

A Poem to the Unknown God: *Samson Agonistes* and Negative Theology

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God is unknowable either in this world or in the world to come, for in this respect every creature is darkness. [. . .] God is known to God alone.

Nicholas of Cusa

Samson Agonistes is a dark, painful, and difficult work. Among its highlights are a character who kills with astonishing efficiency, and others who defend that killing as the will of God while celebrating the terrifying deaths of the enemies. In a day and age in which God is once again invoked to justify war and its accompanying horrific episodes of brutality, vengeance, and devastation, can a work which includes the killing of those described as “Infidel[s]” (221)¹ be read with anything like sympathy? How can we understand Milton’s portrayal of Samson’s violence and justifications for violence?

Each of Milton’s works can and should be read in relation to the entire body of his work; however, in the case of *Samson Agonistes*, contextual reading becomes even more important. Considered in terms of the date of first publication and the order of printing, *Samson* is the last of the great works. As such, *Samson Agonistes*, to be properly understood, needs to be considered in the light of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. The three works form a literary triptych, a three-paneled painting of God, or more properly *ideas of God*, in which the two shorter works continually reference and comment on each other as well as on the great epic. As I have recently argued, *Paradise Lost* presents its image of God as an object of criticism, while *Paradise Regained* presents the Son as both a new positive image, and as a negation and rejection of the Father’s image (Bryson, *passim*). *Samson Agonistes* also functions as a negation, though it does not present any image of deity whatsoever. That refusal (not failure) to present an image of God in *Samson Agonistes* is the primary source of the work’s power, and the center of its critique of those whose religious certitude enables them to engage in and/or excuse violence of the most brutal and horrific nature. Milton creates a portrait of what results from acting with the appearance of certainty, but without its actual presence or substance. In other words, Milton’s Samson does not present an occasion for celebration, but an occasion for doubt, reflection, and the realization that we may not truly know what we think we know, especially if what we think we know is the mind and will of an absent, unnamable, and unknowable God. According to Joseph Wittreich, “the Samson story functions as a warning prophecy, an oracular threat, that would avert the disaster it announces and contravene the situation it seems to court” (*Interpreting* xii). Milton, after crafting the Son’s rejection of politics and violence in *Paradise Regained*, is not presenting us with a Samson whose primary talent is killing people

in order to recommend him; rather, as Wittreich goes on to argue, “Milton casts the Samson story as a tragedy, exemplifying through its protagonist what not to do” (16).

Milton’s great works are engaged in an extended poetic and theological meditation on the differences between God and ideas of God. *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* form a chain of affirmations and negations, a series of representations of God that are successively dismantled. In essence, Milton’s great poetic works are vividly imagined presentations of one of the central problems in Western theology—the tension between the God with qualities and the God without qualities, the “Gods” of cataphatic and apophatic, positive and negative theologies. This tension, most notably presented in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, can be described as a continuous process of affirmation and negation, a “yes, but no” approach to trying to understand that which, ultimately, is beyond human understanding. The “yes, but no” pattern posits and then negates qualities (Goodness, Being, Righteousness, etc.) that might be used to understand the divine. It is for this reason, I believe, that *Samson Agonistes* is printed with *Paradise Regained*, and printed in the second and final position. *Samson Agonistes* is the negation of the affirmations made in *Paradise Regained*. The short epic is the “yes,” while the play is the “but no” of Milton’s poetic pairing.²

The essential pattern of affirmation and negation is established by Pseudo-Dionysius in his works the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology*.³ Dionysius starts with “the most important name, ‘Good’” (DN 68), and makes a case for an understanding of the divine that emerges from what he calls “the processions of God” (DN 68). For Dionysius, these “processions” (Good, Being, Wisdom, Truth, etc.) must be understood in causal terms, that is, in terms of God as the Cause of Goodness, Being, Wisdom, and Truth as they manifest in creatures and the created world. What Dionysius outlines is an inductive approach to the divine, reasoning from the manifestation to the cause thereof, from the observable instance to the unobserved (and unobservable) principle or cause.⁴ Much like Milton’s “ways of God to men,” Dionysius’s “processions of God,”⁵ are the observable effects of the divine as translated into human terms—the conceivable and categorizable “aspects” and “actions” by which human beings are able to represent God to themselves in the world.

The words we use to speak about God only point to that which we cannot truly speak, capture, sum up, or define in human terms. For Dionysius, the “words we use about God [. . .] must not be given the human sense” (DN 106). In fact, we must withdraw the words we use about God almost as soon as they are uttered. We can do no more—no matter what name, quality, or combination of names and qualities we use—than point to our own inability to truly describe and understand the divine:

[W]e use the names Trinity and Unity for that which is in fact beyond every name, calling it the transcendent being above every being. But no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being. (DN 129)

Thus, we require negation, or apophatic theology, not merely as a correction to, but in a fuller sense as a complement to the affirmations of more traditional cataphatic

or positive theology. Negation also serves as a necessary safeguard against idolatry, against making idols of our own cherished images and ideas.⁶

Negation is necessary because it reminds us that our images and our concepts are not identical to that to which they merely point. In Dionysius's words, "the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming" (*MT* 139); thus it is imperative to remember that the divine is "beyond intellect" and that as we approach it "we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing" (*MT* 139). From this negative or apophatic perspective, what we say about "God" says little or nothing about the divine itself, but it speaks volumes about us, and the ways in which we understand and categorize our experiences of the world. The divine as it actually "is," is "beyond every assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it" (*MT* 141).

Dionysian ideas were available to Milton and to his contemporaries (an English translation of the *Mystical Theology* was published in 1653),⁷ though due in part to the controversy surrounding the authorship and dating of the texts, they were viewed with suspicion by such reformers as Luther (post-1516) and Calvin.⁸ Though Luther, in his early work *Dictata super Psalterium (Lessons on the Psalms)*—generally dated between 1513 and 1515), sounds remarkably at one with Pseudo-Dionysius,⁹ in his later work, he seems to reject Dionysian ideas.¹⁰ However, the basic insight of Pseudo-Dionysius—that images and concepts of God, the realm of "thinking and speaking," must finally be regarded as lesser than that which lies within "the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (*DN* 137)—is one that Luther shares.¹¹ In *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther describes a second and much more radical sense of hiddenness as a distinction between God preached (the word of God, as revealed in scripture and in the crucified Jesus) and God hidden (the inscrutable will of the unknowable God). Luther argues that Erasmus revealed his ignorance "by not making any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the word of God and God himself." Though Luther goes on to argue that humans must "pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone" (Rupp and Watson 201), the distinction between God and "God-for-us" is as clear in Luther as it is in Pseudo-Dionysius.

The Milton who declares in *De Doctrina Christiana* that "God, as he really is, is far beyond man's imagination, let alone his understanding" (*CPW* 6: 133),¹² would have had no trouble agreeing with the basic Dionysian and Lutheran idea of God as hidden and unknowable. In fact, as Michael Lieb has recently argued, "For Milton, the whole project of attempting to know God is already called into question by the fact of God's hiddenness" (*Theological* 77).¹³ But Milton moves past Luther's first sense of God's hiddenness, and comes directly to the more radical—and Dionysian—sense, as is evidenced by his refusal ever fully to portray in his poetry the "humiliated and crucified Jesus" that Luther finds indispensable. Rather than present such an image of Jesus, what Milton offers are iconoclastic poems that regard the divine, as it actually is, as "beyond every assertion and denial." In his three great poetic works, Milton tries to refocus his readers beyond the visible, constrainable, and definable in order to sweep away old concretized images of the divine, idols—even that of a "humiliated and crucified Jesus"—which have become impediments to understanding that all *anyone* (poet or preacher, ruler or ruled) can do is make "assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it." And, it is

in this context that we can—and I believe should—understand the violence and the justifications offered for violence in *Samson Agonistes*.

Affirmation and Negation: The “Gods” of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*

Here we must backtrack briefly in order to put *Samson Agonistes* into context. In pursuing his stated goal to “assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men,” Milton posits two conceptual models of divinity—the Father and the Son. Milton’s work, of course, explores various understandings of and perspectives on those two models. *Paradise Lost* alone contains several passages where different—even contradictory—ideas of the divine are expressed. For example, the invocation to light in Book 3 contains several possible ways of imagining, understanding, and describing the divine; other useful examples include the devils’ perspectives from Books 1 and 2 on their now-sworn enemy, Raphael’s observation about the Father’s mixing “destruction with creation” in his conversation with Adam, and Adam and Eve’s darkly foreboding prayer that they receive only good from God. Each of these constructions of the deity says more about the one constructing it than it does about the deity itself, and each of these constructions is contradicted or negated almost as soon as it is made. Why? Negation, the project I see Milton undertaking in his great poems, requires—as a complement, as a co-laborer, if you will—proliferation.¹⁴

Milton pushes this dynamic nearly to the breaking point, proliferating divine images and characteristics in order to erase or contradict them, asserting, then negating, multiple images of “Eternal Providence,” the phrase that serves Milton as a way of speaking about a God beyond “God,” a divinity beyond all images and concepts that can only be pointed towards, never captured or summed up, in such terms. The Father is drawn as a king, a deliverer of (often self-justifying) speeches, a passible or emotionally moveable character who expresses anger (in Book 3) and derision (in Book 5),¹⁵ and who shows a remarkable concern with power, glory, and obedience (paid to him) within a hierarchical order. But just as for Pseudo-Dionysius, so also for Milton, “God, as he really is, is far beyond man’s imagination, let alone his understanding” (*CPW* 6: 133); by definition, the character of the Father in *Paradise Lost* is neither beyond “man’s imagination” (having, in fact, been imagined by a man—Milton), nor “his understanding” (having been created by a human author, and analyzed by countless human readers and writers since). The Father is *an image, a symbol*, and exists well within the limits of a limited, and positive (in the sense of *positing*) theology.

From the externality of the Father in *Paradise Lost*, Milton takes us to the opposite extreme of the internality of the Son in *Paradise Regained*. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton presents the Son as distancing himself from nearly everything that had defined the “divinity” of the Father: kingship, military power, and the receiving of endless rounds of praise and obedience delivered during days “spent / In song and dance about the sacred hill” ([*PL*] 5.618-19). Where the Father demands public appreciation, the Son seeks solitude and private contemplation. Where the Father’s

idea of reign is reflected nowhere so well as in his ultimatum in *Paradise Lost* 5.600-15 (“Hear all ye Angels, Progeny of Light, / Thrones, Dominations, Princedom, Virtues, Powers, / Hear my Decree, which unrevok’t shall stand . . .”), the Son’s idea of reign could not be more different. The kingdom is to be found within; the kingdom is of the inner man. For the Son, nations are guided, not by military force or by monarchical authority, but by “saving Doctrine,” by the power of the “inward oracle” ([PR] 1.463) to guide each individual to truth. Such guidance is an affair of the inner man, having little or nothing to do with the shows and trappings of a secular and clerical government that “o’er the body only reigns / And oft by force” (2.478-79). Finally, where the Father emphasizes externality, the Son emphasizes internality. It is to highlight this negation of the external that the Son returns, not to his Father’s house and a heavenly, and therefore public and universal throne, but to “his mother’s house private” (4.639) at the end of *Paradise Regained*. But at this point, rather than being merely a negation of the external, the Son is more powerfully an affirmation of the internal—a new model, a new image of the divine.

Samson Agonistes and the Dangers of Internality

Every affirmation is limited, pointing to something that cannot be contained, or fully defined and understood, in the human language and ideas used to make the affirmation. The more ingenious the affirmation, in fact, the more radical will be the breakdown when the limits of affirmation are reached. In Dionysius’s terms, as “we take flight upward,” and go higher and higher in attempts to describe the indescribable affirmatively, “we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing” (*MT* 139). Considered in this light, *Samson Agonistes* is a marvelous illustration of the limits and the dangers of the affirmations made in *Paradise Regained*. Though the Son as negation moves beyond the image of the Father, the Son as affirmation is another image—only this time, the image is not “God as King” but “God as Everyman” (or God *in* Everyman). Resting here, without moving beyond this new affirmation, without continuing to the “but no” in relation to this new “yes,” is perhaps even more dangerous than simply remaining with the earlier “yes” that posited kingship and military power to the divine. If any action can be explained as the result of divine guidance from the “inward oracle” ([PR] 1.403), and the “spirit of truth” (1.402) that dwells within, then what is to prevent this reasoning from being used to justify violence, up to, and including, killing? This is the situation that the reader is presented with in *Samson Agonistes*. Samson claims divine warrant for otherwise unspeakable actions.

Samson claims to act, as the Son claims to act, from an internal ground. What the Son refers to in *Paradise Regained* as listening to an “inward oracle” (1.463), Samson describes as responding to an “intimate impulse.” In explaining (excusing?) why he had a taste for Philistine women, Samson argues that his actions are, in their origin and motivation, God’s actions: “what I motioned was of God; I knew / From intimate impulse” (222-23). Samson’s father, Manoa, confirms that Samson had made this claim earlier: “thou did’st plead / Divine impulsion prompting how thou

might'st / Find some occasion to infest our Foes" (421–23). Both expressions use causal language—God is posited as the efficient cause of the actions that play themselves out in the world through Samson (as the material cause). God is claimed to provide the motion (“what I motioned was of God”) and/or the impulse that powers the motion (“Divine impulsion”). What is especially interesting about Samson’s claim, delivered in the context of describing his motives for wedding the Philistine woman from *Timna*, is how radically Milton’s depiction differs from that of the Book of Judges. As Feisal Mohamed has recently written (though in the context of Milton’s construction of Samson’s dialogue with Harapha), when Milton “departs completely from his biblical sources” this “suggests that this portion of the drama is particularly significant to his view of the Samson story” (330). Milton’s Samson delivers the claim of divine impulsion himself; a reader has only Samson’s word that “what I motioned was of God” (222). In Judges, the claim of divine direction for Samson’s choice comes directly from the narrative voice: “But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines” (Judg. 14.4). While the dramatic form of *Samson Agonistes* demands that someone speak this line, Milton’s choice of genre neither excuses Samson, nor validates his claims. It is quite the opposite—in choosing to present Samson’s story in dramatic form, Milton focuses our attention on the subjective and potentially unreliable nature of his Samson’s claim to divine impulsion. What Judges establishes as truth, Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* opens to doubt and skepticism.¹⁶

Like Samson, the Son claims that *his* actions are *God’s* actions, though in a sense far more complicated than Samson’s. For the Son in *Paradise Lost*, true divinity is only to be found within, through obedience to an inner voice, an inward oracle. In *Paradise Regained*, the Son and Satan have diametrically opposed views on what constitutes obedience to an inner voice; in fact, the Son rebukes Satan for making a claim that, at first, sounds very similar to that of Samson’s claim of “intimate impulse.” In reference to the Father, Satan says “what he bids I do” (1.377). The Son’s withering response reveals a vital distinction between his “inward oracle” and Samson’s “intimate impulse”—fear (and its frequent companions, violence and revenge). “Wilt thou impute to obedience what thy fear / Extorts[?]” (1.422–23). Just as he does at 1.223, where he expresses his preference to “make persuasion do the work of fear,” the Son here regards actions taken out of fear (or out of the desire to create fear in others) as contemptible, like the actions of Satan who once “fawn’d, and cring’d, and servilely ador’d / Heav’n’s awful Monarch” ([*PL*] 4.959–60). Actions taken out of fear or a desire for revenge do not have their source in an “inward oracle” no matter how often or how loudly the claim of “intimate impulse” or “Divine impulsion” is made. A truly internal connection to the divine, an “inner light” or a sense of the divine within is a *refuge from fear*, not a cover for or sublimation of fear. The Son’s “obedience” is not rendered out of fear, nor is it an elaborate embroidering of violent and vengeful actions; rather, the Son’s continual rejection of the kinds of earthly power (offered by Satan) that would enable such violent and vengeful actions makes the opposite case. While both the Son and Samson argue that their actions are prompted by the divine within, it is, to paraphrase Matthew, by their fruits that you will know them. What are the results of the claims of the Son and Samson to divine warrant for their actions? And, what can be gleaned from those results about their respective motives?

In asking these questions, I, of course, am foregrounding the very external factors that Stanley Fish's argument seeks to minimize. For Fish, *Samson Agonistes* presents a world in which "Ultimate effects, which would provide a true standard of judgment, are known only to God; we can neither act by calculating them, nor evaluate actions as if we were cognizant of them. From the human vantage point, only intention is capable of being unambiguous" (427). However, when viewed in terms of questions about results (the visible effects Fish argues that Samson is indifferent to), the differences between the claims (and perhaps the motives) of the Son and Samson are clear. Where the Son "unobserved / Home to his mother's house private returned" ([*PR*] 4.638-39), seeking to "make persuasion do the work of fear" (1.223) in attempting to deliver the people, Samson does quite the opposite—moving, not only out into the Israelite world, but into the world of the Philistines, using "fear" (and violence) to do the work of "persuasion." Far from seeking out the obscurity of a "mother's house," Samson seeks an audience for and makes a grand show of everything he does. Even Samson's death is described, after the fact, in a way that drives home the differences between himself and the Son as Miltonic characters. Manoa announces his intention to "fetch him hence and solemnly attend / With silent obsequy and funeral train / Home to his Father's house." There, Manoa will build him a "Monument" where all his "Trophies [will be] hung, and Acts enroll'd / In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song" (1731-37). Young Israelite men of future generations will see this great monument and be inspired to be like Samson: these young men shall "from his memory inflame thir breasts / To matchless valor, and adventures high" (1739-40), while the young women, far from being disturbed by the body count Samson left in his wake, will only mourn "His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice" (1743).

At this level, that of preferring public glory to the trials and satisfactions of private life, the ending of *Samson Agonistes* is reminiscent of nothing so much as it is of the *Iliad*. Samson, though neither "swift-footed" nor a "breaker of horses" is certainly qualified for a modified Homeric epithet like "killer of Philistines"; Samson, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, is presented as a kind of classical battle hero. Like Achilles, Samson is presented with a choice between an inglorious life and a glorious death, and like Achilles, Samson chooses the latter. Had Milton revisited Samson in a later work—in the way Homer revisited Achilles—Samson may well have learned a variant of the heartbreaking lesson that Achilles expresses in the *Odyssey*: that it would be better to be alive, even as a slave, than to be king among the dead.

Samson might have learned this lesson, though I doubt it. There is more humanity in Achilles than appears in Samson. Samson's lesson would more likely be modeled on Milton's Satan: "better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" ([*PL*] 1.263). Samson could not, in fact, be more different from the Son as presented in *Paradise Regained*. Aside, in fact, from their respective claims to internality as connection to the divine, the Son and Samson resemble each other almost not at all. By far the more profound resemblances are to be found between Samson and Satan. Where *Paradise Lost* embodies a God concerned with power, and—to no small degree—revenge, *Samson Agonistes* shows us the effects of belief in such a deity on the humans who imagine the divine in such a way by worshiping, in the terms of Gerrard Winstanley, "[their] own imagination, which is the devil" (qtd. in Hill 141). If in *Paradise Lost*, "War wearied hath performed what war can do" (6.695), in *Samson Agonistes* war and violence are presented as the near-permanent

mode of human existence and of (mis)understanding the divine. “Pale, ire, envy, and despair” ([*PL*] 4.115) are Samson’s emotions as much as they are Satan’s.

The Satanic Samson

Samson is introduced as a character who bemoans his fallen state: he suffers from “restless thoughts, that [. . .] present / Times past, what once I was and what am now” (19, 21–22). Like Satan, Samson is weighed down by a sense of loss—first and foremost, the loss of his own former glory:

O wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold
 Twice by an Angel [. . .]
 Why was my breeding order’d and prescrib’d
 As of a person separate to God,
 design’d for great exploits; if I must die
 Betray’d, Captiv’d, and both my Eyes put out,
 Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;
 To grind in Brazen Fetters under task
 With this Heav’n-gifted strength? O glorious strength
 Put to the labor of a Beast, debas’t
 Lower than bondslave!

(23–24, 30–38)

Satan provides the model for Samson’s complaint: “O Sun [. . .] how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state / I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere” ([*PL*] 4.37–39). Samson’s complaint goes on to echo Satan’s sense of his own blameworthiness—“Nay curs’d be thou; since against his thy will / Chose freely what it now so justly rues” (4.71–72)—when he says, “Whom have I to complain of but myself?” (46). Samson’s outwardly greater piety (at least when compared to Satan’s rather low level of piety) might seem to get him off the hook of the Satanic comparison I am making here. After all, he expresses a concern not to “quarrel with the will / Of highest dispensation” (60–61), does he not? But immediately thereafter, he reenters, and brings to its highest pitch, his “Pale, ire, envy, and despair” mode (one can only imagine what Samson would look like to the eyes of Uriel, as the blind strongman certainly goes through an extremity of negative emotions, “more than could befall / Spirit of happy sort” ([*PL*] 4.127–28). In grieving his blindness, Samson reaches a level of despair that, in all of Milton’s works, is perhaps most closely matched by Satan.¹⁷ Making reference to “all my miseries; / So many, and so huge, that each apart / Would ask a life to wail” (64–66), Samson goes on to describe his blindness as “worse than chains, / Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age” (68–69). Samson does not merely suffer his blindness, he is his blindness—so thoroughly and completely does Samson inhabit the darkness that blindness has cast him into, that he, like Nicholas of Cusa’s “every creature,” quite literally “is darkness” (127). Samson’s blindness is, in fact, a wonderful illustration of the creaturely darkness Nicholas of Cusa insists is the effect of being unable either to comprehend “infinite light,” or the “God [that] is known to

God alone” (127). The wages of this darkness is death. Being blind is, for Samson, “To live a life half dead, a living death” (100), and even more dramatically (and Satanically), Samson describes himself as carrying death inside him:

Myself 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.

(102-09)

Satan’s despair, and sense of himself as identical to the pain he suffers, is remarkably similar:

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threat’ning to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav’n.

([PL] 4.73-78)

Samson is his own grave “Myself my Sepulcher” and Satan is his own hell “myself am Hell”: Samson—The man of action whose solution to every problem is violence (or threats of violence—see his impotent taunting of Harapha at 1109-29) Samson is almost nothing like the Son of *Paradise Regained* who once felt that his “Spirit aspir’d to victorious deeds” and “heroic acts” to “subdue and quell o’er all the earth / Brute violence and proud Tyrannic pow’r” (1.215-20). Unlike the Son, who develops to the point that he “held it [. . .] more heavenly” to “make persuasion do the work of fear” (1.221, 223), Samson never breaks out of this mode of thinking and acting. For Samson, just as for Satan in *Paradise Lost*, his own “right hand / Shall teach [him] highest deeds, by proof to try / Who is [his] equal” (5.864-66).

Where *Paradise Regained* embodies a Son who rejects temporal means to temporal power, *Samson Agonistes* gives us a human “hero” who is much like the superhuman hero of *Paradise Lost*, the Satan who embraced violence as a tool in both rebellion and reign. The very language of the scenes in which Samson is recognized (“O change beyond report, thought, or belief” [117]; “O miserable change!” [340]) suggests the language employed in hell: “If thou beest he; but O how fallen! how changed . . .” ([PL] 1.84). Samson is Satan on a human scale, claiming to fight for freedom while, in reality, seeking to “oppress . . . oppressors” (232-33), and in the process, becoming the very thing he fought against. Samson even speaks in the political and philosophical vernacular of the devils of *Paradise Lost*: when he criticizes those Israelites who love “Bondage with ease more than strenuous liberty” (271), he echoes the style of Mammon, who preferred “Hard liberty before the easy yoke / Of servile pomp” (2.256-57). Samson is Milton’s warning of what can and will go wrong with violent rebellion. Killing sets

no one free, and the self-appointed avenger drowns in the very blood-dimmed tide he sets loose upon the world. Looking back from the vantage point of a revolution that ultimately failed, Milton writes a dramatic poem whose Chorus insists that God's ways are justifiable, without providing any justification for (or other than?) suicide and mass murder, and more disturbingly, insists that "All is best" (1745) while steadfastly refusing to provide any evidence for such a conclusion. Here again, Joseph Wittreich has made a trenchant suggestion:

It is conceivable that Milton wrote his poem simply accepting that identity with Samson and, through him, urging another, this time successful, revolution; it is equally conceivable that, divorcing himself from Samson, Milton composed this poem as a retrospective repudiation of the cause he once championed. It is probable however—for this is the way in which the evidence drifts and in which the pressures of the poem point—that Milton accepts the historical and personal identifications [. . .]; he embraces the revolutionary but not the revolution. (*Interpreting* xxi-xxii)

In other words, while Milton agrees with the end—liberating the people of God from oppression—it is the means of Samson (and perhaps, in retrospect, of the English revolutionaries) that he rejects. The power of the right arm, as with Satan, so with Samson, is a power that corrupts. This point is emphasized in Milton's treatment elsewhere of the Son, who though he had once wielded an even greater version of such power, lays it down, as is demonstrated not only by his shift in *Paradise Lost* from the brash warrior of Book 5 to the quieter remonstrant of Book 3, but also by his rejection, in *Paradise Regained*, of his own youthful feeling that his "Spirit aspir'd to victorious deeds" and "heroic acts" to "subdue and quell o'er all the earth / Brute violence and proud Tyrannic pow'r" (1.215-20).

If, in the tradition of negative theology, God is that upon which no thing can be predicated, best described as "not this, not this," at the end of *Samson Agonistes*, all that can confidently be said of God is that he is not what Samson, Manoa, and the Chorus make of him. Each of these characters tries to "confine the interminable" (307) in the way they think about, and justify God.

For Manoa, God is both Samson's partisan, and a defender of his own military glory. God will

not long defer
To vindicate the glory of his name
Against all competition, nor will long
Endure it, doubtful whether God be Lord,
Or *Dagon*

(474-78)

Manoa also sees God as a giver of gifts that perversely backfire on their recipients: "Why are his gifts desirable; to tempt / Our earnest Prayers, then, giv'n with solemn hand / As Graces, draw a Scorpion's tail behind?" (358-60). Manoa's God is both partisan and perverse, both vain and violent. Manoa himself follows a different exemplar—Belial. In urging Samson to consider that "perhaps / God will relent" (508-09), Manoa sounds much like the lawyerly fallen angel who advised

against renewed hostilities with God: “Our Supreme Foe in time may much remit / His anger, and perhaps thus far remov’d / Not mind us not offending; satisfi’d / With what is punish’t” ([*PL*] 2.210–13). Further, in urging Samson, “if the punishment / Thou canst avoid, self-preservation bids” ([*SA*] 504–5), Manoa reveals himself to be a pragmatist after the fashion of Satan, who also does his best to avoid punishment and seek self-preservation: “Lives there who loves his pain? / Who would not, finding way, break loose from Hell, / Though thither doomed?” ([*PL*] 4.888–90). Though Manoa is careful to advise Samson to “Repent the sin” (504), in the rest of his advice, he seems to regard God, much as do Belial and Satan, as a figure whose demands can be negotiated or finessed.

The Chorus has a more fluid concept of God, at times describing God as “unsearchable” (1746) or “interminable” (307), while often with the same breath describing him as both quite searchable and quite terminable (definable). In the “Just are the ways of God” speech (293–325), the Chorus is both so desperate, and so inept in its attempt to “justify” God that it ends up describing him as a Machiavellian prince, “[w]ho made our laws to bind us, not himself, / And hath full right to exempt / Whom so it pleases him by choice / From national obstruction” (309–12). The Chorus shows shocking dexterity (duplicity?) of mind by going, in a scant few lines, from chiding those who “would confine the interminable” (307) to describing God as a ruler who knows how to abandon the law when necessary, like “those Princes who have done great things [and] have held good faith of little account,” (Machiavelli 24), and who deliberately go outside the bounds of law “when the reasons that caused him to pledge [faith to the law] exist no longer” (Machiavelli 24). But the Chorus is evidently unable to resolve the contradictions implied in his thought between God as law-maker and God as law-breaker, and so it denigrates “reason,” or at least “vain reasonings” (322). Here might have been the breakthrough that would have returned the Chorus to the idea of God as unsearchable, as unknowable in the sense suggested by Pseudo-Dionysius—but that line of reasoning proves “vain” if one’s ultimate goal is to justify, not God (or the “ways of God”), but one’s own desire for vengeance against enemies in a nice, tidy, morally understandable world.

Both the Chorus and Manoa posit a violent God. Thus, each seems to approve of Samson’s violence, thinking of it as being undertaken at God’s prompting. Their view fits into the pattern that Michael Lieb describes, one in which the warrior does the will of God by killing the enemies of God: “Samson’s end is a new beginning, a cause for celebration, not despair. The successful enactment of violence in God’s cause becomes its own reward. As the way in which violence is executed upon God’s enemies, Samson regains his former stature” (*Milton* 261). But, as Peter Herman asks:

[I]s it a cause for celebration? The sheer lack of distinction should give one pause. Is everyone in the theater equally guilty? Even those who do not live in the city but arrived “to solemnize” their feast? Does the simple fact of one’s identity as a Philistine condemn one, regardless of how much or how little one contributes to either Samson’s degradation or the war between the Israelites and the Philistines? (174)

Such unsettling questions are powerfully raised by *Samson Agonistes*, and—like the perspectives of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, and Dalila here—demand to be taken seriously.

Even Manoa—the partisan who ultimately approves Samson’s final actions—initially reacts to the Messenger’s report of Samson’s last moments in an unsettled manner, walking the line between despair and celebration before he finally comes down on the side of the latter:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause: Samson hath quit himself
Like Samson, and heroically hath finish’d
A life Heroic, on his Enemies
Fully reveng’d [. . .]
With God not parted from him, as was fear’d,
But favoring and assisting him to the end.
([SA] 1708-12, 1719-20)

For Manoa, Samson’s heroism is defined by violence: having fully revenged himself on his (and God’s) enemies—the Philistines—Samson becomes both a holy martyr and a heroic template for future warriors in the cause of God.

Here it is especially important to take note of the way in which Milton casts a skeptical eye on the equation between violence and heroism in *Paradise Lost*. As Clay Daniel has previously argued:

Milton distinguishes not between factions in a murderous dispute but between the peaceful who obey God’s law and the violent who transgress it, those [who] do not kill and those who do, between the murdered Abel, who will “lose no reward” (11.459), and the murderer Cain, whose violence “will be aveng’d” (11.458). God’s champions, such as Enoch and Noah, gain divine favor in virtually the only way possible—obedience to God’s law. [. . .] These righteous men persevere in the ways of “Freedom and Peace,” abjuring concupiscence and violence. Samson, on the other hand, is in the violent and lustful line of Cain. He kills, he engages in sex with voluptuous atheists, and he repeatedly demonstrates his slender knowledge of the ways of God. (9-10)

Far from recommending the violence of Samson, Milton goes out of his way to create a context in which such violence can be seen for what it truly is: a failure of understanding, of intelligence, and of faith. The logic of Michael’s speech in Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*, in which the corruption of Noah’s time is highlighted by the near-worship of violence and force, puts Samson on a shaky ground:

For in those days Might only shall be admir’d,
And Valor and Heroic Virtue call’d;
To overcome in Battle, and subdue
Nations, and bring home spoils with infinite
Man-slaughter, shall be held the highest pitch
Of human Glory, and for Glory done
Of triumph, to be styl’d great Conquerors,
Patrons of Mankind, Gods, and Sons of Gods,
Destroyers rightlier call’d and Plagues of men.
(689-97)

The attitudes of Manoa and the Chorus toward might and violence reflect those of Samson.¹⁸ For Samson, God is a divine warrior, one whose skills Samson hopes to enlist in a war against the Philistines and their deity, Dagon. After acknowledging that “the strife / With me hath end” (460–61), Samson hopes that his efforts, his “strife” will prove to have been successful in drawing God into battle: “all the contest is now / ’Twixt God and Dagon; [. . . God] will arise and his great name assert: / Dagon must stoop” (461–62, 467–68). This assertion is not borne out by the poem, however, unless the reader assumes that Samson’s killing of the Philistines (an action he specifically describes as taken “of my own accord” [1643]) is prompted by God, as if God were using Samson as a kind of proxy in a battle against Dagon. Manoa certainly seems to agree, describing Samson’s last orgy of violence as having been undertaken “[w]ith God [. . .] favoring and assisting him to the end” (1719–20). But how can Manoa know this? In spite of the repeated imperatives not to ascribe motives to God (see 44–45, 210, and 373), Samson, Manoa, and the Chorus all do little more than construct “Gods” who justify them in their actions and attitudes, and provide a framework on which to hang the pre-Panglossian notion that “all is best” (1745).

The question comes down to the issue of the “intimate impulse.” Does Samson have divine warrant for his actions, or even more dramatically, divine impulsion for his actions? When Samson reports to the Chorus that he “begin[s] to feel / Some rousing motions” (1381–82), can anyone be certain that those motions are from God? In Peter Herman’s view, that is “the central point around which both *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained* revolve” (172). Herman goes on to argue that Samson probably does not receive the impetus for his actions from God:

Milton emphasizes the likelihood that Samson’s actions originate from him, and not God, in the reports of his last moments. After Samson is placed in between the supporting pillars, “with head a while enclin’d, / And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray’d, / Or some great matter in his mind revolv’d” (1636–8), a passage that shows Milton transforming the certainty of Judges into incertitude. [. . .] in *Samson Agonistes*, just about everything is made unclear. Milton drops Samson’s prayer, and the messenger presents us with another Miltonic “Or”: Samson inclines his head like someone praying, “Or” as though “some greater matter” revolved in his mind. Not only does the poem not definitively decide between the two, but it also takes an unquestioned fact in the original narrative (Samson’s prayer) and transforms it into an uncertainty, since the Messenger neither rules out his prayer nor rules it in. (173)

David Loewenstein takes the opposite perspective, arguing—from the context of mid-seventeenth-century religious radicalism—that Milton’s Samson does receive an inner prompting from God: “[f]or radical religious writers, Samson being moved inwardly by the Lord’s Spirit could signal the operation of an awesome conquering power of divine origin, as it did for the Independent minister and Fifth Monarchist preacher John Canne” (276). Milton’s poem gives “dramatic expression to the notion voiced by the regicide and Anabaptist William Goffe [. . .]: ‘Now the work of the Spirit is, that we do pull down all works [that are not] of the Spirit whatsoever’ ” (276). Loewenstein places Samson’s act of vengeance alongside the

themes of revenge in the writings of the “godly” of the seventeenth century. In the words of George Fox, “A day of vengeance is coming upon you all; that the Lord will be recompensed upon you all his adversaries” (qtd. in Loewenstein 281). Loewenstein further maintains that radical Puritan readers in Milton’s time “could compare Samson’s act of destruction against the Philistines to the Lord’s desolation of worldly powers in their own age” (281) and concludes that Samson is “the militant, faithful champion of God [who] embodies Milton’s unsettling vision of a radical saint who [follows] the impromptu motions of the Spirit” (291).

Each of these perspectives offers a compelling potential answer to the question of how we are to understand Samson’s violence and his justifications thereof. If *Samson Agonistes* is considered alone, out of the context of *Paradise Regained* and *Paradise Lost*, then the question of Samson’s warrant for his actions may very well be undecidable—suspended between the two aforementioned possibilities. However, placed into the context of *Paradise Regained* and *Paradise Lost*, in the midst of what Derek Wood has called “the profoundly anti-militaristic and anti-violent moral vision of the two epics” (129), I believe the answer is no—Samson has no divine warrant for his actions. Samson acts, in the end, as he says to the Philistines: “of [his] own accord” (1643).¹⁹ There is no solid indication that the Spirit of God moves Samson to act as he does. In the hearsay account Manoa, and the reader, is given, Samson his “head a while enclin’d, / And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray’d” (1636–37)—“as one who pray’d”, yes, but these, as Hamlet might note, are actions that a man might play, being but the trappings and the suits of devotion. Despite the confidence of Manoa and the Chorus (and despite the confidence of modern readers like Mohamed and Loewenstein), Milton steadfastly refuses to give the reader any indication whatsoever as to whether or not Samson really did have the divine impulsion he so often (and so conveniently) claimed. Samson’s “intimate impulse” (223), which early in the play he claims to be the prompting of the very God he imagines, is neither the Son’s “inner man, nobler part” in *Paradise Regained*, nor the inner awareness of divine similitude that I have previously argued is the spiritual path being pointed to by the Son in that poem (see *Tyranny*, Chapter 5). Instead, it may be something rather closer to the “hell” that Satan carries within him in *Paradise Lost*—an abiding conviction that violence is the order of the universe and physical strength that universe’s primary principle.

Milton’s Exhausted Talk: Negation without Affirmation

In the end, *Samson Agonistes* serves as the negation to *Paradise Regained*’s affirmation, the “but no” to the short epic’s “yes.” However, it offers no new model, no new “yes.” No longer do Milton’s works hold affirmation and negation in anything like a complementary tension, in which “each informs the other” (Davies and Turner 3). The dialectical “yes, but no” process I have been describing comes to its end with *Samson Agonistes*.

The play serves as a negation by pointing out the limits of the model offered by the internal mode outlined in *Paradise Regained*. Negative theological discourse, according to Denys Turner, operates in the same fashion, by pointing out the limits of positive (positing) discourse about God: “the silence of the negative way is the

silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted. The theologian is, as it were, embarrassed into silence” (18). It is at the point where the positive model breaks down, at the point at which the “talk about God” of *Paradise Regained* “has been exhausted” that the “embarrassed [. . .] silence” of *Samson Agonistes* becomes the most truly eloquent, where the questions one must ask after reading it become most urgent. How can anyone know the difference between Satanic (or Samsonic) self-will and the promptings of what Milton in the *De Doctrina Christina* calls “the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of every man” (CPW 6:587)? What if the “inward oracle” tells you to kill, and tells you to do it for God? What is the difference, finally, between the servant of one god who claims that he must kill for that god and the servant of a different “god” who makes the same claim?

There may very well be no difference at all—not, at least, if the question of difference is looked at from outside the claims of a particular and local belief system. An excellent modern example of this lack of difference can be seen in the Moabite Stone. Discovered in 1868, the Moabite Stone gives us—from the perspective of King Mesha of Moab—an account of Moab’s military defeat of Israel. In an illuminating parallel to the terms of what biblical scholars have long called the Deuteronomic Theory of History (if Israel is faithful to Yahweh, Yahweh will bless Israel with land, prosperity, and victory in battle—if not, the reverse), the Moabite Stone quotes Mesha as crediting Chemosh (the Moabite deity) with defeating Israel and releasing the Moabites from Israelite oppression:

Omri was king over Israel, and he afflicted Moab for many days, because Chemosh was angry with his land. And his son succeeded him; and he also said, I will afflict Moab. In my days he said this [. . .] but restored it to Chemosh in my days. [. . .] And Chemosh said unto me, Go, take Nebo against Israel. And I went by night, and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon. And I took it and slew the whole of it, 7000 men and [. . .] women [. . .] and maid-servants; for I had devoted it to Ashtor-Chemosh. And I took thence the vessels of Yahweh, and I dragged them before Chemosh.
(Harper 63)

What is the difference between Israel and Moab? One serves the true God while the other does not? According to whom?²⁰ Though Milton cannot have known of the Moabite Stone, he is already exploring the question of difference that the testimony of King Mesha helps us resolve today. This is the point of Dalila’s appeal to the values and traditions of Philistia:

[. . .] thou know’st the Magistrates
And Princes of my country came in person,
Solicited, commanded, threatn’d, urg’d,
Adjur’d by all the bonds of civil Duty
And of Religion, press’d how just it was,
How honorable, how glorious to entrap
A common enemy, who had destroy’d
Such number of our Nation: and the Priest
Was not behind, but ever at my ear,

Preaching how meritorious with the gods
 It would be to ensnare an irreligious
 Dishonorer of *Dagon*: what had I
 To oppose against such powerful argument?
 (SA 850–62)

Dalila's arguments—though they would almost certainly be rejected out of hand by most seventeenth-century English readers (not to mention many twenty-first century readers²¹)—forcefully convey the point Milton has been making throughout his great poems: even if we firmly believe in the primacy of one deity (Yahweh) over another (Chemosh or Dagon), or beyond primacy, even if we firmly believe that our God exists while their god does not, we do not, and cannot know with certainty whether our fights are God's fights, in no small part because the images we form of God are not God. While the latter point might be obvious to the majority of Milton's readers when framed in terms of Dalila's image of the divine (the fish-god Dagon), it is perhaps not so obvious, and thus all the more important to realize, that the same point holds for Samson's image of the divine (the warrior-god Yahweh). Though Manoa, the Chorus, and Samson all seem to have a clear idea of who God is, what God wants, and when God wants it, this God does not appear, does not speak, expresses no will or desires whatsoever. All that readers know of God in the world of *Samson Agonistes* is what a blind man, his father, and those on the street (the Chorus) tell them. This play suggests that such positings of identity and desire to the deity merely reflect (in often dangerous ways) the human beings who express them. The nonportrayal of God in *Samson Agonistes* is thus profitably understood as an exercise in negative theology—an effort to show what God is not.

Samson Agonistes is the capstone to Milton's larger project of redefining God through a negative path: at the end, God is neither the Father of *Paradise Lost* nor the Son of *Paradise Regained*. Furthermore, God is not the vengeful warrior of Samson, the mysterious judge of the Chorus, or the merely national deity of either Israel or Philistia. Such militaristic and partisan constructions of the divine all too often serve to aid and abet violence and destruction for those who are already bent on such means and ends. This is nowhere made more evident than in the closing speech of the Chorus. Referring to the "unsearchable dispose / Of highest wisdom" (1746–47), and the hidden face of God ("Oft he seems to hide his face" [1749]), the Chorus proceeds to posit a quite searchable dispose and a manifestly unhidden face to God. In the Chorus's view, a nakedly partisan deity has "Bor[n]e witness gloriously" to his "faithful Champion" (1752, 1751)—presumably Samson. The Chorus inhabits a universe in which might is the ultimate proof of right, in which victory in battle is a demonstration of the justice of one's cause. The Chorus, in other words, inhabits a universe whose most eloquent statesman is Satan. However, the Chorus's similarity, and Samson's similarity, to Satan is not a suggestion that Satan be taken as a new image of divinity—far from it. *Samson Agonistes* ends, absolutely stops cold, the "yes, but no" pattern I have been describing in Milton's last great works. There is no new "yes," as both Samson and *Samson* serve finally as negations without new affirmations, as negatives without new positive terms. Milton ends with negation.

Thus, Milton leaves us in what Dionysius describes as "the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (*DN* 137). And this just may be Milton's most urgent

message to his “fit audience [. . .] though few”: claims to knowledge of God and God’s will are always potentially dangerous in a world in which good and evil “grow up together almost inseparably” (*CPW* 2: 514). In such a world, what the dialectical relation between positive and negative theologies tells us is this—what we think we know about God can always be only provisional, and this lesson must be kept in mind especially at the point where such knowledge enters the realm of violent certitude, the conviction that the “Infidel” (*SA* 221) deserves death at one’s own hand.

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NOTES

¹ All quotations of Milton’s poetry are from Hughes’s edition. Unless noted otherwise, quotations of Milton’s prose are either from the Yale or Columbia editions. Quotations from the former are cited parenthetically as *CPW*, with volume and page number. Quotations from the latter are cited parenthetically as *CM*, with volume and page number.

² Peter Herman makes a similar argument about the relation between *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*: “Read in order of publication, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* move from certainty to uncertainty, from a universe in which God exists and is immanent in this world to a universe which God, assuming He exists, seemingly has abandoned. We move from a world of moral certitudes, in which there is no doubt that Satan represents evil and the Son represents good, to a world of moral incertitudes” (175).

³ All quotations of Pseudo-Dionysius are from Luibheid’s translation of the complete works. Such quotations are cited parenthetically as either *DN* or *MT* (to correspond to the *Divine Names* or the *Mystical Theology*), with page number. The remainder of this section on apophatic theology, while originally written for this essay, has been adapted at greater length in “The Mysterious Darkness of Unknowing: *Paradise Lost* and the God Beyond Names,” an essay to appear in Shawcross and Lieb.

⁴ As Michael Lieb has previously noted, “Pseudo-Dionysius maintains that [cataphatic theology] embodies a descent from first things to last, that is, from the most abstruse conceptions of deity to their concretization in symbolic form,” while its necessary complement, apophatic theology, “involves a return or *epistrophē* upward from last to first things. In this return, we discover an obliteration of knowing, understanding, naming, speech, and language as the seer travels into the realm of unknowing, divine ignorance, the nameless, the speechless, and the silent” (*Visionary* 236–37).

⁵ The idea of “processions” has its most immediate source in the work of the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus, whose *Elements of Theology* Dionysius frequently echoes. For Proclus, procession is the method through which all things are brought into existence, and the basis for how the ineffable may be imagined, if not actually known. We are able to ascribe qualities to the divine—though always only tentatively and provisionally—from what we see and learn by observing the characteristics of creatures and the created world. Each creature participates in the level of existence above it, sharing in the qualities of that higher level, and this chain of sharing and participation continues all the way up until it is broken at the point of the One, or what Proclus calls “the unparticipated” (29). According to Dionysius, it is this break at the point of the One, or “the unparticipated,” that defines the limits of the affirmative method:

[W]e have a habit of seizing upon what is actually beyond us, clinging to the familiar categories of our sense perceptions, and then we measure the divine by our human standards and, of course, are led astray by the apparent meaning we give to the divine and unspeakable reason. (*DN* 106)

⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, the fifteenth-century German theologian, emphasized this point by insisting that “the theology of negation is so necessary to the theology of affirmation that without it God would be worshipped not as the infinite God but as creature; and such worship is idolatry, for it gives to an image that which belongs only to truth itself” (126).

⁷ The *Mystical Theology* was published in 1653, in an English translation by John Everard, appended to Everard’s *Some Gospel Treasures Opened*. It also appeared alone, in the same translation, under the title *The Mystical Divinity of Dionysius the Areopagite* in 1657. Though Milton could certainly have read Dionysius in Greek or Latin translation, the English translation made Dionysius available to a far wider audience, and more easily enables a “fit” audience (though few) to have the background of ideas necessary to recognize apophatic ideas in *Paradise Lost*.

⁸ The Swiss reformer characterizes Dionysius “whoever he was,” as having “skillfully discussed many matters in his *Celestial Hierarchy*,” but judges the discussions to be “for the most part nothing but talk” (Calvin 1: 164).

⁹ Dennis Bielfeldt writes of “Luther’s praise of Dionysius and the *via negativa*,” further showing that “Luther points out that God dwells in ‘inaccessible light’ such that ‘no mind is able to penetrate to him.’” Finally, Luther follows Dionysius up the ladder of negations: “Luther claims that it is Dionysius who taught the way of ‘anagogical darkness’ which ‘ascends through negation. For thus is God hidden and incomprehensible’” (416).

¹⁰ Luther’s rejection of Dionysian mysticism is suggested by his characterization of Dionysius as *plus platonizans quam christianizans* (more of a Platonist than a Christian):

Indeed, to speak more boldly, the setting so great store by this Dionysius, whoever he may have been, greatly displeases me, for there is scarce a line of sound scholarship in him. [. . .] [I]n his *Mystic Theology*, which certain most ignorant theologians greatly puff, he is downright dangerous, being more of a Platonist than a Christian. (2: 275–76)

For Luther, a “humiliated and crucified Jesus” came to be absolutely essential to his notion of God as hidden. As David Steinmetz argues:

Luther rejected Dionysian mysticism absolutely after 1516, in spite of the fact that he makes occasional positive references to it. Dionysian mysticism is too speculative for Luther, too impatient with a God who is found in the humiliated and crucified Jesus. Rather the Dionysian mystic wishes to scamper up a graded ladder of ascent to a God who reigns in glory. But the only ladder to God, Luther believes, is the ladder provided by the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. (23–24)

Luther formalized his vision of this humiliated and crucified Jesus and the hidden God through the famous “theology of the cross.” As David Tracy describes this concept, “God discloses God’s self to sinful humans—*sub contrariis*—life through death, wisdom through folly, strength through weakness” (“Form” 81). God’s strength is shown by being hidden behind the weakness of Jesus. God is thus both hidden and revealed through the “humiliated and crucified Jesus” Luther thought essential for human relation to God.

¹¹ David Tracy, much of whose relatively recent work focuses on what he calls “the two greatest Christian namings of God” (“Literary” 312), argues cogently for a much closer relationship between Luther’s formulation of the hidden God and the unnamable God of Pseudo-Dionysius than is usually recognized: “The central dilemma for Christian self-understanding is that Luther *does* speak [. . .] of a second sense of hiddenness. He even dares to speak of a second sense of hiddenness as behind or even ‘beyond’ the word” (“Form” 82).

¹² In the original, “*nam Deus, prout in se est humanam cogitationem, nedum sensus longe superat*” (CM 14: 30): “For God, as he is in himself, is far above human thinking, much more so of human senses.” Milton’s Latin here, can, in my own somewhat inelegant rendering, be read as suggesting that God is beyond both human understanding (abstract intellection) and human sense (felt perception or intuitive apprehension). Charles Sumner’s 1825 translation captures a similar idea: “for to know God

as he really is, far transcends the powers of man's thoughts, much more of his perception" (CM 14: 31). Either rendering suggests that God is both intellectually and physically beyond human capacities, while the Carey translation places a more exclusive emphasis on the intellect in such terms as imagination and understanding. In fact, *sensus* could be rendered in physical terms (feeling, perception, sensation), emotional terms (affection, emotion, feeling, sentiment), or in terms of human opinion or point of view (moral sense, opinion, thought). Thus, the difficulty of Milton's statement about just how far God exceeds human capacities is in knowing exactly which capacities are being referred to: in my view, Milton is taking full advantage of the multivalent quality of *sensus* in order to argue that all human capacities—intellectual, emotional, physical—are grossly insufficient for the most basic level of understanding, apprehending, perceiving, and relating to the divine.

¹³ Lieb goes on to note that Milton "reveals his determination to conceive the act of knowing God by arguing that God is beyond all power to know. [. . .] Essentially at issue is [. . .] apophatic theology" (*Theological* 77). Finally, according to Lieb, "what emerges from the discussion [of God in Milton's theological treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*] is the unknowableness of God on any level" (*Theological* 79). Lieb's entire discussion of the apophatic in *De Doctrina Christiana* (in Chapter 2 of *Theological Milton*) is the most thorough account that any Milton scholar has ventured to date of the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Milton's thought, and though he does not extend that discussion to an analysis of the apophatic in Milton's poetry, my own attempt to do so stands indebted to Lieb's work.

¹⁴ This idea of creation and negation is inherent in the Greek term that underlies the whole notion of "negative" theology. Revealingly, *apophasis*, which is usually defined in terms of negation, can also function as an assertion. Raoul Mortley emphasizes this point by distinguishing between what he calls the privative and the accumulative use of the alpha prefix, which "can convey both the removal and the multiplying of characteristics," a fact that "must make us alert to the possibility of ambiguities in the connotations of alpha words" (429). When seen in light of the twofold significance of alpha, it becomes clear how inseparable are the positive and negative paths, as they—with their complementary functions subsumed in the very notion of *apophasis* itself—work together to assert characteristics in order to negate them. Thus, in "assert[ing] Eternal Providence," Milton stakes out his poetic territory on the razor's edge of the fundamental ambiguity of both the "yes, but no" approach to the divine inherent in the relations between apophatic and cataphatic theologies, and in the tensions central to the concept of *apophasis* itself.

¹⁵ Michael Lieb has previously argued for the possibility of Milton's God, writing that Milton "not only intensifies the idea of passibility, but bestows upon it a new significance" in his portrait of the Father (225). Lieb concludes that "the figure of God in *Paradise Lost* is portrayed as a fully passible being" ("Reading" 229).

¹⁶ It should be noted here that Mohamed's principle—though generally useful—is one he uses in service of an argument that is diametrically opposed to my own. For Mohamed, the "intimate impulse" Samson claims in reference to the woman of Timnah is "received directly from God" (334). Furthermore, the "rousing motions Samson claims to feel before he agrees to be led off to entertain the Philistines 'recall these 'intimate impulses' from God—and hark further back to the 'strong motion' leading Jesus back into the desert of *Paradise Regain'd* (1.290-91)" (334). What Mohamed takes to be a repetition of a pattern between Jesus and Samson, I take to be a deliberate contrast—a portrait of what it looks like to act from real certainty and false certainty.

¹⁷ Another possible match for the despair of Samson is that of Adam in *Paradise Lost*. After the fall, Adam goes through a series of recriminations—against Eve, against God, finally against himself—but what separates Adam and Samson, and connects Satan and Samson, is the issue of violence and destruction. Adam is content to let God take revenge upon the serpent (Satan), while Samson and Satan strike out against their real and perceived enemies.

¹⁸ Though he does not take the comparison as far as I am taking it here, Derek Wood has suggested that both Samson and the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* show a "disturbing" relationship to the Satan of *Paradise Lost*:

If we return to the Chorus in *Samson*, we may notice that the rejoicing of the Danites recalls another response in Milton's poetry to horrifying destruction.

Sin congratulates Satan on his “magnific deeds” (PL 10:354). [. . .] They proceed to “destroy” (611), “waste and havoc” (617). The similarities in the two situations, that is, the intertextual implications, are disturbing for those who would believe that the voice of the Chorus is anything like the voice of Milton. [. . .] I am not suggesting that we are to read Samson’s morality as “satanic”, but [. . .] Samson keeps some ugly company. (32-33)

¹⁹ For an especially detailed discussion of Milton’s possible meaning in the use of the phrase “own accord,” see Wittreich, *Shifting* 220-26. Wittreich argues that Milton means this phrase to indicate a total lack of external influence or authority; thus, an action taken of one’s “own accord” would have no prompting but one’s own. Samson, in this reading, has no divine prompting whatsoever.

²⁰ Commenting on Dalila’s speech from lines 975-96, Peter Herman reminds us that alternate perspectives at work in Milton’s poetry are not there simply to be dismissed without consideration: “Dalila’s motives, like Eve’s and Satan’s, cannot be easily dismissed. We are forced to confront the hard fact, not to be confused with moral relativism, that a hero to one group, the Israelites, is ‘a fierce destroyer’ to another; that Dalila represents to the Philistines what Jael represents to the ‘Circumcis’d’” (168). Susan Ackerman suggests that such alternate perspectives may very well already be present, and taken seriously, in the Book of Judges itself: “so bumbling is Samson in his role as an Israelite hero that it seems almost as if Judg. 14:1-16:22 *had been* written by a Philistine, one whose intention was to poke fun at the Israelites’ alleged champion” (33). Ackerman goes on to claim that:

“Heroic” is hardly the adjective that springs to mind to describe this witless lout. Indeed, if there is any hero in the story, it is Delilah, who goes about her mission of discovery with determination and courage (given that Samson could conceivably turn on her at any moment) and who ultimately triumphs, like the adroit David over the hulking Goliath, over her more powerful foe. (35-36)

²¹ Feisal Mohamed, for instance, argues that “there is an important difference between [Samson’s and Dalila’s] declarations of allegiance: Dalila’s marks her as a confirmed idolater, while Samson’s is a commitment to God” (330).

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