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Jobean Heroism and the Silent God in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

Irene Montori

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER AS A POET, MILTON ECHOES THE BOOK OF JOB IN A VARIETY of literary genres. When commenting on the Biblical and classical examples of poetic forms in *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), Milton describes the Book of Job as a 'brief' epic (CPW 1.813), upon which *Paradise Regained* (1671) is later modelled.¹ Although Milton does not overtly mention Job in *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), Adam's encounter with Michael in Books eleven and twelve parallels Job's final theophany (Job 38-42). Through Michael's prophetic discourse, Adam gains new understanding so, like Job, whose eyes eventually see God (Job 42:5), Adam declares, 'now first I find / Mine eyes true opening' (PL 12.273-74).² *Paradise Regained* follows a similar structure to the Job story. The Book of Job describes how God tests Job's virtue through physical and spiritual pain, it develops into the dialogues between Job and the comforters, then the epilogue recounts how Job is blessed with some higher knowledge. Like Job, Milton's brief epic begins with God's decision to expose his Son to Satan's temptations, then the poem develops into a dialogue section between the Son and his tempter, and it concludes with the Son's recognition of his divine nature.³ *Samson Agonistes* also has strong affinities with the Job story; specifically, the dramatic poem relates to the Biblical figures of Samson (Judges 13-16) and of Job. Following the Jobean pattern, Samson receives the unsatisfying comfort of three visitors – the Chorus, his father Manoa, and his wife Dalila – but, like Job, the more Samson argues with them, the deeper his discomfort about his actual, unexpected suffering grows. Samson's inner conflict reaches a climax when he pulls down the Philistine temple. Just as Job's fortune is restored, Samson's heroic death shows that God has 'not parted from him' (SA l. 1719). Thus, his spiritual regeneration resembles Job's final reconciliation with God. Like Job, the story of Samson moves from a tragic situation, concerning the agony of an individual, and concludes with a sublimation of their suffering.⁴

¹ Quotations from Milton's prose are from Don M. Wolfe et al. (eds.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, 1953- and are mentioned in the text with the abbreviation CPW. Milton's brief poems are from John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd edn., Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2007.

² Milton's *Paradise Lost* is from Fowler's edition: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn., Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2007. The Book of Job directly refers to Adam (Job 15:7, 28:28) and to Eve and the serpent (Job 28:7-8). In medieval tradition, Job is paralleled to Adam, see Harold Fisch, 'Creation in Reverse: The Book of Job and *Paradise Lost*', in James H. Sims and Leland Ryken (eds.), *Milton and Scriptural Tradition: The Bible into Poetry*, University of Missouri Press, 1984, pp. 104-16.

³ For the importance of the Book of Job in *Paradise Regained* see Barbara K. Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Regained*, Brown University Press, 1966, and Victoria Kahn, 'Job's Complaint in *Paradise Regained*', *English Literary History*, 76.3 (2009), 625-60.

⁴ For the analogies between the Book of Job and Milton's *Samson Agonistes* see Ann Gossman, 'Samson, Job, and "the Exercise of Saints"', *English Studies*, 45 (1964), 212-24; Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton's Mind*, Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 230-60; Murray Roston, 'Milton's Herculean Samson', in Roston, *Changing Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts: 1650-1820*, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 13-39; Sanford

The subtext of Job, therefore, runs in all of Milton's major works. In this light, Milton's later poems constitute, as Ann W. Astell has pointed out, 'a trilogy that provides an extended commentary on the Book of Job.'⁵ Structurally speaking, all of Milton's three poems follow a similar Jobean pattern of regeneration and self-awareness, which originates from a condition of despair and spiritual crisis, at different levels of interpretation. Like Job, Milton's protagonists virtuously stand before their tribulations and consequently enjoy a final moment of acknowledgment and spiritual renovation, whether a promised state, as in *Paradise Lost*, or an actual condition, as in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. For Milton, the Job story is an exemplary case showing God's use of good temptations and exhibiting a divine test of human virtue. In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, the poet explains how God's providence operates through good temptations as instruments to demonstrate faith or patience or to become wiser.

Good temptations are those which God uses to tempt even righteous men, in order to prove them. He does this not for his own sake – as if he did not know what sort of men they would turn out to be – but either to exercise or demonstrate their faith or patience, as in the case of Abraham and Job, or to lessen their self-confidence and prove them guilty of weakness, so that they may become wiser and others may be instructed. (CPW 5.388)

However, Milton's reading of Job changes in his three poems and develops a new understanding of Christian heroism in relation to God. Throughout his poetic works, Milton elaborates an interpretation of Christian virtue, whose efficacy depends less on divine intervention, and more on the hero's ability to respond virtuously to the divine calling. In the Book of Job, the hero's movement from ignorance to higher knowledge is completely dependent on God speaking out of the whirlwind. After having heroically and patiently endured his humiliations, Job repents before God's overwhelming discourse. As a result of his repentance, Job is dispensed new knowledge and is rewarded again with spiritual and material goods. Similarly, Adam's movement from his cognitive incapacity after the Fall to a new awareness is the result of Michael's prophetic discourse in the final Books of *Paradise Lost*. As a consequence of the Fall, Adam is subjected to Michael's instruction, which instils in him the knowledge and promise of future salvation. Therefore, Adam's *anagnorisis* depends on divine intervention through Michael's prophecy. In Milton's later works, by contrast, the heroes' ultimate self-recognition is gradually less dependent on divine agency.⁶ In *Paradise Regained* and in *Samson Agonistes* particularly, the Son's and Samson's self-discovery originates from their individual responses to God's call; that is, from their own free will. God's providential temptations are, therefore, an opportunity to manifest one's heroism, since it depends on the individual's will to respond to the trial and act out his virtue accordingly. For the poet, Job is not only a model of patient

Budick, 'Milton's Joban Phoenix in *Samson Agonistes*', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 11.2 (2005), 5.1-15.

⁵ Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 210.

⁶ The fact that Milton's later poems were first printed together in 1671 has been argued in favour of a dialectical reading of the two heroes. On the one hand, the Son as a true Christian hero; on the other, Samson's violent and ambiguous example for imitation. I believe that if *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* are to be considered two companion poems, they represent two aspects of Christian heroism, rather than two competing models of Christian virtue. For further bibliography on this argument, see Carey's introduction in John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, pp. 349-50.

suffering, but is also central in understanding how man can react heroically in the face of undeserved suffering. Particularly in the drama of Samson, Milton is more interested in the Book of Job as a moral example of human heroism than as a revelation of the nature of God. For this reason, the deity gradually disappears from the scene throughout Milton's poems. In fact, in *Samson Agonistes*, there is no image or voice of the deity whatsoever, while the character of God is evidently set forth in Books Three and Four of *Paradise Lost*, and in *Paradise Regained* God is still audible. The absence of any divine warrant to justify Samson's destruction of the temple is, indeed, one of the arguments in favour of the tragedy's ambiguity. This is when the relation of *Samson Agonistes* to the Book of Job is especially important, since it may provide an answer to the question about Samson's salvation or condemnation. In this paper, I will focus on Milton's use of the Book of Job in *Samson Agonistes* in order to attempt a positive reading of Samson as a regenerated hero. In what follows, I will first discuss Milton's reading of Job as an exemplary model of dramatic heroism in *Samson Agonistes*, then I will analyse the relation of God's silence to Samson's Jobean virtue. In this light, the presence of Job in *Samson Agonistes* offers not only a challenging narrative about the poet's understanding of Christian heroism, but may also offer additional evidence of Samson's regeneration.

In Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Job is an example of patience but, as Victoria Kahn and Mary Ann Radzinowicz have noticed, Job also puts forward his vehement request for God's justice and makes violent and ironic replies to the blind reasoning of the comforters.⁷ Job is not only the typological model of Christ in an allegorical sense, but Milton also recognises him as having a certain 'impatience towards God, a sin which even the saints are sometimes tempted to commit' (CPW 6.662). Although Milton sees moral integrity in Job's consciousness, he comprehends that even the most righteous and patient man can commit this sin and, therefore, he alludes to Job (CPW 6.662-63) when he curses his birth (Job 3:2) and when he cries out violently without receiving an answer (Job 19:6). Curses are, indeed, among human errors so much so, that 'The godly themselves sometimes fall in this way' (CPW 6.667). Milton's reading of the human dimension of the Job story finds expression again in a passage from *Of True Religion* (1673), in which Milton explains the difference between heresy and error. Whereas heresy is a wilful profession against Scripture, error is 'in misunderstanding the Scripture after all sincere endeavours to understand it rightly.' No man is free from error, because, 'It is a human frailty to err.' But Milton reassures his readers of their salvation as long as they 'profess to set the word of God only before them as the rule of faith and obedience.' In this case, Milton continues, 'God will assuredly pardon them, as he did the friends of Job; good and pious men, though much mistaken, as there it appears, in some points of doctrine' (CPW 8.423).

Milton's interest in Job's impatience and in human mistaken doctrine reflects an alternative exegetical tradition to the dominant understanding of Job as the Christian warrior. According to the prevalent exegetical tradition, which understood Job's patient experience as foreshadowing Christ's suffering, the story of Job resembled the heroic subject matter of classical epic. As in classical epic poems, Job is a patient warrior in the battlefield of faith fighting against the blows of Satan.⁸ It is as an

⁷ Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes*, p. 247; Kahn, 'Job's Complaint', 631-32.

⁸ As Richard Blackmore explains in his *Paraphrase on the Book of Job* (1700), Job prevails over humanity's greatest adversary because of the 'constancy' of his virtue, which makes him 'a most

analogue to classical brief epic that Milton uses Job in *Paradise Regained*.⁹ Along with this understanding of Job as the patient epic hero, another interpretation emerged from Hebrew exegesis and influenced some Protestant commentaries until the seventeenth century. This reading, found in the writings of Luther, Calvin, Beza and a few other Reformation writers, emphasised Job's fall and the dramatic tension between an individual's struggle and God's inscrutable justice in the dialogue section (Job 3-38).¹⁰ As Barbara K. Lewalski has explained, this Protestant tradition, which influenced the modern conception of Job, 'prepared naturally enough for the focus on the Jobean dialogues as revealing Job's human frailty and the imperfections to which even saints are subject.'¹¹ This reading of Job was particularly interested in the character's lack of understanding, seeing in his inner turmoil a universal condition of mankind. For this reason, this exegesis insisted on the dramatic tension between the human and the divine, as expressed in the dialogue section, and often regarded the Book of Job as a drama or a tragedy. The parallel between the Book of Job and drama belonged to an ancient tradition, dating back to the fourth century with Theodore of Mopsuestia, who believed the story of Job to be modelled on Greek tragedy, and continuing in the sixteenth century with the Reformation thinker Theodore Beza, who considered the subject matter and the structure of the book similar to a tragedy, although he hesitated before Job's positive ending. Despite the historical roots of the association between the Job story and drama, this tradition was almost ignored during the seventeenth century.¹² As Lewalski has demonstrated, before the second half of the seventeenth century there were 'only one neo-Latin Job play, three in English (all lost), and a very few in French, German, and Italian.'¹³ Compared to the interpretation of Job as drama, the allegorical understanding of Job as an antitype of Christ remained dominant until the seventeenth century, as Milton's quotation of Job as a brief epic in *The Reason of Church Government* indicates.

Nevertheless, Milton was certainly aware of the alternative contemporary

noble Example of *passive Fortitude*, a Character no way *inferiour* to that of the *active Hero*' in classical epics. Sir Richard Blackmore, *A paraphrase on the book of Job as likewise on the songs of Moses, Deborah, David, on four select psalms, some chapters of Isaiah, and the third chapter of Habakkuk*, London, 1700, Preface, sig. d1^r.

⁹ Along with Milton's brief poem, several seventeenth century paraphrases of Job incorporated epic elements, either in their title, such as in the case of Francis Quarles's *Job Militant* (1624), or in the use of the epic form and the treatment of epic heroism, such as in Henry Oxinden's *Jobus Triumphans* (1651). These few examples demonstrate a wider interest in Job as a model of heroic poetry during the seventeenth century; see Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, pp. 28-32.

¹⁰ For a list of the Protestant authors who focused on this reading of the Job story, see Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, p. 364, n. 41.

¹¹ Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, p. 18.

¹² The interest in the Book of Job as tragedy was aroused again in nineteenth and twentieth century biblical criticism; see William Martin Leberecht De Wette, *A Critical and Historical Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Theodore Parker, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1864; Horace M. Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy Restored*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1959 (first published in 1918); Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

¹³ Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, p. 18. Aquace D'Albiac, Joannes Oecolampadius, Mercerus, and Johannes Brentius were among those who treated the story of Job as a tragedy; see Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, p. 20. For the possible reasons for this neglect, see Roston, *Biblical Drama in England: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 95.

tradition and with the debate on the nature of the Book of Job as drama.¹⁴ Given the poet's ability to read Hebrew and his insistence on privileging the original words of the Hebrew Scriptures to understand Christianity in his divorce tracts, Milton probably chose the exegetical interpretation of Job as drama to represent the tragedy of Samson as a Christian hero.¹⁵ Because of its conciseness, the Book of Judges offered Milton little material for the development of a Christian drama. The scriptural narrative depicted Samson as a hero, although it highlighted Samson's corporeal strength and violence, rather than his intellectual struggle. The Biblical character, in other words, did not undergo any inner tragic conflict between the hero's elevated status and his fallen condition. It is plausible that Milton elaborated on some elements of the Job narrative, which the poet also used in *Paradise Regained* – such as the corporal and mental afflictions of Job, his spiritual growth, the conflict with the supposed comforters – in order to turn Samson's savage folk tale into the inner drama of a hero. Possibly, for the same reason, Milton purged the protagonist of Judges of his more brutish and lustful aspects. In order to elevate Samson to the status of a tragic hero, Milton omitted some undignified episodes of his career, such as the visit to the harlot in Gaza or the putting of a firebrand in the foxes' tails to burn the Philistines' standing corn. In a similar vein, Milton turned Dalila into Samson's lawful wife, instead of his mistress, and emphasised Samson's inward consciousness rather than his muscular exploits. A plausible explanation of such a radical metamorphosis in the character of Samson and the echoes of Job in the drama is that Milton was more interested in the portrayal of Samson's fallen state and his moral development than his physical exploits. For this reason, *Samson Agonistes* rewrites the last part of the Biblical story and enlarges it in order to investigate the hero's inward conflict.

The Protestant reading of Job, which emphasised Job's vehement protest against his suffering and his downfall as a representation of human frailty, offered Milton a tragic model to illustrate Samson's inner struggle in understanding God's justice. According to this minor tradition, Job's fall from his moral righteousness begins in Chapter Three with his harsh complaint against his undeserved suffering, and continues in the dialogues between Job and Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. After all kinds of terrible things have happened to Job God places a final indignity on him, through Satan, by covering his body with sores and boils (Job 2:7). Heavily afflicted in both body and mind, Job curses the day of his birth, 'Let the day perish wherein I was born' (Job 3:3). Next Job receives the visit of his friends, who having heard of his condition come 'to mourn with him and to comfort him' (Job 2:11). Whether the three comforters are true friends or not is debatable, since they accuse Job of having done something terrible in order to justify his ruinous state.

Samson Agonistes follows a similar structure to the tragedy of Job. In both stories,

¹⁴ See Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes*, p. 232.

¹⁵ Samson's story was in Milton's mind since his early career. In the 1640s, Milton began two notebooks, one of which is commonly referred to as the Trinity manuscript, because it is preserved in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. The story of Samson was included in Milton's list of projected Biblical and historical dramas in the Trinity manuscript, although he probably turned to the dramatisation of Samson in his late years. The date of composition of *Samson Agonistes* is still a debated question. The traditional account assumes that this is Milton's last work written in the 1660s, between 1665-67. This reading emphasises the autobiographical elements of the play. The second theory about the date of composition places Samson between 1647 and 1653. A less plausible third option dates the composition of the play during the early 1640s. See Carey's introduction, pp. 349-50.

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each character falls from a condition of material wealth and divine appointment; each character protests against God's disposal; and each character is engaged in a spiritual struggle with his inner soul and his supposed comforters. Like Job, the tragedy of Samson begins with the captive hero in despair.

O wherefore was my birth from heaven foretold ...
Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed
As of a person separate to God,
Designed for great exploits; if I must dye
Betrayed, captived, and both my eyes put out,
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze;
To grind in brazen fetters under task
With this heaven-gifted strength?
(SA ll. 23-36)

Following the structure of the Job story, Samson receives the visits of the Chorus, Manoa, and Dalila. The Chorus explains to Samson, 'We come thy friends and neighbours not unknown / ... To visit or bewail thee, or if better, / Counsel or consolation we may bring, / Salve to thy sores, apt words have power to 'suage / The tumours of a troubled mind' (SA ll. 180-86). Samson's mind is, indeed, tormented by 'restless thoughts' (SA l. 19) because of the inconsistency between his elected birth and his fallen condition. More than his sores and wounds, Samson is oppressed by his thoughts: 'Thoughts my tormentors armed with deadly stings / Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts, / Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise / Dire inflammation which no cooling herb / Or med'cinal liquor can assuage' (SA ll. 623-27).

In their abject state, both Job and Samson question the deity, engaging in a tormented spiritual quest about the meaning of the suffering meted out to them. Though Job is right in defending his innocence in the series of confrontations with his comforters, his impatient outcry shows a weakness in his soul. He seeks death as the unique relief from his spiritual and physical pain.

I should have been carried from the womb to the grave.
Are not my days few? cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little,
Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land
of darkness and the shadow of death;
A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death,
without any order, and where the light is as darkness. (Job 10:19-22)

Like Job, Samson wonders, 'as for life, / To what end should I seek it?' (SA ll. 521-22). Also, for Samson, death would be 'the balm' (SA ll. 651) to all his miseries. Instead, he is exempted from the 'privilege of death and burial' (SA ll. 104) and condemned 'in the land of darkness yet in light, / To live a life half dead, a living death, / And buried; but O yet more miserable! / My self, my sepulchre, a moving grave' (SA ll. 99-102). Both protagonists are debased to the condition of a worm, as Samson cries out, 'Inferior to the vilest now become / Of man or worm' (SA l. 73-4).¹⁶

Despite the similarities of their fallen states, the cases of Job and of Samson are not identical. When Job speaks of his rectitude and innocence, he is right because he has never sinned against God in the way erroneously implied in his friends' opinions. Samson, instead, is perfectly conscious of his guilt in having revealed the source of his strength to Dalila. For this reason, Samson repeatedly admits his responsibility for his

¹⁶ Compare Job 25:6, 'How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?'

crime: 'let me not rashly call in doubt / Divine prediction; what if all foretold / Had been fulfilled but through mine own default, / Whom have I to complain of but myself?' (SA ll. 43-47). Yet, in both situations the characters' agony depends on the contradiction between their election and their calamity. Like Job, Samson defends God's justice and power. When his father Manoa questions the excess of God's punishment on his son, Samson replies, 'Appoint not heavenly disposition, father, / Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me / But justly; I myself have brought them on, / Sole author I, sole cause' (SA ll. 373-76). Despite his admission of guilt, the Job-like Samson impatiently insists on the disproportionate nature of his suffering and he cannot resist questioning why God associated his gift with his, Samson's, hair (SA l. 59), and why God confined sight to such a tender (eye)ball, 'so easy to be quenched' (SA l. 95).

Through Samson's echoing a similar agony to Job's inner struggle, *Samson Agonistes* reflects the Protestant exegesis of the story, which emphasised Job's tragic fall and his vehement demand for divine justice in the face of his suffering. In fact, Kahn has noticed how this counter-story of Job with his impatient rhetoric is also present in the dialogues between the Son and Satan in *Paradise Regained*. Although Milton's brief poem is modelled on the epic patience of Job, as Christ's antitype, the Son's rhetoric counterbalances this allegorical reading, according to Kahn, 'with an acute sense of Job's ironic and subversive practices of interpretation in the central dialogue.'¹⁷ While this alternative tradition plays a minor role in Milton's rewriting of the brief epic, in *Samson Agonistes* the dramatic understanding of the Job story is extensively suggested in the structural analogies between the two characters. By the same token, Milton's tragedy also retains some aspects of the typological interpretation in the parallel between Job, Samson, and Christ. The use of the allegorical reading of Job as a type of Christ in *Samson Agonistes* reflects the typological association of Samson with Christ. The typological reading of Milton's tragedy sees a parallel between Samson's sacrifice at the temple and Christ's crucifixion. Many critics have highlighted how Samson's outstretched arms, 'With both his arms on those two massy pillars' (SA l. 1633), replicates the posture of Jesus on the cross – along with the image of the Jobean phoenix as a symbol of Christ's resurrection and Samson's moral regeneration (SA ll. 1699-1707).¹⁸ Yet, in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton is more interested in Job as a tragic example of human heroism than as an allegorical type of Christ.

The reason for Milton's alternate use of the two exegetical traditions might depend on the fact that, in *Paradise Regained* and in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton aimed to represent two different aspects of heroism.¹⁹ In *Paradise Lost* Milton calls 'patience

¹⁷ Kahn, 'Job's Complaint', p. 626.

¹⁸ For the parallelism between the phoenix simile as a symbol of Christian redemption in the Book of Job and in *Samson Agonistes* see Budick, 'Milton's Joban Phoenix in *Samson Agonistes*'. For a typological reading of Milton's dramatic poem see Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition*, Princeton University Press, 1949; H. R. MacCallum, 'Milton and Figurative Interpretation of the Bible', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 31.4 (1962), 397-415; William G. Madsen, *From Shadowy Types To Truth: Studies in Milton's Symbolism*, Yale University Press, 1968, pp. 181-202; Lewalski, 'Samson Agonistes and the "Tragedy" of the Apocalypse', *PMLA* 85 (1970), 1050-62; Lynn Veach Sadler, 'Typological Imagery in *Samson Agonistes*: Noon and the Dragon', *English Literary History*, 37.2 (1970), 195-210. The typological view of Samson is also reinforced by Milton's reference to the tragedy of *Christus Patiens*, see Russell M. Hillier, 'Grotius's *Christus Patiens* and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*', *The Explicator*, 65.1 (2006), 9-13.

¹⁹ From a different perspective, Radzinowicz makes a similar point when she analyses the common but not identical ethics of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson*

and heroic fortitude' the most heroic virtues (*PL* 9.32). The Son epitomises this heroic ideal of patience and fortitude in *Paradise Regained*. Because of his 'firm obedience fully tried / Through all temptation' (*PR* 1.4-5), the Son of God is compared several times in *Paradise Regained* to his antitype 'Job, / Whose constant perseverance overcame / Whate'er his [Satan's] cruel malice could invent' (*PR* 1.147-49). Also, in *Samson Agonistes*, the chorus repeatedly insists on the virtue of 'Extolling patience as the truest fortitude' (*SA* l. 654). Further in the tragedy, the chorus explains that magnanimous deeds might identify a hero, 'But patience is more oft the exercise / Of saints, the trial of their fortitude' (*SA* l. 1287-88). However, patience is not Samson's main virtue in the tragedy, since Samson's heroism consists in his uncompromising rebellion against the Philistine tyranny. Samson's Christian virtue resides in his relentless decision to act upon divine vocation, rather than in his enduring the Philistine constraints. The fact that the poet considered Samson as a Christian example of heroic liberty is also seen in his *Defensio Pro Populo Anglicano* (*Defence of the English People*, 1651), where Milton praises Samson's massacre as a precedent for the regicide.

Even the heroic Samson, though his countrymen reproached him saying, Judges 15, "Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?," still made war single-handed on his masters, and whether prompted by God or by his own valor, slew at one stroke not one but a host of his country's tyrants, having first made prayer to God for his aid. Samson therefore thought it not impious but pious to kill those masters who were tyrants over his country, even though most of her citizens did not balk at slavery. (*CPW* 4.302)

Although Samson's final act is representative of a singular individual, not of the majority of the nation, Milton is not questioning the value of the hero's deed. Similarly, the fact that Samson's people did not recognise his divinely inspired acts – 'Israel's governors, and the heads of tribes, / Who seeing those great acts which God had done / Singly by me against their conquerors / Acknowledged not, or not at all considered / Deliverance offered' (*SA* ll. 242-46) – does not lessen the heroic status of his actions. Therefore, Milton's shorter poems illustrate two different aspects of heroic virtue.²⁰ *Paradise Regained* demands patience of the saints and faith in God's providential plan; whereas, though a lesser hero than the Son, in *Samson Agonistes* the protagonist is called proudly to act upon God's revelation. Milton's aim to differentiate Samson's bold heroism from Christ's patient suffering may also explain why the echoes to Job in *Samson Agonistes* are latent, whereas Milton explicitly compares the Son to Job in *Paradise Regained*.²¹ Nonetheless, Milton clearly structures *Samson Agonistes* upon the minor exegetical tradition of the subversive and dramatic Job. Both in his tragic fall and in his unrepentant questioning of God's dispositions, Samson echoes the story of

Agonistes, pp. 230-60.

²⁰ Milton's idea of heroism develops around a bifold quality: the ability to recognise the good chance (*magnanimitas*) or the virtue to wait patiently for God's providential plan to be brought to its final resolution (*humilitas*). On the one hand, the classical virtue of magnanimity or pride, which acknowledges the possibility of attaining glory self-sufficiently through the good deployment of reason. On the other, the Christian virtue of humility, which recognises that human merits are gifts from God. Stephen Fallon, 'Milton and Literary Virtue', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 42.1 (2012), 181-200.

²¹ As Lewalski has noted, the Son of God is compared six times to Job in *Paradise Regained* (11.147, 369, 425; 3. 64, 67, 95), the Biblical book is mentioned twice (11.33, 368), and 'either the Book itself or the tradition of commentary explaining it is alluded to on at least ten other occasions.' Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, p. 110.

Job.

Not only does Milton reappraise the Hebrew tradition of the tragic Job, but he converts Samson's Jobean heroism to Christian virtue. In his echo of Job, Milton renews the conclusive message of the Biblical book and introduces a new understanding of the relation between the human and the divine. As in the Job story, Samson eventually receives his heavenly calling upon which he decides to follow the Philistine messenger to the temple then, to kill his enemies. Though divinely inspired, Samson's heroism does not simply consist in his answering God's call. Milton's dramatic poem aims to exhibit Samson as an uncompromising Christian champion, the agent of a freely chosen, though morally questionable, deed.

The tragic reading of Job does not only shape the structure of *Samson Agonistes*, but it also influences Milton's dramatic poem at a deeper level. In his journey from fall to redemption, Job requires a mediator to aid him in his distress, and this intermediary is Elihu, whose speech interrupts the cycles of discourses between Job and his comforters, creating a turning point in the narrative. In the form of a sudden break in the narration, Elihu anticipates God's whirlwind and announces the Book's ultimate message: the revelation of divine inscrutability and omnipotence. In the role of messenger, Elihu mediates Job's change from ignorance to knowledge. Through his discourse, Elihu discards the traditional and mistaken orthodoxy of his friends and introduces a new understanding of God's relation to man in terms of a revelation of the divine within the human.²² At the beginning of his address, Elihu contends that his wisdom is inspired by the divine Spirit, 'my lips shall utter knowledge clearly. The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life' (Job 33:3-4). Through inner motivation, God reveals his knowledge to mankind, since 'there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding' (Job 32:8). In the light of Elihu's inner revelation, Milton's Job-like heroes in *Paradise Regained* and in *Samson Agonistes* move from ignorance to self-discovery through an internal connection to the divine. However, in Milton's two shorter poems, the Son's and Samson's recognition does not depend on the mediation of an intermediary. While in *Paradise Lost* Michael's prophecy mediates Adam's new awareness, Milton's later works emphasise the ability of the two Christian heroes to recognise God's calling in their being inwardly moved, and to exercise their virtue according to their inner motivation.

In *Paradise Regained*, Elihu's new orthodoxy has an echo in the Son's understanding of true knowledge as an inward, divine revelation: 'he who receives / Light from above, from the fountain of light, / No other doctrine needs' (PR 4.288-90). It is through divine inner revelation that the Son eventually establishes his own identity. After Satan takes him to the pinnacle of the temple, the Son of God replies, 'Tempt not the Lord thy God' (PR 4.561), which is a quote from the commandments in Deuteronomy – 'Ye shall not tempt the Lord your God' (Deut. 6:16). In this repetition of the word of the Father, the Son does not simply warn Satan not to make trial of God, but he also means, 'do not tempt me because I am God myself as his Son.' Though the divine presence is no longer visible, God's voice is still audible in the Son's internal appropriation of the

²² I take this expression from Ariel Hirschfeld's contribution, 'Is the Book of Job a Tragedy?', in Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes (eds.), *The Book of Job: Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 9-36.

divine command and, ultimately, in the conclusive singing of 'a fiery globe / of angels' (PR 4. 581-82), who lift the Son from the top of the temple and celebrate his renewed identity. Through the re-enunciation of the Father's command, the Son recuperates his self-awareness, thereby creating a moment of sudden unity between his human and divine dimensions. In this final revelation, the Son assumes the role of a mediator, since he incarnates the divine Spirit into a human body, the 'True image of the Father' in 'human form' (PR 4.596, 599).

Samson is also moved by divine, inner promptings. When explaining the reason why he married Dalila, an infidel, he declares that he was 'motioned ... From intimate impulse' (SA ll. 222-23). In a similar vein, at the climax of the drama, Samson decides to follow the Philistine messenger to the temple by pronouncing the words, 'I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts' (SA ll. 1381-83).²³ Analogously to the Son, whose decisions are led 'by strong motion' (PR 1.290), Samson's deeds follow an inward, divine motivation. Nonetheless, in Milton's drama there is no God's command to mediate Samson's actions, in particular there is no divine sanction to warrant his catastrophic destruction of the temple. Before pulling down the pillars, Samson, indeed, announces that, 'Now of my own accord such other trial / I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater' (SA ll. 1643-44), as if he were acting of his own free will, without following any divine prompting.²⁴ The fact that the tragic poem does not include a clear divine endorsement of Samson's violent resistance has resulted in its being read as 'A Work in Praise of Terrorism' – to quote Carey's famous article that compared Samson's massacre of the Philistines to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.²⁵ The ambiguity of Samson's decision is just one of the many issues within a heated critical debate that has been trying to establish whether Samson is a Christian regenerated hero or Milton's version of a suicide-terrorist. While in *Paradise Regained* God's commandment, 'Tempt not the Lord thy God' authorises the Son's self-discovery, in *Samson Agonistes* there is no divine command besides Samson's 'rousing motions' to endorse a similar revelation.

²³ The very source of the 'rousing motions' has been one of the most debated sections of the tragedy. For some critics, such as Anthony Low and Mary Ann Radzinowicz, the 'rousing motions' are evidence of the fact that Samson is the recipient of divine grace. The traditional regenerationist view recognises Samson's intellectual development as the spiritual growth and renewal of the Christian hero, who is able to master his passions through reason and mental labour; see Anthony Low, *The Blaze of Noon: A Reading of Samson Agonistes*, Columbia University Press, 1974; Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes*; also Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition*; Joan S. Bennett, *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989; Albert C. Labriola, 'Divine Urgency as a Motive for Conduct in *Samson Agonistes*', *Philological Quarterly* 50.1 (1971), 99-107. Rather than viewing him as a type of Christ, revisionists emphasise the negative traits in Samson – lust, bloody violence – and understand the destruction of the temple as the protagonist's free moral act, rather than inspired by God; see Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., *Interpreting Samson Agonistes*, Princeton University Press, 1986; Derek N. C. Wood, *'Exiled from Light': Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton's Samson Agonistes*, University of Toronto Press, 2001; Irene Samuel, 'Samson Agonistes as Tragedy', in Wittreich (ed.), *Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Honor of John S. Diekhoff*, Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971, pp. 235-57.

²⁴ Wittreich, *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002.

²⁵ Carey, 'A Work in Praise of Terrorism?: September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 2002, pp. 15-16.

Resembling the central section of the Book of Job, the drama of Samson is a play full of voices, but none of the speakers effectively comprehends God's dispositions. In their closing speech, the Chorus complains that 'we oft doubt, / What the unsearchable dispose / Of highest wisdom brings about', particularly when God 'seems to hide his face' (SA ll. 1745-49). The problem of communication is the condition of humanity after Adam's fall, and Samson's tragedy marks this chasm between God and man. Similarly, the impossibility of the human intellect to understand divine providence lies at the core of Elihu's discourse and God's rhetorical questions from the whirlwind, as Maimonides explains in his exegesis of the Book,

the notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence; nor is the notion of our governance of the things created by Him the same as the notion of our governance of that which we govern. The two notions are not comprised in one definition, contrary to what is thought by all those who are confused, and there is nothing in common between the two except the name alone.... This is the object of the *Book of Job* as a whole ... you should not fall into error and seek to affirm in your imagination that His knowledge is like our knowledge or that His purpose and His providence and His governance are like our purpose and our providence and our governance.²⁶

Along similar lines, *Samson Agonistes* expresses a parallel immeasurable distance when Samson's final act against the Philistines obtains no heavenly sanction. The absence of God's words in Milton's tragedy might be understood as Samson's inability clearly to perceive divine dispositions from the perspective of fallen humankind. Nonetheless, the distance between the divine and the human realm is not only a limitation for postlapsarian man. Like Samson, human beings are inwardly induced to perceive a heavenly calling and to act freely upon it. Following the common early modern interpretation of Samson as a Christian hero, Milton recognises in Samson the virtue of exercising his own free will when fulfilling God's disposal.²⁷ Samson's pronouncement, 'of my own accord' (SA l. 1643), does not aim to declare the hero's dismissal from heavenly disposition. Rather, 'of my own accord' announces Samson's responsibility in seizing God's calling and freely choosing to act according to it. In other words, God's silence does not aim at expressing ambiguity towards Samson's heroism, rather it emphasises man's freedom to act virtuously and heroically when receiving inner revelation, even if this results in a morally questionable deed. When he decides to follow the messenger to the temple, Samson freely chooses to respond to his 'rousing motions' (SA l. 1382) and heroically perform his virtue; therefore, he continues, 'I with this Messenger will go along, / Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour / Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite. / If there be aught of presage in the mind, / By some great act, or of my days the last' (SA ll. 1384-89). As a Christian hero, Samson exhibits his liberty in freeing himself from the slavery of the Philistines with the aid of God's grace.

Particularly in modernity, the tragedy of Job has had a central role in representing the chasm between the human and the divine. Within his various exegetical traditions, Job has been alternatively understood as a book about the nature of God or about the human being. Drawing on the interpretation of Job as tragedy, Milton's *Samson*

²⁶ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, part III, chapter 23, trans. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols., University of Chicago Press, 1963, 2.496-97.

²⁷ Tobias Gregory, 'The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*', *Studies in English Literature. 1500-1900*, 50.1 (2010), 175-203.

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Agonistes dramatises the tragic burden of postlapsarian humanity, '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' (SA ll. 667-70). Yet, Milton's tragedy does not only record Samson's Job-like fall, it also translates the Job story into Christian terms. In the course of his confrontations, Samson does not merely gain awareness of his own responsibility as a human being, but he also realises how God's inscrutable plan works through his active response to a godly inward command. Milton's dramatic poem illustrates from a human perspective how Samson is granted absolute liberty, first to fall, then actively to respond to the divine calling and demonstrate his true Christian virtue of 'heroic martyrdom' (PL 9.32).

Notes on Contributors

David Barratt with Roger Pooley and Leland Ryken edited *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory*, Apollos/Baker Books, 1995. The second edition of his *C. S. Lewis and his World*, retitled: *Narnia: C. S. Lewis and his World* appeared in 2005.

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Dr Roger Kojecský's *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism* describes Eliot's attempts to engage as a Christian man of letters with social issues. The book, revised (2014) for the Amazon Kindle format, contains first publication of a paper on the role of the clerisy contributed by Eliot to an elite discussion group, The Moot. He is among the contributors to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP). He is Secretary of the Christian Literary Studies Group and has lectured recently at universities in Krakow, Toronto and Xiamen. With Andrew Tate he co-edited *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text* (2013).

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