## CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

## Waiting for God: John Milton's Poems of 1671

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I

THE YOUNG JOHN MILTON concluded his poem *Il Penseroso* with a prayer for a peaceful old age,

And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell
Of every star that heaven doth shew,
And every herb that sips the dew;
Till old experience do attain
To something like prophetic strain.
These pleasures Melancholy give,
And I with thee will choose to live.

The political realities of Milton's last years were somewhat different to the situation anticipated in this early poem but the idea of forming experience into prophetic stylistics remains highly relevant for Milton's

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<sup>1</sup> Il Penseroso, 167–76. Quotations from Milton's poetry are taken from the Longman 2nd edn., John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems, ed. John Carey (Harlow, 1997); John Milton: Paradise Lost, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, 1998), unless otherwise stated. All references to Milton's prose are from Complete Prose Works of John Milton, ed. Don M. Wolfe, et al. (New Haven, 1953–82), 8 vols., hereafter, Yale Prose. The following abbreviations are used within the main text, Ode for On the Morning of Christ's Nativity, PL for Paradise Lost, PRg for Paradise Regained, and SAg for Samson Agonistes.

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Restoration publications. The voice of John—as Baptist, Evangelist, and Miltonic narrator—might be said to constitute *Paradise Regained* while, throughout the 1671 volume, we hear Milton's dialogue with Pauline witness. My particular interest here however will be in tracing the means by which old experience might attain prophetic status and, specifically, the unexpected choice of dramatic compositional techniques within the 1671 volume as the appropriate manner in which to rehearse the Miltonic message one final time.

Milton's professional interest in theatre and the dramatic spans his career. Gordon Campbell's recent biographical research has uncovered a tantalising family link to the London theatres but in any case there are numerous proofs in Milton's writing (not least the Trinity College manuscript drafts for an epic; the argument of Eikonoklastes; or the structure of Paradise Lost, Book IX ) of his abiding fascination with, and fear of, the emotive power of drama.<sup>2</sup> Despite their disconcerting lack of action, the 1671 poems are intimately attentive to dramatic issues. We find a vehement insistence on voicing arguments throughout the volume: to the extent that both texts are on the verge of being constructed as wholly inward, staged within the mind of their respective protagonists. The interest in dramatic form in Samson Agonistes is obvious from its opening Headnote, Of that Sort of Dramatic Poem Which Is Called Tragedy, and is made manifest in the poem's lexical and compositional debt to ancient Greek tragedy. The poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Gerard Manley Hopkins were both fascinated by the influence of Greek metrics on Milton's dramatic poem but the most recent generation of critics have turned to the politics of style, reading Samson Agonistes against the context of the Restoration public theatre.<sup>3</sup> This is easy to see in a dramatic poem that specifically denies the contemporary stage and in which the blind antagonist topples the idolators' 'theatre' (SAg, 1605). Now, in addition, the critic Stephen Zwicker has argued that Paradise Regained should also be read as a repudiation of Restoration drama. He thereby proposes that the 1671 volume in its entirety is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Gordon Campbell, A Milton Chronology (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Sharon Achenstein, 'Samson Agonistes and the Drama of Dissent', Milton Studies, 33, (1997), 133–58; Blair Worden, 'Milton, Samson Agonistes and the Restoration' in Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History, Gerald MacLean, ed. (Cambridge, 1995), 111–36; Laura Lunger Knoppers, Historicizing Milton: Spectacle, Power, and Poetry in Restoration England (Athens, Georgia, 1994); David Loewenstein, 'The Revenge of the Saint: Radical Religion and Politics in Samson Agonistes', Milton Studies, 33 (1997), 159–80; Nicholas Jose, Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature, 1660–1671 (Basingstoke, 1984).

intended to challenge the galling dominance of the Royalist dramatic mode of heroic drama.<sup>4</sup>

This argument for a conscious awareness of specific Restoration dramatic tastes within the 1671 volume is valid. The rhymed heroic plays of the 1660s were the late Stuart equivalent to the court masque in the earlier Caroline period, offering neo-Platonic structures through which to disseminate the Royalist myth of Restoration. Their cultural ascendancy was longer lasting than one might suspect given that their spectacular displays, musical interludes and emotional reversals were soon to translate into a developing taste for operatics on the English stage. In staging debates of political theory and theological dispute, both Miltonic texts consist in revealing not only the private expression of doubts but a public challenge to the current state of Restoration drama, not least in the priority they give to hearing over visual display. However, the pertinence of Milton's oppositional dramaturgy is best seen when one also allows the reworking of Milton's much earlier Ludlow *Maske* to be considered as fundamental to the construction of the 1671 volume.

The masque was only performed once, on 29 September 1634, but the extant textual variants suggest a complicated process of early collaboration and ongoing Miltonic revision. There is a working copy of 'A maske' in the Trinity College manuscript and another early version in an unidentified hand exists in the so-called Bridgewater manuscript. It used to be thought that this might have functioned as a prompt book for the production in Ludlow but Sprott's careful analysis of all the extant versions of Milton's text made this seem less likely. In any case, a text entitled *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* was printed under Henry Lawes's supervision in 1637 for the publisher Humphrey Robinson and later a further version of *A Mask* is included within Milton's *Poems 1645* and once again in his *Poems 1673*. Surprisingly perhaps, it was here in the occasional masquing text of the 1630s that the great Miltonic dialectic on the freedom of the will was first heard and it seems that reworking the Ludlow *Maske* became something of a lifetime obsession

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Steven N. Zwicker, 'Milton, Dryden, and the politics of literary controversy', 137–58 in Maclean, ed., *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration*. Parker was also intrigued by the dramatic elements of *Paradise Regained* and speculated on the early composition of a dramatic version of the poem. See William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biographical Commentary*, revised and edited by Gordon Campbell (Oxford, 1996), vol. ii, pp. 1139–42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For more detailed information, see S. E. Sprott, *John Milton A Maske: the earlier versions* (Toronto, 1973) and the headnote to *A Masque presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634 [Comus]* in Carey, ed., *Milton: Shorter Poems*, pp. 173–8. As Carey notes, it is probable that Milton actually had his Trinity manuscript variants read to him when preparing copy for *Poems* (1673).

for Milton—presumably because it explored such core metaphysical and theological questions and because it encountered such fundamental logical impasses.

We find references to the Circe myth, amounting to a Miltonic shorthand for all forms of moral bankruptcy, scattered throughout the political prose and, of course, it is well-known that the Lady's dramatised temptation is returned to and refined within Milton's epic. In Paradise Lost, the Maske is mined for (amongst other things) its temptation debate, its 'rash hand of bold Incontinence', its 'barbarous dissonance' and its 'wand'ring steps'. In addition, each of the companion poems in the 1671 volume functions as a refashioning of themes and motifs from this early sortie into the performing arts. When Milton returns yet once more to the Ludlow *Maske* under a well established Stuart regime, divine philosophy will be joined to a starkly political debate over nonconformity and toleration. The experience of defeat reads the Ludlow Maske as a poem on conscience, a theme that can be employed to bridge theological, political and stylistic implications of a resistance to force. Samson Agonistes inherits paralysis and utilises the Circean brutalisation and idolatry images so prominent in the Ludlow Maske. The protagonist, Samson, cannot free himself from the chair of his own broken body but although he endures physically disablement and enslavery, 'Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves' (SAg, 41), he refuses to sink further. Acknowledging his fault in admitting Dalila's seduction, he now refuses, just as the Lady did before him, to be further deluded by the 'snare' (SAg, 931) and 'enchanted cup' (SAg, 934) of carnal temptations.

We might remember that the Ludlow *Maske* posited an abstracted contrast between chastity and moral corruption

He that has light within his own clear breast May sit i' the centre, and enjoy bright day. But he that hides a dark soul, and foul thoughts Benighted walks under the midday sun; Himself is his own dungeon.<sup>7</sup>

This pedantic theorising was pronounced but not proven in the *Maske*, leaving us more amused than awed by the Elder Brother's precosity. But the lesson is returned to and demonstrated in the 1671 texts. Samson's great opening soliloquy realises the lesson all too painfully in its lament, 'O dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon' (*SAg*, 80), and particularly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Maske, 396, 549, 192, cf., Paradise Lost, IX. 780, VII. 32, XII. 648.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Maske, 380–4.

in its identification of 'Myself, my sepulchre, a moving grave' (*SAg*, 102). In contrast, the Son in *Paradise Regained* sits out a diabolic storm 'unappalled in calm and sinless peace' (*PRg*, IV. 425). Learning the lesson first expounded by the Elder Brother is traumatic for Samson. He compares his griefs to festering wounds that

Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts, Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise Dire inflammation which no cooling herb Or med'cinal liquor can assuage, Nor breath of vernal air from snowy alp.<sup>8</sup>

Here in the late poetry one cannot rely on a magic flower device but in its place may be found a more direct route to the symbolised referent of haemony, the individual conscience as guide.<sup>9</sup>

The text of *Samson Agonistes* and especially the troubling role of the sympathetic Chorus teaches us not to seek external salves to conscience but rather to submit to a rigorous internal examination of our own culpability. Through that self-scrutinising process, Samson can recover an inner respect that mirrors the Lady's advocation of inner fortitude in the face of physical abuse. Within Samson's story, this means that on being asked to break his Nazarite oath of non-contamination by joining the Philistine games, he can at first refuse. The Officer warns him, 'Regard thyself, this will offend them highly' (*SAg*, 1333) but Samson can now respond,

Myself? my conscience and internal peace. Can they think me so broken, so debased With corporal servitude, that my mind ever Will condescend to such absurd commands?<sup>10</sup>

This new found conviction is reminiscent of the Lady's constant articulation of inner strength but the scene has shifted from the terrors of the wood to the realities of political defeat. The centrality of individual conscience will be Samson's defence against the particular paradoxes of his situation, obliged to serve the Philistine state in body but not in mind.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Samson Agonistes, 624–8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Andrew Marvell's poem *Upon Appleton House* (lines 355–60) interpreted Milton's plant as conscience in the early 1650s, '*Conscience*, that Heaven-nursed Plant, / Which most our Earthly Gardens want. / A prickling leaf it bears, and such / As that which shrinks at ev'ry touch; / But Flowrs eternal, and divine, / That in the Crowns of Saints do shine'. *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, 3rd edn., ed. H. M. Margoliouth and revised by Pierre Legouis with E. E. Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1971), vol. i., 73. Cf. *Maske*, 628–40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Samson Agonistes, 1334–7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See Achinstein, Milton Studies, 33 (1997).

The need to present a vigorous exhortation of virtue within the Ludlow *Maske* led to a demanding speaking role for Alice Egerton. The rarity of female speaking parts of any sort within the masquing tradition at court is often commented on in discussions of Milton's construction of the Lady's role. Her vehement vindication of inner chastity may be culturally indecorous but it proves the importance of the witnessing voice to the young Milton. His artistic endorsement of the integrity of the voice is furthered later in the temperate refutations of the Son in *Paradise Regained*. Of especial significance for this connection is the lengthy speech added by Milton to the masque text soon after the performance at Ludlow. That this speech was introduced to the reading text suggests that this is a personal statement—an addition that reclaims an occasional performance as a Miltonic meditation.

Arm his prophane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the sun-clad power of chastity;
Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
Thou hast nor ear, nor soul to apprehend
The sublime notion, and high mystery
That must be uttered to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of virginity,
And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know
More happiness than this thy present lot.
Enjoy your dear wit, and gay rhetoric
That hath so well been taught her dazzling fence,
Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinced;
Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
To such a flame of sacred vehemence,

That dumb things would be moved to sympathize, And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,

Till all thy magic structures reared so high, Were shattered into heaps o'er thy false head. *Comus*. She fables not, I feel that I do fear Her words set off by some superior power; <sup>12</sup>

Or have I said enough? To him that dares

... Shall I go on?

The speech is remarkably close to Milton's later interests and particularly to the shape of the 1671 volume. Samson Agonistes plays out the violent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The additional lines are 778–805, from which I quote lines 778–800. The strongly declamatory nature of the Lady's speech would slow the action in production. In 1738, Dalton found it necessary to modify this section of Milton's text. See John Dalton, *Comus, a Mask: (Now adapted to the Stage)* (1738), pp. 44–7.

toppling of pagan structures but the remainder of the Lady's argument acts like a commentary on *Paradise Regained*.<sup>13</sup> Immediately, one can see that the Lady's central metaphor has been translated into the incarnate central figure of *Paradise Regained*, the *Son clad* power of chastity.

The additional speech given to the Lady both admits and indeed asserts that the tempter will never fully comprehend the arguments of virtue. A similar but more sustained staging of separateness is repeated in *Paradise Regained*. There, for example, Book III opens with Satan confounded and even uses the same term as the Ludlow *Maske*, 'convinced' (*PRg*, III. 3), meaning both persuaded and convicted as guilty. Satan of course does not stop talking just because his arguments are spurious. Nor did Comus but somehow there was more illicit menace in his attack, partly because actions speak nearly as loud as words in production and partly because of the gendered nature of that early contest. In the culmination of the masque temptation scene, 'Be wise, and taste . . .' (*Maske* 812), one presumes force was intended and would have been used had not the rescuers fortuitously appeared. The Son, in contrast, is more than a match for his opponent on all levels.

The later text of Paradise Regained has the advantage that the temperate male body makes the argument for chastity or indeed virginity less fraught. The Son experiences physical hunger but his control of all appetite is exemplary. The Ludlow Maske intended to explore chastity and virginity as spiritual metaphors but remained fettered by the all-tooreal problem of human sexuality.<sup>14</sup> In comparison to the Lady, the Son's body is near asexual and the poem may focus on temperate diction, avoiding the pitfalls of the Lady's gendered fallibility. This allows the 'rigid looks of chaste austerity' (Maske, 449) to be removed from the disturbingly repressive connotations of a Medusa shield and aligned instead with the 'unmoved' (PRg, III. 386, IV. 109) diction of the Son. Equally, the later presentation can endorse Pauline imagery without experiencing any unpleasant aftertaste. The 'unpolluted temple of the mind' (Maske, 460) returns without the clotting complications of the Elder Brother's speech in the Son's own arguments (e.g., PRg, II. 466–7) while the Pauline doctrine is reaffirmed and now fully controlled on the temple's heights. My point then is that in the Ludlow Maske the actors prove counterproductive to the argument. The situation of an adolescent girl exposed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye remarks on the similarity between the Lady and the Son, finding them equally cold and unsympathetic. See Northrop Frye, 'The Typology of *Paradise Regained*', *Modern Philology*, 53 (1956), 227–38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Katherine E. Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1995), p. 204.

to unscrupulous libertines is hard to square with abstract philosophical debate. While the theory is easily asserted, 'Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt / Surprised by unjust force, but not enthralled' (*Maske*, 588–9), the Lady's all-too-immediate physical vulnerability brings an unexpected and subversive erotic frisson to the piece; this is most evocatively expressed in the leering, 'And left your fair side all unguarded lady?' (*Maske*, 282). Removed from the Ludlow performance in front of Alice's father, the Lady's 'unowned' (*Maske*, 406) state is deeply problematic and that problem has surely been noted and repaired in the unusual phrasing by Mary that her son is 'owned' (*PRg*, II. 85) by Heaven.

There are real tensions inherent in the construction of forced consumption as tantamount to rape in the Ludlow Maske. Yet, rather than avoiding that issue, Paradise Regained chooses to rework the rape metaphor as its climax. The Son is raped in that he is literally snatched by Satan and taken by force to the pinnacle's heights. However, the violence here is non-penetrative; in 1671 the threat to the Son's body is moral as well as mortal but it is not confused by an additional gender question. Indeed, in Paradise Regained, the argument reverses the moment in the early Maske where Comus could immobilise the Lady against her will. There, restriction of movement imposed by another identified a core anxiety over the real fallibility of the flesh in any discussion of selfdetermination but the later text offers a radical rethink of the theological and metaphysical implications of movement and stillness within the masque form. In fact, it appears that as a technician Milton has worked through the Ludlow composition to understand how grace and strength can be expressed in stylised movements. To hold a single position freely and without wavering takes great discipline and this has become the intellectual argument of Paradise Regained, embodied in the Son whose intellectual austerity and obedient stillness is the ultimate balletic activity.

The review of the masquing text undertaken from a Restoration perspective necessarily revisits the problem of release and the role of Sabrina. There is no Sabrina in *Paradise Regained*. Instead of the external mechanics, representation of a saving grace has been transferred to the punctuated choreography of the narrative voice. The vocative complex alone—whereby the narrator repeats the Son's application of an Old Testament inscription—has to encapsulate movement, song, argument, and action in harmonious balance, 'To whom thus Jesus; Also it is written, / Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood.' (*PRg*, IV. 560–1). Much has now been written on the interpretation of this line but what

seems significant to me is its measure, the pacing of speech and the importance of enacting a silence or a pause before continuing the story. <sup>15</sup> The length of pause is unscripted but its relevance as still centre of the argument can be proven when the extreme contrast with the production choices at Ludlow are noted. The *Variorum Commentary* on Milton's Ludlow *Maske* suggests,

While at Ludlow the intricate machinery used at Whitehall would not be available, we may safely imagine Sabrina's slowly rising from the centre of the stage in her chariot, surrounded by the Nymphs, all adorned in ways suggested in preceding lines. The time occupied by this slow-moving tableau and the action that followed would give the audience an opportunity to apprehend whatever symbolic significance the poet intended and they were capable of grasping. <sup>16</sup>

The masque times its employment of the *deus ex machina* Sabrina in order to close with a sacramental and ritualistic resolution that actually seems more Caroline than Spenserian. Sabrina is invoked by the Attendant Spirit's song, 'Listen and save' (*Maske*, 858–88), and she comes to sprinkle water on the overheated body of the Lady. <sup>17</sup> The antiphonal and ceremonial qualities seems problematically reminiscent of the *asperges me* and the *Salve regina*, and perhaps mirror Henry Lawes's courtly taste for high neoplatonic conceits. <sup>18</sup>

The sparse rhythms of *Paradise Regained* vehemently contradict such refinement. Rather than the ritualistic resolution of Sabrina's sprinkled doctrine, *Paradise Regained* relies on plain scripture as the foundation of true faith and individual liberty of conscience. It does however still offer

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> I would wish to extend Donald Friedman's excellent identification of the Ludlow *Maske* as a measured, listening text to *Paradise Regained* and indeed to the 1671 volume as a whole. See Donald Friedman, 'Comus and the Truth of the Ear' in C. J. Summers & T. Pebworth, eds., "The Muses Common-Weale": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century (Columbia, Missouri, 1988), 119–34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> A. S. P. Woodhouse & Douglas Bush, eds., A Variorum Commentary on The Poems of John Milton (New York, 1972), vol. ii, part 3, p. 967.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> A Spenserian sense of 'salve' would seem to underpin Milton's use of the Sabrina figuration. The revised application of aspects of the Ludlow *Maske* within the 1671 volume suggests a play on the ineffective salves in *Samson Agonistes* contrasting with the Son's power to save.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> George Herbert's 'Church Porch: Perirrhanterium', where he attempts to reclaim what might otherwise appear a Laudian ceremonial, strikes me as similar in intention to Milton here. *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), pp. 6–24. In addition, I think that Milton's Lady could usefully be reread against recent critical work on courtly presentations of the female body in the 1620s and 1630s, e.g., Ann Baynes Coiro, "A ball of strife": Caroline poetry and royal marriage' in *The Royal Image: representations of Charles I*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge, 1999), 26–46 which highlights the considerable negotiations required within Caroline poetry of fertility given the repeated reality of Henrietta Maria's pregnant body.

a significant spectacle of its own despite the erasure of Sabrina. The Son standing on the pinnacle is the body triumphant. This amounts to a poetic redemption of the human condition from the tangled nature exposed in Comus's wood, with the Son inhabiting but not encumbered by the body. No gums of glutinous heat are sticking him to the temple roof and there is no need for the purgatory waters of the Severn. *Paradise Regained* remains of course a baptism poem but that sacrament is not to be comprehended in terms of formulaic ceremonial. Instead, the events at the Jordan predate the poem and their interpretation is the impetus for both Satanic quibbling and the Son's private meditations. Satan simply cannot see beyond the literal performance narrative,

...; I saw
The prophet do him reverence; on him rising
Out of the water, heaven above the clouds
Unfold her crystal doors, thence on his head
A perfect dove descend, whate're it meant,
And out of heaven the sovran voice I heard,
This is my son beloved, in him am pleased.
His mother then is mortal, but his sire
He who obtains the monarchy of heaven,
And what will he not do to advance his son?<sup>19</sup>

The still centre, 'This is my son beloved, in him am pleased', eludes him completely even though he witnesses unwittingly to the truth of the moment.

Despite Satan's ignorance it is clear to see that the cleansing, healing implications of so much of the water imagery in Milton's early poetry are encapsulated in the baptismal concept of Jesus at the Jordan. The Son, recollecting events at the Jordan in his soliloquy, terms the river 'the laving stream' (*PRg*, I. 280). Milton's use of the distinctive verb, to lave, in *Lycidas* for the flowing stream that not only washes but also purges and anoints is particularly pertinent. The defining movement in *Lycidas* from reiterative elegiac consolation to redemptive consummation is an elemental transfer achieved through water.

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high, Through the dear might of him that walked the waves; Where other groves, and other streams along, With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves, And hears the unexpressive nuptial song, In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Paradise Regained, I. 79–88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Lycidas, 172–7.

The verbal renewal in the Son's memory of the Jordan baptism suggests both initiation and inauguration but no loss. So much more is on offer here than in the *Maske*, *Lycidas*, or even *Samson Agonistes*. In *Paradise Regained* the human body is not overcome but exalted, with the phrase 'the exalted man' being given summary prominence at the start of the poem (*PRg*, I. 36).

Within *Paradise Regained*, the epiphanic moment is shifted from the Jordan to a more private transfiguration model. It is the brevity of the Son's words on the temple heights and the place set aside for silent meditation as we receive the power of the Logos that must be retained, despite the interventions of a narrator who fusses over his verbal constructions as Peter did over his tents. Asceticism as fulfilment in the Son's statement (*PRg*, IV. 560–1) gives way to aesthetic fullness in the narratorial rush to respond adequately to a divine revelation. Two similes of epic proportions explore the nature of Satan's defeat even though the extempore patterning on 'foiled' and 'fall' says it all. In any case, this response is immediately outclassed by the baroque richness of the Son's descent with the

... fiery globe
Of angels on full sail of wing flew nigh,
Who on their plumy vans received him soft
From his uneasy station, and upbore
As on a floating couch through the blithe air,
Then in a flowery valley set him down
On a green bank, ... <sup>21</sup>

The construction of the poem forces us to turn from silent meditations to endorse a vocalised gloria. We watch the Saviour return to earth. We are looking up as he comes down, and the angelic song acts as both a temporal and a musical counterpoint to the action, glorifying the Son as both a transcendent being and an incarnate Saviour.

The Son returning is a poetic articulation of kenosis: heavenly grace descending to mankind through the incarnate deity. The eirenic tableau chimes with the description of meek-eyed Peace in the *Nativity Ode* who, '... crowned with olive green, came softly sliding / Down through the turning sphere' to strike 'a universal peace through sea and land' (*Ode*, 47–8, 52). Even as early as the *Nativity Ode*, Milton's contemplation of the Incarnation implodes human history. There, it involved a renewal of the machinery for descent of God's grace to describe either the return of Astraea or the forthcoming apocalypse.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Paradise Regained, IV. 581–7.

Yea Truth, and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Th'enameld *Arras* of the Rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Thron'd in Celestiall sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,
And Heav'n as at som festivall,
Will open wide the Gates of her high Palace Hall. (141–8)<sup>22</sup>

A link between *Paradise Regained*'s Restoration reformed baroque and the masque-like quality of grace descending is likely to have been in Milton's mind given the refinement to 'Orb'd in a Rain-bow; and like glories wearing / Mercy will sit between' made to the text of the *Nativity Ode* printed in the 1673 volume.<sup>23</sup>

The movement also betters the promise made at the close of the Ludlow *Maske*.

Mortals that would follow me, Love Virtue, she alone is free, She can teach ye how to climb Higher than the sphery chime; Or if Virtue feeble were, Heaven itself would stoop to her.<sup>24</sup>

The *Maske* achieves closure aspiring to an interaction between humanity and the heavens but it is conditional. In *Paradise Regained*, in contrast, the interchange is assured because grace comes with the Son. His role as mediator affects both our spatial and our temporal understanding. The angels look forward to a closure but are lauding a conclusive start, 'Hail Son of the Most High, heir of both worlds, / Queller of Satan, on thy glorious work / Now enter, and begin to save mankind.' (*PRg*, IV. 633–5). The poem leaves the Son (or rather the Son leaves the poem) to begin his public office but it leaves the reader aware of a non-linear experience of Christian history. The glimpse of a transcendent plane and the counterpoint of heavenly (and Miltonic) harmonies offers us a fuller realisation of the wondrous meaning of the presence of the Son on earth. The contrast with *Samson Agonistes* where absence not presence is the abiding experience is acute.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Poems of Mr John Milton (1645).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Poems upon Several Occasions (1673). Stephen B. Dobranski, Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade (Cambridge, 1999) argues cogently for a re-evaluation of the publication of Poems (1673) as a significant literary act. See also Ann Baynes Coiro, 'Fable and Old Song: Samson Agonistes and the Idea of a Poetic Career', Milton Studies, 36 (1998), 123–52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Maske, 1017-22.

П

Both poems in the 1671 volume trump logic, finding a new solution to a seemingly closed paradox: Samson employs lateral thinking, the Son reveals a vertical axis. In Paradise Regained, the vertical axis offers a sudden clarity of vision. It reveals a new intent in something heard numerous times before, namely the commonplace imagery of the heights of ambition.<sup>25</sup> Bowing and bending, ascending to mountains and to the temple afford numerous examples of such imagery in *Paradise Regained*. The standard application can be heard in Mary's recounting Simeon's prediction for her son, 'That to the fall and rising he should be / Of many in Israel' (PRg, II. 88-9). Elsewhere, Satan's tired reading of earthly ambitions makes him think he can succeed by tempting the Son with worldly power and his ace card will be the offer of assistance in usurping the debauched emperor, Tiberius. The easy identification of the Son as a liberator of the chosen people, 'in his place ascending / A victor people free from servile yoke!' (PRg, IV. 101-2) is an obvious Satanic misappropriation of the idiom and clearly a slippery rhetorical construction. The Son is not fooled and nor is the reader if we have paid attention to the narrator's description of Rome, '... an imperial city stood, / With towers and temples proudly elevate / On seven small hills' (PRg, IV. 33-5). The deflatory intent behind 'proudly elevate' (and the underlying jibe against Papal authority) is reminiscent of the epic's remarks upon the devils entering the newly built Pandaemonium (PL, I. 768–92).

Readers familiar with the epic will be attuned to the Miltonic encoding of a moral dimension within the language of standing and falling. Satan, however, has missed the theological implications of the Son rising from the waters of the Jordan completely and is totally unready for the new Christian dimension revealed on the pinnacle. To stand atop the temple at Jerusalem is a manifestation of the new covenant of Christian liberty. Although the Son will continue to live obedient to the Law until atonement is achieved on the cross and the veil of the temple is rent, here at the start of his public ministry he stands triumphant, momentarily revealed as the apex of Hebraic Law and faith. Paul endorses chastity as a necessary restraint: one must respect the body as 'the temple of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The intensity of this trope within *Paradise Regained* brings to mind the ultimate Renaissance example of the structural potential of the metaphor, Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* (1605). *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford & Percy Simpson (Oxford, 1932), vol. iv, 327–485. The choice of Tiberius' rule and the references to Capri and to a 'wicked favourite' (*PRg*, IV. 95) support the suggestion that Milton is well aware of Jonson's coterie drama.

Holy Ghost which is in you'.<sup>26</sup> The verse obviously influenced the Ludlow *Maske* debate but Miltonic poetics have already reconstructed the crucial Pauline articulation of the internal nature of the Christian Spirit for an epic argument, 'And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all temples the upright heart and pure' (*PL*, I. 17–18). Now, in *Paradise Regained*, we have the Son as the living temple and, to all believers, life in Christ will offer freedom from the letter of the Mosaic law and from the Platonic dichotomy of body and soul.

In addition, the Son's victory is seen to vindicate God's word in the face of secular ambition. His single-mindedness links back not just to the Lady in the Ludlow *Maske* but to the postlapsarian experience depicted in *Paradise Lost* and the arguments for liberty of conscience in the final book of Milton's epic. The period immediately before the coming of the Messiah is identified by the archangel Michael as a time when wolves will usurp church offices and thwart Scripture, turning pentecostal truth into corrupt ordinances. The perverse activity is expressed in true Miltonic fashion.

... What will they then
But force the spirit of grace it self, and bind
His consort liberty; what, but unbuild
His living temples, built by faith to stand,
Their own faith not another's: for on earth
Who against faith and conscience can be heard
Infallible?<sup>27</sup>

The power of this argument is intensified in the second edition of *Paradise Lost* published in 1674 where the structural revision means that Book XII is focused directly on this issue. In the epic, it is stated by Michael that this heinous crime cannot be righted until the coming of the Messiah. Intriguingly, the coming of the Son is repeatedly conceived of by Milton as a return and one can hear a temporal slippage in the lines from *Paradise Lost* quoted above, as the connotation of Papal infallibility is necessarily in play. This is a lesson reiterable until apocalypse and the oppression of individual conscience by secular tyranny can be read against all epochs in human history: the experience of nonconformists under the restored Stuart regime being one example.

The need to come to terms with political reversals and the seeming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> I Corinthians 6. 19. Quotation taken from the Authorised Version.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Paradise Lost (1667), Book 10, 1415–21 and PL, XII. 524–30. See also Joan S. Bennett, Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

defeat of the good old cause pervades Milton's later writings and, of course, in addition to disillusionment, he faced immediate physical danger, straitened circumstances and long-term mockery following the Restoration. It seems to me likely that Milton was spurred to consider a publication on the unusual theme of the temptation in the wilderness, linked so closely to the fate of a blind hero, partly in response to Roger L'Estrange's scathingly personal attack in *No Blinde Guides* (1660). The pamphlet is a response to Milton's *Brief Notes Upon a Late Sermon* (1660) with glancing remarks on *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660) but it opens accusing Milton of being a devil in human form,

Mr Milton.

Although in your Life, and Doctrine, you have Resolved one great Question; by evidencing that Devils may indue Humane shapes; and proving your self, even to your own Wife, an Incubus: you have yet Started Another; and that is, whether you are not of That Regiment, which carried the Herd of Swine headlong into the Sea: and moved the People to beseech Jesus to depart out of their coasts. (This may be very well imagined, from your suitable practises Here). Is it possible to read your Proposals of the benefits of a Free-State, without Reflecting upon your Tutours—All this will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down, and worship me? Come, come Sir, lay the Devil aside; do not proceed with so much malice, and against Knowledge:—Act like a Man,—that a good Christian may not be affraid to pray for you.

and L'Estrange goes on to place his strongest argument on the fact that, 'In one word: The *Saviour* of the *world* was a KING, and a *King* of *Jewes*'.<sup>28</sup> Milton always defended himself vigorously from personal slights but given the ascendent Restoration regime an imperative need to reverse such perverse applications of scriptural models and to counter the charge of idol worship would be obvious to him.<sup>29</sup> Without indulging too much in biographical speculation, it is worth noting that the 1671 poems are preoccupied with reputation and the individual justification of one's choice of action in the face of public perceptions.

The worst aspect of Samson's fall for both himself and his father Manoa is the fact that it has allowed the irreligious maliciously to mock the power of Jahweh,

. . .; to God have brought Dishonour, obloquy, and oped the mouths

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Roger L'Estrange, No Blinde Guides, in answer to a seditious pamphlet of J. Milton's, intituled Brief Notes upon a late Sermon . . . (1660), pp. 1, 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> He has already reversed *Eikon Basilike's* appropriation of the pinnacle episode in *Eikonoklastes*. See *Yale Prose*, III. 405 and Bennett, *Reviving Liberty*, p. 226, n. 27.

Of idolists, and atheists; have brought scandal To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt In feeble hearts. . . . <sup>30</sup>

Obloquy meaning calumny or evil speaking occurs only three times in the poetry—when Abdiel confronts Satan the apostate in Book V of Paradise Lost (PL, V. 813); when the Son accuses Satan of ingratitude towards God in Book III of Paradise Regained (PRg, III. 131); and here in Samson Agonistes. Similarly significant is the term scandal. It is used twice in Samson Agonistes but is otherwise nearly absent from the poetry compared with over sixty references in the English prose. Its technical meaning is to discredit religion or to perplex the conscience of the faithful by the false conduct of exemplar individuals. Samson must eventually justify his decision to attend Philistine ceremonies by maintaining that his actions will be virtuous, 'Yet this be sure, in nothing to comply / Scandalous or forbidden in our Law.' (SAg, 1408–9). The Son's position is distinct but he too must justify himself, clarifying his own sense of vocation and identifying those whom he has come to save.

My remarks on the political intent behind Milton's 1671 volume make the prose pamphlet on toleration Of True Religion (written before May 1673) a helpful cross-comparison. The argument of that prose text is for a union of all good Protestants against the 'common adversary' of Popery and a more charitable toleration of opinion within the Protestant brotherhood.<sup>31</sup> We might well compare this with the two-fold argument embedded in the 1671 volume, as each poem considers firstly whether it is possible to remain separate from idolators and secondly whether it is possible to unite the chosen people. Samson is not idle on the idol's day but it is harder to say how successful a role model he proves to be. The Son must stand firm and not yield to Satan, so much is obvious but his gathering of a chosen people, although it has begun with the apostles, lies primarily with those who in the future will listen to his word. The real goal in Paradise Regained was perhaps to write a doctrinally independent poem that would nevertheless unite a Protestant readership. Although it is possible to prize out a number of heterodoxies (including a private interest in Socinian thought; a nonconformist priority being given to individual conscience; an endorsement of adult baptism; and the reinvestment of the Miltonic epic poet), no doctrinal controversies are highlighted and it is striking how orthodox the poem has seemed to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Samson Agonistes, 451–5.

<sup>31</sup> Yale Prose, VIII. 420.

commentators. The prose pamphlet *Of True Religion* will champion a charitable toleration of doctrinal differences as long as the two principles of Protestantism, (the Word of God and Faith based on Scripture), are upheld. The poem of the Son standing victorious on the temple roof is a clear statement of just such Miltonic Protestantism in action.

## Ш

I have been arguing that the 1671 volume enacts a reformed aesthetic, old experience reworked as political prophecy and traceable in part through the revision of the dramatic techniques of the Ludlow *Maske*. The famous speech by the Son in Book IV of *Paradise Regained* on the subject of literary style is also helpful in taking the argument forward. There the Son reserves his praise for the prophets of the nation who teach 'The solid rules of civil government / In their majestic unaffected style' (*PRg*, IV. 358–9). Those lines, and not the overindulgent critical attention paid to the place assigned to classical literature, are the defining aesthetic in the poem and the volume. The Son of God authorises the Miltonic endeavour to provide a regenerate poetics for the chosen nation and does so in highly suggestive terms. The majesty claimed for late Milton's unadorned style is an intriguing alternative to the grandiose operatic developments of the later seventeenth century that spring in part from the Stuart masque and heroic plays and indeed from the epic form.

Milton's interest in the civic implications of drama can be traced back to the early 1640s and his prose tract *The Reason of Church Government* (1642). There he considers classical drama as 'doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation' and argues that it should be possible to reclaim public pastimes as a means of 'instructing and bettering the Nation at all opportunities'.<sup>32</sup> Later, during the 1650s, Milton's association with Davenant suggests direct knowledge of the schemes in place to construct a Commonwealth theatrical tradition. Davenant of course becomes associated after the Restoration with heroic drama while the frustrated Milton moves in another direction, towards a radical denial both of passive instruction by spectacle and the complicit role of the Restoration audience. However, in an ironic twist of fate it was the adaptation of the Ludlow *Maske* by other hands that proved more amenable to eighteenth-century taste and

<sup>32</sup> Yale Prose, I. 815, 819.

what happened then has skewed our understanding of Milton's stylistic dynamic of reform.

It is quite possible that the pastiche of Spenserian and Miltonic pastoral settings to be found in Dryden's *King Arthur*, finally produced in 1691 with music by Purcell, helped shape English tastes. <sup>33</sup> Certainly, by 1698, Toland can write enthusiastically of a text he calls *Comus* 'like which Piece in the peculiar disposition of the Story, the sweetness of the Numbers, the justness of the Expression, and the Moral it teaches, there is nothing extant in any Language', but he is unable to muster much interest in *Paradise Regained*. <sup>34</sup> Richard Meadowcroft in 1732 was the first to devote an entire critical volume to *Paradise Regained* but his praise is reserved primarily for the sublime epic continuities of Book III. <sup>35</sup> In that same decade of the 1730s, the opera *Sabrina* came to the London stage. Its text was composed by the Italian Paolo Rolli, and was based on Milton's Ludlow *Maske*. Moreover, in the subsequent London season (1737–8), the highly successful *Comus, a Mask: (Now adapted to the Stage)* by John Dalton with music by Thomas Arne premiered. <sup>36</sup>

Dalton's highly ornate and spectacular production, revelling in its machinery and its musical ornament, became for many in the period their impression of Milton's text but even a brief excerpt will show how far removed it is from Miltonic arguments. In the central temptation scene in Act III we find the following busy stage directions,

After this they put on their Chaplets, and prepare for the Feast; while Comus is advancing with his Cup, and one of his Attendants offers a Chaplet to the Lady, which she throws on the Ground with Indignation, the Preparation for the Feast is interrupted by lofty and solemn Musick from above, whence the second Attendant Spirit descends gradually in a splendid Machine, repeating the following Lines.

This additional Attendant Spirit will prove invisible to all but the Lady, even though his song can be heard by Comus's crew, causing 'some Concern, which they endeavour to dissemble'. After his song he reascends, while the Lady thanks this 'heav'nly Songster' for his assistance in bringing 'the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> I am endebted to Neville Davies's paper, 'Art shall meet Art: Milton, Dryden and King Arthur' presented to the British Milton Seminar, Oct. 2000, for this connection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> John Toland 'The Life of John Milton' (1698), quoted in *Milton: The Critical Heritage*, John T. Shawcross, ed. (New York, 1970), p. 119. Toland's critical opinion echoes Sir Henry Wotton's letter to Milton from 1638, *Critical Heritage*, p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Richard Meadowcroft, A Critique of Milton's Paradise Regained (1732).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Don-John Dugas, "Such Heav'n-taught Numbers should be more than read": *Comus* and Milton's Reputation in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England' *Milton Studies*, 34 (1996), 137–57.

Song of Virtue' to her ear.<sup>37</sup> Virtuoso performance not Miltonic philosophical inquiry is the primary objective here and the elegance of the songs, heavenly and bacchanalian, is now the significant cultural endeavour, with the adaptors being particularly fond of the urbane refrain, 'Away, away, I To Comus' Court repair; I There Night out-shines the Day I There melts the yielding Fair'.<sup>38</sup> Although most of Milton's text remains undisturbed, the changed atmospherics and the many additions trivialise his endeavour.

Dalton's eighteenth-century appropriation is glaringly inappropriate when placed against Milton's own remodelling of the Ludlow *Maske* in 1671 where songs, Shakespearian allusions, the Attendant Spirit and the masque machinery are all erased in favour of a listening text which promotes aurality over visual spectacle and pares down movement to a minimum.<sup>39</sup> By leaving us only the voice and the words, Milton intensified the importance of syntactic units and enjoined the reader to apply the pause or silence as a punctuating tool. To the eighteenth-century eye, the text of *Paradise Regained* would have appeared worthy but dry and certainly, when compared to contemporary stage adaptations of *Comus*, non-dramatic. However, if Milton's late dramaturgical revisions were not embraced by the eighteenth-century stage, they should be more immediately recognisable and appreciable today.<sup>40</sup>

The embedded dramaturgy of the 1671 volume can be paralleled to the modernist exploration of a static theatre and, in particular, the interest shown by Samuel Beckett in immobilising his dramatic characters in order to explore their inward motivation. Beckett tells us of the shifting artistic focus that drew him to drama, 'When I was working on *Watt*, I felt the need to create for a smaller space, one in which I had some control of where people stood or moved, above all of a certain light. I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Dalton, Comus, a Mask (1738). All quotes from pp. 40–1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Dalton, *Comus, a Mask* (1738), pp. 16, 29. I prefer the errata 'There yields the melting Fair', p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Milton's possible allusions to Shakespeare is a subject in its own right. My point here is that the Ludlow *Maske* echoed both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* but that these links have been dropped by 1671. *Paradise Regained* remains in fact remarkably plain but not so *Samson Agonistes*. John Carey has identified a number of possible Shakespearian echoes there: those to *Coriolanus* are certainly significant. See Carey, ed., *Milton: Shorter Poems*, p. 404.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Angus Fletcher, *The Transcendental Masque: an essay on Milton's Comus* (Ithaca & London, 1971) includes 'A Note on Blake's Illustrations for *Comus*', pp. 253–6. Blake made two sets of illustrations for the Ludlow *Maske* and Fletcher argues for a crucial shift in Blake's artistic response from the overt theatricality of the first series to the depiction of interiority. This Fletcher considers to mirror Blake's developing understanding of the 'iconography of inwardness' (p. 254) to be found in Milton's masque.

wrote *Waiting for Godot*.'<sup>41</sup> Milton, it seems fair to say, imposes similar restrictions on himself after the completion of *Paradise Lost*. The epic canvas is reduced to a single event and the palette is reduced accordingly. *Paradise Regained* is produced in a modish chiaroscuro, while it is surely appropriate to think of the Hebrew voices speaking from the shadows after the spotlighted central figure of Samson goes off. Indeed, the difficulty encountered in justifying Samson's 'going off' seems remarkably prescient of the Beckettian terror of leaving the stage as the real death. For Samson it is of course classical decorum that positions the violent action offstage but, nevertheless, the jarring discontinuity as the piece continues without its central figure is essentially modern; the panic to fill the space and interpret the exit forcing a further deferral of final silence.

Beckett is rightly considered innovative in *Endgame* (1958) for dramatising internal voices, setting the play within the confines of one head. Yet the composition of *Endgame*, based on the interaction of four characters, Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell, who are named as nails driving home the torment of self-frustration, seems to be closely in sympathy with the play of voices that is *Samson Agonistes*. Equally *Endgame*'s remarkable choreography in chess moves is only one further step on from the stylised stalemates played out by Satan in *Paradise Regained*. Even the last lines of *Samson Agonistes* can be read as more of a salve to thought than a stark confrontation of the meaning of one's own termination of existence. The theory of dramatic catharsis is repeated but without the effect having necessarily been produced in the reader. The Hebraic Chorus crossculturally invokes a classical Greek ritual that reveals the most basic human need for comfort, in Beckettian terms 'a last attempt to obtain relief'.<sup>42</sup>

Both Milton and Beckett are, as poetic dramatists, exploiting the imprecise nature of their linguistic medium to enhance the exploration of doubt as the necessary postlapsarian human condition. Although their religious objectives are contradictory, there are dramatic techniques common to both and the idea of salvation (as a presence or an absence) is prominent in the works of both writers. Beckett is of course sceptic to the end. Like Satan in *Paradise Regained*, he would surely be unwilling and hence unable to recognise the Son when he does arrive on stage, forced to rehearse his arguments endlessly and repeatedly to struggle

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Quoted by Michael Worton, 'Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text', p. 69 in The Cambridge Companion to Beckett, John Pilling, ed. (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 67–87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> *Ohio Impromptu. Samuel Beckett: the complete dramatic works* (1986), p. 445.

against the ever-tightening self-made noose rather than know God. His drama expresses a desperate need to belong coupled with a bleak but instinctive knowledge that one is forever shut out from communion.

VLADIMIR: [Pause.] Gogo.

ESTRAGON: [Irritably.] What is it?

VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?

ESTRAGON: The Bible . . . [He reflects.] I must have taken a look at it.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon.

We'll swim. We'll be happy.<sup>43</sup>

There is much more work to be done if the links between Milton and Beckett are to be clearly identified and I am not suggesting at this point that this is how Beckett himself read Milton, although read Milton he most certainly did.<sup>44</sup> However, in closing this preliminary argument for a rehabilitation of Milton's late dramaturgy, it seems safe to say that Samuel Beckett's drama is of the devil's party and (just perhaps) he knows it.

*Note.* This lecture works as something of a companion piece to my chapter on *Paradise Regained* in *A Companion to Milton*, edited by Thomas N. Corns (Blackwell, 2001). My thanks to Tom for getting me thinking about *Paradise Regained* and also to Susan Jones for conversations on Beckett.

<sup>43</sup> Beckett: dramatic works, p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> My thanks to Professor Ian Donaldson for mentioning that Christopher Ricks sees Milton as one of Beckett's forerunners, see Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990* (Oxford, 1993). See also Albert C. Labriola, "Insuperable Highth of Loftiest Shade": Milton and Samuel Beckett' in A. C. Labriola & Edward Sichi, eds., *Milton's Legacy in the Arts* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1980), pp. 205–17.

