

**THE UNCERTAIN WORLD OF
'SAMSON AGONISTES'**

Edited by John T. Shawcross

Studies in Renaissance Literature

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THE UNCERTAIN WORLD OF *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Milton's dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* is rich with ambiguities, and here Professor Shawcross proposes that they are intentional: the actual words, the dates of composition, the genre and the characters – particularly Samson and Dalila but also Manoa, Harapha, and the Chorus. Ambiguity also lies in Milton's presentation of political issues both philosophical and practical, his treatment of gender concepts, the constant questioning of the reader, and the poem's effect. Discussing all these elements, Shawcross follows with a detailed reading of the text which argues that it remains purposefully ambiguous, reflecting Milton's own recognition of the uncertainty of the content, and suggesting that Milton himself would question some of the 'solutions' that modern scholarship has offered in the last two decades.

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THE UNCERTAIN WORLD OF
SAMSON AGONISTES

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PREFACE

John Milton's dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* has long been a favorite work of many people, and has long been read as simply a version of the story of Samson in the Bible and its author's "last" view of his world, now blind and victim of domestic and political strife. Its "strange" prosody seen in terms of English syllabic verse, its Hebraic origin in Greek form with Christian import, its alleged figuration of a Christ figure, its relationship with its first publication's companion poem *Paradise Regain'd* (or lack thereof), its nonconformity to expected stage presentation have all evoked numerous critical statements since the mid-eighteenth century. In the last half of the twentieth century it has also been scrutinized as possibly not just a simple version of the confused Samson legend of the Bible, and Samson has been examined as not just a folk hero, positive of evaluation, but a negative figure to be rejected as exemplar. It has been speculated as earlier work in composition, or at least earlier in its first inspiration and partial writing, yielding perhaps an "unfinished" text. Biographical substance in any direct way has been rejected (and then reasserted). On one hand there is misogynistic Milton's view of woman and the wrestlings with power structures in the patriarchal world of both gender and government. On the other there is some infrequent rebuttal through its presentation of a renovated woman and an ideal concept of marriage. Basic to many of these arguments is the assumption that the author is expressing his own beliefs and attitudes when Dalila and Samson's relationship with her are introduced, yielding a masculinist Milton of the most extreme kind. In turn are provoked defenses of Milton through a reading of Dalila in positive terms and through argument of genderizations during his lifetime (which, indeed, continue in contemporary life). The dramatic poem has taken on political dimensions in the past and in the present.

My study of Milton and this text raises fundamental objections to the usual interpretations I hear and read: "biography," prosody, the dates of composition and the reliability of text, the generic expectations, the figure of Samson and his seeming typology, the political philosophy which its author would read out of that text, and, most importantly for today's critical world, the female/male questions that are raised and Milton's attitude toward them. I have previously published some of my conclusions about a few of these questions and some of my readings of the

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work.¹ I know that many of those conclusions and readings have been (and are) strongly disagreed with, and I suspect, from ensuing commentary, that some of them were not always examined cogently. For some critics, apparently, one must be on this side or that, and so, for instance, I am known as an early-dater of the work, although that hardly represents my position.

The present study adapts and revises sections of these previous materials, some of which I would not, and thus do not, express with exactly the same words, and reexamines the issues noted above. I do not find that my views have changed over these many years but the words expressing them have, for greater exactness and, I hope, clarity. Some of the focus in this present study is on the character of Dalila and the episode in which she appears, and thus I engage certain feminist critical positions, but much of the focus is also on the political advice–admonition–philosophy that I see as fundamental within the work. The feminist and political issues I find to be dependent rather than absolute: dependent upon people, dependent upon morality and its idealism, dependent upon compromise and its inherent indecision. The figure of Samson, and its possible *psychological* manifestation for the author (an aspect of the “biographical” that has little been examined), is also part of the burden of this brief foray into a text that has more uncertainties, it seems, than the oratorical rhetoric that sustains its dialogues.

The bulk of this study moves toward Chapter 9, which offers a reading of the dramatic poem with assumption of readings presented in the preceding chapters, and with further comments upon some literary matters like language and the device of prolepsis. I view this study as one developed through *cumulative* considerations of various issues, building toward the hermeneutics decoded. Content readings review prior commentary, offer specific interpretations of the poem, and generally conclude that the world of

¹ Among these are: “The Chronology of Milton’s Major Poems,” *PMLA* 76 (1961): 345–58 (on prosody and dating of the poem); “Irony as Tragic Effect: *Samson Agonistes* and the Tragedy of Hope,” *Calm of Mind*, ed. Joseph A. Wittreich (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), pp. 289–306 (on genre, political significance, and interpretation of the poem); “The Genres of *Paradise Regain’d* and *Samson Agonistes*,” *Composite Orders: The Genres of Milton’s Last Poems*, ed. Richard S. Ide and Joseph A. Wittreich, special issue of *Milton Studies* 17 (1983): 225–48 (on companion poems and genre); *Paradise Regain’d: “Worthy t’Have not Remain’d so Long Unsung”* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1988), passim (especially as companion poem); *John Milton: The Self and the World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), passim (especially pp. 163–66, 227–31); and “Misreading Milton,” *The Miltonic Samson*, ed. Albert C. Labriola and Michael Lieb, special issue of *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 181–203.

I quote Milton’s poetry from my edition of *The Complete Poetry of John Milton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970), and his prose from original editions except for *De doctrina christiana*. For the latter and other references, see *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–82), eight volumes, cited as Yale Prose.

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Samson Agonistes remains uncertain. Other concerns, like dating and genre, the state of the biblical text and the chronological ages of Samson and Dalila, all impinge upon readings of the past and upon the interpretations given here. These concerns likewise are uncertain of conclusion – I do not say “ambiguous,” for it seems to me there is less ambiguity in, say, the date (both the 1640s and the 1660s) than “uncertainty” about when *specific* sections were written, revised, and finalized.

This is, I daresay, an “old-fashioned” study in that I do not have an agenda overriding what I read as the substance of the poem, or even a thesis that I seek to “prove” through that reading. Issues are laid out and, for the most part, allowed their own viability. I do argue that the drama offers a “solution” to the dilemma of life that the True Believer Milton sought to express for himself and for others in all his work: God is omnipotent, God is merciful, God will save His true servants. This consistency of thought that I see in Milton’s writing may provide a thesis-statement underlying the poem, and this is specifically examined in the final chapter. Milton’s stated intention in *Paradise Lost* applies here, particularly when *Samson Agonistes* is compared and contrasted with its companion *Paradise Regain’d*: his “great Argument” is to “assert Eternal Providence,/ And [thereby] justifie the wayes of God to men.” Not unlike the longer epic, the dramatic poem etches those people and their attitudes that see God’s ways as unjustified, capricious, ultimately uncaring, and that cast what they see as provided in Eternal Providence as useless in understanding life, here and now or afterward, useless in determining who we are, why we exist, and certainly not offering joy or comfort. But this study is not directed toward proving that as a thesis; rather it looks at numerous issues that the dramatic poem generates for a scholar and for any reader. Noncontent issues, like the text and the date of composition, even though they may impinge on content issues, remain uncertain. Content issues raise uncertain conclusions as well, and perhaps Milton was aware that readers might champion one conclusion over another, just as he may, at least subconsciously, have known that there would be those who would advance Satan as hero of *Paradise Lost* – one to be emulated against perceived tyranny. In the case of Satan and the justification of God, Milton offered signposts for the fit reader to reject Satan and his thinking and to understand God’s ways toward men. In the case of *Samson Agonistes*, such signposts may be less efficacious and more ambiguous. Yet as in all his work, I believe, the underlying belief in God’s mercifulness and salvation of his true servants comes through, and it is thus my “thesis” that the dramatic poem has much of uncertainty about it, which will not be and need not be removed, but that it depicts yet once more Milton’s consistency of belief.

Chapter 1

THE WORLD OF SAMSON AGONISTES

AS a result of recent feminist critical movements, the two important female characters in John Milton's major poems have come under particular scrutiny, with an accompanying reassessment of Milton himself as male author. These fictionalizations are Eve in *Paradise Lost*, a portrayal of the female progenitor of human life in the Bible, generally believed to have had real existence, and Dalila in *Samson Agonistes*, a rendition of Delilah in the biblical story found in Judges. She and the Samson story are treated as truly historical because they are biblical, by some people as actual persons in every detail. But the points of tangency between these two female literary personages are slight and their differences at least those one always finds between individuals. The new critical scrutiny has also involved revisions of Samson as symbol during the mid-seventeenth century, within the dramatic poem, and for a political present. The privileging of the feminine discourse and the political issues has, unfortunately, disengaged parts of the poem from the whole and has frequently ignored the literary nature of the work. The study here presented reviews much that has gone before in the reading of the dramatic poem but extends and amplifies and reinterprets that commentary, and offers an approach to the text that reifies both the world of the poem and the uncertainties of the world of the poem as not only reader-available but writer-created.

In the dramatic poem we see Milton expanding the bare biblical story of Samson's work at a grist mill as the captive of his tribe's enemies, the Philistines, and his being galvanized into the Great Deliverer it had been prophesied he would be when he pulls down the pillars of the Philistine temple, killing the lords and aristocracy gathered therein. Whether he is indeed through his action the Great Deliverer and how one understands the person Samson at this momentous event are questions that have arisen for readers of Milton's text, a text thus seen as recounting the Bible story but subverting it through analysis into a questioning not only of whether such action accomplishes delivery and exemplifies championship, but also of motivation and the possibility of renovation. Perhaps, however, the emphasis should be put on Samson the individual as example of what can happen to others and not upon his being a "Great Deliverer"; perhaps the political admonition is that change, correction of wholesale injustice, must start with

the individual, each individual in the oppressed and bonded group, whether a member of the tribe of Dan or the republican of mid-seventeenth century England.

The layers of narrative in the Judges account, extending over a number of years of development, give rise to the thought that Milton recognized the instabilities of the text and the character depicted therein, tried to make sense of that text, but ultimately failed to amalgamate a consistent whole for all readers. The narrative of Samson in Judges is in fact out of place among its companion stories, since, unlike other Judges, Samson derives from a sun deity (with potential in typological thinking of the Son), his hair metaphorizing the sun's rays,¹ and since he does not function as judge as, more typically, Gideon or Jephthah does.

The Judges of the biblical book were the leaders of Israel against its enemies after the death of Joshua (Joshua xxiv:29–31; Judges i:1) to the reign of Saul and other kings (1 Samuel viii:10ff.). The designation “leader” is not appropriate for Samson, who acted always by himself. From an Israelite point of view a judge would be cast as “deliverer” from the Philistines if he, like Othniel, delivered Israel from a Chushan-rishathaim (iii:7–11). Samson's actions never achieve that. Yet Samson is said to have “judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years” (Judges xv:20) and again after his death and burial, the verse says, “he judged Israel twenty years” (Judges xvi:31). The citation of “Israel” here is in error: there were many tribes of Israelites, Dan being but one of them. If Samson “judged,” he would have judged only the Danites. The Samson episode employs “Israel” only three times – in the very first verse of chapter xiii: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years,” which is incorrect since only the Danites were in the hand of the Philistines; and these two aforementioned references to Samson's judging.

The first citation stating Samson's judging of Israel lies between his succumbing to the woman of Timnath followed by his slaying of the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass and his going to Gaza, meeting a harlot and then Delilah. The second citation may be a summary statement of the total years of his judging, simply repeating the first citation, which could mean that his being a “judge” did not extend even into the first days in Gaza. Yet the first citation may also be summary of his whole life. The text recounting Samson's life and exploits, apparently thrust into the historical account of Judges, begins with the verse cited above (xiii:1). It would seem, thus, that the episode of Philistine dominance over the “Israelites” (for which we should read Danites) in which Samson's birth, life, and death are recalled was a total of forty years, and that Samson's *two* periods of “judging” have been made equivalent with the length of this full episode, a questionable use

¹ For one discussion of this etymological and folk-culture understanding of “Samson,” see Michael Lieb, *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 229–30.

of “judged” in terms of Samson’s very early years at least. While the Danites apparently remained under the control of the Philistines, there is no further reference to the Philistines in the book of Judges after Samson’s demise although there are references to the Danites. What, therefore, does “forty” mean? (The citation in xvi:31 has generally been taken as cumulative, it would seem, and Samson’s assignment as judge has thus usually been twenty years. “Forty” is often a standard symbol of privation, trial, and tribulation, and forty years has the added concept of a generation.)

It would thus appear that Samson’s age upon consorting with Delilah was twenty or so, and that roughly twenty years elapsed between that time and his death, a period spent in company with Delilah, in thwarting the Philistines (rather than “delivering” the Israelites from them), and in the grist mill. Or were the years before Delilah entered the narrative part of the twenty years and did less time elapse after she entered? In any way of reading the biblical text the word “judged” is uncertain and confusing. The biblical text moves quickly from Samson’s having his eyes put out and making him “grind in the prison house” (xvi:21) to the growth of his hair “after he was shaven” (xvi:22) to Dagon’s feast day (xvi:23), the scene of Milton’s dramatic poem. Aside from the differences in biblical and modern time designations, the whole account is fraught with error and improbable statements (as one would, indeed, expect of an account of a folk hero), but the movement from first incarceration to Dagon’s feast covers little time and the *noticeable* growth of his hair might have taken about a month. Perhaps the best one can conclude is that the biblical story was interpolated into Judges because of Samson’s alleged exploits against the Philistines, and adjustments to relate that legend to the biblical book were inserted. The angel of the Lord says that “he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (xiii:5) and Samson entreates the Lord after his slayings at Ramath-Lehi, “Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant” (xv:18). But one must wonder what kind of “great Deliverance” the killing of 1000 Philistines at Ramath-Lehi and 3000 Philistines at the feast of Dagon could possibly be: these exploits are not equivalent to Othniel’s prevailing against Chushan-rishathaim and the forty years of ensuing rest. The Danites are not delivered from the Philistines in any way.

Samson’s age, a debated question recently in cyberspace, seems therefore to be somewhere in the mid-twenties (or forties, if we credit two twenty-year periods). In Milton’s dramatic poem many readers have felt an older Samson, one wearied not only with exploits and labor but with age; still the references to “old” in lines. 69, 572, and 925 talk of a *future* old age. The Chorus addresses Manoa: “Thou in old age car’st how to nurse thy Son,/ Made older then thy age through eye-sight lost” (1488–89); this does not make Samson “old,” only appearing old. Delilah surely was young (twentyish at most?) and as we have seen not much time could have elapsed between Samson’s fall and Dagon’s feast, so that Dalila, though she looks at first like a “Matron” to the

Chorus, should not have been more than around twenty. To see Milton's Samson and Dalila as young, about twenty to mid-twenty, is to color our reading of the poem; as fortyish, we have a quite different coloration.

Prior to the opening of the dramatic poem, Samson has succumbed to Delilah's blandishments and revealed the secret of his strength as being in his hair, which is then shorn, making him easily subdued by Delilah's countrymen, the Philistines, for whom she has acted as spy.² To incapacitate him further, he is blinded. That central event in Samson's story, of course, occurs before the poem opens and is referred to often as it proceeds, especially in the episode in which Dalila appears. But emphasis on the event and thus by extension on Dalila misdirects a reading of the poem that surely has Samson as focal character, the alteration of his psychological status developing the rising action (the epitasis), and its "completion" in the climax, a catastasis provided by the Officer and the Philistine demands. The poem is not about Samson's seduction by Delilah but about what has been construed as Samson's recovery of self through trial and repentance, his renovation. His change or alleged change will be examined in Chapter 4. Since in the pre-poem the seduction by Delilah brings the climax of the narrative of Samson's fall, its reprise and reversal are central to any alteration of self which may lead to reversal of that fall and return to moral and historical purpose. Some have viewed this episode as the hinge of the drama, for Samson's succumbing to Delilah's temptation is the culmination of the episodic movement of his biblical life.

In the central episodes of the dramatic poem, Samson is offered, first, the lure of ease by his father Manoa, who intends to bribe the Philistines for release of his son; second, the lure of wife and home by a reformed or allegedly reformed Dalila; and third, the lure of championing his God by the violence of combat with Harapha, a giant and representative of Dagon, the fish-god of the Philistines. This third lure is an express form of the Lucan third temptation which basically involves the question, Whose god is God? as do, however, the other episodes in the poem as well.³ At play here are concepts of heroism, fundamental to classical epic and rejected as less heroic in the proem to Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. "False" heroism arises from "Warrs, hitherto the onely Argument/ Heroic deem'd, chief maistrie to dissect/ With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights/ In Battels feign'd" (*PL IX*, 28–31). In

² I refer to the prior biblical account (Judges xiii–xvi) through use of "Delilah" and to Milton's text through use of "Dalila."

³ The tempting of Jesus in the Wilderness by Satan is told in Matthew iv:1–11, Mark i:12–13, and Luke iv:1–13, and of course is the subject matter of the dramatic poem's companion *Paradise Regain'd*. The standard temptation of the Flesh, the World, and the Devil (as will be detailed later in this chapter) metaphorizes a human's dilemma to remain morally upright in the sin-laden world. The challenge by Satan of God's word and the rejection of Satan by Jesus, saying, "Thou shalt not Tempt the Lord thy God," appears in the temptation to violence and vainglory, placed third in Luke (and Milton) and second in Matthew.

the eyes of his followers Satan's action in the War in Heaven in Books V and VI is heroism; in Milton's it is "false." The true heroism that underlies the diffuse epic, though often unrecognized, as it was by that early reader of the manuscript, Thomas Ellwood, and that is explicitly exemplified in the brief epic, *Paradise Regain'd*, must emerge in the dramatic poem without being diverted by such lesser heroism as combat with Harapha would exhibit. Samson, in this third temptation, has not yet been galvanized into the "hero" he will (or will seem to) become; rather the episode has him entertain the possibility of being a "hero" in popular, somewhat shallow terms only.⁴ Samson resists all three temptations, is finally enjoined by a public officer to go to a feast in honor of Dagon as an exhibit and to perform feats of strength, doing so through vague awareness of "rouzing motions" within himself, and pulls down the pillars, as reported by a messenger (the standard nuntius of classic drama).

While initiation is a major subject of *Paradise Lost*, it is trial and repentance that encompass recovery for Adam and Eve in Book X and that underlie the action of the saints in Books XI and XII. (Initiation indicates a human's entry into his human world and his growing knowledge of it, thus enacting transformation of self. The demands of living and its pitfalls ["trial"], during which, in moral terms, one falls into sinfulness, initiates the self into rebirth. As Carl Jung wrote, "without sin there is no repentance and without repentance no redeeming grace."⁵ The "recovery" or "rebirth" or "renewal" requires repentance such as Adam and Eve exhibit as Book X closes.) While initiation and trial are the major subjects of *Paradise Regain'd*, it is the absence of the need for repentance that obviates recovery for those who follow the Incarnated Son, Jesus. The subject of *Samson Agonistes* is not initiation, but trial and repentance, initiation having

⁴ See later and discussions of "the hero" in my *With Mortal Voice: The Creation of Paradise Lost* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), Chapter 4, 33–41, and of "true heroism" in my *Paradise Regain'd*: "Worthy t'Have not remain'd so Long Unsung", Chapter 6, 70–91. According to William Arrowsmith, "heroism . . . arise[s] from a fortuitous and accidental eruption of the irrational in the nature of things"; see "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy" in Robert W. Corrigan, *Tragedy: Vision and Form* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 267. The "planned" heroism of Samson, as Deliverer, thus seems to be inconsistent with Greek concepts of heroism, which will therefore enter the dramatic poem only with Samson's final fortuitous act of irrational inspiration. The dramatic poem becomes an answer to the question of what does a "hero" do (as Samson was construed in the earlier part of his biblical legend) in defeat? Or do we, instead, recognize an analysis that posits Samson's *not* having been a hero despite his and others' early opinion, until he reaches that classic definition and until he asserts the kind of heroism I have discussed in the aforementioned books?

⁵ Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hall. Edition 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30. "Perfect" repentance, *contritio*, "regards sin as the opposite of the highest good"; "imperfect" repentance, *attritio*, "reprehends it not only on account of its wicked and hideous nature but also from fear of punishment" (29n). The sequence from "imperfect" to "perfect" is well demonstrated by Adam and Eve. It is a sequence Samson must learn.

preceded the opening of the poem. As in *Areopagitica* where Milton accepts the nonexistence of innocence for humankind ("Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather," 12) and where recovery is prepared for by trial ("that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary," 12), the dramatic poem assumes the initiation of Samson into impure being. He had reexperienced the Fall by deceit and most significantly by will, becoming a "proud Aspirer," like one given to "proud imaginations," one of "proud ambitious heart," phrases used of Satan in the long epic.⁶

The important episode in Samson's life, Delilah's fraud, which leads directly to the situation in which we see him as Milton's poem opens, is clearly only background in the poem, not its subject. The poem iterates the trials that Samson has previously undergone, through the temptation motif, for only by reversal will return be possible, each temptation leading to an aspect of repentance and culminating in full repentance and reversal of the two avenues to sin, deceit and will. As various critics have detailed, the dramatic poem's central three sections are built on the temptation motif as established for the Christian in Jesus's temptation in the wilderness (Luke iv:1–13): the temptation of the flesh, of the concept of necessity and gluttony, of the Self in relation to itself; the temptation of the world, of fraud and covetousness, of the Self in relation to the community; and the temptation of the devil, of violence and vainglory, of the Self in relation to the godhead.⁷ These three temptations appear as the three central episodes of the poem, with a prologos, a parados, and the first episode between Samson and the Chorus preceding, and with a fifth episode between Samson and the Public Officer, an exodos, and a kommos following. (See Chapter 3, p. 37, for this standard Greek dramatic terminology.) The symmetry is noteworthy: it emphasizes the centrality of the Delilah episode in Samson's prior life and the need for reversal of that episode's deceit before repentance can proceed. But that deceit is not only Delilah's fraudulence as "wife," but Samson's self-deceit through his excessive pride and self-aggrandizement.

The temptation motif first presents Manoa offering "ease" to the flesh: "if

⁶ For Eve and Adam the initiation has been accomplished by the deceit perpetrated on Eve, to be reversed by the truth of the protevangelium, and the willfulness of Adam's act, "not deceav'd," to be reversed by the sacrifice of Jesus and by the acceptance of God's will. For humankind, born with the sin original of its grand-parents, the message should be clear: recognition of the Truth, acceptance of Justice, and hope in the Mercy of Providence. Milton in *Paradise Lost* delineates and allegorizes the two broad, basic means by which humans sin: by deceit and by willfulness.

⁷ Meta Schon Wallace compares the Christian pattern of temptation, trial, and grace in *Paradise Regain'd*, *Samson Agonistes*, *The Faerie Queene* (Book I), and *Macbeth* in her doctoral dissertation at the University of Arkansas (1978); see Dissertation Abstracts 39 (1978): 3607A–08A. This pattern has four elements: an annunciation of some mission or quest; a series of temptations based on the ancient trial of the Flesh, the World, and the Devil; the acceptance or rejection of grace; and the fulfillment or failure of the annunciated mission.

The World of Samson Agonistes

the punishment/ Thou canst avoid, self-preservation bids” (504–505).⁸ For Manoa “the pains and slaveries” are “worse then death inflicted” (485). His argument, not unlike that of Satan to Jesus in Book I of *Paradise Regain’d*, is

Reject not then what offerd means, who knows
But God hath set before us, to return thee
Home to thy countrey and his sacred house,
Where thou mayst bring thy off’rings, to avert
His further ire, with praiera and vows renew’d.
(516–20)

Samson’s rejection involves concepts of his Self: he will not “sit idle on the houshold hearth,/ A burdenous drone; to visitants a gaze,/ Or pitied object” (566–68); and acceptance of his Self: “All otherwise to me my thoughts portend,/ That these dark orbs no more shall treat with light,/ . . . My hopes all flat, nature within me seems/ In all her functions weary of her self,/ My race of glory run, and race of shame” (590–91, 595–97). This temptation motif in the dramatic poem leading to positive assertion and triumph is a reversal of the ironic or paradoxical success of the temptation motif prior to the beginning of the poem, by which Samson’s succumbing has led to his enslavement. The Chorus, in lines 541–46, 553–57, refers to Samson’s prior rejection of “Desire of wine and all delicious drinks” such as other famous warriors partake. This is part of his vow as a Nazarite, but the rejection of this aspect of *concupiscentia carnis* underscored the superficiality of mere avoidance of what some think necessary, particularly since it is not, as it were, of his own rejection of wine through “temptation,” but of an imposed vow. “Nonsinning” which results not from considered choice but only from prohibition only does not constitute resistance to temptation, or, in this case, control of the Self. We think of the prohibition given to Adam and Eve and the choices to which each separately succumbs. (But Samson is culpable in the first instance, and he did not avoid the other two injunctions of the Nazarite, as we will note, one through fraud but one through obliviousness to injunction.⁹)

Samson in the past has resisted (it would seem) one aspect of the first temptation but has not come to a rejection of conceived desires of the flesh, nor therefore to an acceptance of the Self. It is something like outward appearance that may, and in this case does, mislead and obscure the inward being. The temptation to which Samson has submitted in the past was his

⁸ We might compare the narrative voice’s epitome of Belial’s words concerning the fallen angels’ further action: “Thus *Belial* with words cloath’d in reasons garb/ Counsel’d ignoble ease, and peaceful sloth,/ Not peace” (*PL* II, 226–28).

⁹ The biblical Samson seems not to have kept these vows, as Dennis T. Olson writes: he attended drinking feasts, touched the carcass of the dead lion, and had his hair cut by Delilah. See *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), “Nazirite,” p. 552.