." Certainly,
it is impossible to say just to what extent Milton intended
to identify with Samson here. That he could have failed to
recognize the close similarity to his own history is such
an unreasonable supposition as to be well nigh impossible.

The Chorus replies to this last statement of disil-
lusionment, trying to direct Samson into the right way of
accepting his fallen state:

Many are the sayings of the wise,
In ancient and in modern books enrolled,
Extolling patience as the truest fortitude;

(S.A. 652-654)

In various statements of his Christian and heroic ideals, 79
from the Commonplace Book to the major poems, Milton has
expounded the virtue of patience. We have it precisely de-
 fined in the Christian Doctrine (Book II, Chapter III):

Patience is that whereby we acquiesce in
the promises of God, through a confident re-
liance on his divine providence, power, and
goodness, and bear inevitable evils with equa-
nimity, as the dispensation of the supreme
Father, and sent for our good. 80

In reference to his bearing up under the burden of his

79 Commonplace Book in Douglas Bush et. al., eds.,
Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Yale Edition (New
Haven, 1953), I, 364.
own blindness, he wrote to Morua in the Second Defense:

To be blind is not to be miserable; not to be able to bear blindness, that is miserable. But why should I be unable to bear that which it behoves every one to bear, should the accident happen to himself, without repining. Why should I be unable to bear what I know may happen to any mortal being?

We also have this patience which the Chorus praises expressed by Milton in reference to himself in the famous "Sonnet XIX":

...But Patience, to prevent
That murmer, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best."

There is no question but that we have personal philosophy concerning a personal subject spoken by the Chorus here in Samson Agonistes.

In the midst of its consolation, however, the Chorus falls to the same metaphysical questioning upon God's treatment of his servants "with hand so various." A qualification is made, however, and we are told that the common man is not included or thought to have pertinence to such a problem:

Nor do I name of men the common rout,
That wandering loose about

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Grow up and perish as the summer fly,
Heads without name no more remembered.

(S.A. 674-677)

Here Milton has made the Chorus a social philosopher in his own image. This is a characteristic statement of the Miltonic aristocratic republicanism which has already been mentioned (page 55). For extended expressions of this sentiment as they relate to the English lower classes of the seventeenth century, see "Sonnet XII"; the peroration to the Second Defense (where he advises Cromwell on the subject); and The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, much of which is devoted to expressions of profound distrust in the "rude multitude."

This long speech by the Chorus becomes a veritable diatribe on the unreasonable adversities dealt out by providence to those who would be thought to deserve better rewards. The fate that some of these men suffer is told:

Oft leav'ist them to the hostile sword
Of heathen and profane, their carcasses
To dogs and fowls a prey, or else captived,
Or to the unjust tribunals, under change of times,
And condemnation of the ingratitude multitude.

(S.A. 692-696)

This passage has been widely cited by autobiographical theorists as a reference to the treatment of the regicidal conspirators at the hands of the Royalists in the early post-Restoration period. Bishop Newton pointed out particularly the case of Sir Henry Vane, who was probably the
most heroic of the regicides in speaking out against the Royalists to the utter disregard of his own safety.

Among the customary horrors that were part of the executions during the Restoration days were the placing of dismembered bodily parts at various points around the city and the mounting of the severed heads of the victims upon high poles for the crowds to mock and abuse at will. Because carrion fowl would prey upon these remains, the hangman boiled the heads in a solution of "bay-salt" and "cummin-seed" to keep them away. In considering this passage for autobiographical interpretation, however, the reader should first compare Deuteronomy XXVIII, 26:

> And thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth....

In the Scripture, this verse is a part of the Palestine covenant delivered by Moses to the Israelites, prophesying the havoc which was to result when the covenant should be broken. It would be possible, then, for this Chorus of Danites, when it moralizes in *Fall of Princes* fashion, to have the history of the Jews as a referent. It is probable, though, that Milton used the Scripture here, as he frequently does throughout his works, for felicity of

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82 Todd, III, 265.
83 Thomas Ellwood's account of his prison experience. Masson, VI, 471.
expression. The remainder of the passage—speaking of "unjust tribunals," "change of times," and "condemnation of the general multitude"—seems rather to be Milton moralizing with the dual referent of the fate of Samson as well as the fate of many of his own compeers of the interregnum.

The Chorus continues its speech:

If these they scape, perhaps in poverty
With sickness and disease thou bowest them down,
Painful diseases and deformed,
In crude old age

(S.A. 697-700)

This is a continuation of the same abstract moralizing, but at once it is more abstract with regard to Samson and the Israelites, and much more particular to Milton's personal situation. Although he "scaped" the "hostile sword," the "unjust tribunals under change of times," and "condemnation of the ingrateful multitude," he did suffer poverty, sickness, and painful disease. Milton's poverty after 1660 has already been mentioned in the discussion of verses 75-76. As for his health, it was never particularly robust, and his poor physical condition occasionally interrupted his duties as Latin Secretary in the 1650's, as he testifies himself. Masson describes the poet's health in the 1660's:

The blindness, now total for ten years, was a settled matter; but Milton's ailments besides were serious enough, and had taken form at length of a confirmed and severe gout.\textsuperscript{85}

Gout is, of course, a disease both painful and deforming when the visitation is severe. It stands to reason that the source of this "abstract" illustration of the exemplary fallen man was Milton's personal condition in the early or middle 1660's.\textsuperscript{86}

The play takes on new interest with the entrance of Dalila. Here is a portion of the description of the way that she approaches Samson:

\begin{quote}
About t' have spoke; but now with head declined
Like a fair flower surcharged with dew, she weeps,
And words addressed seem into tears dissolved,
Wetting the borders of her silken veil;
But now again she makes address to speak.
\end{quote}

(S.A. 727-731)

In Edward Phillips's telling of the reconciliation of Mary Powell Milton and her husband at the home of one Mr. Blackborough in the year 1645, we have the following description:

\begin{quote}
One time above the rest, he was making his usual visit, the wife was ready in another room, and on a sudden he was surprised to see one whom he had thought to have never seen more, making submission and begging pardon on her knees before him.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{85} Masson, VI, 455.

\textsuperscript{86} For an extensive autobiographical interpretation of these verses, see Todd, III, 266.

\textsuperscript{87} Masson, III, 437.
Compare also this description of Eve's supplication to Adam after the fall in *Paradise Lost*:

... but Eve,
Not so repulsed, with tears that ceased not flowing,
All tresses all disordered, at his feet
Fell humble, and embracing them, besought
His peace.

(P.L. IX, 909-913)

She ended weeping, and her lowly plight,
Immovable till peace obtained from fault
Acknowledged and deplored, in Adam wrought
Commiseration.

(P.L. IX, 937-940)

The verses in *Samson Agonistes* seem to have only a shading of the experience which appears to have been the conscious source for the scene between Adam and Eve. To interpret this confrontation in *Samson* as an entire allegorical representation of the one in 1645 can be no better than a mere guess. Judging from what we have been told of the latter meeting, there seems to have been no stern rebuke on the part of the poet, and Mary was soon reinstated in his household. In all three of the instances discussed here, however, there is a strong resemblance in the manner of the approach of the repentent wife to the husband, and Milton may well have drawn upon his own experience as a source for this literary portrayal.

Samson dismisses Dalila in a rage, and in deprecating the power that women hold over men, he says that "wisest and best men" are "full oft beguiled" into a union which
proves to be their ruination. (S.A. 759-765) Here, again, Milton has his character to expound his personal philosophy and experience. For more complete expositions of verses which convey Milton’s ideas of the relationship with woman as man’s nemesis for his indiscretion, see pages 50-51 and 72-74.

Dalila tries to parley Samson into reconciliation, but he further upbraids her for her treatment of him:

I before all the daughters of my tribe
And of my nation chose thee from among
My enemies, loved thee, as too well thou knew’st

...Why then
Didst thou at first receive me for thy husband,
Then, as since then, thy country’s foe professed?
Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave
Parents and country; nor was I their subject,
Nor under their protection, but my own;
Thou mine, not theirs.

(S.A. 876-878; 882-888)

At this point in the dialogue between Samson and Dalila, Milton makes innovations which are extraneous to the Samson story of the Bible, to his own exegetical interpretation of Samson’s actions as expressed elsewhere in the drama, and to Scriptural doctrine in general. First, Samson says that he "loved" Dalila, but elsewhere in the poem (verses 221-224, 232, and 421-423), Milton has made it a point to attribute Samson’s relationship with both the woman of Timna and with Dalila as being of strict pragmatism. It was
something that was done to better enable Samson to afflict the Philistines, and it was action that was "motioned" by God. Here, however, we have love brought in for the nonce, doubtless so that Samson will have more sufficient grounds for his rebuke of the woman. Furthermore, since Samson has said that he loved Dalila, the first part of his expostulation, "Why then/ Didst thou at first receive me for husband?" is rendered illogical and ineffective, and Dalila's expected answer might be, "because I loved you too, you silly boy." The fact is, love is out of place here, as is Samson's entire pleading against the tort. If we were to give an analysis of the predicament in modern terminology, we might say that Samson was playing for high stakes by going into the Philistine camp and entering into a marriage union under the pretenses of love. Turnabout has always been fair play. Dalila was also Samson's "country's foe professed," and the upshot of the whole affair, when seen in the right prospective, is that she beat him at his own game. Really, then, Samson has just cause to stamp his feet or gnash his teeth—something in lieu of pulling his hair out at the roots—against his bad luck, or against the Philistines for putting out his eyes (as he does in Judges XVI), but the diatribe against Dalila is somewhat wide of the mark and illogical.

The next lines bring us closer to a better insight into the entire passage. First, Milton has reversed the doctrine
found in Genesis II, 24, which explicitly states that the man must leave his country and cleft to the woman. Second, and more important, Milton has again allowed false logic to enter his dialogue. If Samson's mission in joining Dalila was to facilitate his harassment of the Philistines, how is it that he would have wanted Dalila to leave her parents and country? There is no question but that Samson would have wanted to stay right where he was within the Philistine stronghold to work against the enemy according to the mission which had been stipulated at the time of his miraculous birth. (See Judges XIII.)

Since this entire insertion is so much out of the way of Samson's story—even as Milton himself has presented the story—let us see if a more probable home cannot be found for it: In 1642, Milton met Mary Powell at her father's estate near Oxford, and he loved her. She received him for her husband, although her family was situated in the midst of an area which was sympathetic to Milton's professed foes (the Royalists). Once being his wife, she was unable to leave parents and country, and she returned home, although she was legally Milton's, not theirs.

The only conclusion that can be reasonably drawn from the disparity that the passage has to the Samson story and the close similarity that it has to the poet's own history is that Milton relied heavily upon his own experience in the creation of it, and, in this case, he was not quite as
discreet as he has been in other such reliances.

Dalila's visit has made Samson even more acutely aware of his failing, and once again the Chorus offers some consoling words:

Yet beauty, though injurious, hath strange power,
After offense returning, to regain
Love once possessed, nor can be easily
Repulsed, without much inward passion felt
And secret sting of amorous remorse.

(S.A. 1003-1007)

Milton could testify to this through experience. Strange, indeed, must have seemed that power to him in 1645 when it led him to accept Mary once again after she had deserted him for three years and after he had written four divorce tracts in the interim. These lines are really not very relevant in this context because Samson seems to have had no trouble at all in repulsing Dalila, and her sexual attraction does not appear to have any power over him at this stage of their relationship.

The Chorus attempts to comfort Samson further by suggesting that the appeal of such women as Dalila has been the downfall of many good men:

Whate'er it be, to wisest men and best
Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,
Soft, modest, meek, demure,
Once joined, the contrary she proves, a thorn
Intestine, far within defensive arms
A cleaving mischief, in his way to virtue
Adverse and turbulent; or by her charms
Draws him awry, enslaved
With dotage, and his sense depraved
To folly and shameful deeds, which ruin ends.
What pilot so expert but needs must wreck,
Embarked with such a steers-mate at the helm?

(S.A. 1024-1045)

This is another reflection of Milton's personal experience and his anti-feministic philosophy put into the mouth of the Chorus, and again we have a statement which is not in good propriety with the Samson and Dalilah story. I refer to the implication that Dalila is "...all heavenly under virgin veil;/ Soft, modest, meek, demure." Although Milton has raised her to the station of a wife, following a tradition of exegesis, it is still rather difficult to picture her in terms such as these. In seeking a source for some of the elements of this passage, we may turn to The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce:

But let them know again, that for all the wariness can be used, it may yet befall a discreet man to be mistaken in his choice. ... The sobrest and best governed men are least practiced in these affairs; and who knows not that the bashful muteness of a virgin may oft-times hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for conversation. ...

Further from the same work:

... hath changed the blessing of matrimony not seldom into a familiar and co-

88 Krouse, p. 76.
89 The italics are my own.
Finally, this excerpt from Tetrachordon:

... one moment after those mighty syllables pronounced... this divine blessing that looked but now with such a human smile upon us... straight vanishes like a fair sky and brings on such a scene of cloud and tempest, as turns all to shipwreck... 

This passage of Samson Agonistes, then, appears to be a clear redaction from the divorce pamphlets, and the divorce pamphlets were at least partly influenced by his own experience. This last opinion is derived by the use of common reason in the interpretation of some facts concerning the four tracts: First, their subject matter is pertinent to Milton's own domestic situation at the time. Second, their publication was proximal only to the hiatus in his conjugal relationship with Mary, and he came forth with no more divorce pamphlets after 1645, the year in which the two were reunited.

Samson is visited by the Philistine giant, Harapha, who has come to witness the hero in his fallen state and to taunt and provoke him. Among other things, he charges Samson with the murder of thirty Philistines, which Harapha considers as having been unjustified. Samson replies that

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91 The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Columbia Edition, III, 381.
he needed no justification:

My nation was subjected to your lords.
It was the force of conquest; force with force
Is well ejected when the conquered can.

(S.A. 1205-1207)

The phraseology and possibly the whole idea of this passage can be traced to some of Milton's statements of the early 1650's in defense of the overthrow of the monarchy. These two excerpts from *Eikonoklastes* contain the essence of the verses in *Samson*:

Who not for five repulses of the Lords, no
not for fifty, were to desist from what in the
name of the whole kingdom they demanded, so
long as those Lords were none of our Lords.93

For the idea of "force with force," we have this statement:

And if Arguments prevail not with such a
one, force is well used. . .to acquit and res-
cue our own consciences from the force and pro-
hibition laid by his usurping error upon our
Liberties and understandings.94

The parley with Harapha continues, and Samson turns
his denunciation upon his own countrymen who delivered him
into the hands of the enemy:

. . .if their servile minds
Me their deliverer sent would not receive,

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94 Ibid., p. 136.
But to their masters gave me up for naught,  
Th' unworthier they; whence to this day they serve.

(S.A. 1213-1216)

The tone of Milton's political advice to the English people in the 1650's concerning the proper way to take advantage of what had been wrought by the Protectorate (and later by the Rump) was as if to say, "These are the straight and narrow byways to true liberty and a free commonwealth." In 1660, when he felt certain that his advice had gone unheeded and that the Good Old Cause was to be lost, he revealed his despair and his frustration toward the people. The tone and the attitude in the following passage from The Ready and Easy Way bear a close resemblance to these quoted from Samson:

Thus much I should perhaps have said though I were sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the Prophet, O, earth, earth, earth! to tell the very soil itself what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to. Nay though what I have spoke, should happen....to be the last words of our expiring liberty. 95

Surely, in the 1660's after the English people had accepted their king, as it were, back from Egypt, Milton must have thought many times, "Th' unworthier they; whence to this day they serve." Such thoughts seem to have influenced Milton in his selection of implicit sentiments in the story

for explicit presentation. It is even plausible that Milton's recognition of the Samson story as a compatible vehicle for the expression of such thoughts was the impetus that caused him to follow through with his own suggestion of a dramatic rendering of the story, one of the literary projects found in the Trinity Manuscript of 1642.

Even after Samson has sent Harapha away, as the Chorus describes, "somewhat crestfallen," the hero continues to suffer his dejected state of mind. In a further attempt to comfort him, the Chorus speaks a panegyric (verses 1270-1286), which is one of the best and most concise descriptions in the play of the attributes and offices of the magnanimous Christian deliverer-hero, a figure extolled by Milton in many places throughout his writings and one which, within his own capacity and his own province as a man of letters, he sought to emulate.

Samson is now summoned by a Philistine officer to appear at the festivities in celebration of Dagon. After first refusing, he is inwardly persuaded to comply. In bidding his friends farewell, he tells them not to accompany him, as they might be subjected to some danger by the reveling and drunken multitudes. His caution contains the following description of the celebrating Philistines:

    . . .Lords are lordliest in their wine;
    And the well-feasted priest then soon fired
    With zeal, if aught religion seem concerned;
No less the people on their holy-days
Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable
(S.A. 1418-1422)

An elaborate application of this passage to seventeenth-century English nobility, prelaty, and church policy concerning the "heathenish pastimes" which were prescribed as permissible on "holy-days" by the bishops is presented by Todd (pages 303-304). The bishops had given sanction in 1618 to various forms of rural sports, such as dancing, archery, leaping, and other forms of physical exercise, in a pamphlet entitled A Declaration to Encourage Recreations and Sports on the Lord's Day. The derogatory reference to the priest should also be recognized as a topical, personally Miltonic grievance.

Later in the play, after the catastrophe, the Chorus, the Semichorus, and Manoa eulogize the martyred Samson, and the Semichorus says that although he was blind, Samson accomplished his final triumph over the Philistines "With inward eyes illuminated." (S.A. 1689) This is almost identical to some of the phraseology that Milton used to describe the implications of his own blindness in 1654:

The divine law, the divine favor, has made us not merely secure, but, as it were, sacred, from the injuries of men; nor would seem to have brought this darkness upon us so much by inducing a dimness of the eyes, as by the overshadowing of heavenly wings; and not unfrequently is wont to
illume it again, when produced, by an inward and far surpassing light.\textsuperscript{96}

Manoa delivers the closing panegyric, in which he says that Samson

\begin{center}
...To Israel
Honor has left, and freedom--let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion.
\end{center}

(S.A. 1714-1716)

How much this sounds like Milton's exhortations to the "backsliders" of the late 1650's to take a final stand and seize upon the progress wrought by the Army and the Protectorate, progress which had brought England closer to an ideal government than she had ever been. Notice the identity of ideas between the above lines of Samson and the following selections from \textit{The Ready and Easy Way}:

\begin{quote}
...we may be forced perhaps to fight over again all that we have fought, and spend over again all that we have spent, but are never like to attain thus far as we are now advanced to the recovery of our freedom, never to have it in possession as we now have it, never to be vouchsafed hereafter the like mercies and signal assistances from heaven in our cause, if by our ingratitude backsliding we make these fruitless. ...\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

Now is the opportunity, now the very season

\textsuperscript{96} Second Defense, Columbia Edition, VIII, 73.

\textsuperscript{97} The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, Columbia Edition, VI, 118.
wherein we may obtain a free Commonwealth and establish it forever in the land, without much difficulty or delay.98

This marks the end of my autobiographical findings in *Samson Agonistes*. In the following chapter will be found a summary and concluding analysis of the nature and amount of Milton's personal infusion into the drama.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The first question to ask in evaluating the autobiographical interpretation of *Samson Agonistes* is whether or not Milton was likely to have indulged in such subjectivity. The answer is dependent upon our grasping a true realization of his personality and self-concept. We must recognize that Milton had a tremendously high opinion of himself from his earliest years. He was proud of his intelligence, proud of his ability at debate and literary composition, proud of his virtues, and proud of his claimed physical prowess with the sword. Neither was he reticent in voicing this pride in his letters, his prose works, and his poetry, the expressions running a gamut from confident conceit to a more sublime self-praise. Not only was he a proud man, and one who was not reluctant to speak or write in praise of himself, but he had somewhat of a penchant for boasting, self-aggrandizement, and exaggeration. A sufficient example is this compliment which he bestows upon himself and the posture of a militaristic hero which he assumes in the *Second Defense*:

It is not before our own doors alone that I have borne my arms in defense of liberty; I have wielded them on a field so wide, that the justice and reason of these which are no vulgar deeds, shall be explained and vindicated alike to foreign
nations and to our own countrymen; and by all good men shall no doubt be approved. . . .

In the same work, he went so far as to make this exaggerated boast:

Armed with this weapon [the sword], as I commonly was, I thought myself a match for any man, though far my superior in strength. . . .

According to what we know of his life, however, Milton never knew the sensation of bestriding a racing charger with his truncheon at rest; he never smote down a Royalist, horse and man; nor did he ever cleave a brain-pan to the teeth. Professor Hanford has given us a more realistic description of Milton's aspirations and ideals in comparison to the way that he really lived and acted, when he says that Milton was "condemned by the limitations of his own nature to be a spectator where he would be an actor, a man of peace when he wants to wield the sword, a praiser of deeds which he fain would be doing, an exhortor of others to a leadership which he feels should be his own. . . ."

Milton also greatly exaggerated the influence and effectiveness of his role as a functional deliverer or liberator of the English people, a role which he once

100 Ibid., p. 61.
assessed as that of the bringer of liberty "to every nation from the columns of Hercules to the farthest borders of India," when in truth, he was unable, within the smaller expanse of London, to bring about the acceptance of the various issues which were the subjects of his prose tracts. Really, when we consider the true nature of his work under the Lord Protector, he seems to have been a low-salaried official literary hack-worker, whose writing was prescribed by his superiors. Yet to hear Milton describe the role, he might have been a veritable Knight of the Quill and Scroll and an effective public savior of the first water. When we consider the poet with this necessarily realistic attitude, therefore, we must realize that there seems to be little question as to whether or not he would have taken the natural opportunities afforded by the Samson story to commingle therein his personal history and ideas, even though such an infusion is tantamount to self-aggrandizement.

With this in mind, in addition to the exposition in Chapter III of this paper, it remains for us to summarize and evaluate the nature and amount of the subjective incorporation. Thus, we are led to a question which lies at the heart of the issue: Must Samson Agonistes be a minutely scrupulous, detail-perfect allegory of Milton's experience in order to be considered as autobiographical? The answer

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is an emphatic and unhesitating no. The very term "autobiographical" is adjectival, which means that it will bear qualifications of type and degree. I have no such idea that *Samson Agonistes* is a complete allegory of Milton's life or of his fallen condition after the Restoration, nor that Manoa is the poet's father, nor that Dalila is Mary Milton, nor that Harapha is Salmasius, although, as I have shown in Chapter III, some aspects of the literary portrayal of Dalila may well have been derived or suggested by instances in the relationship between Mary and John Milton, and some aspects of the dialogue between Samson and Harapha have as a likely source the exchange of polemics between Milton and his foreign adversaries in the 1650's. The subjectivity, however, is broader, more pervasive, and more vague than regular allegory. It might be described as a *sympathetic identification* of Milton with his hero and an *active participation* in the action or thought throughout the entire work. Sometimes the participation is directly in Samson's plight and the similarity which it bears to Milton's own life, and in Samson's character and the similarity which it bears to Milton's own self-concept. Thus, we find heavy emphasis upon such things as Samson's blindness, his role as a divinely inspired deliverer of the people, and the failure of the populace to rally in support of the progress which he made against the Philistines. In addition, the
active participation is in the form of Miltonic ideals, Miltonic philosophy--political, ethical, moral, and theological--and nuances of contemporary English history which happened to be more or less implicit in the thought and action of the story in the Bible and in the Christian tradition, and which Milton has made explicit in the drama.

This sort of active participation and sympathetic identification is made all the more probable in Samson Agonistes because its genre is that of the classical Greek tragedy, which means that it comprehends the element of catharsis. In this case, the catharsis was of extra function and pertinence, for who could experience the purgation of emotions through fear and pity aroused by the experience of the protagonist more than the dramatist himself, whose own experiences and misfortunes had been so similar?

I have sought to illustrate in this paper--by the pertinent verses from the drama cited in Chapter III and the supporting exposition from the history of Milton's life; from the political, social, and ecclesiastical history of his times; from elements of his personal philosophy, ideals, and self-concept; and from corresponding passages found elsewhere in his writings--that Samson Agonistes is a quasi-autobiographical work. The nature of the autobiography can be defined with some preciseness, but the amount is more uncertain and is subject to debate.
APPENDIX

Here is a numerical listing of sixteen aspects of the character of Samson and the Samson story which developed in Scriptural exegesis from the early patristic writers down to the middle of the seventeenth century. The source of the information herein is the study entitled Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition by F. Michael Krouse (Princeton, 1949):

1. Most early expositors aggrandized Samson's character, many treating him as a saint and a martyr. They based the interpretation upon Samson's being mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews XI, 32-34 as one of the true believers and upon his role in Judges XIII—XVI as an exemplar of ultimate faith.

2. Divine motivation is often given as the reason and justification for Samson's slaughter of the Philistines and for his consorting with Dalilah.

3. Many commentators attributed Samson's fall to an inordinate lust after womankind.

4. Samson was also frequently treated as an allegorical figure of Christ.

5. Samson was frequently made more magnanimous in his capacity as liberator of Israel than is indicated in the Bible account.

6. The expositors of the "Scholastic Period" (ca. eighth
to fourteenth century) tended to emphasize the latter part of Samson's life and the implications of his fallen state. More attention was given to his betrayal by Dalilah, his captivity, blindness, shame, the labors at the mill, and the final act of destruction against the Philistines.

7. Many writers of the later Middle Ages used Samson as a moral example of the great and strong man brought to a lowly plight by the influence of a woman.

8. There was a strong bond of association between the story of Christ and the story of Samson in the sermons and literature of Milton's time.

9. By Milton's time, the story of Samson had received so many different interpretations that it meant a variety of things, from an example of sainthood and martyrdom to an example of the justice which is visited upon man for acts of lust and murder, so that to give a redaction of the story was tantamount to taking an exegetic stand on the matter.

10. There was a controversy over whether or not Samson's sins were justified by his ultimate faith.

11. There was a controversy over whether or not Dalilah was Samson's wife, but most agreed that she was his concubine.

12. Many of Milton's contemporaries stressed Samson as a tragic figure.
13. Many commentators expressed the opinion that Samson's punishment was out of proportion to his sins.

14. There was a seventeenth-century narrowing of the tragic aspect of the story to Samson's mental anguish and his loss of sight rather than his loss of strength or his enslavement.

15. Many of the political overtones are a part of the story in much of the hermenutic literature, especially the idea that the Israelites were in a lapsarian state and "went a-whoring after other gods."

16. Anti-feminism, because of Dalila's role, had always been implicit in the story.
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