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The Body Beyond: Corporeal Suffering and Space in John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

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ABSTRACT

Samson Agonistes can be seen as expressing John Milton's belief that corporeal suffering may have a divine purpose, and that the suffering self may be the site of a possible "resurrection." Milton, like the Greek tragedians, shows us a basic fact of human existence: physical pain is more than pain; it paradoxically leads to self-regeneration. Both Samson's corporeal disfigurement and bodily confinement account for his extreme interiority and immobility, characterized as "Prison within Prison." In a sense the prison's own dimensions become that of his self; he becomes the prison. It is only when he enters the open public space in the final temple scene, where he takes advantage of its spaciousness to stage his planned catastrophe, that he at last feels inwardly free and open. *His body is* transformed from a private to a public one, a body belonging to his people and his history and thus directly facing his and their enemy. In his physical act of pushing against the mighty pillars he seems to be moving outward, moving "outside himself" into a state of total exteriority which yet will be internalized, drawn inward, just as the phoenix's flight out of the fire has a sense of both inward and outward transcendence. Although one *could* say that in the final offstage scene Samson uses his body like a page of Scripture, metaphorically rewriting his sacred script, his "letter" to the profane Philistines in his own blood, the value of his mutilated body is more dependent on, or defined by, suffering than by the ending ultimate violence.

KEY WORDS: *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton, corporeal suffering, space, self-integration

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超越的身體：約翰・密爾頓《大力士參孫》中的受難身軀與空間

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摘　要

密爾頓的作品《大力士參孫》透露了作者的信念，乃是受難的身體具有一神聖目的，而受難之個體可為復活重生的場所。密爾頓在受難的議題上的看法與希臘悲劇家的觀點相近，乃是：肉體之痛苦意義超越其本身之實質痛苦，它弔詭地通往重生。主角參孫所承受的身體痛苦可謂「雙重禁錮」，包括他殘缺的身體（眼盲與神力喪失）以及他階下囚的處境。二者說明他的極致內限與死寂。置身囹圄中，囚禁他的軀體的監牢這一特殊空間，定義了他的身份。直到劇末處，當參孫步出囚房進入敵人神殿的公眾空間，他得以藉著空間的釋放而完成一場出自他自由意志的毀滅劇。參孫的身體，由一個屬於個人的提昇為屬於公眾的層次。此刻，他的身體屬於他的子民與他的歷史。在他摧毀神殿巨柱時，似乎他得以真正跨越出自身到外界，這同時他亦內化這種向外延展的空間感，如同火鳳凰在毀滅性的火中燃燒般，具有內在與外在雙重的超昇意義。或許參孫之身軀如同聖經頁紙，以血為墨來書寫著神聖文本予以褻瀆的敵方，但他殘缺的身軀之價值仍然在於其受難經歷，而絕非是終場的暴力使用。

關鍵詞：約翰・密爾頓、《大力士參孫》、肉體痛苦、空間、自我整合

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> Suffering . . . is the sign of man's dependence on a divine Law.
> ——Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*

> Only great suffering is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit. . . .
> Only great suffering; that great suffering, under which we seem to be over a fire of greenwood, the suffering that takes its time – forces us philosophers to descend into our nethermost depths . . . .
> ——Nietzsche, "Nietzsche contra Wagner," *Epilogue*

John Milton's poetic drama – *Samson Agonistes* – has been a controversial work at least since the eighteenth century, when Samuel Johnson questioned the structure of the play.[1] The controversy then arose in recent criticism has been centering around the issues of Milton's idea of God, the ambiguity of Samson's heroism, the moral status of Samson's use of violence, and Samson's regeneration. However, there have been few readings tat take as their central focus Samson's physical pain, his corporeal suffering as a prisoner. I will argue that to fully explore this tragic hero's process of spiritual development, of self-overcoming or transcendence, we need to begin with the crucial role played by his deep self-awareness of bodily suffering.

We could say that, with the corporal suffering and his need to *endure* it, Samson is presented at the beginning of the play as a Stoic hero, a type prevalent in English Renaissance tragedy.[2] For the Stoic philosopher Seneca, "*calamitas virtutis occasion est*," ("calamity makes possible virtue") (Seneca 6), where "virtue" in its original sense also means manly, heroic strength. It is through the chaos and violence, the fire of adversity, suffering and pain that a heroic *virtue* is forged or created. Samson's suffering in the drama may suggest the stoic discipline of the crippled Epictetus: the self bends back upon itself like a bow in a gigantic effort of self-mastery or self-control.[3] Here

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[1] Johnson thought that *Samson Agonistes* has a beginning and an end but no middle. His view was first printed in *The Rambler*, No. 139 (July 16, 1751).

[2] Other examples of the Stoic hero in English Renaissance dramas are characters like Pandulpho in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (first performed in 1599), who is "a mouthpiece of Stoicism," and Rusticus in Massigner's *Roman Actor* (first performed in 1626), "a model of Senecan fortitude." Significantly, "[i]t is in the plays of George Chapman that Stoicism is most fully drawn" (Hattaway 55).

[3] See e.g., Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. P. E. Matheson (London: Oxford UP, 1938). Vol. 1, Book I, Ch. 12, p. 87. Epictetus says that it is not what happens to us—the outward events that we experience through sense perception— that matters but only the attitude we take toward what happens to us. That

suffering is overcome, for the subject's act of total self-control is an act of self-overcoming. "Creative suffering" means, after all, self-generation or self-creation through intense suffering, and the body, as with Milton's Samson, may play an important role here. In fact it is clear, and not only from his sonnet on his own blindness,[4] that Milton believed corporeal suffering may have a divine purpose, and that suffering self may be the site of a possible "resurrection."

Such an interpretation would need to be set in the context of some of the most influential readings of the play undertaken in the last fifty years, among which we find the theme of corporeal suffering to have been not especially emphasized. Critical approaches to *Samson Agonistes* commonly fall into two main categories, the orthodox readings and the dissenting voices. In the orthodox interpretations, Samson is generally considered to be a fallen sinner who somehow regenerates or redeems himself and experiences a final reunion with God after much torment and struggling. One of the early "orthodox" readings of *Samson Agonistes* is that of F. Michael Krouse, who claims Christian sainthood for Samson in *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (1949). Krouse affirms that "[t]he Samson whom we meet in Milton's play is a saint, a champion of God, a great hero" (104) and that "Milton invited his reader to think of Samson as a model of virtue . . . a martyr, and a counterpart of Christ" (124). Despite the negative reviews which it received, Krouse's book marks a major shift of direction away from the concern, proposed by William Riley Parker and Richard Jebb in the 1930s, with the influence of the Greek tragedians on Milton's drama, which, for Jebb, is more Hebraic than Hellenic, and, for Parker, written in a specifically Sophoclean mode.

In Krouse's view, then, the reading of Samson as a regenerate Christian hero of faith would likely be the dominant one for at least the foreseeable

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is, we have the power, through "the proper handling of the impressions," to control our own mood, to remain steady. For Nietzsche, the living subject "must be formed broken, forged, torn, burnt, made incandescent, and purified—that which *necessarily* must and *should* suffer" (*BGE* 1966, 154). This discipline of suffering, "of *great* suffering," Nietzsche says, "has created all enhancements of man" (1966, 154). That is, great suffering can restore the self-transformative properties in/of a being.

[4] In "When I Consider How My Light is Spent" (1673), when the speaker wonders sadly how he can truly serve God since he is blind, "Patience . . . soon replies, 'God doth not need/ Either man's work or his own gifts; who best/ *Bear his mild yoke*, they serve him best. [. . .]/ They also serve who only stand and wait'" (emphasis added). The "mild yoke" recalls Samson's "brazen fetters," his "labor of a beast" in "Philistian yoke." (35-39).

future. In 1974, Anthony Low's Christian reading in *The Blaze of Noon* takes the heroic Samson as "the image and example of the champion of God" (117). Mary Ann Radzinowicz claims in *Toward* '*Samson Agonistes*' (1978) that by setting Milton's works in a biblical context, we find that this final play is "true to his personal experience, true to his historical experience, true to his national experience" (xx). The play demonstrates that its subject is growth and its "mimesis is of a biblical story recording movement from self-destruction to self-transcendence, or from near-death to second birth" (xx). Radzinowicz's exultation of Samson as a hero of self-generation is most clearly seen in her reading of the final act of destruction: here the horror is but "a human imaging of God's might . . . an exemplary act which teaches how God gives freedom" (346).

However, in *Interpreting 'Samson Agonistes'* (1986), Joseph A. Wittreich proposed a groundbreaking "unorthodox" counter-reading. Wittreich argues that Samson is a figure who subverts moral and spiritual belief, thus reminding us of Milton's "dark" side, his sympathies with Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Wittreich's subversive view of the play is clearer in his more recent *Shifting Context* (2002), in particular in his analysis here of the image of the phoenix, which is but a "regression . . . from phoenix back again to worm-serpent with wings . . . the noxious worm in the path of Jesus [in *Paradise Regained*] when his temptations commence" (267). More recent critical discussions of Milton include those of Stanley Fish, Barbara K. Lewalski, John T. Shawcross, Derek N.C. Wood and Michael Lieb, all of whom have engaged in what is termed the criticism of interrogation. My study here, though basically in accord with the orthodox reading of Samson as a hero of faith, focuses on this tragic hero's corporeal suffering, a theme that remains largely unexamined by Milton scholars.

Radzinowicz says that "*Samson Agonistes* is a poem of growth and change, depicting a hero who achieves late insight superior to his earlier insights. He breaks through clusters of time-encapsulated beliefs to achieve a new synthesis of understanding" (xx). In my own view, Milton does affirm with this play the profound paradox of suffering, for here the phoenix that is used to symbolize Samson's mortal life also can, in rising from out of the very fire that consumes it, symbolize the self-transformational process of suffering. Samson's suffering enables him to fully confront his own corporeal being as a radically finite, mortal being and in so doing to move out of or beyond this

state, to transcend it.

The interpretation of the play to be offered here, then, is broadly in keeping with the orthodox "Samson as Christian hero" perspective though it also makes use of some less orthodox ideas. It takes the suffering, fragmented body of Samson as becoming reintegrated on another, trans-corporeal level, a reintegration and refining or purification made possible through the enduring of extreme pain. The suffering subject must come to know that it is breaking with its exclusive dependence on the body, which means in Milton's case its dependence on the great gift of physical health and strength. Corporeal mutilation or fragmentation is then a becoming other-than-self that is necessary if the self is to become reintegrated, made whole again. Yet to speak of bodily suffering as a form of breaking-apart or fragmentation implies the presence of a corporeal space, a space of corporeal suffering. Indeed, Milton emphasizes Samson's internal and external "spaces"—which are restricted until the end of the play, when the hero is in the open space of the temple and his interior spatiality is opened-out. The problem of pain, fragmentation or suffering would naturally seem to be primarily one of internal spatiality, although finally becoming-whole or becoming other-than-self also seem to imply identity, equivalence or fusion of interior and exterior bodily space.[5] Here then the transformative fragmentation of the Samsonic body-self, only fully realized at the end of the play, will be explored in the context of Samson's progressive "movement" from his condition as a (self-) imprisoned subject, confined in a limited physical and mental place, to his condition as an autonomous subject within, and ultimately without, the open space of the drama's final scene.

"Prison within Prison": The Space of Corporeal Suffering

According to John Caputo, our whole concept of "suffering" comes from our knowledge of the flesh, of our own bodies. "Flesh is soft and vulnerable. It tears, bleeds, swells, bends, burns, starves, grows old, exhausted, numb, ulcerous . . . . Flesh smells" (158). Flesh is the tangible, mortal agent for the act of suffering. Samson can exemplify Elaine Scarry's view that, regardless of the situation or the particular cause of suffering, "the person in

[5] Another way to look at this paradox is *via* the insight that "fragmentation" (breaking of a whole into parts) can be seen in terms of an exterior space becoming interior space and also the other way around.

great pain experiences his own body as the agent of his agony" (47). Scarry also quotes Karl Marx's observation that "There is only one antidote to mental suffering, and that is physical pain" (33). The body internalizes and integrates its memory of pain into its knowledge of itself; bodily memory is a crucial element in our sense of self-identity. Samson's mental despair is paradoxically *overcome* through the physical pain that permeates his whole body. It is a pain that is all that he can now be conscious of, becomes the (internal/external) *place* of self-knowledge. And therefore it is through suffering that our finite, transient flesh approaches a *kind* of immortality, just as Milton's phoenix rises from the fire.[6] Milton, like the Greek tragedians, shows us with his tragic hero a basic fact of human existence: physical pain is more than pain; it paradoxically leads to self-regeneration.

Milton begins his last work with the very scene of suffering, a scene which depends on a certain limitation of the body/mind's internal and external space. Here the poet's tragic hero, and perhaps his double, is a prisoner of war doing forced labor.

> To live a life half dead, a living death,
> And buried; but O yet more miserable!
> My self, my Sepulcher, a moving Grave,
> Buried, yet not exempt
> By privilege of death and burial
> From worst of other evils, pains and wrongs,
> But made hereby obnoxious more
> To all the miseries of life,
> Life in captivity
> Among inhuman foes.[7] (100-09)

This image of being one's own "moving grave" is very powerful. It includes the idea that one is in some sense—psychologically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, if not quite yet physically—already dead and buried, and, yet, the "sepulcher" in which Samson is entombed is that of *his* own still-living,

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[6] See the epigraph from Nietzsche. Also see the discussion of Milton's phoenix, and the paradox of what one might call immanent or corporeal "immortality," at the end of this paper.

[7] See Milton, John. "Samson Agonistes." *The Complete Poetry of John Milton.* 1971. Ed. John T. Shawcross. Subsequent references to Milton's poetry are from this edition, including "*Paradise Lost*", and the line numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

still-*moving* body: and thus, in the play, Samson is his own "moving grave." The conceptions of both interiority and exteriority are included and somehow combined here. Samson's suffering begins with the loss of his corporeal powers: first there is the fading of his physical strength and then the loss of his eyesight, which throws him into an abyss of eternal darkness, rendering him "exil'd from light" (98). In the opening pages of the tragedy, Samson's soliloquy shows him mourning the loss of his bodily functions, a man who feels life is hopeless and thus has come close to death: "To live a life half dead, a living death" (100). Deprived of his almost superhuman strength and eyesight, his body has become fragmented, disordered, broken, as if indeed he has entered into a state of living death.

For while originally he had identified *himself* in terms of the normal, healthy integration of all his body-parts, now Samson defines "it" as a being torn by pain, that is, as the pain which totally dominates his consciousness. "Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half" (79). This pain may be felt as fragmentation, as a being torn-apart, and the loss of body parts—above all the eyes and hair—is experienced as ambiguously a physical and mental pain, an object of both bodily and mental (or conscious) perception and knowledge. It is tempting to think that in such extreme circumstances Samson could have sought a simple death to relieve the overwhelming pain once and for all. Nontheless, this external fragmented body demands a reason for the loss of those bodily parts (hair, eyes) which had contributed in crucial ways to its interior mental integration. The loss of vision does not just have implications for being or not being able to see others or oneself. Lauren Shohet reminds us that his blindness should also "act as a message from God, more insistently pointing to Samson's incompleteness" (106). His ongoing lament over the vulnerability of his eyes "suggests he still resists understanding how dependent humans are upon God, how human heroes are only a 'part' as tender and as fragmented as the eyeball" (Shohet 106). This points to Samson's skeptical view of the truth of God and his refusal to acknowledge his own vulnerability.[8]

[8] As for the loss of his hair, it may have a similar implication. Ever since he was very young he has associated the "divine gift" of his golden hair with light, with the sun; his sunny locks have endowed him with a divine strength and thus defined for him his identity. His bright hair always marked him as a Nazarite, one who has received the blessings of God, and at the moment of yielding to temptation he loses his bearings, his grasp of "the golden beams of Law and Right"; now he is deprived of "those bright and weighty tresses of his laws." He is bereft of his solar identity due to his betrayal of the solar authority, left in a state of physical and spiritual blindness in the prison of the Philistines.

Of course, Samson has lost more than his hair and his eyesight. His previous "life" is gone along the way. Confronted at the very beginning of the play with the spectacle of the hero's tragic fall from the life of an eminent and powerful man to this "half dead" existence, the reader's feelings of pity and horror are aroused. The gap between "what once I was, and what am now" (22) is painfully clear. Once the chosen deliverer of the Israelis from the yoke of the Philistines, Samson has himself now taken on this yoke, this harness and "labour of a beast" (36-9); reduced to the level of a slave or animal, he is just a moving body filled with pain. Here we also get the more objective viewpoint of the Chorus:

> O change beyond report, thought, or belief!
> See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd,
> With languish't head unpropt,
> As one past hope, abandon'd,
> And by himself giv'n over;
> In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds
> O're worn and soild;
> Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be hee,
> That Heroic, that Renown'd,
> Irresistible *Samson*? whom unarm'd
> No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand;
> Who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid,
> Ran on embattell'd Armies clad in Iron,
> And weaponless himself,
> Made Arms ridiculous
> [. . .] Which shall I first bewail,
> Thy Bondage or lost Sight,
> *Prison within Prison*
> Inseparably dark?
> Thou art become (O worst imprisonment!)
> The Dungeon of thy self. (117-31, 151-56; italics added)

The reaction of the Chorus to the radical change in Samson's condition—"Oh change beyond report [. . .] / [. . .] Can this be hee […]?"—is just like that of the Chorus in Greek tragic dramas as its members collectively witness the downfall of the tragic hero. Samson has become doubly darkened, his own

"Dungeon," through bondage and blindness. If the extreme interiority and immobility of this "Prison within Prison" is the result of both corporeal disfigurement and bodily confinement, the interior self-distancing of Samson's subjectivity is further intensified by the fact that now the Chorus is observing him from a distance, that is, from the perspective of the "onlooker." And here we must keep in mind Milton's ambiguous interplay of "external space"/"internal space," the paradox resulting from the conflation of inner space/outer space.

This futureless state of "living death" could also be seen, at least metaphorically, as that of a living hell. At one point Milton explicitly associates Samson, living ever in darkness due to his blindness, with the Prince of Hell himself in a passage which, echoing one in *Paradise Lost*, presents us with an ambiguity of confined/extended space. In the great epic poem Satan is thrown down into a place where

> The dismal Situation waste and wild,
> A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
> As one great Furnace flam'd; yet from those flames
> No light, but rather darkness visible
> Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,
> Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
> And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
> That comes to all; but torture without end. (*Paradise Lost* 1 50-51, 60-67)

The newly-blind Samson is subjected to physical confinement in a dungeon as well as within a body that has been tortured and disfigured and made to labor continuously, in a place where "peace/ And rest can never dwell, […]/ […] but torture without end. He seems most saddened by his blindness: "O loss of sight, of thee I most complain! [. . .] O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,/ Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse/ Without all hope of day!" (67, 80-82). Perhaps our sense of self or subjectivity is closely tied to our sense of sight, in which case even the blinded Samson's sense-of-self has been diminished or perhaps rather, again, more radically "internalized." He can no longer gaze[9] at

[9] The gaze is one of the four essential causes of desire and thus of our human dependency on the outside world. According to Dylan Evans, "[i]t is only in 1964, with the development of the concept of the *objet petit a* as the cause of desire, that Lacan develops his own theory of the gaze, a theory which

those Others who, as he well knows, are gazing at him; his can now only be, in every possible sense, "the inward gaze." Yet at the same time Samson, forced to walk continuously in circles around the floor of his prison-pit, may also feel that he is being exposed to the gaze of his spectators, that he is being possessed by their desire to see him, even that in some sense the most inward and secret parts of himself are being exposed.

To reflect further on what this might mean for Samson, in terms of the dimensions of interiority and exteriority, it may help to briefly look at Scarry's discussion of the suffering experienced by "normal" prisoners who, perhaps also victims of torture, are exposed to the gaze of their guards as well as that of other prisoners. Such prisoners, Scarry says, experience

> an almost obscene conflation of private and public [as] part of the ongoing external action and activity of torture. For the prisoner is forced to attend to the most intimate and interior facts of his body (pain, hunger, nausea, sexuality, excretion) at a time when there is no benign privacy, for he is under continual surveillance, and there is no benign public, for there is no human contact, but instead only an ugly inverting of the two. (53-54)[10]

The last phrase here suggests that what should normally have been the prisoner's private life or private self—in the first place his external body but also his innermost selfhood, his thoughts and feelings—becomes now something "public," while what should have been a normal "social life" becomes "private" in the sense that "there is no human contact." In a sense the prison's own dimensions become that of his self; he becomes the prison. In the case of the blind Samson, who can only *imagine* the gaze of Others—perhaps making it more terrible than it actually is—while having a more intense sense of his own dark interiority, perhaps the dynamics and indeed the "inversion" briefly sketched by Scarry may be even more powerfully at work.

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is quite distinct from Sartre's. . . . the gaze becomes the object of the act of looking, or, to be more precise, the object of the scopic drive. The gaze is therefore, in Lacan's account, no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the Other" (72).

[10] Scarry has listed eight aspects of physical pain and the one quoted above is the fourth (52-59).

Thus if a prisoner normally would be fragmented, split between the inward state of seeing himself and the outward state of seeing and being-seen by the others, where as Scarry suggests it is not just his body but his inner self that is "seen" by them, the blind Samson is split or fragmented between seeing himself and being-seen by others that he cannot see (except in his mind's eye). For him there is no physical "vision" on either side, in either direction. In a way we could say that for Samson this split between inner/outer becomes closer to being an inner/inner split, an internal fragmentation, one that is purely his own. This sense of fragmentation more truly defines him in his own interior selfhood, which now lies beyond what others can see or even imagine. Thus the split really becomes that between one's physical pain and one's sense of one's own inner selfhood which, by in effect "owning' this pain, transcends it, and so it is through his own bodily suffering that Samson transcends himself. Perhaps then the absence of physical light and vision may make the move toward self-overcoming more possible.

"To fence my ear": Three Visitors, Three Corporeal Selves

Samson's basic movement or progression through the play, then, is from a self- alienated (self-fragmented) imprisonment to his final and climactic act in the open space of the temple—an act not so much of self-assertion as self-reintegration through a more complete self-othering. For that final act is clearly a completely free and autonomous act, a self-willed act, even if involves self-destruction as a way of becoming-more-than-self. But between these two essentially spatial-corporeal situations we see Samson's body or body-space being fragmented in another way, one which suggests he still does not know "who he is." If the early and late "moments" are largely non-social, alienated, this middle moment of the play is an interpersonal one which is finally just as self-alienating as the others.

Before attaining his autonomy, then, Samson has to overcome his sense of being split among three spatial-corporeal "selves" as these are represented symbolically by three visitors: Manoa the father, Dalila the wife, and Haraphra the adversary.[11] These three characters may be seen as embodying

[11] Critics like Raymond Waddington hold the traditional view that Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha are Samson's three (self-)parodic versions of himself; for Karen L. Edwards these three figures offer "different temptations" (232) to Samson. Sherman Hawkins, John Hill, and more recently Emily Wilson see, if in different ways, the three visitors as Samson's own passions. For Wilson, for example,

three dimensions of Samson's existence— past self-knowledge, (the early Manoa), sexuality (Dalila) and past glory (Haraphra)—but they also can easily be correlated with three parts or levels of the hero's body: the upper body (the father), the lower body (the wife), and the middle body (the gigantic challenger). Manoa represents Samson's head and thus the power or possibilities of his early thought, and yet this earthly father is "frequently seen as having a limited understanding, being spiritually blind, being a false redeemer, attempting to thwart God"; thus Manoa becomes not exactly a devil but nevertheless "a 'temptation' Samson must resist and reject" (Wood 53). The father misguides his son by reinforcing Samson's already-limited understanding of God; he offers no cure for his son's suffering. Already physically confined in the prison-house, Samson is also bound and blinded by his father, the very one who (along with his mother) gave the son his earthly body. Manoa's opening queries concerning God's justice possess an agonizing tone, and seem to offer a rather premature justification of God's treatment of his son:

> Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt
> Our earnest prayers, then giv'n with solemn hand
> As graces, draw a scorpion's tail behind?
> For this did th'angel twice descend?
> [. . .] glorious for a while,
> The miracle of men; then in an hour
> Ensnared, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
> Thy foes' derision, captive, poor and blind. (358-61, 364-66)

Significantly, these twisted, tormented words of the father seem to match Samson's own lament at the end of the conversation: "I was his nursling once and choice delight,/ His destined from the womb,/ Promised by heavenly message twice descending,/ [. . .] But now hath cast me off as never known" (633-35, 641). Both father and son emphasize the loss of their more heroic and even "divine" past, yet for Samson (unlike his father) this has meant a new self-knowledge gained through suffering. And yet, in echoing

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"Samson's passion has been cured by his three encounters; through them, he has been made ready to do God's work" (157). My main point of departure, of course, has to do with our understanding of the psychology and metaphysics of "doing God's work," that is, with what it means to "do this work" (where the definition of "work" in physics as "force times distance" seems not entirely amiss here.)

Manoa's speculations on the reasons for their being deserted by God, Samson also seems to remain skeptical toward the religion, as if still bound by his past self-image as a heroic (and pagan) warrior. However, while his father's proposal that the son be ransomed seems to offer Samson the chance of an easy liberation, it is rejected by him as he now more clearly recognizes and accepts his sufferings as an essential part of his life—for they have liberated him, helped him to see that his all-too-mortal life may be leading toward some form of immortality. Therefore, though Manoa's visit may seem to end with a deeper sense of despair on Samson's part and with his desire for a "speedy death" (650), Milton also seems to imply that now his suffering hero begins to see more clearly, more closely and intimately the actual experience of death. Thus we begin to feel the hidden force that the hero will summon in his in his final act of destruction. Yet this act will also mean Samson's choice of a Heavenly Father rather than an earthly one as the agent of his purification, just as his final self-sacrifice will imply a higher sort of love, obedience to a higher law.

Given her well-known association with lust, desire and profanity, Dalila symbolizes the "lower body" of Samson. As Mary Radzinowicz succinctly puts it, "she wishes to master him sexually" (38). And yet "Dalila is a lost soul, as unregenerate as Satan. She leaves the scene damned, like another Judas, to be destroyed, no doubt, at the temple where the Christ-like Samson is sacrificed" (Wood 99).[12] She is not only a Philistine who profanes the God of the Hebrew Samson, but also arouses Samson's sexual desires, luring him to betray his God by revealing the divine secret to her, a revelation which leads to all the disasters that follow. Dalila seems to have been created to make Samson sin against his God; thus hers is a serpent-like role ("Entangl'd with a pois'nous bosom snake") (*SA* 763), one that also fits the patriarchal stereotype of women in Renaissance England. Phyllis Rackin notes that the women of this period were considered "more lustful than men (46) . . . appetitive creatures, easily enslaved by bodily lusts and irrational passions. Incapable of rational self-government, they were associated with the lower parts of the

[12] While beginning with the traditional, very negative view of Delila, Derek Wood surprisingly defends her, seeing her as a mirror-image of Samson: he will not forgive her as she begs "but he himself continues to expect the final pardon of God" (103). Unlike most scholarly readers (e.g., Mary Radzinowicz), Wood tends to adopt the standpoint of Dalila. He asks, "Why do these readers not see a wife's attempt at forgiveness and reconciliation as a claim on love and sacramental union, not merely sex?" (104).

body" (50).

Dalila seduces Samson and thus causes him to descend into the Hell of his (and her) lower body, into the interior of that dark womb that nurtures only lies, betrayal, and degeneration. She might symbolize a sort of evil or contagious matrix or womb that is unhealthy, that gives birth to Samson's torments, deformity, and catastrophe. For Samson must of course overcome sensuality if he is to regain the grace of God or, in terms closer to those of the interpretation being suggested here, fully overcome or go beyond himself in order to become integrated with(in) a larger whole.[13] The prisoner Samson is able to get beyond his wife's "transgression," to use his term, by ignoring it, by turning a deaf ear as well as a blind eye to it:

> Thy fair enchanted cup and warbling charms
> No more on me have power, their force is null'd,
> So much of adder's wisdom I have learnt
> To fence my ear against thy sorceries. (934-37)

Thus Samson is able to reject Dalila's request to touch his hand, "lest fierce remembrance wake/ My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint" (952-53). Her touch would have been to him like the touch of Hell. Samson then says: "At distance I forgive thee; go with that" (954), which words seem to signify a clean break not just with her but and also with the bodily lusts of his past self.

Harapha, the final visitor, is Samson's "opposite" in the sense of a "double": he represents Samson's old self, the one that depends merely upon physical force. Easily correlated with Samson's middle-body—torso, arms and upper legs—he embodies a strength that disgraces, humiliates, and misuses itself in every way, just like Samson before his fall. Harapha provokes his former enemy by boasting of his own strength, now (it would seem) clearly superior to that of the once-powerful Samson. Though Samson had once "wrought such wonders with an Asses jaw" (1095), he now is forced to "wish other arms" or "leave his carcass where the ass lay thrown" (1096-97). Harapha's denigration of Samson's body in its current state is a way of negating the latter's identity as a warrior, the integral force of his body,

[13] However, John P. Rumrich holds a different view: "What he rejects is not a sexual temptation, at least not in the usual sense, but her desire to dominate him through caretaking" (90). This results, in Rumrich's opinion, from Milton's literary tendency to prefer the maternal side of women to their (merely) sexual side, an inclination also observable in *Comus* (88-93).

though to the degree that Samson still possesses the latter he will now use it to a less egocentric, less merely-human end. Confronted with Harapha's language of contempt and humiliation (which replaces the previous physical combat), Samson comes to realize the meaning of the secret gift that gives one not merely physical power but also tests one's faith in God. On the other hand, at this stage of his development Samson's concept of divine strength is, Milton implies, paradoxically and perhaps ironically also a metaphor for the hollow pride of his Philistine rival. Harapha might then be seen as the prideful body of Samson turned inside out, and his role as that of enabling the fallen hero to more fully acknowledge, experience, "re-enter" his own body, coming face to face with his own radical vulnerability, his porosity or transparency, in some sense his nothingness.

These three parts or "fragments" of Samson's corporeal self, his intellectual skepticism, profane sexuality and prideful muscular body, can only be integrated through a giant leap in and of bodily form, a greater *movement* of the body that makes him exclaim: "I am my own body." This movement will of course be that of his final self- and other-destructive act, through which he will reconstruct himself (his self) on another spatio-temporal plane, or within another dimension be somehow (re)integrated into a larger whole, a larger Otherness. For this is how the blind and tortured, self-imprisoned and self-fragmented captive will "quit himself like Samson" and so end "A life heroic" (1709-11).

"The other side was open": Open Space and Self-Othering

In critical interpretations of this play, there is much discussion of the "hero's" death. Like Samson's father Manoa, who himself asks the crucial question, "How dy'd he?" (1579), readers tend to show a preoccupation with this issue, which could perhaps encapsulate most interpretations of the play. For Milton's critics, the tragedy can represent the art of dying, as Dennis Kezar points out,[14] or a rite of regeneration, but it can never be a simple enactment of death itself.[15] In his act of violence that ends the lives of his

[14] Dennis Kezar claims that *Samson Agonistes* "records a preoccupation with the interpretation of its hero's death," and argues that "Milton achieved this interpretive focus by deliberately designing the play to be recognizable as an art of dying" (296).

[15] Regarding the cause of Samson's death, which is considered by some critics as a form of "passive suicide" committed out of deep despair and agony, Emily Wilson argues that *Samson Agonistes* is a

enemies, captors and torturers along with his own life Samson chooses both faith and death, and in this way reshapes the rhythm of the history of his people and of his life. It is only when Samson enters the open public space in the final temple scene, with a clear goal in mind (the fulfillment of his project, of what now seems his whole purpose in life), that he at last feels inwardly free and open.

Samson's inexplicable decision to agree to present himself during the ritual for Dagon's feast day, after three times saying "I will not come," has drawn much attention from Milton's readers. We know that his feelings were suddenly stirred: "I begin to feel/ Some *rouzing motions* in me which dispose/ To something extraordinary my thoughts./ I with this messenger will go along" (1381-83, italics added). This emotional reaction ("rouzing motions") suggests forces or "motions" within his body that "move" him, his whole body, to act. Thus the flowing of forces moving both outside and within the body (i.e., moving through, *transversing* it) could also be seen as a more intense form or an epitomizing of his own bodily movement through space (from prison to temple) and also of his inner/outer process of self-overcoming or transcendence.

With his public appearance at the site of the festival for Dagon, Samson takes advantage of the spaciousness of the temple to stage his planned catastrophe: he pushes against the pillars until the whole temple crumbles, everyone dies and he, perhaps, gains eternal life for his soul or, as I am suggesting, becomes a more fully-integrated self, as well as attaining a name to be remembered in the history of his people.

> 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,
> This day will be remarkable in my life
> By some great act, or of my days the last. (1385-89)

As a body at last able to move under its own will, Samson appears to have achieved his aim of becoming an autonomous subject and determines to make this day "remarkable" in his life. He is again under the gaze of the

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Christian tragic drama, "concerned with the sense of overliving that may afflict all postlapsarian human beings, even those who have a glimpse of God's plan for humanity" (20).

"public" but not in the way he was as a slave-like prisoner (and we remember that Scarry says the prisoner has no "benign public"); he now occupies as it were the "center stage" of a public place, and he will enter the public discourse and history of his people through his act of self-sacrifice, an act which at first was to have been merely a demonstration of his physical prowess or perhaps a circus stunt. "Samson should be brought forth to shew the people/ Proof of his mighty strength in feats and games" (1601-02). That is, his body is now transformed from a private to a public one, a body belonging to his people and his history as it directly faces his and their enemy. Whereas Samson had expressed his pain and sense of suffering in a lament-like soliloquy at the beginning of the play, he now transcends his pain through a "body language" so violent that it will bring down the whole temple on himself and all the others.

In the original Bible story before Milton made a play based on it, Samson's final act is set, interestingly enough, in a theatre.

> The building was a *spacious* Theatre,
> Half round on two main Pillars vaulted high,
> [. . .] The other side was *op'n*, where the throng
> On banks and scaffolds under Skie might stand. (1605-06, 1609-10; italics added)

The place is "spacious" and "open." Though he is still blind, Samson's body is no longer restricted against its will to a circular path in a pit-like prison; he now can enact his (its) own will, play out what he sees as his proper, divinely or at least historically destined role in a free and open space, the space of a public performance where the gaze of the audience is something to be expected and desired. Rather than seeing Samson's death as a passive mode of "overliving" (Wilson 20), I see the hero's final act as an active, life-force-driven self-sacrifice which allows him to reintegrate with a larger whole or other-than-self through the force of self-Othering —even if this act might seem mainly violent and destructive to the spectators in the temple, the theater audience and (generally speaking) to the critics. In his physical act of pushing against the mighty pillars he seems to be moving outward, moving "outside himself" into a state of total exteriority which yet will be internalized, drawn inward, just as the flight of the phoenix out of the fire holds a sense of both inward and outward transcendence. He knows that his corporeal self will

be reintegrated, reconstructed after death in such a way that it will no longer be merely corporeal.

After his long period of imprisonment, torture and corporeal suffering, Samson can now finally re-affirm his heroic subjectivity in his final speech. When he is led into the temple and puts "both his arms on those two massive Pillars" (1633), he utters his last words:

> Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impose'd
> I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying,
> Not without wonder or delight beheld.
> Now of my own accord such other tryal
> I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater;
> As with amaze shall strike all who behold.
> [. . .] As with the force of winds and waters pent
> When Mountains tremble, those two massie Pillars
> With horrible convulsion to and fro,
> He tugg'd, he shook, till down they came and drew
> The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder
> Upon the heads of all who sate beneath. (1640-45, 1647-52)

Samson's making his last speech to the public is indeed an act of testimony that serves to justify his choice of bodily violence. Here he ironically contrasts his previous slave-like obedience, as is shown by a prisoner at his captor's disposal, with the total freedom of the deed he is about to perform, for this act, which will end the earthly life of all, does represent (embody) a state of total freedom of the will, of self-determination. "The force of winds and waters pent/ When Mountains tremble, those two massive Pillars/ With horrible convulsion to and fro [. . .]": these lines suggest the tremendous, terrible and awesome force of nature but also, ironically perhaps, that of the Biblical Jehovah, in whom the Philistines, his enemies, presumably did not believe.[16]

John P. Rumrich claims that the "[i]ntimations of the passion that occur in *Paradise Regained* indicate that Milton found Anglo-Saxon traditions of the joyously brave and triumphant Son more to his taste than late medieval

[16] Or perhaps we should think of this divine power, as opposed to any earthly power, as being innocent. John Donne says in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning": "Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,/ Men reckon what it did and meant;/ But trepidation of the spheres,/ Though greater far, is innocent" (l9-12). Again we have the sense that Samson is somehow located in-between.

representations of Christ as the tortured and spat upon man of sorrows" (67)[17]; if so, then Milton perhaps has his Samson combine the two "types," which again suggests the dialectical or two-sided nature of the hero's move toward self-transcendence as one that combines the forces of body and mind or spirit. In any event, the final act of violence is a powerful expression of the will which shows that Samson is no one's slave, even if throughout the play he has seemed to be a hostage to his enemies, to his marriage and to his own strength.[18] The bloodiness of the final scene can also suggest, not just a ritual (self-) sacrifice and murder but the act of giving birth to a newborn child or rather newborn hero, one who is neither an Adam nor a Satan but might seem to somehow combine or mediate these two Miltonic figures. Rumrich says: "For Milton, self-assertion allegedly equals rebellion, whereas the simultaneous but opposed drive for obedience threatens dissolution of individual identity" (61); we would assume Milton's self-assertive Samson has achieved some form of re-integration here.

While the images Milton uses to describe his hero's final act—"As with the force of winds and waters pent/ When Mountains tremble, [. . .] / With horrible convulsion [. . .] / with burst of thunder [. . .]"—suggest very powerful natural and perhaps divine forces, the actual suicide-and-mass-murder scene is in fact presented "intellectually" by the poet: the audience never sees it; it is done offstage. Milton is careful not to attach Samson to scenes of staged physical violence, for he wishes to keep the tragic hero's body "pure"—free from such profane images. Also, after his death, Samson's body must be found and properly and respectfully cleaned by those who will "with lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off/ The clotted gore" (1727-28). Milton may want his Samson (especially after death) to be, to remain "pure" because the poet himself "wants to be entirely pure, and to have this purity be an indication of his superior moral discipline" (Nicholas 204).[19] Samson's absent body at the end of the drama is thus both an

[17] John P. Rumrich's observation here is derived from Charles A. Huttar.

[18] Mary Beth Rose argues in her comparison of the three works—Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage*—that the heroic condition is "represented first in the hero's position of being seduced into slavery and second in the relation of the hero's slavery to marriage" (85-99).

[19] Jennifer L. Nichols elaborates: "Milton's desire for *physical purity* does not spring, then, out of a devotional heart that is repentant or a devotional desire to unite with other believers. Rather, it is rooted in a deep belief, explored by other critics, that he is somehow unfallen and worthy of special merit" (204; emphas is added).

allegorical figure of resistance and a sign of lack, loss, and deficiency that disturbs and challenges readers. Milton's concealment of the physical body also suggests the move beyond or outside-itself of this body, even if it still maintains a sense of (absent) physicality; that is, it suggests some sense of this body's self-overcoming, some sense of transcendence.

The present interpretation, then, seeks to slightly alter the traditional Christian view of a soul-body split, and speaks rather of a body that is fragmented in its earthly suffering and reintegrated through the force of a final state of extreme suffering. Such a view would take Samson as having reintegrated his living body as/into a "whole"—that is, as a more-than-living body, a body that now has gone fully beyond itself, where this "beyond" might be taken in both inward and outward senses, to become one with God. The point is that such a reading, while not intending to subvert the traditional Christian (or for that matter also Platonic and Cartesian) body-soul dichotomy, seems in certain ways to fit Milton's language and perspective here, where one would want to emphasize the fundamentally visual and spatial sense of the term "perspective."

Samson's Body as Temple and Text

Indeed, speaking of interiority/exteriority and the shift of perspective, we may look at the *meaning* of Samson in terms not just of metaphor but of paradox and oxymoron. For his is a life "finding victory in death": he "will win by losing, will slay by being slain" (Low 516). Samson is blind when he sees and is enlightened by being blind; his spiritual self-creation or regeneration is achieved only through his performing of a diabolic act of violence, just as the true transcendence of the soul is only possible through the death of a body, and just as sublimity comes only through suffering.[20]

An interpretation which could perhaps extend the one presented above—that is, the reintegration of the body through extreme or limit-case

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[20] We note the important role played in the "logic" here by Milton's rhetorical use of paradox and oxymoron. Anthony Low observes that Milton's fondness for using opposites might be influenced by his contemporary artistic milieu: "Paradox characterizes much of the poetry of the period, strain and conflict are seen in the painting and architecture. . . Milton's use of dialectic . . . may owe something to his interest in Ramistic logic . . . Still another possible influence was the intellectual and artistic milieu, specifically the Mannerist and Baroque aesthetics" (515).

suffering, the self-overcoming of the body itself— would correlate the "body of Samson" with the "body of the text." This may be metaphorized as spatiality, but as inward/outward linguistic or textual space rather than human corporeal space. Now the process by which self-fragmentation regenerates out of itself a new wholeness becomes a process through which fragmented *meaning* becomes whole and so achieves a wholeness of sense or meaning. To say that Samson achieves a new "identity" at/after the moment of death also means, especially when we think of Milton's seventeenth- century poetic context, that he achieves a new "meaning." In fact Samson's body has been from the beginning of the play a site for meaning-making, even perhaps the text whereon is inscribed the meaning of its deeply-felt pain. The suffering through which the bodily self becomes reintegrated, and in such a way that it moves beyond itself, can also be understood as being written on the body and inscribed in the bodily memory.

It seems, of course, that we would need to distinguish the more purely spatial- corporeal interpretation presented here from the one that takes Samson's physical body as a body that has been tortured, castrated, fragmented like that of Christ on the cross, and then transformed into a *holy* textual body—perhaps ultimately that of the saintly relic of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.[21] Although one *could* say that in the final offstage scene Samson uses his body like a page of Scripture, metaphorically rewriting his sacred script, his "letter" to the profane Philistines in his own blood, the value of his mutilated body is more dependent on, or defined by, suffering than ultimate violence.[22] The latter is but a metonym for the phoenix's fire of immolation, which brings about its rebirth from its own ashes as a bodily transformation, a process through which a new identity and new meaning are given to its body:

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[21] This of course has Medieval echoes. Bynum says: "In the twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts the resurrected body is a jewel lifted from the mire, a rebuilt temple, a vessel recast or reassembled after wanton destruction" (8). With regard to the meaning of corporeality, Lauren Shohet argues, on the other hand, that "*Samson* uses circumcision as a figure for the way history is written on the body—the way the self is marked by history" (96).

[22] In his reading of *Samson Agonistes*, Michael Lieb comments that "[t]he drama is a work of violence to its very core. It extols violence. Indeed, it exults in violence" (237). Also, Lieb asserts, "With all its violence and devastation, the act purifies Samson: it is a pious act . . . an act through which Samson demonstrates his piety to his 'living Dread,' his God" (261). Violence, as I argue here, though exercised by Samson, is not the consequence of the knowledge learned from his sufferings, but the corporeal expression of his subjectivity that reverses his passive status as sufferer into an active and positive suffering or self-fragmentation.

But he though blind of sight,
Despis'd and thought extinguish't quite,
With inward eyes illuminated
His fierie virtue rouz'd
From under ashes into sudden flame,
[. . .] Like that self-begott'n bird
In th' *Arabian* woods embost,
That no second knows nor third,
And lay e're while a Holocaust,
From out her ashie womb now teem'd
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deem'd,
And though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular bird ages of lives. (1687-91, 1699-1707)

This "secular bird" tends to suggest the mythic, heroic and indeed pre-Christian aspect of the symbolic bird that rises from out of its own fire and/or (as Milton suggests here) from out of its own ashes, its own "ashie womb." The last lines above, "And though her body die, her fame survives [for] ages of lives," also suggest an immanent (temporal, historical) reading of Samson rather than a purely transcendent one. While Wittreich (267) may provide an even more immanent and "regressive" reading of the Phoenix here, Rumrich (67) claims, we remember, that Milton prefers the Anglo-Saxon, heroic, active, warrior-like and joyous view of Christ to the more dismal Medieval view of Christ as suffering martyr, a point which again suggests a reading of the Phoenix here in terms of immanent historical time, and perhaps one which takes Samson's martyr-like self-sacrifice, one that also succeeds in killing many enemies, as the act of a heroic pre-Christian warrior. The latter view more easily fits, after all, the idea that Samson's self-transcendence is in some way purely corporeal.

Of course, Milton wants to maintain the corporeal/spiritual or immanent/ transcendent ambiguity here, the paradox, with his "self- begott'n bird" that "[r]evives, reflourishes [from] "out her ashie womb [. . .]. And though her body die, her fame survives [. . .]." We will be left with a paradox in any case, so that the question then becomes: just how much emphasis one is to give the immanent-corporeal-heroic side, and how much to the

transcendent-spiritual-divine side.[23] In the interpretation pursued here the focus has been on the immanent-corporeal which nonetheless has, within itself, the potential to move beyond itself.

[23] As for this paradox, we note that the image of Samson's regeneration could also be associated with the definition of "regeneration" given in Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*: "Regeneration means that the old man is destroyed and that *the inner man is regenerated through the word and the spirit* so that his whole mind is restored to the image of God, as if he were a new creature. Moreover, the whole man, both soul and body, is sanctified to God's service and to good works" (*Complete Prose Works of John Milton* 461; emphas is added).

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