"What in me is dark/ Illumine"(PL 1:22-23): The "Other" body of *Samson Agonistes*

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Abstract

At the heart of *Samson Agonistes* lies a constellation of losses that cannot be overcome by any virtue that critics may accrue for Samson's 'heroic' end. I wish to investigate the nature and significance of these losses to demonstrate how the text collapses, builds and overextends itself, and in so doing, anticipates its Other: a new paradigm of "peace and consolation" ('*SA'* 1757). What can we make of the wilful death of a colossal giant like Samson, whose image tutored, crafted and developed through concepts of 'consecrated' violence, ends his life embroiled in the spoils of his own carnage?

Accepting that the grand close of the Samson drama lies in the force of its narrative imagery, which powerfully depicts for us the colluding of two ideologically opposed worlds we must ask, what have we missed here?! What is the ideological breach/excess scripted in Samson's mutilated frame? How can the text be retrieved to 'illuminate' for us the trajectories of our dark histories? How can the text lead us to the pregnant Silence, the Stillness encrypted in the in-between spaces of the text's framing, to enable, encourage and facilitate a purposeful and energetic 'pursuit of global religious accord'.

How do we read a text like *Samson Agonistes* in the light of the 21st century where distinctions between father and mother, brother and brother, father/mother and child lose its character in collective madness. If we are walking, to borrow the title of Gupta's book, the *Path to Collective Madness*, should we not extricate ourselves from the conventional reluctance to demythologize the violence suppressed in religious texts and its antecedents based on historical and authorial premise? To insist on pure "historical" readings of any text is to suggest that history/literature/ art has only one face, frozen at the site of its articulation, and the rest of literature is and must be tested merely as fossil records. While we may speculate on authorial intention, we can never determine its validity beyond the boundaries of the core/source text, and even then we would still be speculating. It is my intention to propose a reading of Samson Agonistes to debunk some of the myths that have popularised readings of Samson as a traditional Israelite hero.

The controversies over Samson Agonistes reflect the tensions with reading a text whose authority is debated on the basis of its biblical antecedent. For many the traditional view of Samson is that of undisputed hero, his death, redemptive, his "rousing motions" a final and cataclysmic demonstration of faith. Such orthodox readings have a long history and continue to be debated till recent times. Elizabeth Oldman sees that Samson's "warlike retaliation against his enemies is justifiably defensive according to Groatian principles" of just war" (2007, 369). George McLoone argues, for an emphasis on "ecclesiastic and liturgical allusion in the text", which he regards is central to an understanding of Milton's view of Samson as tragic rather than epic hero (1995, 2) These and "typological readings" which see Samson as a "imperfect" Christ (Wood 2001, 6) labour the point that Samson is either God's favoured son, a classical hero with a tragic flaw or epic hero (Wood 2001, 6). Such readings regard the poem as embodying a kind of Homeric vision: Samson's own chartered Gethsemane, his desert experience; his movement through trial and suffering into regeneration and redemption is argued in the light of God's witness and affirmation of Samson's sacrifice. Such readings also appear to need to "confirm the intelligibility" of the world (Fish 2001, 435).

Modernist readings of Samson focus on Samson's humanness, his fantasies, limitations and oversights against God's indecipherability. Clay Daniels argues that it is Samson who seems to be "busily-directing God in the fulfilment of his prophecy, he never glimpses the light

behind the prophecy. For Samson, there is no progression towards God; he begins and ends : "dark dark dark ... Samson stumbles form error to error ... killing, lying, boasting, revenging, glorying and whoring [...]" (1989, 28). Irene Samson condemns him as an "egocentric monomaniac" (250 cited in Wood 2001, 8). For Stanley Fish, it is the inscrutability of the intentions of the players that is paramount and Fish concludes accordingly: "The only wisdom to be carried away form the play is that there is no wisdom to be carried away, and that we are not alone, like Samson, and like the children of Israel, of whom it is said in the last verse of Judges: 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes'" (Fish 2001, 473). The difficulty is that we "find ourselves unable to determine what part of the hero's decision is to be traced to his own hard-worn intuition, and what part(if any) to the direct intervention of heavenly powers "(Fish 2001, 421). Further, some would argue that the "absence of a narrator's voice or a heavenly chorus, [...] sharply increases interpretative uncertainty by comparison with Paradise Regained" (Krook 1996, 129). Barabara Lewalski concludes that "[whatever consensus] once obtained about Samson Agonistes no longer exists"; we have rather a "cacophony of critical voices" to draw from (Milton's Samson 233 cited in Wood 2001, 9).

Resistance to modernist readings of Samson Agonistes are based on what scholars regard as attempts to contaminate the pure and apparently obvious intentions of the author. Low argues that modernist readings which "repudiate the violent ending of SA" are on their own since there is "no evidence that Milton or his contemporaries saw the destruction of the Philistine temple as anything but admirable and heroic" (2002, 287). Low's defence of this is based on Milton's earlier works but the time lapse between Milton's earlier works and Paradise Regained to which is added Samson Agonsites is several decades. To suggest that the Milton of 1644 never developed beyond and to the last phase of his writing life is to deny the extraordinary appeal of Milton's last writing phase which embodies his great classics, Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Also, such readings do not allow for the ways in which Milton's blindness would have moderated and challenged his revolutionary ideals.

For those who argue for biographical readings and who see in Samson, Milton's double, I would caution some moderation on the basis that while Milton shared an emotional space and intimacy with Samson, on account of his blindness and perhaps even his fall from grace, Samson's brute force and his intellectual limitations collapse any twin identification we could speculate on, on Milton's behalf. Indeed, Milton's blindness gave him an artistic and imaginative edge, an acute sensitivity that should not be confused with Samson's solipsist and narcissistic portrait of blindness. Further, Milton's revision of the Samson story as Jane Melbourne points out takes it so far from its prequel that it complicates the question of authority, necessarily. Milton expands the rather minimalist record of the Biblical Samson into a poem of 1755 lines, injecting imaginatively into the structure of the poem interactions between the characters that fill out and in instances contradict the Biblical version (Melbourne 1996). For in Judges, there is little opportunity to credit any real emotion to a giant who enters and exits the text only as a series of violent and irrational impulses. The biblical text resolves Samson's status as a hero of faith not by proving it but by demanding a suspension of disbelief which we are not so willing to part with in our times.

Finally, to recognize that Milton's text is first and always art would be helpful for those who insist that Milton's text must conform to Biblical exegesis. And for those who argue that Milton keeps the Mosaic law separate from the Gospel (Woods 2001, Preface xviii), we cannot be satisfied that Samson fulfils or upholds Mosaic Law. Judging from Milton's work alone, he marries against Mosaic Law on two occasions, eats presumably whatever he is

served and kills indiscriminately. The problem lies also in that God's absence is notable. For it is only through Samson's consciousness that we are able to ascertain God's supposed designs. The repertoire of violent incidents for which Samson is credited and the force and barbarity of that violence leaves much to be desired in the extant portrait of Samson as hero and defender of the Israelite nation but more importantly it calls into question the character of Samson's God.

While 'providential readings' of Samsom Agonistes continue to moderate and challenge modernist readings, their findings are contestable given that Milton spares no economy in fleshing out the Biblical Samson and enlisting his weaknesses to complicate any simplistic responses we may have to the grand close of the drama. For indeed, Harapha and Dalila/(as distinctive from the biblical Delilah/Dalila), are Milton's creation, as is Milton's Chorus. It can be argued that the changes Milton invests in all these characters reflect his attempt to distance himself from the mythological treatment of Samson in Judges. In this regard, we are indebted to Derek Wood for his sound analysis of Milton's Dalila. Derek Wood's caution that scholars have generally lost the subtleties of "Milton's human insight and rich fictionalization of the woman", Dalila, remind us of the range Milton manages with this text, both intertextually and intersubjectively. Milton brings to his text a sensitivity to issues of gender and prejudice, collapsing stereotypes of the female fatale in Dalila, investing instead an intelligence and strength in her which forces Samson to contend and confront her as an equal.

Further, while the Chorus may assert the existence of "calm of mind all passion spent," readers familiar with the Bible know that Samson's actions and death do not lead to the deliverance of the Danites" (Melbourne 1996, 111). We would be judicious in taking Shawcross' direction to rest in the text's multiple possibilities. Finally, the contextualization of Samson Agonistes as either "subordination" or "supplementation" to Paradise Regained complicates attempts to locate some form of unadulterated meaning from the poem (Wittreich RSA 285). For Wittreich, interpretation is necessarily " cumulative" and "corrective" (xi Intro) the poem "breeds" new questions and defies closure, "proferring" instead " a range of possibilities for interpretation(Wittreich RSA 285).

To collapse the resistance to modernist readings of Samson Agonistes, we must recognize the over-determination by scholars to read Samson Agonistes in the light of biblical exegesis. We would do well to remind ourselves that Milton's work is not a biblical commentary or an imitation of the biblical narrative. Jane Melbourne reminds us that Samson Agonistes is not the "dramatization of a Bible story; all dramatic action is created by Milton [...]: "Between the climatic drama of the Biblical record and the evocation of that moment in Samson Agonistes, Milton writes 1540 lines, interpreting this action before the Messenger's narration of it"(Melbourne 1996). The story of Samson Agonistes as Wittreich points out is "founded upon conflicted and conflicting texts ... producing rival interpretations from them" (Wittreich. RISA 2002, 73). Whatever reservations scholars may have of Wittreich's interpretation of the text, they cannot ignore his call to contend with the "hermenutical potentiality of the tale" (Wittreich. RISA 2002, 73)

The most disturbing aspect of scholarship on this text involves the rationalizing of violence in its sacralized format. There is a reluctance to deal with the horror of the close of the poem and the indiscriminate destruction of lives. There is a Manichean tendency to read the text in black/white, good/evil, holy/unholy categories which limits the reading of a text that deals with issues pertinent to our times, the issue of sacralized violence and sectarian/religious

prejudice/animosity. As Derek Wood argues, scholars "driven by an unqualified admiration for Milton and Samson" deny the brute and graphic violence that closes the Samson's saga, and argue that the "horror" of the violence against the Philistines are "a human imaging of God's might ... an exemplary act which teaches how God gives freedom'(Mary Ann Radzinowicz 346 cited in Wood 7).) Gregory Semenza argues that "[t]he destruction of the Philistines- an undoubtedly bloody event – is also the deliverance of God's chosen people [...]. And, is therefore, perfectly acceptable to Milton(2002, 459). Yet, the only basis for the pre-modernist readings lie in the stereotyping/orientalizing of the Philistines as "unclean" and "unholy" (Nyquist 1994, 85). There is a denial of the humanness of the Philistines; a summary dismissal of the colossal loss of lives is somehow, coldly justifiable at the hands of Israel's hero and Israel's God.

My intention then in reading Samson Agonistes is to subvert the attempts to read this text in its historical framings. My intention is to collapse the sanctions of religious violence some insist make these texts hermeneutically closed and sealed off to modern readings. Taking my cue from postcolonial and postmodern scholars, I suggest that to find our way out of violence, we have to find our way out of circular readings of providential violence by reading against the grain, seeking out the "writing back" text as a means of destabilizing the archaeology of violence the text suppresses in its religious framing. In this regard, it would be contingent to note what Shadia Drury(2003) perceives is "an uncanny resemblance between Samson's attack of the Philistines as described in the Bible (Judges 16:26-31) and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York 2001 (2003, 1).

Anthony Low, while being suspicious of modernist readings of this text, argues that for those who acquire a mandate for violence from the reading of Samson Agonistes, we should, rather than "deconstruct the model […] educate them to make better choices and to draw proper conclusions from their readings" (Low 2002). If we accepted for a moment that we can all agree on what constitutes "proper conclusions", I would still ask, why should not "deconstructing the model" be just such a way of educating readers to "make better" if not "proper choices". As Susanne Woods reminds us in "Choice and election in 'Samson Agonistes: "Milton offers no Attendant Spirit, but only questions and ambiguities". In this regard, she cites Wittreich's appeal to the precedence of the Romantics who provide us with a lens for reading "complexity" and "disclose meanings that previous generations resisted, even shielded"(cited in Woods 176).

Indeed, the mandate for the 21st century must be to stop skirting around the issue of sacralized violence or fixating on Milton's intentions in the text. For those who regard that any reading of Samson Agonistes which names and exposes the violence suppressed in its heart, is an affront to historical readings and biblical hermeneutics, I would say, let Milton's initiatives speak to them. The departures Milton takes from the Biblical version of the Samson story enables the initiative we take with modern/postmodern readings. As Jane Melbourne puts it, we cannot but "finally ... surrender through the text to ... mystery " (Melbourne 1996, 111) For those who need a mandate from Milton, they need to look no further than what "Milton proposes in Of Education, our engagement with learning is meant to repair the ruins of our first parents, teaching us to know God aright" (384 Wittreich Interpreting Samson Agonistes cited in 186 Milton and Grounds of Contention).

In Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, Girard writes, human beings "kill and continue to kill, strange as it may seem, in order not to know they are killing (Girard 1987, 163). The willful blindness, necessary to make the sacrifice effective is, according to Girard,

best sustained through the "theological basis of sacrifice"(Girard. VS 1979, 7). "Men can dispose of violence more efficiently if they regard the process as not something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree" (Girard. VS 1979, 14). My reading of Samson Agonistes is based on this premise that Milton's Samson articulates for us the misunderstanding through which the drama of sacralized violence is articulated, performed, and sustained in the Old Testament.

At the heart of Samson Agonistes lies a constellation of losses that cannot be overcome by any virtue that critics may accrue for Samson's 'heroic' end. I wish to investigate the nature and significance of these losses to demonstrate how the text collapses, builds and overextends itself, and in so doing, anticipates its Other: a new paradigm of "peace and consolation" ('SA' 1757). What can we make of the wilful death of a colossal giant like Samson, whose image tutored, crafted and developed through concepts of 'consecrated' violence, ends his life embroiled in the spoils of his own carnage? Accepting that the grand close of the Samson drama lies in the force of its narrative imagery, which powerfully depicts for us the colluding of two ideologically opposed worlds we must ask, what have we missed here?! What is the ideological breach/excess scripted in Samson's mutilated frame? How can the text be retrieved to 'illuminate' for us the trajectories of our dark histories? How can the text lead us to the pregnant Silence, the Stillness encrypted in the in-between spaces of the text's framing, to enable, encourage and facilitate a purposeful and energetic 'pursuit of global religious accord'.

Samson Agonistes serves as a self-evaluating and corrective function, pointing us through its theme of "blindness" away from its horrific and climatic display of violence to something Other. Indeed in yoking this text to Paradise Regained, Milton enables us to interrogate the violence that has traditionally been regarded as "heroic" and divinely inspired through its Other, the example of Christ, through whom all discourses and rationale for violence collapses. In this sense, Samson Agonistes defers to its Other, the parent-text, which Milton provides for us through Paradise Regained as a parent-narrative. Samson Agonistes seems to be Milton's last word on the pattern and mimicry of violence which Milton invites us to judge against the back-drop of the hero of Paradise Regained. As an attachment to Paradise Regained, Milton leaves us in Samson Agonistes with the dilemma of violence against the ideal of Christ's peace, as if to measure the gap between where we are and where we could be! Milton appears to be inviting a re-reading of the portrait of the biblical Samson through new lenses. It is this re-reading I wish to do.

How could we read Samson? My answer lies in understanding the psychology of Samson's fears and motivations. To do this, I turn to the study of Samson's search for the meaning of his gift of Strength against the background of his violent history. My argument is based on the premise that just as Samson's outcry against the Philistines is deafening, so is God's silence! Samson attempts to drown this silence through his many and varied appeals to his divine-calling, namely, his search for understanding his gift of strength. It is through his strength that Samson defines himself and the result is an identity crisis that Samson is unable to manage or resolve. The "rousing motion" he feels at the end of the poem upon which he acts and destroys the Philistines in an apparent act of suicide suggests his need to overcome the confusion of identity he suffers. Samson fits the pattern of those whose "narcissistic rage take on violent forms" through their "fail(ing) to live up to absolute expectations" and "for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable [...]" (Kohut (GAP 1978) cited in Grimland et al, 113). For Samson, the "unavailability" of God as an "approving mirroring function" and the irresolution of the "ever-present opportunity" of "a

merger with an idealized" Other, upon which his "coherence of the self depends" is critical (Kohut (GAP 1978) cited in Grimland et al, 113).

If we can get beyond the need to reconstruct Milton's mind to locate in his work a seemingly static text or resist the over-determination to read this text in the light of Biblical hermeneutics, we could ask what can we learn from "Samson Agonistes" contingent to our times. To do this, I suggest that we turn to Milton's own direction in the prologue which encourages us to read the play in the light of the Greek tragedians. And so I turn to Sophocles' Antigone for some direction. Antigone dies to teach us a truth, that philos and ekhtros are political and necessary inventions and that beloved/enemy are each the mirror of the Other. I want to suggest that it is this truth that is unbearable to Samson: that is, his affinity/and startling resemblance to the enemy. Samson's life charts for us his choosing Philistine community/law over Hebrew law, while all the time declaring/naming the Philistine Other. I argue that Samson needs not just an "enemy" but the illusion of an "enemy". Hence the "performance violence" he enacts at the close of the poem is intended to reach beyond the moment of its occurrence, in the estimation of its projected value in the collective memory of its witnesses (Juergensenmeyer 2000, 122). My reading traces, through the loss of distinctions between beloved and enemy, a route out of this violence.

I wish to turn to Samson's soliloquy for this purpose. Samson's soliloquy begins with his search for light, "for choice of Sun or shade", demonstrating Samson's confusion and need for clarity. The language Milton gives Samson here is defined not just through words but artistically through Samson's body, best described through the sign which Derrida claims is "the theme of the drawings of the blind" : the hand (Derrida 1993, 4) which speak as they search for meaning: "A little onward lend thy guiding hand". These movements of the wavering, groping hands become the character of the entire poem, bringing to us a Samson, from whom like the shifting, quivering hands, questions, doubts, fears, spill and alternate with regrets, confessions, supplications and reach finally for resolution in the violent close of the drama. It is these hands that are evoked again through the drama's climax which suggests that the violent end we imagine as Samson collapses the pillars of the temple, reflect his need to shake off/still forever the doubts and fears and loss of agency characterized by the opening images of his shuffling through the dark.

This shuffling through the dark movement invites us to seek out the function of Samson's secret: the core motif of the poem through the two rival texts :the secret divulged to the Timnan woman and the secret divulged to Dalila. Of these, I wish to invoke the latter in its binary implications of good/evil, holy/unholy, guilty/innocence to yet a third secret which lies like a cipher in the sub-text: Samson's own undisclosed secret and unacknowledged guilt from the Judges text which is prominent by its absence in Milton's text. Yet, Milton's play on the word "secret" which reverberates through the poem forces us to connect with this undivulged secret. This secret involves Samson's "violat[ion]" of " dietary laws eating from the carcass of a lion" (mieke Bal, 133 cited in Melbourne 1996, 111); I want to suggest that this violation of the law is marked by a further transgression submerged in a third secret, that by which Samson condemns his entire family. Samson breaks the dietary law and shares the spoils with his parents, keeping the nature of the food a secret from them. He involves his parents in transgressing the very law which was expressly given to his mother at his divine annunciation. Instructions to Samson's mother to prevail from "strong drink" and "unclean" food are histrionically repeated "in full three times within twenty-one verses"(Melbourne 1996) and predict how Samson's failings will come through the carnal appetite, (ironically, for a giant like Samson, incomparable in strength), through the weak body.

By yoking the secret of the dietary transgression to the secret of Samson's imagined Otherness, we recognize that the nexus of both secrets is the question of purity/impurity, holy/unholy. Samson knowingly breaks the law but does not acknowledge his sin in the first instance and in the second instance imagines his purity/innocence which the text has already contested. Indeed, the secret of his strength is compromised long before he divulges it to Dalila by his marriage to non-Hebrew women. His position as clean/pure/undefiled stands already challenged and it is this position that Samson cannot acknowledge even to himself. It explains his denial of his own part in transmitting the secret which he insists was "wrenched" from him against the record of not one, but four attempts by Dalila to gain the secret.

What both these secrets point to is Samson's default position as one who tests the limits of the law. In that both secrets deal with issues of law in relation to Hebrew election, the transgressing of both laws are equalized through their cancelling out any difference between clean and unclean, pure and defiled. They subvert Samson's claim to divine prediction/election and reframes him as equal to the enemy he despises. It also blurs the notion of the secret itself by transposing the "real" secret (which Samson never acknowledges) with the imaginary secret (which he obsesses over).

In this light, Samson's labouring over the burden of the secret throughout the poem can be explained through the play of the real and phantastical, which in turn, becomes a nexus between Milton's text and its submerged Other. For Samson, the real and phantastical become twin pillars that never meet, the result being that he operates on a system of denial and substitution in the interplay of his fantasies of identity. This accounts for his inability to deal with reality as much as it represents a deficiency of the imagination to find a new path or way out of his predicament. Having used only his strength to solve/create his problems, he appears incapable of re-inventing himself.

Samson's condemnation of the Philistines is complicated by the role he assumes as guardian of the very laws he transgresses. He stands condemned by his own assessment of the enemy. If the dietary regulations serve a purpose, they foreshadow Samson's tragedy as his embodiment of two opposing principles: strength and weakness. If Strength leads to or is interchangeable with weakness, then a strong body equates a weak body. When we collapse this dichotomy, we collapse also Samson's assumed difference to his hated enemy, the Philistines, who are according to the register of the text, weak, "unclean, "unholy", a defilement to Israel. This attitude to the Philistines is advanced by Samson's belief that he is the chosen son, God's favour, the mark of which resides in the privilege of his "gift" of strength. But Samson is deluded in his own estimation of his divine election at least in relation to his show of brute force and to his assumed difference from the Philistines. This delusion is treated through the early stirrings of the play which opens on Samson's respite from work, ironically, in observance of the Philistine's Sabbath in honour of Dagon. This opening scene foreshadows the way the rest of the poem will map Samson's transgressions as a Nazarite: his breaking of his vows regarding unclean food is eclipsed through his examination of his double-marriage to non-Hebrew women. Clearly, the sub-text of the poem indicates that Samson for all his feats of glory, lived and loved in the Philistine camp, even as he bartered with them and slaughtered them at his own discretion/impulse.

Several critics are quick to point out that Samson is remorseful. While this is true, Samson's remorse does not go far enough to acknowledge the real source of his problem, his transgression of Hebrew Law. His tendency to attach his fall to the imaginary secret/crime

rather than own up to the real secret/crime demonstrates his spiritual blindness. It is not surprising then that when we meet Samson, he has suffered a double blow: the loss of both his strength and his sight. This duality is significant in that they reflect how Samson's physical weakness is equated to his loss of sight : "but chief of all,/O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!"(66-67). If we regard sight/light as the symbol of enlightenment and spiritual awareness, we can conclude that Samson's loss of strength/sight implies a deficiency, a moral degeneracy, a forcing out of the self into the dungeons of the unknown.

Samson's sojourn then into the unknown is traced through his groping hands, his shuffling feet, his tortured mind, his repetitive questions, his soul-searching and agonising treatises, all bent on reaching for and claiming some thread of understanding for his predicament. The deep resonance that Samson's questions carry suggest his suspicion of God's complicity in his fall from grace: "Light, the prime work of God to me is extinct/ And all her various objects of delight/Annull'd" [...] / O first created Beam ... Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?" (70-85). The craving for the "various objects of delight" suggest how close to the flesh Samson still lives and that his incapacitated frame has in some way stalled temporarily his reckless bouts of violence. Interestingly and appropriately, the deluded Chorus lists for us a litany of Samson's exploits as soon as they arrive on the scene and we are now left with the questions of the meaning of Samson's strength, against the Chorus' praise of what are obviously Samson's petty, impulsive and reactionary show of force.

It appears then that those fit to judge Samson are not those in his own camp, but rather, from the opposing camp. And Milton provides for us Samson's best critic in the form of his Philistine wife, Dalila. Contrary to critics who regard Dalila as "camouflaging law in emotionality and impulse" (Oldman 2007, 362), I see Dalila as combining both emotion and logic not as an art-form but in a sincere attempt to express her double-bind: her love for Samson and her loyalty to her nation. It is Dalila who stands ironically in the text as the voice from the margins, embodying a writing-back reasoning power, refusing to hide from her faults and refusing equally to be bullied into submitting to Samson's view of himself or of her people.

Dalila provides the alternative view-point the poem seems to be wanting by encouraging Samson to shed his fantasies and embrace the reality of the bond he shares with the Philistine world. Ironically and appropriately, it is through her that Milton challenges Samson's own delusions and writes back to Samson's vilification of the Philistines. Milton's enables Dalila the language and wit to collapse any appeal Samson may make on behalf of his Israelite status. To Samson's charge of treachery, Dalila answers: "To what I did thou shewdst me first the way. [...] Let weakness then to weakness come to parl/So near related, or the same of kind"(785-786). These lines collapse the Manichean view that sustained the Israelite rationale for violence against the Philistines. And to reinforce the point, Dalila makes it clear that Samson is "near related, or the same kind". Further, she rejects Samson's estimation of her betrayal, labouring with him on the strained and difficult choices she was forced to make , not for "gold" but "by all the bonds of civil Duty/ And of Religion"(553-554). I would argue that Dalila pits her own religious and civic duties against Samson's and in doing so, she demands recognition for her people, her faith, her laws. Her arguments match Samson's and echo through the rest of the text as parallel histories, as significant doubles, yoking the Philistian and the Nazarite worlds in a seemingly fresh encounter.

If Dalila's argument attempts to make her people visible to Samson, it serves to consolidate her role as Philistian/woman/victim- voice. Her attempts underscore what Samson denies,

that her desires/fears/weakness are equal to his, the needs of her people as authentic as his, her God as sovereign as his. In short, she appeals for the humanity of the Philistines to be recognized. Samson's rejection of her argument is met by her steely resolve to invest in herself the dignity of the uncircumcised!

> My name perhaps among the Circumcis'd
> In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering Tribes,
> To all posterity may stand defam'd,
> With malediction mention'd, and the blot
> Of Falshood most unconjugal traduc't.
> But in my country where I most desire,
> In Ecron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath
> I shall be nam'd among the famousest
> Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,
> Living and dead recorded, who to save
> Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose
> Above the faith of wedlock-bands (975-986)

Indeed, Dalila articulates a clearer sense of herself, demonstrates an ability for introspective reflection and is capable of sounder judgement than Samson. Her ability to speak to her faults convey an integrity which makes Samson pale in comparison. Her heroic spirit is conveyed through the eulogic overtones of her nationalistic pride. She names the prejudice we call the "chosen" or the "beloved" and the violence we sacralise in the name of Samson's God. Regrettably, Dalila's role is too often treated in the light of biblical orientalism. As Derek Wood points out, "all signs of vitality, self-respect, individualty, or spirit in her [Dalila] have been treated as vicious or sinful, while Samson's behaviour has been routinely sanctified " (Wood 2001, 104).

The fact that Milton makes Dalila Samson's wife suggest that she is not a figure to be ignored or treaed stereotypically. Milton borrows respectability and subjectivity for Dalila which would not have been accorded the biblical Delilah. In this regard, Wood argues that "Samson's implacable, unyielding rejection of his wife's contrition" is unsympathetic (2001, 104). Further, Samson's empty rhetoric, his almost clichéd invocation of himself as God's elect and Israel's defender calls into question not only his marriage choices but his failure to model the proprieties of Mosaic law to his Philistine wife. Arguably, it is Samson's fascination for all things "unclean" that the text appears to support. "Far from wanting to persuade [Dalila] away from Dagon, Samson is drawn to her because of her alien faith"(Wood 2001, 106). Dalila's argument collapses Samson's attempts to make her or the Philistines the scapegoat for his indiscretions.

It can be argued then that the real crux of Samson's relationship to the Philistines lies in the question of his "heav'n-gifted strength"(36), and by default to the question of identity. In this sense, Samson's deliberations over the meaning of his "gift" are a screen for his identity confusion and the fantasies of the self that he preys upon. What is the meaning of Samson's gift of Strength? What can we make of Samson's fixation with his gift of Strength, his need to know and understand the meaning of his gift. The need for this understanding is foreshadowed for us through the restless pacing of his mind "like a deadly swarm/Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,/But rush upon me thronging,/and present/Times past, what once I was, and what am now"(20-22). The reference to the "Hornets arm'd" suggest the acute nature of Samson's inquiry which is developed further through his framed questions:

"O wherefore was my birth from heaven foretold[...]/ Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd [...] if I must dye [...] with this heav'n-gifted strength"(23-36). It is no accident that in 114 lines of the poem which make up Samson's soliloquy, at least half deal with Samson's regrets, fears and doubts in relation to the "gift". Indeed, for Samson, the "gift" pervades his entire consciousness. It defines his very existence. His idealization of the gift, its loss, brings him to varying degrees of grief, rage, anger, regret and through the vestiges of madness, to a desire for death :

> His pardon I implore; but as for life,
> To what end should I seek it? when in strength
> All mortals I excell'd, and great in hopes
> With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
> Of birth from Heav'n foretold and high exploits,
> Full of divine instinct, after some proof
> Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond
> The Sons of Anac, famous now and blaz'd,
> Fearless of danger, like a petty God
> I walk'd about admir'd of all and dreaded [Milton *SA* 521 -530]

What Samson makes abundantly clear is that any alternative to the life of "high exploits" he had lived is to him unimaginable and unacceptable. The immoderate modelling of himself as a "petty God ... admir'd of all and dreaded" suggests that in Samson's estimation, the world was not then enough to contain him. As Anthony Low points out Samson's "sin" is among other things "something that resembles Greek tragic hubris". This hubris takes the form of Samson's exhaustive and laboured invocation of the meaning of his "gift". Through Samson's rhetoric, Milton demonstrates how Samson's very purpose for living is embodied in the nature and significance of the destiny he believes God had designed for him through the gift of his strength.

> I was his nursling once and choice delight
> His destin'd from the womb
> Promised by heavenly message twice descending.
> Under his specie eie
> Abstemious I grew up and thriv'd amain;
> He led me on to mightiest deeds
> Above the nerve of moral arm
> Against the uncircumcis'd, our enemies.
> But now hath cast me off as never known
> And to those cruel enemies,
> Whom I by his appointment had provok't,
> Left me all helpless with th'irreparable loss (Milton SA 633-645)

Samson's giftedness is a life and death issue as we see by the end of the play/poem. To unpack the significance of this, I wish to study Samson's "gift" in the light of Derrida's view of "gift". If for Samson, the "gift" binds him more closely to God, it profiles him also as a target of God's disapproval. The gift then is managed in a kind of enclosure encompassing God and Samson in what, to borrow Derrida's term, can be called the "phenomenon" of "gift" (Derrida. TK. 1992, 166).

The question remains: does God dictate the use of Samson's gift? or does Samson inadvertently ransom God, on account of his gift, to his purpose? Whatever the answer, we would have to agree that "the moment" his strength "appeared" to him "as gift(Derrida. TK. 1992,179), God and Samson entered into a partnership or pact or a "ritual circle of debt"(Derrida. TK. 1992,179). Derrida argues that this "gift in the ritual circle of debt" would be "annul[ed] through the "engage[ment] in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure "(Derrida. TK. 1992,179). On this basis, I would argue that in Samson Agonistes, Samson engages in a "sacrificial/economical ... structure" in his attempt to repay or "annul the gift". His suicide attempts to break the "ritual circle of the debt". Samson's tragedy is in essence a misunderstanding of his gift and it is to this that I wish to devote the rest of this paper.

In The Time of the King, Derrida argues that "gift, if there is any, would no doubt be related to economy"(Derrida. TK. 1992, 166).

> For there to be gift, it is necessary [il faut] that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt" (Derrida. *TK*. 1992, 171).

Samson's obsession with the "gift" suggests that the weight of return he assumes it demands is both the sum and the bane of his existence. God is then, both benefactor and aggressor. For him then God and he are in a relationship of "narcissistic gratitude"(Derrida . TK. 1992,179). The rhetoric regarding his Strength and his duty to God must be weighed against his solipsist fascination and projection of his strength, his past feats of glory and the adulation he covets. His despair, his bouts of madness in the poem focus on the loss of divine favour he perceives in relation to his strength which lead him to desire only "speedy death"(651). As Derrida argues "a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible: it misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else"(180). This impossibility can be traced through the excess and contradictions of Samson's language.

The weight of Samson's reflections on the expectant promise and the ever-increasing burden of the gift is reflected through the circular questions, doubts, fears, confessions, accusations and self-flagellations the poems resonates in. The permutations of Samson's mind in its varying phases of discontent lock Samson into the mode of "gift"-child and its many play of mirrors expressed in his rather petulant : "what once I was and what am now"(22); this split portrait runs like two parallel and contesting narratives, explaining, refuting, collapsing, extending his own agency. Yet, the biblical records make no reference or inference to gift in relation to Samson's birth. Samson's role as defender of the Israelites is announced without attaching any real privilege to Samson himself. Indeed, as we have discussed, it is announced in relation to duty and the law. Out of the Law to not shave his head, Samson constructs his gift. This "simple recognition, (of gift as gift), suffices to annul the gift" (Derrida 171), for it is the very naming and identification of the gift that complicates the recipient's response.

> For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, coutnergift, or debt. […] It may, moreover be a a matter of a good thing or a abd thing. Here we are anticipating another dimension of the problem, namely, that if giving is spontaneously evaluated as *good* (…), it remains the case that this "good" can easily be reversed. We know that as good, it can also be bad, poisonous (*Gift, gift*), and this is true from the moment the gift put the other in debt, so that giving comes down to hurting, to doing bad (170-171).

For Samson, the "countergift" is impossible to achieve and impossible to ignore. This explains why for much of the poem, Samson struggles with this gift-economy, the demands he feels the gift has made on his life and his present state. "O glorious strength/Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't/Lower than bondslave!" To Samson, the gift carries expectations/ burdens and rewards. The rewards for Samson though are measured purely by his ability to use the gift in annihilating the Philistines. Indeed, Samson's Strength has served no other purpose. Besides killing the Philistines, Samson's life has been a catalogue of depravity.

What then can we make of Samson's gift? It seems to me that the loss of the gift is the epiphany the poem seems to articulate. It is the impasse that forces Samson to exercise the restraint he never understood, to learn the value of a contemplative, reflective, meditative life. The purpose of the "gift" is not in the power of its physical exertion but in its contemplative value of the meaning and purpose of strength. Samson's blindness becomes a trajectory for this contemplative growth.

Accordingly, while the poem opens on the evocation of the grand drama surrounding Samson's birth, it almost immediately closes in on the images of his crippled and blind state: "betray'd, captiv'd ... both my eyes put out" (33). If Samson appears rigorous in demanding the meaning of his gift, he becomes progressively despondent as the answers evade him. His serial juxtaposition of "what once I was and what am now" emphasizes his fixation with his image and haunts the rest of his soliloquy at one point bordering close to blasphemy as he wails his being "separate to God"? This implied distinction between him and God implies and subverts its own intent. In branding his "breeding" as "separate to God" and by implication "to man", he encounters the fantasy and peril of all heroes. By the time he gets to line 529, the reluctance to name himself here as akin to God has dissipated in his description of himself as a "petty god" "Fearless of danger"/ "admir'd of all and dreaded"(529-530).

The fixation with his strength projects his plenitude of being, his desire to imitate that which cannot be imitated, a form of mimicry :to be god and not god, man and not man. If the gift has become for Samson a "sign of divinity", it has by the same token collapsed into a demon that will haunt him. In this sense, the soliloquy imitates the movement of blindness, collapsing the walls to the self through the search for light, breaking through shadows and desperately clutching at the darkness for the desire to connect/know/understand mystery, that which cannot be understood. Ultimately, such a quest over-extends its search through the fantasies of the self. This over-extension is raised, then muted and contained in the apostrophe: "O glorious strength". These lines reflect how Samson has emptied himself into the object of his search for understanding and become Other/ Gift/Everything/ Nothing. For at this point, Samson's god is nothing more than his personified Strength; "O glorious strength." In effect, he becomes the "beast" he decries. Accordingly, the dramatic irony of lines 40-43: "Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him/Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves/Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke;" is significant. In combining images of blindness and slavery, the soliloquy subverts Samson's self-pity and raises instead the suppressed text, the spiritual/carnal blindness undergirding Samson's physical blindness.

Samson himself provides the entry into the suppressed text through his sporadic moments of growth of which I have singled out one, that is, Samson's splitting of his mind from his body. Milton's treatment of the evidence of God's gift is presented to us by Samson himself as a weight too much to bear, a weight that reinforces Samson's mental anguish and instability, in fact the dislocation of the mind and body is symbolized by Samson's own account of his gift which he moans God "hung in his hair" to show "how slight" the gift of strength was.

The word "hung" bears down like a weight on the text, collapsing any positive benefits we might accrue through our reading of Samson's giftedness and instead creates for us a picture of Samson pinioned to the ground by his hair, an image evoked for us through the Chorus' description of him lying with his head "unpropt". This image collapses the boundaries that Samson had demarcated outside of himself as champion/hero against Philistine unspeakable/ victim to raise them now inside him as champion/gift/unspeakable/ victim : in short, disembodied mind. The gift becomes Samson's albatross and like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, his life is reduced to serial confessions, reflections and meditations on the trajectory of his own past. Samson's guilt, paranoia, indebtedness, rage coalesce into this image of impotent strength.

The juxtaposition of "slight" and strength cancels each other out. Further, the connotations of "slight" whether it means "frail" or "delicate" or "vulnerable" or "short-lived" parodies Samson's "former glory". It mocks Samson's own fixation with his strength, both in his pretending to own what was never his and owe what was never a debt and that which cannot be owed. In Samson's mind, the gift at one and the same time, sets him apart and renders him vulnerable. The gift then is emptied of all else but "economy", that is its illusions survive through Samson's body pitting itself against the Philistines: It is this "economy of the gift" , the work of Samson's labour, that empties Samson of an identity. He becomes the debt he cannot repay, the plague he wants to annihilate, disembodied "as one past hope" (120), reduced to a sepulchre of memories change[d] beyond report, thought, or belief!(117)", he becomes the unrecognizable, the unknown echoed by the Chorus: "Can this be hee, That Heroic, that Renowned,/Irresistible Samson?"

The irony of the Chorus' incredulity forces Samson's confrontation with his own self-portrait, as they shift without warning from his journey from Azza to Hebron to express their own quandary : "Which shall I first bewail,/Thy Bondage or lost Sight/[...]/ Thou are become [...] O mirror of our fickle state"(151-164). The reference to the uprooting of the Gates of Azza, foreshadow the destruction of the temple of Dagon but complicate the latter through returning us to the image of Samson with the harlot at Azza. It is against this that we measure Samson's "rousing motions" which I read as his attempt to resist and expunge from his own mind the possibility of the impossibility of the gift, to which his life bears witness. It is in this sense that the poem over-extends itself, reaching out of its own body through Samson's now undifferentiated body from the Philistines for the submerged text, the Other Body of Samson Agonistes: pointing to the humanizing of the Philistines and the peace of the Christ of Paradise Regained to which this text is added.

Accordingly, we must turn to the Philistines for an assessment of Samson and I turn to the Giant of Gath whose chivalry is notable in his refusal to fight Samson on account of Samson's blindness. Samson's blood mingled now with that of the Philistines forces us to measure him against the home he finds in death amongst those he had despised. Harapha's assessment of him as "a Mutherer, a Revolter and a Robber" (1180) is left unchallenged even by his own Israelite leaders, who by default stood alongside the Philistines, as Harapha points out, by handing Samson over to them:

> Is not thy Nation subject to our Lords?
> Their Magistrate confest it, when they took thee
> As a League-breaker and deliver'd bound
> Into our hands, for hadst thou not committed
> Notorious murder on those thirty men

> At Askalon, who never did thee harm, then like a Robber stripdst them of their robes?
> The Philistines, when thou hadst broke the league/Went up with armed powers thee only seeking,
> to others did no violence nor spoil"(1183-91)

In the final analysis, the Philistine account of Samson's transgressions do not in any way detract from the biblical account in content except in purpose and exposes the violence the Bible conceals. In this sense, Harapha's assessment of Samson becomes a revisionist, or more appropriately, a writing-back to the Judges story. Here, Milton allows the Philistine voice, as it does with Dalila to articulate its own wounding. To use a Girardian concept, it serves as a revelatory text, exposing the violence concealed in the Judges register through enabling the voice of the victims. The colluding of the two worlds invites a reassessment of violence as much as it enables a trajectory, a dialogue between opposing camps.

For Samson, doubt is a fate worse than death, patience weakness and the deferral of the meaning of his gift impossible. For all Samson's faith, his life is a misunderstanding of the One God he loves and acknowledges. Samson Agonistes then names the phantom of our own times; our need to inscribe our gods in our own image and in the 20th century, significantly it is then Samson's god of violence we meet and resurrect. The poem is a call to prayer, to patience, to waiting out our lives softly, in collapsing the divisions between philos and ekhtros, to "turn the other cheek" to embrace love as the only economy that humanizes us to seek out the other through a new paradigm of "peace and consolation" ('SA' 1757).

Milton gives us a cyprtic text in that the poem invites the reader to meditate through Samson's agony on the scope and limits of the human imagination in its metaphysical enquiry. Samson Agonistes is less about Samson's heroism or Christian piety and more about the mysterious bonds that bind us to the Other, and by that I mean, God and my neighbour. Samson Agonistes, as a meditative tableau, a poetic tapestry that works like stained glass, whose meaning is negotiated through the play of light and shadows. The many celebrated images, portraits of the mythical Samson, God's Herculean champion continues to survive despite the controversies and debates that have grown around this fascinating and arresting character. Yet, it is a portrait that sits most uncomfortably in the midst of our emerging understanding and encounter with escalating levels of sacralised violence.

Samson's obsession to prove his difference from the Philistines is met in the final analysis with the most confronting and penetrating reality. His mangled corpse lies in a strange intimacy within the hearth he made for his "unclean" enemies. The image of Samson lying amidst the Philistines in the crumbling ruins of the temple of Dagon brings us to an understanding of the limits of religious faith and even mission. Our stories of God are ours alone and whatever Samson's intentions, from the portals of the twenty-first century, we must be willing to let Samson's god die with him, for the story of violence can only be scripted by the players who enact it. As Samson himself states, there is only One God and yet by implication, Samson contradicts his own assertion and faith by speaking, attacking, destroying the temple of Dagon. In touching it, he acknowledges the presence and the reality of other gods. God is not changes by the names we attribute to Him, nor by the limits of our worship, however misguided our forms and expressions of worship may be.

Samson is, in his own mind, the poetic potential of God's warrior, fighting a war he declares and supposes, is God's, in a war that was never God's. Amidst Samson's chaotic and frenzied clamouring is a Silence, a Stillness that is deep and dignified that defies our scripting. In this sense, Samson Agonistes leaves us a space for reflection, a meditative positioning inviting us to ponder on the conundrum at the heart of its poetic endeavour: that is, the constraints of language and art to deal with the paradoxes of faith and worship. Perhaps Milton's blindness, gives him an edge, an inner vision, which enables him, late in his life, to measure the gap between the twin pillars of idealism and wisdom. In the final analysis, the God of Samson Agonistes defies being scripted into our drama of violence. He remains above all inscrutable, mysterious and transcendent.

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