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# The Representation of Samson's Eyes in Samson Agonistes

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<sup>33</sup> Wordsworth 47-48.

<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth 52, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 66.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence E. Johnson, *A Morally Deep World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 41.

<sup>37</sup> Wordsworth 93-95, in Stillinger.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., *The Romantics on Milton* (Cleveland: The P of Case Western Reserve U, 1970) 119.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989) 209.

<sup>40</sup> Wittreich 116.

<sup>41</sup> H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe* (Bristol: U of London, The Athlone P, 1962) 71.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Piper 71.

<sup>43</sup> Piper 71-72.

<sup>44</sup> Piper 25.

<sup>45</sup> Piper 71.

<sup>46</sup> Devall and Sessions 65.

<sup>47</sup> Devall and Sessions 69-70.

<sup>48</sup> Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 61.

<sup>49</sup> Owen Barfield has opened the door to applications of Coleridge's philosophy to ecological thought by convincingly arguing that Coleridge's law of polarity has significant bearing on ecology. See p. 142 in *What Coleridge Thought* as cited above in note 21.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF SAMSON'S EYES IN *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Everyone knows that in *Samson Agonistes* Milton altered many details in the Judges narrative of Samson, changing Dalila from a concubine to a wife, for instance, and inventing the characters of Harapha and the Public Officer. Yet one alteration that has gone unnoticed is the fact that Samson's eyeballs remain intact and his face looks normal and uninjured even after his being violently blinded by the Philistines. The clearest indication occurs when the Hebrew Messenger observes Samson's appearance just before pulling down the pillars, when "with head a while inclined,/ And *eyes fast fixed* . . . [he] stood, as one who prayed"<sup>1</sup> (1636-1637; my emphasis). Similarly, earlier in the drama Manoa attempts to encourage his son by remarking that "God [can] . . ./ Cause light within thy *eyes* to spring" (581, 584; my emphasis). Samson disagrees, asserting that "these dark *orbs*

shall no more treat with light" (591; my emphasis). A conversation between the Chorus and Manoa offers further confirmation of the eyes' presence. After the Danites remark that Manoa may soon find himself in the position of having to "nurse" his own son back to health (1488), he declares that "it shall be my delight to tend [Samson's] eyes,/ And view him sitting in the house, ennobled/ With all those high exploits by him achieved . . ." (1490-1492; my emphasis). He then expresses the wish that "[s]ince [Samson's] strength with eyesight was not lost,/ God will restore him eyesight to his strength" (1502-1503), the Chorus responding "[t]hy hopes are not ill-founded" (1504). Moments later, on hearing the sounds of the catastrophe, they voice the same expectation: "What if [Samson's] eyesight . . . / . . . [is] by miracle restored?" (1527-1528). The fact that both Manoa and the Danites refer to the possible restoration of his eyesight implies that the eyes are whole and merely in need of reactivation.

It also seems telling that none of Samson's visitors say anything about a facial injury when they first encounter the fallen champion. The Danites' description, which is spoken beyond Samson's hearing, mentions his rags, filth, and posture of dejection, but not his eyes (115-123). By contrast, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which is often considered one of the main sources of Milton's tragedy, the Chorus' first response to Oedipus is "Ah! His face is dreadful!" (141),<sup>2</sup> and then, moments later, "Ah! His eyes are blind" (150); in like manner, Theseus says "[your] tortured face/ Make[s] plain your identity (555), while Antigone laments her father's "lost, irrecoverable eyes" (1200). Also, when Samson resists Manoa's efforts to bring him home, he does so out of self-consciousness about his *hair*, not his eyes: he fears that other visitors would regard him as a "gaze/ Or pitied object" (567, 568), because of his locks, which would appear "[r]obustious to no purpose clustering down/ Vain monument of strength" (569-570). Samson says nothing about the possibility of their being repulsed by his eyes.

Certain lines in the tragedy do suggest that the eyeballs, not just the eyesight, are gone. Among these are various allusions to Samson's gouging, which is described in Judges as follows: "[T]he Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him

down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house" (16:21).<sup>3</sup> At line 33, Samson recalls the episode, lamenting that the fact that as one "separate to God" (31) he nonetheless "must die/ Betrayed, captived, [with] both my eyes put out" (32, 33). Less than ten lines later, he mocks himself with "Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him/ Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves" (40, 41). He also wonders

[W]hy was the sight  
To such a tender ball as the eye confined?  
So obvious and so easy to be quenched,  
And not as feeling through all parts diffused,  
That she might look at will through every pore? (93-97)

Similarly, in the Harapha episode, the giant tells Samson not to expect any help from God, since he has "delivered [thee] up/ Into thy enemies' hands, permitted them/ To put out both thine eyes . . ." (1158-1160). Harapha also refuses to fight Samson because "both thy eyes [are] put out" (1103). And at the end of the tragedy Manoa predicts that virgins shall "visit [Samson's] tomb with flowers, only bewailing/ His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,/ From whence captivity and loss of eyes" (1742-1744).

While these lines imply that the eyes are ruined, the majority of references I have cited nullify this impression, leaving the reader with a clear sense that the eyes remain. In fact, as I shall demonstrate momentarily, some of the references to the loss of Samson's eyes are not unequivocal; they may refer to his loss of eyesight, not the destruction of the eyes. First, however, what is the source of Milton's innovation? There are no precedents for it in any of his other works, in Scripture, or in early modern versions of the Samson story. Among the numerous references to Samson scattered throughout Milton's corpus, a passage from *Eikonoclastes* clearly indicates that he was aware of the nature of Samson's punishment. Milton believed King Charles to be the author of *Eikon Basilike*, and mocked him accordingly in *Eikonoclastes*:

And if the Parlement so thought not [that Charles was wiser than they], but desir'd him to follow their advice and deliberation in things of public concernment, he accounts it the same proposition, as if Sampson had bin mov'd to the putting out his eyes, that the Philistins might abuse him.<sup>4</sup>

Nor are there any hints in the various Bible versions Milton may have consulted that Samson's eyes are still intact. The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin renderings of Judges 16:21 ("the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes") all indicate that Samson is seized and violently blinded by his enemies. The Hebrew (Masoretic) text for the verb "put out" is *nakru*, which denotes a picking or tearing out; the Alexandrine codex of the Septuagint is *execopsan*, and also indicates a cutting out of the eyeballs; and the Vulgate's *eruerent* connotes a tearing out or uprooting. And none of the early modern versions of the Samson narrative represent him any differently. In fact, both Hieronymus Zieglerus' *Samson, Tragodeia Nova* (1547) and Marcus Andreas Wunstius' *Simson, Tragodeia Sacra* (1604) stage the gouging, while Vincenzo Giattini's *Il Sanson: Dialogo per Musica* (1638) portrays Sanson hiding his disfigured face whenever he is in public.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that Milton's representation of Samson's eyes must be understood in terms of his own blindness. We know from his letter to Philaris that the blindness was brought on gradually, by a degenerative optical disease. He tells Philaris that

[i]t is ten years, I think . . . since I noticed my sight becoming weak and growing dim . . . The [right] eye was also failing slowly and gradually over a period of almost three years, some months before my sight was completely destroyed. (722)

While the cause of Milton's blindness was quite different from Samson's, he too retained a normal-looking appearance after going blind. In her 1934 study of Milton's blindness, Eleanor Brown points out that the early modern term for Milton's eye disease was *gutta serena*, which denoted "all blindness in which the eye retains a normal appearance."<sup>6</sup> Milton alludes to the malady in the invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost*, when he states that "[s]o thick a drop serene hath quenched [my] orbs" (25). In lamenting his own blindness, Samson deploys two of the terms Milton uses here ("quenched" and "orbs"); their recurrence in the tragedy strengthens the impression that Milton conceived of the appearance of Samson's eyes in terms of his own. Also, the use of "quenched" in the invocation suggests that Samson's statement that the eyesight is "so obvious and so easy to be quenched" (95) is not necessarily a lament for punctured eyes, but only lost eyesight.

Milton's other references to his own blindness often emphasize his normal-looking countenance. In his penultimate sonnet, "To Mr. Cyriak Skinner Upon His Blindness," he declares that "[m]y eyes . . . [are] clear/ To outward view of blemish or of spot" (1-2). Just so, in the *Second Defense*, he responds to Alexander More's charge that he is "a monster, dreadful, ugly, huge, deprived of sight" (313) by stating "Never did I think that I should rival the Cyclops in appearance" (313), for his eyes "have as much the appearance of being uninjured, and are as clear and bright, without a cloud, as the eyes of men who see most keenly" (314). Moreover, in the pamphlet Milton frequently refers to the blindness as a "loss of my eyes" (316); the phrase clearly indicates his vanished eyesight, not the eyeballs. It is probable that Manoa's reference to Samson's "loss of eyes," mentioned above, is meant in this sense.

Milton's claims are corroborated by the Faithorne portraits, one of which constitutes the frontispiece for the *History of Britain* (1670). In his discussion of the work, Masson remarks that

no one can desire a more impressive and authentic portrait of Milton in his later life [than this portrait]. The face is . . . uniquely Milton's. Underneath the broad forehead and arched temples there are the great rings of eye socket, with the blind unblemished eyes in them, drawn straight upon you by your voice . . . (649).<sup>7</sup>

The reaction of Milton's daughter to the Princeton portrait, which was also done by Faithorne and is quite similar to the other Faithorne portrait, confirms their accuracy. When shown the latter, she exclaimed "'Tis my father! . . . I see him! 'tis him!"<sup>8</sup>

In sum, it would seem that in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton made over Samson in his own image, at least in terms of their eyes. Otherwise, they were quite different, physically: Samson possessed a powerful physique, while Milton was, according to some accounts, somewhat slight, though well-proportioned; moreover, though Milton was no Roundhead in matters of grooming, his hair was not as long and thick as Samson's is in the tragedy.

Milton's innovation may have been intended to cause readers of the tragedy to see parallels between himself and Samson, and of course many have, starting at least with Andrew Marvell, whose poem "On Paradise Lost" (1674) almost certainly contains the first print allusion to the play, when it compares Milton

to "... Sampson [groping] the Temple's Posts in spite/The World overwhelming to revenge his sight."<sup>9</sup> In addition to their blindness, other similarities between Milton and his protagonist frequently adduced include the political disappointments suffered by each, their marital strife, and their solicitous fathers. Other critics have dismissed these parallels, pointing out the dissimilarities, such as the fact that Milton took Mary Powell back after their separation, while Samson threatens to tear Dalila to pieces when she tries to become reconciled with him. Nevertheless, autobiographical interpretations of Samson have persisted, and the evidence I have presented provides further confirmation that, at least to some extent, Milton based Samson's representation on himself.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, citations from Milton's poetry and prose are to *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, citations from the Bible are to the Authorized Version.

<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia UP, 1932) vol. V, 179.

<sup>5</sup> See Watson Kirkconnell, *That Invincible Samson: The Theme of "Samson Agonistes" in World Literature with a Translation of His Major Analogues* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor G. Brown, *Milton's Blindness* (New York: Columbia UP, 1934) 22.

<sup>7</sup> David Masson, *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time* (New York: Peter Smith, 1946). See Don Wolfe, *Milton and His England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) for reproductions of the Faithorne portraits.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfe 4.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in *John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957).