

30. A New Turn

- Excuse me! I'm looking for Professor Baumgarten.*
- I'm he. Who are you?*
- A strange mix of things. But principally a new voice assigned to these proceedings.*
- You're quite beautiful. Forgive my colleague. He had a bit too much to drink. New voice, you say?*
- Well, certainly not one to overrule yours or in any way threaten it. After all, I'm only an undergraduate.*
- Please, come in. Sit down. You're certainly a welcome relief. I must tell you, I've almost been stretched to the breaking point of late. This business of endlessly circling around a subject, of not cutting through to something clear – do you know what I mean? – it's a horror!*
- I understand. It's not at all what you're used to.*
- Oh, you've said so much. Thirty years of teaching students to think clearly and logically about truth and now this.*
- There's unfairness and injustice and a certain amount of cruelty you've had to put up with.*
- Oh, you're a wonder! You're an angel!*
- You've been a captive audience in the worst sense. Under normal conditions, you wouldn't have tolerated it. You would've walked away.*
- Especially when it goes on and on, dear girl, and seems to be plugged into your very thoughts. To be maliciously circumventing every possible objection you can make.*
- You've suffered a great deal. And if it weren't for the fact this is a kind of thought experiment, it wouldn't be possible to justify it.*

With my mind's eye I can see as if seated in darkened rows those who will one day visit this site called *On Truthtelling*. Such a phantom readership is really the common mind in all its range and variability with the one thing that can be relied on as never failing to show up and, at the very least, lurk

about in the shadows.

So much by way of saying that truth-telling forever attaches itself to interest, curiosity, wonder, admiration, elevation, worship, and so on and that all of these can just as easily be found where truth-telling *isn't*. To be warding off boredom and to be telling the truth at the same time is only the most unflattering way of depicting this tension and struggle. Not being involved in the sort of project that creates an argumentative edifice allowing for a step-by-step satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, I continually find myself having to improvise, having to create and discover over and over again.

– You're with him, aren't you?

Not to dabble grossly in fiction but not to pretend I don't dabble in it – this might be just another way to put it. To make my life more interesting than I sometimes lived it is virtually forced on me by the threat of letting this work run down, lose its dramatic impetus, and, with ever-circling reflections, take the form of an interminable soliloquy. I like to think that I have always craved a soul sister in my life and that, if she had ever popped up in it as Hilda in Halvard Solness's, I would have been more than willing to be completely devoted to her. This fantasy of mine as the potential knight waiting to serve his princess has of course its ironic counterpart in my inordinate desire for spiritual freedom and independence.

– I want him to go on, of course. But not with the idea of changing your mind. I just want him to have the chance to fly.

– To fly?

– Yes, to fly. Ever so high. Oh, I know, it sounds silly but I would like to see it and if you decide you don't want to be here, it won't happen.

What essentially is left to cover except many more years of university studies? What essentially is left to say except that this was my spiritual course as I found it and did what I could to make it fly?

– What in God's name are you talking about?

What more can I probe as subject matter except the many essays I wrote over these years?

– He needs me now and yet I'm dependent on you. Without you here, I'm

frivolous, disappointing, nothing more than a silly enthusiast.

What more is there to say about my fixation on the heroic and how it kept popping up in my writing assignments?

– I'm not going to help him fly, whatever that means. I'm thoroughly against his crass egoism.

Certainly I didn't shy away from looking at it from all angles. But this is as much as to say that, first, I recognized that it is a stretchable term even to the point of being applied to ordinary people. And that, second, it can be taken positively or negatively and elevated to the very clouds or ranked with destruction and damnation.

– You're of course much more erudite than I am but are you sure you know everything there is to know about egoism?

Does this mean that the heroic is dissolved or just that it is on a sliding scale? What does the average man have to do with Oedipus or Hamlet?

– I could've popped up in another scene and been nothing more than a frivolous fantasy and a piece of erotic fluff. But I came to this one because I wanted to be something more. Professor Baumgarten, I need a bit more substance, that's what it is. I just wish you would think it worthwhile to stick around and help me make something new and possibly even thrilling come about. Oh, Professor, think of it as a possibility for philosophy. A kind of thought experiment. You can be just as you are and speak your mind and tell me when you think I'm being foolish or self-indulgent or just plain stupid. You can even tell me if you think I'd be better off in one of your classes.

Where can I touch down on this matter? There was the Milton course with *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. And so heroes as different as the Satan of the first poem, the Christ of the second, the Adam and Eve of the first, and the strongman Samson in Milton's drama with the eponymous title.

– If I'm to be as I am, dear girl, I'll tell you what should happen, This spell should be broken, the wand of the experimenter thrown deeper than plummets sound, and I, a wizened-faced and thoroughly fed up Ariel, given my freedom.

There are types and many different types. Almost every different set of circumstances generates a new type.

– *Do you really want to leave, Professor Baumgarten?*

– *What are you proposing?*

There are clearly false types. But is the Satan of *Paradise Lost* one of them?

– *A game of chess.*

Milton the theologian, the author of *The Christian Doctrine*, seems to have thought so.

– *I'm sorry, I'm going. I need time to recover from this and then get on with my own work. If you've got any sympathy for what I've just been through, you'll let me out of here without any attempts to — you're as bewitching as hell but I won't fall victim to you. A philosophical castle in the air? Is that what you want? Good heavens, that's more suitable to literature than to philosophy. And to make me part of that? Me? An analytic philosopher? A logician? I'm not the sort to dabble in the absurd. My name isn't Lewis Carroll. And by the way I'm late, I'm late. For a very important date. Goodbye.*

But as many commentators have noted, his poem or his poetic instinct had its own say.

– *Professor Chalmers?*

– *Oh, that was an excellent dream! That was — good heavens, where am I?*

– *In your office of course.*

– *But where is Theo? Who are you? My God, I feel like I've spent three months touring Ireland in a motorcar and now have been abruptly returned to an earlier dream not nearly as pleasant.*

– *Really? Was it that good?*

– *Oh, it was excellent, my dear! Astounding! I was all over Ireland. What a beautiful country! And the people are truly friendly. Even the ones you pick up on the road.*

– I'm glad you had such a wonderful dream. I certainly didn't want to bring you back to a nightmare.

– Well, it wasn't a nightmare exactly though it was very strange. It was like being caught in the head of a postmodern — where's Theo?

– Let me explain. I wanted him to stay but he insisted that, if he were to be truly himself, he had to leave and get on with his own work.

– Have I woken up yet?

– Dear Professor Chalmers. In a way I'm glad it didn't work out with Professor Baumgarten. I'm sure you'll be ever so much more help to me.

The phenomenon of Milton the poet being taken in a direction that significantly departed from and undercut the one he took as a systematic thinker (which of course is not totally absent from his poem because he declares at the outset that his purpose is to teach God's ways to men) wasn't something I looked at very deeply then. Nonetheless it weighed enough on me that I saw him as one who, although enmeshed in the doctrinal points of his faith, was forced to return all of this to fiction as the more telling and truthful principle. Principally it was the morality-based and morality-engendering myths of Christianity that he returned to and that, so far as he could make them vibrant and coherent, were also a matter of rendering the corresponding morality no longer pure, unmixed, and entirely independent of contrary and conflicting elements. Here was the truth that dared not speak its name but could only reveal itself stealthily so that all of us might receive the grace of being less than doctrinaires in our heart of hearts.

– Are you a student here?

– Yes, I study philosophy.

– Really? I've never seen you before.

– I just arrived. Tell me, do you think a philosopher should really live his philosophy like Thoreau says?

– Do you mean go off into the woods and criticize society from a distance?

– I mean caring about it so much you think about it every single day.

- *I'm sure there are many who do just that.*
- *I mean eating with it, sleeping with it, practically going to bed with it.*
- *That might not be for everyone.*
- *I'm not talking about everyone. I'm talking about philosophers.*
- *But there are many different types of philosophers.*
- *Isn't that begging the question?*
- *I don't see how. Why should anyone be constrained to follow a particular path when there might be others equally important?*

That we are inhabited by many voices that often conflict with one another is the still-vague sentiment I would like to bring out more. Usually there is the other way of looking at it, namely, that there are simply lines of argument or points of view that we're free to take from others and make our own. The surface play of our intentions and operations is thus treated as if it were the whole of truth-telling or rather the only meaningful part cancelling all below it without prejudice and remainder. To raise a question or have a doubt about this usually gets targeted as being morally suspect.

- *What're you doing?*
- *We're going to play a friendly game of chess.*
- *But I've been here long enough.*
- *Professor Chalmers!...*
- *No, I've got other things to do.*
- *I could've popped up in another scene and been nothing more than a frivolous fantasy and a piece of erotic fluff. But I came to this one because I wanted to be something more. Professor Chalmers, I need a bit more substance, that's what it is. I just wish you would think it worthwhile to stick around and help me make something new and possibly even thrilling come about. Oh, Professor, think of it as a possibility for philosophy. A kind of thought experiment. You can be just as you are and speak your mind and tell me when you think I'm being foolish or self-indulgent or just plain*

stupid. You can even tell me if you think I'd be better off in one of your classes.

Still I'm confronted with the insurmountable fact that one voice wishes to dominate and lord it over all the others. Be it a voice in the wilderness or one of the many voices of community and consensus, its will is to have its world organized as values or valuations descending from it in rank. What significant difference is there between playing at this as if it were merely make-believe and actually working away at it? It is an uneasy dictatorship of the mind that has to partly democratize itself because it is always labouring to give fully legitimate birth to itself. The so many things that arouse antipathy in us even while being formally recognized and saluted are the traces of this incessant struggle to be benignly and inclusively on top.

– You're an admirer of his, that's pretty clear. But how do you fit in?

– Professor Chalmers, there's a lot of indifference and non-recognition in the world. The gap between what we want most for ourselves and what we end up with is too great to bear.

– For all people?

– At some point I would say yes.

– And your hero?

– I'm here for a good time, Professor. Let's not have any more depressing thoughts.

So I think now that there was this dominant voice in me at the time of taking these courses whose particular bent was to demand that other voices present themselves in fair and open combat. Of course the most imposing strength and greatest power of these other voices came from the outside where they, operating as dominant voices in their own right, challenged me to abandon mine and enter into their far-flung weal. While it is not easy to say how far any of this went or how far it goes at any time, I have little doubt that some of these other voices brought about dissension and discord in me that needed to be quelled. Both those that hoisted the flag of traditional longstanding values and those that sounded the trumpet of new and timely ones were strong enough to brazen their way up to the borders of my post-Nietzschean realm and assault its weakest defences. How like a Roman emperor I then sallied forth to meet them and subdue them just as

they, in their parleys and councils, sought to subdue me. No, it can't be said that I ever felt my seat to be truly shaken but no more can it be said that I didn't relish the challenge and risk to it.

– You're as beautiful as can be. Unfortunately, you don't move me as much as those two boys in my class.

– I'll go in drag, professor – then we'll see.

Wasn't Professor Wyke himself an argument for Christianity? Didn't I feel this highly intelligent, Oxford-educated professor, this competent, efficient, and serious-minded teacher to be such an argument? What was the distance between him and me that he should believe and call himself a Christian and I should not? Had it anything to do with his being any less courageous, sincere, and truthful than me? Or had it anything to do with his being better or less evil? Ultimately I only ended up getting glimpses of someone with interests and preoccupations very much compatible with his Christian faith and so someone separated from me only in this sense and no other.

– This is some professor of his?

– Yes, he was driven to contest my hero's – I shall call him my hero from now on – swipe at Christianity. He wrote this essay, you see, on Samson Agonistes that cut against the grain of Milton's purported intention for it and so Wyke, being a Christian, naturally resisted it.

– Are you sure?

– Do you know Milton's Samson Agonistes? It's about Samson after Delila has cut his hair and just before he destroys the temple and kills all the Philistines.

– I'm familiar with the Biblical story.

– Wyke took issue with my hero's reading of Milton's dramatic retelling of this story.

– But surely he could've done so for reasons that have nothing to do with his being a Christian.

– No, he made it clear he was against it because he wanted Samson to conform to the model of a hero who learns patience and moderation (I'm

talking about Professor Wyke) through suffering and when my hero analysed it and threw it into a different light, he couldn't do much more than say "Look, I'm with Milton on this and your proof doesn't count as much as his doctrinal account of what it is to be a Christian hero."

"With Inward Eyes Illuminated"

"It is the contention of this essay that, to paraphrase what Samson's father, Manoa, says at the end of *Samson Agonistes*, Samson acquits himself like Samson, is more like Samson than even he himself knows, at the very beginning and throughout the drama and not just at its conclusion. That is, contrary to what many critics think, I contend that the greatest renewal of Samson's spirit has already occurred *prior to* the poem's action and that the latter merely provides the vehicle – the circumstances and events – for its fullest possible expression. But let us pause: *merely* here might be a misleading term. What we see in the poem is a full-blown dramatic realization of this spirit reviving and surpassing that which animated the stupendous strongman and people's warrior of former times. It is precisely this strength of mind, however hidden or obscured, however seemingly contradicted by swings of mood and despairing thoughts, which in its final movement confers upon Samson the highest degree of honour and heroic magnificence.

"Of course the terms 'renewing' and 'reviving' are in some sense interchangeable and so, in order to draw a useful distinction between them, I will employ the image of a vital organ and then point to the former term as referring to what is primary and the necessary condition of a body's returning to full health and vigour. The organ, if damaged or wasted, must regenerate; so too that part of the human spirit which, due to injury or illness, draws down both the inner and outer man, turning robust activity of mind and body into lethargy and despair. Yet conceptual clarity would perhaps be best arrived at by, at the same time, thinking of spiritual renewal as a total process, as that, in other words, which includes the highest degree of spiritual vitality and recovery and also includes within itself the potential for even surpassing a former state of spiritual strength and self-sufficiency.

"Like the regeneration of an organ within the body, spiritual renewal in the primary or necessary sense begins and may continue for a long time in silence and with little outward show. Then again, there are all sorts of oddities and what seems a sign of sickness – might even *be* a sign of sickness – might also be a sign of health. The latter would be particularly true in the case of an exceptional person who, in taking the most profound

measure of himself (that is, at his lowest point or the most critical time of his life), adopts a standard of behaviour at odds with what normally passes for prudence or moderation. That which counts as excess to others comes to him then as, for example, the affirmation of self even at the cost of losing life. In the case of Samson, it is a kind of outwardly rough but inwardly delicate balancing act – a kind of rough dance along a spiritual tightrope which might see him end with extraordinary success or plummet headlong to destruction or both together.

“There is evidence to support the notion that, prior to taking a break from onerous toil just outside his prison-workhouse, Samson already knows for himself (rough-hewn though it may be) a spiritual course. It can be summed up in three words: faith, knowledge, and passion. It combines that of which he is highly conscious with that of which he is only partially conscious. Its unifying principle is the will to preserve the integrity of his character in suffering. We can look no further at this point because his prospects seem so bleak, because all that retains value for him is the continuity, however weakened or threatened, of his present life with the past one as well as, furthermore, his enduring the trials and tribulations which he believes in greatest part to be warranted. Such is the surface movement of his psyche and only when we look deeper do we see that the series of radical encounters with certain people and events brings to light the unspoken, barely thought, deeply buried intimations of greatest import: the hope, fantastic one though it be, that he might yet fulfil his divine mission and utterly redeem himself.

“Now it may be asked: what is the standing of Samson’s faith in God? And how does this faith bear directly on him? He is one whom, due to his breaking of a sacred trust (i.e., his promise not to reveal the source of his strength), God has apparently abandoned. The Philistines have put out his eyes and hold him as their prized captive. They work him to the point of exhaustion every day. They feed, clothe, and house him like an ill-treated slave. They add to his misery by taunting and tormenting him. Moreover, he suffers bouts of black depression and torments himself with self-recrimination and reminders of past glory. Even after some fellow countrymen and his father have come to comfort and counsel him, the latter even holding out the prospect of delivering him from bondage, Samson still may utter such sentiments as pertain to his ‘sense of Heav’ns desertion.’ Yet at no point does he impugn God for his dire fall from grace and in fact checks himself when his thoughts grow too bitter and reproachful.

Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine Predilection; what if all foretold
Had been fulfill'd but through my own default,
Whom have I to complain of but myself?

“There is an element of ambiguity at this early point of the poem in that the above passage immediately follows his citing the divine promise which, taken by itself, gives no hint of having been made conditionally.

Promise was that I
Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver;

“Though quite understandable given the circumstances, it would nonetheless appear that it is only Samson’s *interpretation* of his drastic change of fortune which renders the keeping of the vow about his strength, his sacred trust, a condition of his fulfilling the divine mission. And if such is the case, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that he harbours some hope of a contrary sort.

“The moral significance with which Samson invests the breaking of a sacred vow and the forfeiting of divine trust cannot be understood apart from a sense of his ongoing belief in God’s reality, power, and righteousness. Personal misery and other issues or preoccupations might obscure, even disallow the most direct manifestation of faith; nonetheless the reiterated cry against himself only goes to show the extraordinary claim he believes God made upon him and which now resides in his worthiest acceptance of the divine judgement upon him.

Spare that proposal, Father, spare the trouble
Of that solicitation; let me here,
As I deserve, pay on my punishment,
And expiate, if possible, my crime . . .

“Insofar as there is a claim to human greatness here, it follows only from the knowledge of a divine dispensation and appointment. Nevertheless it still bears the earmarks of excess which, never far from the extraordinary and incomprehensible, raises the suspicions of ordinary men who cannot fathom its spiritual ground.

Be penitent and for thy fault contrite,
But act not in thy own affliction, Son;
Repent the sin, but if the punishment

Thou canst avoid, self-preservation bids;
.....
God will relent and quit thee all his debt;
Who evermore approves and more accepts
(Best pleas'd with humble and filial submission)
Him who imploring mercy sues for life,
Than who self-rigorous choose death as due;
Which argues over-just, and self-displeas'd
For self-offence, more than for God offended.

"All that is the rule and conventional good sense in the above misses the point of what sustains Samson in his plight and keeps alive his potential for 'some great act.' It is the difference between a taut bowstring just waiting for the arrow and the weapon which has been unloosed, set aside, and eventually forgotten. Samson knows that, blinded as he is, a return to home, hearth, and family would undo this bowstring forever.

Now, blind, dishearten'd, sham'd, dishonor'd, quell'd,
To what can I be useful, wherein serve
My Nation, and the work from Heav'n impos'd,
But to sit idle on the household hearth,
A burdenous drone; to visitants a gaze,
Or pitied object, these redundant locks
Robustious to no purpose clust'ring down,
Vain monument of strength;

"A state of supreme spiritual preparedness, in sum, is what the most profound suffering helps to sustain in him and, hardly knowing it himself, he awaits the divine arrow which, being the bow himself, he can send hurtling towards his enemies.

"To employ an Aristotelian term, Samson's *anagnorisis*, his recognition of his fall from grace, has already taken place before we encounter him at the beginning of the poem. All indications are that the time he has spent in prison has been sufficient for the most tortuous self-examination.

Ease to the body some, none to the mind
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,
But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, what once I was, and what am now.

“Over and over again he puts before his mind’s eye (and, to a lesser extent, before those who now come before him) the bitter truth of what he once was, what he is now, and, more importantly, how the change occurred and its significance. The whole is surveyed from top to bottom; no relevant detail is shunted aside or obfuscating or equivocating one added. Exaggeration, if there is any, only comes in the form of self-recrimination.

Am I not sung and proverb’d for a Fool
In every street; do they not say, “How well
Are come upon him his deserts?”

“Everywhere he looks he catches the measure of a thing (which ironically sets off his blindness): the length and breadth of his affliction (‘Yet that which was the worst now least afflicts me / Blindness, for had I sight, confus’d with shame / How could I once look up or heave the head . . .’); the hidden hubris of his past glory (‘Like a petty God / I walk’d about . . .’); the sheer folly by which he fell (‘This well I knew, nor was at all surpris’d / But warn’d by oft experience.’); its moral significance (‘But I God’s counsel have not kept, his holy secret / Presumptuous have publish’d . . .’); its wide-ranging consequences (‘Father, I do acknowledge and confess / That I . . . have brought scandal to Israel . . .’); the limits of his blameworthiness (‘That fault I take not on me, but transfer / On Israel’s Governors . . .’); and, finally, the extent of his most cunning and captivating enemy’s treachery (‘Love-quarrels oft in pleasing concord end / Not wedlock-treachery endangering life’). Over and over again what is put before our eyes is not that these numerous insights and instances of critical awareness are the work of the moment but, rather, the carefully refined product of that millstone in his mind which laboured while he turned the other. Without this hard-earned knowledge, Samson could not acquit himself like Samson in the regeneration of his mind and the renewal of that fighting spirit to which the poem amply attests.

“Appearances can be deceiving. This is the oft-banded truism but I think it is quite appropriate with respect to how others view Samson in his downcast state and how he views himself at times as one who has been abandoned by God. When certain friends and equals of his tribe, which form the Chorus, first come before him, they immediately compare the blind, soiled, and exhausted captive, the seemingly beaten, dispirited, and inconsolable hero, to the hero of old who committed the most amazing feats and stood high, if not highest, among friend and foe alike. It is a reiteration and elaboration upon the theme which Samson himself introduces when he compares the glory of his past calling to the misery of his present helplessness and

captivity. Similarly, Manoa comes before him with sad exclamations concerning the miserable change of his son from a one-man army to a sightless and defenceless mortal. Thus the standard of measure is his past glory and, continuously applied in this way, cannot help but make a bad situation look even worse than it is.

“It goes without saying that these two extremes of fortune and misfortune must, in some sense or other, be defining characteristics of Samson’s emotional life. But care must be taken here; there is every reason to think that there is a difference between the way he thinks and feels when his mind or body is not fully employed and when some task is at hand.

Nor am I in the list of them that hope;
Hopeless are all my evils, all remediless;
This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,
No long petition, speedy death,
The close of all my miseries, and my balm.

“The low point which the above represents comes just after his father has gone off to prosecute the means of his deliverance. Samson, having no interest in this business, lapses into the lethargy which preceded the Chorus’s coming. He laments having to bear the same dull round of pain which seems to lie endlessly before him and so, with no sign of relief on the horizon (that is, relief in the sense of being able to redeem himself), he gives himself up to the despairing view that God has abandoned him.

I was his nurstling once and choice delight . . .
.....
But now hath cast me off as never known . . .

“Shortly thereafter, Dalila arrives upon the scene and we have this from him.

Out, out Hyena, these are thy wanted arts.
And arts of every women like thee,
To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray,
Then as repentant to submit, beseech,
And reconciliation move with feign’d remorse . . .

“The spirited attack goes on at length, never faltering and then, when the giant Harapha shows up, becomes even more ferocious.

Then put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy Helmet
And Brigandine of brass, thy broad Habergeon,
Vaint-brace and Greaves, and Gauntlet, add thy Spear
A Weaver's beam, and seven times folded shield,
I only with an Oak'n staff will meet thee,
And raise such outcries on thy clatter'd Iron,
Which long shall not withhold me from thy head,
That in a little time, while breath remains thee,
Thou oft shall wish thyself at Gath to boast
Again in safety . . .

"The point to be made here is that Samson, unlike a truly beaten and profoundly despairing person, can change his mood rapidly to suit changing circumstances and, more than this, meet even the greatest challenge.

"After Samson's baiting the blustering giant (and almost coming across himself like a bully), the Chorus, mindful perhaps that a sharp tongue and a fiery disposition are not necessarily an advantage in all situations, points to the saint and his virtue of patience as the most likely and appropriate way for Samson to behave. But patience, heaven knows, has already been his path, that is, the only kind of patience a man like Samson could ever know and exercise. It is the patience he has already shown at the mill, suffering the daily round of exhausting work, deplorable conditions, and unrelenting abuse. It is the patience of the violent man who must unlearn violence or, let us say, learn to redeploy it, internalize it, even use it against himself. It is the patience of the recently caught and caged tiger, the rampaging bull elephant brought to heel, the stallion broken for the first time and with the saddle fresh on his back. It is the patience of the powder keg which, installed in some high place, awaits the secret order, the match, and its highest purpose. It is, in short, *not* the kind of patience which can endure an idle or helpless situation forever, become enured to it, even perhaps grow to like it. Samson's head swarms with hornets and he could not become a more reconciled, submissive, saint-like person for all the trying in the world.

"The most disturbing aspect of Samson's passionate grief, his death wish, is as much the key to what he can do as what he cannot do. He cannot forget his former glory any more than he can forget his monumental folly (i.e., revealing his secret to Dalila); he cannot forgive himself for the betrayal of divine trust and the ingratitude to the God who raised him to such a wondrous height; and he cannot relinquish in the deepest recesses of his soul the small hope which bulks so large in terms of sustaining him in his deepest misery while at the same time wearing him down with its futility.

What he can do, however, is treat everything which gives him reason to despair like fissionable material and hold himself at the most potentially explosive level. He can enlist his blackest thoughts to punish and purge himself of what was formerly slack, weak, and under-used in him. He can devise an alternative hope or ancillary plan, that is, death as a happy deliverance, such that it actually becomes easier to push through every day carrying and keeping alive the more futile hope of still accomplishing his divine mission. He can hold within himself such an unbearable degree of tension through inner agitation necessarily constrained by outward circumstance that, in conjunction with his naturally defiant ways, he must inevitably grow reckless with his life and find relief in some perilous mission or else suicidally bring down the enemy's wrath upon him."

- Good heavens! Samson the suicide bomber! Is this what Milton portrays?

"The question we might put before ourselves at this juncture is whether the incidents within the poem are in any sense the basis of Samson's arduous and highly precarious inner life. Suppose, for example, he was not summoned to the temple by the Philistian officer. What then would be the significance of his encounters with his countrymen (i.e., the Chorus), his father, his Philistian wife, Dalila, and his Philistian foe, Harapha? Would he likely change his mind about returning home with his father? Have these encounters influenced him in some fundamental way or shown a secret predisposition towards some more moderate course? Is it not in fact entirely the opposite? When Harapha runs off presumably to the authorities, Samson considers the likelihood of stirring up trouble against himself and then says:

But come what will, my deadliest foe will prove
My speediest friend, by death to rid me hence,
The worst that he can give me, to me the best.
Yet so it may fall out, because thir end
Is hate, not help to me, it may with mine
Draw thir own ruin who attempt the deed.

"Or, to look at it another way, do these encounters bring to Samson a certain state of mind that enables him to do what he otherwise could not? Is the tongue-lashing of Dalila or the browbeating of Harapha necessary to keeping alive the hope of fulfilling his divine mission? Do these incidents help to make preeminent the thought that his enemy is still about and mocking him, thereby restricting, diminishing, or even cancelling out the ones he has of his guiltiness and lost glory? And does all this then allow for a refocussing of his violent thoughts and tendencies such that, instead of unceasingly flagellating

himself for his past failures and weaknesses, he develops once again the taste for battle.

“Just as it would not be unreasonable to answer yes to the above questions, so would it not be to the following ones: Does Samson finally submit to the most prudent-sounding and conventional advice of Manoa and the Chorus in a way that can only be called ironic? That is, does it prove to be the means by which he finally arrives at the idea not to be more patient or forbearing in his affliction than he already is, but only to *seem* so?

“What we are asking then is this: does it prove to be the necessary element in his spiritual renewal that makes him sufficient to capitalize upon events? That indirectly offers him not what he already has, namely, strength, but what he doesn’t have, namely, strategy? The art of deception, the playing of the fox as well as the lion, this is what Samson has never learned (but only been the victim of) before the critical point where he accepts to put on a show in front of the Philistines.”

– *Well, I’ll be damned! Is this supposed to be his heroic magnificence?*

– *It would hardly be there if he kept being stupid.*

– *Why don’t we have other opinions on the matter?*

– *Other scholars? That would be an extension of the Chorus’s waffling back and forth.*

– *Dear girl, how can you be so dismissive?*

– *The Chorus says this between lines 1268 and 1296: “Oh how comely it is and how reviving to the spirits of just men long oppressed, when God into the hands of their deliverer, puts invincible might to quell the mighty of the earth, the oppressor, the brute and boisterous force of violent men hardy and industrious to support tyrannic power, but raging to pursue the righteous and all such as honour Truth; he all their ammunition and feats of war defeats with plain heroic magnitude of mind and celestial vigour armed their armouries and magazines condemns, renders them useless, while with winged expedition swift as the lightning glance he executes his errand on the wicked, who surprised lose their defence distracted and amazed. But patience is more oft the exercise of saints, the trial of their fortitude, making them each his own deliverer, and victor over all that tyranny or fortune can inflict, either of these is in thy lot, Samson, with might endued above the*

sons of men; but sight bereaved may chance to number thee with those whom patience finally must crown." So, you see, the Chorus thinks he can be both things, a heroic avenger and patient saint without any sense of how these conflict.

– And so are all critics in the same boat?

– More or less. Or else at both ends waging war against each other.

All squabbling and struggle, even the bitterest, has at bottom a difference of accentuation. Hence one often battles with the feeling that, even though one should be absolutely right on such and such a matter for such and such reasons, one is never fully in the right. For Milton and Wyke and I would venture to say several generations of readers, what counted most in this drama was the movement away from paganism and from the hubris of the hero in ancient Greek tragedy towards Christian submission and obedience in faith. For me, on the other hand, what counted most was how the first clung to the second and could not be left behind. How the ostensibly non-Christian elements of excess and pride infiltrate this quasi-Christian drama and complicate it irremediably.

– To deny excess and pride as operative factors in Samson's continuing to be a people's warrior is like denying these factors have anything to do with being a warrior.

– The anatomy of a warrior then. Is that what's called for?

– Let them find one who's both saint-like and not a Mahatma Gandhi. If they do, then Gandhi was all wrong when he thought it could only be done without slaughtering people.

What I continually find myself having to resist is the temptation to baldly take up sides and argue here and there on behalf of myself as an exceptionally serious and committed writer of essays that were mere university assignments. Certainly the restraint of my present self springs less from modesty than from wanting to avoid the all too egoistic, that is, from wanting to avoid scanting and obscuring the ego's enormous range and diversity. Keeping a critical distance between my present and past selves is what I have always been attempting to do in this essay to prevent the first from narrowing itself down to an all too polemical self. At the same time I'm well aware that I have been continually arguing for my old self by *not* arguing, that is, by omitting many objections and counter-arguments,

principally the ones that professors put down on my assignments, that, whether I want it to turn out this way or not, engender the disposition or frame of mind of having *no need* to argue.

– My God! – you’re taking notes!

When I look back, I think I had faith enough in my own arguments but never in the assumption that things would finally get resolved by argument. Put down what arguments you would, all it took was one question mark in the margins to unsettle them. Oh, definitely there was always something that could have been written better, more clearly, and so on but, when all is said and done, you would still be essentially where you were and your critic where he was. Would Wyke ever have accepted my interpretation of *Samson Agonistes* without becoming a Nietzschean like me or would I have ever accepted his without becoming a Christian? All that came between us as common ground was nothing more than what results from the limitations of one point of view in isolating and excluding the other. For him, the hero of Milton’s one and only tragedy was magnificent in a special way because he had gone beyond the earlier type of tragic hero. For me, on the other hand, he was magnificent only because he wasn’t essentially different from it.

– Oh, my hero, you’re so profound!

God only knows there was much more in these two years of honours courses that either had me focussing on the heroic in a constative way or acting it out in a performative. It was virtually impossible for me to do otherwise because, however erratic and uncertain my intellectual flight, however low to the ground it seemed at times, it at least provided me with a sense of flying and not simply standing on the ground watching others do it. No, I won’t go so far as to think that everything I did was the greatest scholarship but certainly everything I did was invested with passion. Never did I avoid exploring an area out of fear and in fact, if I did experience this, I took that to be a sign that I should explore it.

– What do you think of that, Professor Chalmers? Isn’t it wonderful?

– No, it’s too puffed up for my taste. Everyone could go around blowing their horn like that. It’s unseemly.

– Professor Chalmers, if others were blowing their horn just like that, just like he’s doing, then they would also be blowing the whistle on themselves. They would be investigating everything that gets hidden because it’s not

particularly attractive or self-flattering. And if they were only blowing their horn in the usual way, then they would only sound hollow and as other people get turned off by it, so would they.

At the same time the more essays I wrote, the more it weighed on me that they were mere university assignments. Rough typewritten things compared to all the newly bound, printed, and handsome books on display in the university bookstore. It may very well be true that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover but it is also true that a good cover impresses a good deal. Similarly having one's work printed and published and held aloft for all the world to see. Yet something kept me from making the slightest effort to get any of my essays out to the public as if the demands placed upon me by such a move would have been more worrisome and wearisome than any possible gratification or benefit. Certainly I was aware that as university assignments they had a liberty and licence they never could have had as articles published in a scholarly journal. On the other hand, what other possibilities were there given that, taken together, they constituted a very mixed collection with no apparent unity? Even though I may have realized then to what extent I was fixated on the heroic, I wasn't so perspicacious as to know how it fitted in with truth-telling. It would have therefore struck me as being very self-indulgent and unappealing to make it a subject or theme. No, it took a lot more plodding before I finally discovered the one subject where, being able to take up unabashedly my weaknesses, I was able to do the same with my strengths.

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