

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Samson's 'I' and 'Now': Their Development in Time

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Following Samuel Johnson's famous complaint that the 'intermediate parts [of *Samson Agonistes*] have neither cause nor consequence', Stanley Fish has argued that the text of Milton's closet drama does not support any linear progression from Samson's despair to his regeneration.¹ Though Samson's development in the drama may be sensed, Fish maintains, it is not explained, and questions of causality are left unanswered.² More recently, Samson's development has been associated with the non-sequential narrative of the poem, in which time is a 'dialectic between past and future rather than a one-way causal relationship between the two'.³ The poem's representation of Samson's continuous attempt at constructing himself has been interpreted in light of its portrayal of the colliding, non-linear narratives that shape it.⁴

My aim in this paper is to show that there exists in *Samson Agonistes* a fully intelligible and concrete movement from despair to regeneration, which is grounded in temporal succession.⁵ This movement is conditioned on Samson's capacity to integrate his split

¹ Samuel Johnson, 'Milton', in *Milton Criticism: Selections from Four Centuries*, ed. by James Thorpe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 65-88 (p. 85).

² Stanley Fish, 'Question and Answer in *Samson Agonistes*', *Critical Quarterly* 11 (1969), 237-64.

³ Jennifer Tole, 'Divine Violence and the Messianic Possibilities of *Samson Agonistes*', in *Milton's Modernities: Poetry, Philosophy, and History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Feisal G. Mohamed and Patrick Fadely (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), pp. 111-33 (p. 112).

⁴ Miranda Garmo Nesler, 'What Once I Was, and What Am Now: Narrative and Identity Constructions in *Samson Agonistes*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37.1 (2007), 1-26 (p. 4).

⁵ Regenerationist readings of the poem include Arnold S. Stein, *Heroic knowledge: An Interpretation of 'Paradise Regained' and 'Samson Agonistes'* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1965); Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward 'Samson Agonistes': The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); David Lowenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); John Steadman, 'Efficient Causality and

self into one coherent 'I', which controls, modifies, organizes and integrates his experience in and through time; more specifically, in and through the present moment, the now.⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, in *Paradise Lost* Milton uses the now in its Aristotelian definition as a concrete structure in and through which the individual develops a consciousness of time.⁷ Here I show how in *Samson Agonistes* Milton represents the now as the temporal domain in which Samson achieves self-consciousness. In his particular fallen condition, Samson experiences himself as a bifurcated person who is incapable of integrating his past and present experiences. The 'I' that he posits after having suffered the trauma of his fall is split between his past and present experiences. It is only after Samson has situated his 'I' in time – more specifically, only after he has situated his 'I' in the present moment, formed a temporal succession between his past and present experiences, and opened it up to the future – that he is capable of unifying his bifurcated self and achieving an understanding of his relationship to God as enduring through the full scope of time.

Catastrophe in *Samson Agonistes*', in *Milton Studies*, guest eds. Wendy Furman, Christopher Grose, and William Shullenberger (1992), 211-26; and, more recently, Elizabeth Liebert, 'Samson Agonistes and Spiritual Autobiography', in *Parergon* 22 (2005), 131-57. Revisionist readings of the poem find in *Samson Agonistes* representations of destructive and self-destructive tendencies, terrorism, violence, and revenge. See, for example, Irene Samuel, 'Samson Agonistes as Tragedy', in *Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on 'Paradise Regained' and 'Samson Agonistes'*, in Honor of John S. Diekhoff, ed. by Joseph Anthony Wittreich (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1971), pp. 235-57; John Carey, 'A Work in Praise of Terrorism?: September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*', in *Times Literary Supplement* September 6, 2002, 15-16; Neil Forsyth, 'Suicide and Revenge', in *Milton, Rights, and Liberties*, ed. by Christopher Tournu and Neil Forsyth (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 317-32; and Feisal Mohamed, *Milton and the Post-Secular Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). For an interpretation of *Samson Agonistes* from both perspectives see Jennifer Tole, 'Divine Violence'.

⁶ So far as I know, no attempt has been made to examine the now as the medium in which Milton represents Samson's development of a unitary self. Angela Esterhammer sees the now as prophecy or 'performative language', in *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 69. For a social interpretation of the now in Milton's early poetry see Blaine Greteman, 'Milton and the Early Modern Social Network: The Case of Epitaphium Damonis', in *Milton Quarterly* 49.2 (2015), 79-95. The role of the now in Milton's personal transformation is analysed in J. Martin Evans, *The Miltonic Moment*, Studies in the English Renaissance (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998). For an interpretation of time in Milton's works as a unifying element see the seminal study of Edward W. Tayler, *Milton's Poetry: Its Development in Time* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979). Time is interpreted as an element that disrupts the continuity of the narrative in Amy Boesky, 'Paradise Lost and the Multiplicity of Time', in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), pp. 380-92; Judith Scherer, 'Meanwhile: (Un)Making Time in *Paradise Lost*', in *The New Milton Criticism*, ed. by Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer, pp. 85-101 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012); Blair Hoxby, 'Milton's Steps in Time', *SEL* 38.1 (1998), 149-72; and Anthony Welch, 'Reconsidering Chronology in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Studies* 41 (2002), 1-17.

⁷ See Ayelet C. Langer, 'Milton's Aristotelian Now', *Milton Studies* 56 (2016), 113-41.

Milton's representation of Samson's self-integration as a process that depends on his understanding of the concept of a temporal continuum in the now echoes Aristotle's theory of time, discussed in the *Physics*, in which the now plays a central role.⁸ For Aristotle the now is the medium of interaction between mind and world, by which the rational or mathematical mind transforms the relation of 'before' and 'after' it recognizes in motion into temporal order.⁹ The mind identifies the 'before' and 'after' in motion with two different nows, each of which marks a different position in motion. Yet, at the same time, the two nows that Aristotle describes are the same, insofar as each of them forms a temporal continuum between past and future events.¹⁰ In Milton's representation the mind's capacity of grasping the temporal continuum in the present moment, which Aristotle describes, becomes, as I will show, the condition for Samson's regeneration.

Yet Milton reaches beyond Aristotle in representing the cognitive process of grasping the continuum in the now as depending on the individual's moral stature. At the beginning of the drama the fallen Samson fails to grasp the concept of a temporal continuum in the present moment. As a result, he is incapable of integrating his past and future experiences over time. It is only after Samson has perceived himself as a moral agent that he is capable of positing a unitary 'I' in the present moment, which, in turn, allows him to begin the cognitive process of unifying his experiences over time. Samson achieves this integration by first forming a partial temporal continuum between his past and present experiences, and, then, by integrating his experiences over the full scope of the temporal continuum. Only after Samson has achieved a full integration of his experiences over time is he capable of understanding his relationship with God as persisting through time, which opens the way to his regeneration.

My exposition of Samson's development of a concept of temporal continuum in the now will proceed through the following steps. After I have briefly expounded Aristotle's theory of the now, I will focus my attention on Samson's opening monologue, in which he fails to integrate his past and present experiences in the present moment. By examining

⁸ Milton's familiarity with Aristotle in general and with the *Physics* in particular is beyond question. See, for example, Shankar Rama, 'Milton, Leibniz, and the Measures of Motion', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Early Modern Literature and Science*, ed. by Howard Marchitello and Evelyn Tribble (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 277-94. For Milton's use of the Aristotelian now in his representation of the individual's development of a consciousness of time see Langer, 'Milton's Aristotelian Now'.

⁹ For Aristotle's theory of the now see *Physics* 4.219a25-30a. For a discussion of the role the rational or mathematical mind plays in Aristotle's theory of time see Ursula Coope, *Time for Aristotle: Physics IV 10-14* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics* 4.10.218a10.

in detail Samson's use of the now in his consecutive dialogues with the Chorus and his father, I will then show that Samson's regeneration is initiated by his capacity to form a concept of a privileged and constantly advancing present, by which he creates a partial temporal succession between his past and present experiences. Yet this capacity is, for Milton, by itself an insufficient condition for regeneration. It is only after Samson has grasped the now as a connection of all his experiences over time and opened up his now to the future that he can finally unify his bifurcated person and achieve an understanding of God as wholly present in all the different times in which Samson exists. Samson's integration of his experiences over the full scope of the temporal continuum is, as I will show, the condition for his regeneration.

Aristotle discusses his theory of time primarily in the *Physics*. He argues that time is one of four principles that are indispensable for the study of nature (the other three principles are place, change, and infinity).¹¹ In three of these principles – place, motion, and time – he identifies the relation of 'before' and 'after', which is one of the most important notions that he develops throughout his *Physics*.¹² The relation of 'before' and 'after' is immanent in nature: it exists both in place and in motion independently of the mind. When the mind recognizes this relation in motion it identifies each 'before' and 'after' with two different moments of presentness or nows. Aristotle defines what is bounded within these two different nows as time:

We apprehend time only when we have marked change, marking it by 'before' and 'after'; and it is only when we have perceived 'before' and 'after' in change that we say that time has elapsed. Now we mark them by judging that one thing is different from another, and that some third thing is intermediate to them. When we think of the extremes as different from the middle and the mind pronounces that the nows are two, one before and one after, it is then that we say that there is time, and this that we say is time. For what is bounded by the now is thought to be time.¹³

In Aristotle's theory of time the now, then, is the medium of interaction between mind and world, in which the two extremes of motion, 'before' and 'after', are marked by the mind as different moments of presentness. The 'third thing' that exists in between these

¹¹ This paragraph is based on my discussion of Aristotle's theory of time in Langer, 'Milton's Aristotelian Now'.

¹² *Physics* 4.219a14-19. See Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 76.

¹³ *Ibid.* 4.219a25-30.

nows is what the mind apprehends as time, which Aristotle views as a temporal continuum.¹⁴

The mind's transformation of the 'before' and 'after' in motion into temporal succession is performed in two stages: (1) the mind identifies the 'before' and 'after' in motion with two different nows, and, (2) the mind grasps what is framed by these nows as a temporal continuum.¹⁵ Although the two nows that the mind counts are different, they are also defined by Aristotle as the same, because each of them serves as a connection of time: each now is a principle of order that organizes past and future events in a temporal succession. By connecting the events of past time with those of future time the now forms one single temporal series in which every event – either in the past or in the future – is necessarily related to the present moment as its reference point. In delineating Samson's recovery of mind Milton uses the same process that Aristotle's describes. Yet since for Milton the process by which the mind grasps the temporal continuum in the now is first and foremost moral, it is performed by Samson in two steps, each reflecting a different moment in his recovery. In the beginning of his process of regeneration Samson forms a concept of a partial continuity in the present moment, the now. Towards the end of the drama Samson is capable of grasping the now as the connection of all his experiences in time, past, present, *and* future, which allows him to integrate his experiences over time and see himself and God as existing over the full scope of time.

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Based on the biblical story of Samson in Judges 13-16, Milton's drama *Samson Agonistes* delineates the last few hours in the life of its protagonist. The drama opens at dawn with a description of the suffering Samson, once a person separated to God, slaving like a beast at the mill in Gaza, shamed and dishonoured, with both his eyes put out. As a result of his traumatic experience the fallen Samson is incapable of situating a unitary 'I' in the now. The fragmentary self that he identifies with the time of his fall and his constant association of this self with space rather than time are insufficient conditions for keeping together his past and present experiences. For Milton, it is only after Samson has formed a concept of a temporal continuum in the present moment, the now, that he begins his way to regeneration. In Aristotelian terms, at this stage of his development the fallen Samson

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For a discussion in Aristotle of the mind's apprehension of the temporal continuum between the 'before' and the 'after' and its relation to the temporal continuum that grounds all movements and times see Erik Raphael Jiménez, *Aristotle's Concept of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 180.

does not have the cognitive capacity of perceiving the present moment as a connection of his past and future experiences.

That the fallen Samson's 'I' is determined primarily by the space in which it is situated is reflected in the text by a repeated juxtaposition of the 'I' with spatial deictic adverbs. In a series of utterances Samson associates his 'I' with his place of imprisonment even as he seeks the 'breath of heaven fresh blowing' (SA, 10). Samson's 'I' is thus first projected into the dark steps, 'there', when Samson declares his wish to reach 'yonder bank': '*there I am* wont to sit' (SA, 4).¹⁶ Next it is located within the prison itself: '*where I* a prisoner chained' (SA, 7). Then, on reaching 'yonder bank', with the space where he feels refreshed: '*here I* feel amends' (SA, 9). Finally, Samson identifies his 'I' with space when he explains his choice of rest in the limited space within which he is confined: '*I seek / This unfrequented place* to find some ease, ease to the body some' (SA, 16-18; emphases added). It is the position that Samson occupies in space that determines his point of reference, which is necessarily subjective and exclusive.

None of Samson's initial utterances of the 'I' is coupled with a temporal adverb. But when Samson starts situating his 'I' in the now he associates it only with his past experience as a glorious person. The present wretched dimension of his person is perceived by Samson to be but a remnant of his past glorious self. As Samson himself says at the outset of the drama, the split between what he was and what he is now is subjective: it is presented to him by his own mind when, relieved from work on the day of the Philistine feast to Dagon, he looks for 'some ease' to his body:

I seek
This unfrequented place to find some ease,
Ease to the body some, none to the mind
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone,
But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, *what once I was, and what am now*. (SA, 16-22; emphases added).

In Milton's representation, Samson's split is built into the grammatical and syntactic levels of the text. The 'I' that Samson situates in the past, *once*, does not form any temporal continuum between all his different experiences and does not integrate his multiple perceptions into one single coherent subject. Rather, it is limited in scope to

¹⁶ All quotations from *Samson Agonistes* are from John Milton, *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. by John Carey, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1997).

Samson's experience as a person 'separate to God'. When Samson refers to his present fallen self he omits the 'I' – 'what [I] am *now*' – so that the 'I' that Samson posits remains limited to his past experiences.¹⁷

In his third use of the now in the opening monologue Samson attempts to integrate his two discontinuous temporal parts by substituting the third person pronoun 'he' that formerly identified his present self with the 'I' by which he referred to his glorious dimension:

Inferior to the vilest now become
Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me,
They creep, yet see, *I dark in light exposed*
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
In power of others, never in my own. (SA, 73-8; emphases added).

Yet this 'I' is again but a fragment of Samson's self. Milton records this in the fragmentary syntactic structure that Samson employs in this passage. Though it is clear that by 'inferior to the vilest now become' Samson means himself, the subject of this sentence, 'I', is omitted. When the 'I' appears two lines later, it still involves a syntactic omission. Instead of the syntactically correct 'I dark in light [*am*] exposed' the text reads 'I dark in light exposed' (75). At this stage of his development Samson, who has not yet developed a concept of a temporal continuum in the now, is still incapable of integrating his two dimensions of his fragmented self into a single unitary 'I'. No such omissions appear in Samson's speech after he has successfully posited his 'I' in the now and formed a concept of a temporal continuum.

This failure reflects Samson's awareness of his self as incapable of forming a temporal succession between his past and present experiences. For the fallen Samson, time determines his self in the same way that space shapes his subjective reference point at the beginning of the drama. Thus, lamenting his loss of sight, Samson draws an analogy between the 'now' and 'here':

Inferior to the vilest now become
Of man or worm; the *vilest here* excel me,
They creep, yet see... (SA, 73-5; emphases added).

¹⁷ Nesler identifies a similar split in Samson's self, which, she argues, Samson never integrates.

By drawing a parallel between ‘the vilest *now*’ and ‘the vilest *here*’ (SA, 73-4) Samson implies that for him time is strictly analogous to space. Both are posited as subjective reference points, which are relative to the thoughts or utterances of Samson alone. Whereas ‘now’ designates the time at which Samson utters his words, ‘here’ refers to the place where he speaks.¹⁸ In both cases the position that Samson occupies in space and time determines his isolated point of reference, which is necessarily subjective and exclusive.

Serving as a limited lens through which all of his experiences are perceived, Samson’s fragmentary self determines also his understanding of his relationship to God. In his opening monologue, Samson refers to God three times, and in each case God is exclusively associated with Samson’s past glorious person. After Samson has retold the story of his birth he laments his lot as a person ‘separate to God’ who failed to fulfil divine expectations for ‘great exploits’ (SA, 31-2). Further on in this monologue God is associated with Samson’s past glory when Samson describes God as the source of his strength: ‘God, when he gave me strength, to show withal / How slight the gift was, hung it in my hair’ (SA, 58-9), and, finally, when God is designated the creator of light, now unseen by Samson: ‘Light the prime work of God to me is extinct’ (SA, 70).

In all three cases Samson views God as inseparable from what is now lost to him: his divine prospects, strength and eyesight. By associating God with only one of his two temporal dimensions, that is, his past glorious person, Samson expresses his perception of God as strictly dependent on his perception of his fragmentary self. For the fallen Samson, God is more an aspect of one fragment of his split self than an independent being. It is only after Samson has separated his perception of himself from that of God and only after he has regained his awareness of his self as the unifying force of his different experiences that he is capable of forming a new relationship to God and choosing to act as a person ‘separate to God’.

Prompted to inward change by his dialogues with his friends, Samson takes his first step towards an integration of his split self in a series of *nows*, in which he extends the scope of his ‘I’ to the past and creates a temporal succession between the two fragments of his self. Significantly different from the *now* that Samson has hitherto identified with his fallen, fragmented self, the first *now* that Samson forms in his dialogue with the chorus becomes the moment in which he situates the ‘I’ as a subject capable of learning:

¹⁸ As Derek Parfit argues, for those who deny the passage of time, the *now* and *here* are ‘strictly analogous’. Both are posited as subjective reference points, which are relative to the thoughts or utterances of the individual. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 178.

Your coming, friends, revives me, *for I learn*
Now of my own experience, not by talk,
How counterfeit a coin they are who friends
Bear in their superscription... (SA, 187-90; emphases added).

In this passage Samson posits an 'I' in the now that integrates his past and present learning experience. In contrast to the past in which he heard about the experiences of others he now learns of his own experience.

Significantly, this now, the first now in the poem in which Samson situates his 'I', is no longer the subjective time in which he situated his fallen, fragmentary self, but rather the medium of experience in which he acquires knowledge. When Samson thus situates his 'I' in the now it becomes the centre of an epistemic process in and through which he begins to grasp the idea of a temporal continuum by integrating his past and present experiences.

The first action of the 'I' that Samson has placed in the now is the further specification of a new now that designates a later point in time:

Ye see, O friends,
How many evils have enclosed me round;
Yet *that which was the worst now least afflicts me*,
Blindness, for had I sight, confused with shame,
How could I once look up, or heave the head,
Who like a foolish pilot have shipwrecked,
My vessel trusted to me from above,
Gloriously rigged... (SA, 193-200; emphases added).

Blindness, which was at the time of Samson's fall 'the worst', now, at a later point in time, 'least afflicts' him. Samson's now is no longer synonymous with the fixed point of his fall, when blindness was the worst that afflicted him. In this passage Samson separates the now from the immediate moment of his fall by moving it along the time series. Samson's formation of a second, different now in addition to the one that he has hitherto identified with his fall may be seen as the first step in his movement towards a formation of a concept of himself as moving in and through time. In Aristotelian terms, this moment is the second of two nows by which the mind marks the 'before' and 'after' in motion, thereby grasping what these nows frame as a temporal continuum.

Samson's movement of the now along the time series enables him to develop a parallel movement of his hitherto static 'I'. In the last cited passage Samson projects his 'I' into a hypothetical fallen existence in which he still has sight: '...for had *I* sight, confused with shame, / How could *I* once look up' (196-7; emphases added). Clearly, the subjunctive is not objective time, yet by imagining his self in a situation that does not take place in the moment of the fall Samson takes a first step towards moving his 'I' along the time series.

Samson's dissociation of his fall from his fixed, subjective now allows him to situate himself in a hypothetical time, but it also enables him to open the now to the possibility of experiences different from his own. Later in his dialogue with the Chorus Samson associates the now with the time of Israel's servitude:

Had Judah that day joined, or one whole tribe,
They had by this possessed the towers of Gath,
And lorded over them whom *now* they serve. (SA, 265-7; emphasis added).

No longer a subjective marker of Samson's fallen condition, in this passage the now has become the objective present moment, which is the medium in which Samson situates entities different from himself – Judah – and events or conditions different from his own fall – their servitude.

Speaking of Dalila, his wife, the third now that Samson uses in his dialogue with the Chorus specifies the time of Samson's suffering:

of what *now* I suffer
She was not the prime cause, but I myself. (SA, 233-4; emphasis added).

This now is simultaneous with both the moment at which Samson has his exchange with the Chorus and, by analogy, the now in which Israel, too, suffers under Philistine yoke. No longer the fixed moment of his fall, Samson's now has become the present moment that moves along the series of time, shedding light on different events and conditions that take place simultaneously.

This movement of the now along the time series generates a similar movement of Samson's 'I' in time. For the first time in the poem Samson posits two different consecutive 'I's – one in the past, the other in the present. The first 'I' in this passage is situated in the now, 'of what *now* I suffer', whereas the second in the past: 'but *I* myself, / Who, *vanquished* with a peal of words (O weakness!), / *Gave up* my fort of silence to a

woman' (SA, 233-6; emphases added). At once the cause of his suffering and simultaneously its effect, the 'I' of this passage serves as the unifying element that controls Samson's past and present experiences and integrates them into one coherent yet complex self.

In Milton's representation the 'I' that unifies Samson's experiences across time is first and foremost moral. Samson's taking responsibility for his present suffering enables him to posit a unitary 'I'. When he perceives himself rather than Dalila as the cause of his suffering he is capable of unifying his two dimensions into one person, to which he refers as '*I myself*' (SA, 234; emphases added). Thus, taking responsibility for his suffering Samson integrates what in the opening monologue he took to be two different aspects of his person – one operating 'once' and the other suffering 'now' – into the same person. Yet for Milton the unifying of one's self over the past and the present is not a sufficient condition for knowledge. Before Samson is capable of seeing himself as a fully integrated 'I' across time he will have to view himself as present across the full scope of time – past, present *and* future – and he will have to interpose a distance between himself and God.

That Samson's formation of a partial temporal succession is an insufficient condition for unifying experiences over time is evident from the first now that Samson uses in his dialogue with Manoa:

The base degree to which I *now* am fall'n,
These rags, this grinding, is not yet so base
As was my former servitude, ignoble,
Unmanly, ignominious, infamous,
True slavery, and that blindness worse than this,
That saw not how degenerately I served. (SA, 414-19; emphasis added)

Samson's glorious self is here perceived as more servile, 'ignoble, / Unmanly, ignominious, infamous' than Samson's fallen person. In this passage Samson's 'I' is a marker of his baseness, which now encompasses both his past and present conditions, while leaving his glory outside his newly constructed conception of himself. By imposing his fallen on his glorious dimension Samson seems to have succeeded in forming a single coherent 'I', yet instead of unifying Samson's experiences over different times this 'I' occludes Samson's past experience as a glorious person. Though Samson no longer views himself as having two distinct dimensions, he has yet to achieve an understanding of himself as an enduring person, that is, as being present in all the different times in which he has being.

In the second now that Samson configures in his dialogue with Manoa he achieves the placement of his relationship to God in all the times in which Samson exists. Here Samson expresses his understanding that, for him, God, too, moves along the time series. Acknowledging that he has brought ‘scandal / To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt / In feeble hearts’ (453-5), Samson expresses his hope that ‘the strife / With me hath end; all the contest is *now* / ‘Twixt God and Dagon’ (SA, 460-2; emphasis added). Samson’s development of a privileged and constantly advancing present, which moves along the series of time from earlier to later times, enables him to see the ‘strife’ as an event that moves from its former position in the past to a new position in the present. By placing God in this now, the now from which he excludes himself, Samson interposes, for the first time in the poem, a temporal distance between himself and God.

That God occupies a different position in time from the one occupied by himself is a significant departure from all Samson’s former references to God as an indispensable part of his once glorious person. Neither in his opening monologue nor in the first dialogue with the Chorus does Samson link God with his fallen condition in the present moment, the now. In his dialogue with the Chorus, for example, Samson associates his glorious self with God three times: once when he reprimands himself for divulging the ‘secret gift of God / To a deceitful woman’ (201-2), and twice when he refers to his almost symbiotic relationship to God – ‘what I motioned was of God’ (222), and ‘those great acts which God had done / Singly by me’ (243-4). In all three cases God is associated exclusively with Samson’s past glory. By identifying God with only one dimension of his self earlier in the drama, Samson implies that his glorious person is somehow an aspect of the divine or, rather, that God is somehow an aspect of Samson’s person. When in lines 461-2 Samson situates himself and God in two different points in time he expresses his newly formed understanding that God is an independent power that is itself quite capable of managing the strife against idolatry without Samson.¹⁹

Yet this interposition of distance, which Samson performs after he has formed a concept of temporal succession, does not immediately set him on the way to regeneration. After having developed a concept of a privileged and constantly advancing present, in which he has situated his self and his relationship to God, Samson, in fact, reaches what is

¹⁹ John Hill discerns presumption in Samson’s conviction that the strife is now between God and Dagon: ‘In saying that the battle for Israel’s freedom is *now* between God and Dagon, he is assuming that before his fall the battle was between Dagon and himself’. What Hill sees as presumption is, I believe, the fallen Samson’s incapacity to define himself as independent of God. See John S. Hill, ‘Vocation and Spiritual Renovation in *Samson Agonistes*’, *Milton Studies* 2 (1970), 149-74 (p. 159). Quoted in Stephen B. Dobranski and P. J. Klemp, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton. Volume Three, Samson Agonistes* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2009).

perhaps his lowest point in the poem. Later on in his dialogue with his father he rejects his father's proposal to ransom him, asks to be left at the mill and, finally, seeks death:

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,
Shameful garrulity. (SA, 487-91; emphases added).

His words, 'let me here' are echoed later in his reply to the Chorus, where they become a preamble to a death wish:

Here rather let me drudge and earn my bread,
Till vermin or the draff of servile food
Consume me, and oft-invoked death
Hasten the welcome end of all my pains. (SA, 573-6; emphases added).

Samson's 'oft-invoked' death wish (575) is coupled with an acute pain or feeling of having been deserted:

He led *me* on to mightiest deeds
Above the nerve of mortal arm
Against the uncircumcised, our enemies.
But *now* hath cast *me* off as never known,
And to those cruel enemies,
Whom I by his appointment had provoked,
Left me all helpless with the irreparable loss
Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated
The subject of their cruelty, or scorn. (SA, 638-46; emphases added).

Once led by God to 'mightiest deeds' Samson is now abandoned 'all helpless' in the hands of his enemies (638; 644). The distinction that Samson draws in this passage between God's action in the world and his own such action is clear: using the personal pronouns 'he' and 'me' to refer to God and himself, respectively, Samson makes clear that God is no longer an aspect of his glorious self but rather an independent power that, once acting through Samson, now has abandoned him. However, it is from the depth of his agony, in the moment of what is perhaps the lowest point in the drama, that Samson forms a continuity between the glorious and deserted segments of his self: in this passage

Samson integrates his past and present experiences by using the pronoun ‘me’ for both, thus creating a continuity between his two segments of self.

Nevertheless, creating continuity between past and present and understanding that his self encompasses both are still insufficient for regeneration. Samson’s interposition of distance between the glorious segment of himself and God leads him directly to despair. In his exchange with the Chorus after Manoa has left to fulfil his fatherly ‘timely care’ by ransoming his son, Samson expresses an explicit death wish:

This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,
No long petition, speedy death,
The close of all my miseries, and the balm (SA, 649-51).

Even as Samson prays for a ‘speedy death’ he opens up his concept of time to include the possibility of the future, and thus moves towards integrating his partially unified person across the full scope of time. Though the future that Samson imagines has nothing to offer him but an end to his miseries, this is still in itself evidence that he is by now capable of extending his imagining of his self into the future, too. At the deepest point of his despair Samson’s ‘I’ unifies his past, present and future experiences across the full scope of time.

Samson’s development of a distinct ‘I’ in and through time reaches a climactic point in his dialogue with Dalila, in which his partially unified ‘I’ forms, for the first time in the poem, two consecutive nows. In the first of these nows Samson juxtaposes his glory of former days, in which he chose Dalila, loved her and ‘unbosomed all [his] secrets’ to her, with his fragmentary ‘I’ of the present, in which ‘now [he] is judged an enemy’:

I before all the daughters of my tribe
And of my nation chose thee from among
My enemies, loved thee, as too well thou knew’st,
Too well, unbosomed all my secrets to thee,
Not out of levity, but overpowered
By thy request, who could deny thee nothing;
Yet *now* am judged an enemy. (SA, 876-82; emphasis added).

Here, as in his opening monologue, Samson’s fragmentary self is built into the grammatical structure of the poem: when Samson refers to his present fallen self he omits the ‘I’ – ‘yet *now* [I] am judged an enemy’ – so that the ‘I’ that Samson posits at the beginning of this passage remains limited to his past actions.

Samson's second now in this dialogue is not simultaneous with his first; it rather designates a future period of time which resembles the bleak future he opened up in the now when he expressed his death wish in 647-51:

If in my flower of youth and strength, when all men
Loved, honoured, feared me, thou alone could hate me,
Thy husband, slight me, sell me, and forgo me;
How wouldst thou use me *now*, blind, and thereby
Deceivable, in most things as a child
Helpless, thence easily condemned, and scorned,
And last neglected? (SA, 938-44).

The now that Samson specifies here is the hypothetical future he envisages for himself as the blind, helpless, and deceivable person, for whom Dalila offers to care.

In Aristotelian terms, Samson's capacity of forming two different consecutive nows is evidence that at this point in his development he has succeeded in forming a concept of a temporal continuum. Once Samson has formed two different nows, past and present, and, in addition, opened the second to the future, he is capable of regeneration. Tracing the series of moments of presentness centred in the self within Samson speech reveals, then, that Milton represents Samson's development of self as a rational movement of the recovering mind.²⁰

Unlike his fallen experience of God as a fixed aspect of his former self, in his dialogue with Harapha (SA, 1091-1241) Samson experiences God as 'living'. In *Christian Doctrine* Milton associates this expression not only with God's vitality but also with God's eternity.²¹ No longer situated in only one of the times at which Samson exists, in this passage God is experienced as surpassing all times:

I know no spells, use no forbidden arts;
My trust is in the living God who gave me
At my Nativity this strength, diffused
No less through all my sinews, joints and bones. (SA, 1139-42).

²⁰ In Nesler's reading of the poem Samson can never achieve any integration of his self. Nesler argues that 'throughout the closet drama it becomes clear that a self and its autobiography are not – cannot be – independently and autonomously formed'. See Nesler, 19.

²¹ See John Milton, *The Works of John Milton*, ed. by Frank Allen Patterson, 18 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-8), XIV, pp. 54-5. Quoted in Dobranski and Klemp, p. 356.

Samson's faith in 'the living God' enables him to view himself as one person whose strength is the same strength that was given him at his birth. In contrast to his former perception of God as present only in one of the times at which he, Samson, exists, in this passage Samson experiences God as equally present both at the time of his nativity and at the time of his speech. The demonstrative pronoun 'this', by which Samson qualifies his strength, indicates that Samson now views his strength as a property of his present condition. By acknowledging God's presence both in his glorious and wretched times and by associating God with his strength, Samson makes it clear that God, for him, has become the unifying force of his identity.

The second step in Samson's development towards regeneration takes place when Samson expands his understanding of the present moment, the now, as a connection of past and present experiences into an understanding of the now as the connection of the past, present, *and* future events. This takes place in Samson's dialogue with Harapha. The first now that Samson uses in this dialogue is the moment in which Samson, who now understands himself as the powerful instrument of Israel's God, challenges Dagon 'to the test', thereby opening up the possibility of the future in the now. Unlike Samson's first formation of the future in the now, in which he viewed the future as a bleak period of time in which he wished to take no part, in this passage Samson's now is the moment in which he situates action:

For proof hereof, if Dagon be thy god,
Go to his temple, invoke his aid
With solemnest devotion, spread before him
How highly it concerns his glory *now*
To frustrate and dissolve these magic spells,
Which I to be the power of Israel's God
Avow, and challenge Dagon to the test,
Offering to combat thee his champion bold,
With the utmost of his godhead seconded. (SA, 1145-53; emphasis added).

By challenging Dagon to a future test in the now, Samson clearly expresses his relationship to God as a performer of God's will, but, at the same time, he also positively opens up the present moment to the possibility of the future. That in his dialogue with Harapha Samson experiences the now as the moment in which he understands his relationship to God as persisting, that is, as continuously identical throughout the full scope of time, is evident from his reply to Harapha's series of 'indignities:'

All these indignities, for such they are
From thine, these evils I deserve and more,
Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me
Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye
Gracious to readmit the suppliant. (SA, 1168-73).

If hitherto Samson has understood his suffering as a well-deserved punishment that ended his relationship with God, at this point of his development of a persisting relationship to God Samson views his suffering as part of a divine system of justice which is, at the same time, open to God's final pardon. By repeating his challenge to Dagon twice more, at lines 1174-5 ('In confidence whereof I *once again* / Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight') and 1220-4 ('These shifts refuted, answer thy appellant... Who *now* defies thee thrice to single fight' [emphases added]), Samson forms a series of consecutive *nows* by which he transforms his interaction with Harapha into a temporal succession.

It is only after Samson has achieved a conception of his relationship to God as enduring through time that he begins to feel 'some rousing motions in [him] which dispose / To something extraordinary [his] thoughts' (SA, 1381-3):

I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.
I with this messenger will go along. (SA, 1381-4; emphases added).

The series of *nows*, with which Samson has measured his dynamic interaction with Harapha, constitutes an inner process, in which the 'rousing motions' he begins to feel incline Samson's thoughts towards action. Significantly, it is the 'rousing motions' that prompt Samson to complete his integration of his 'I' across the full scope of time by forming two consecutive I's, one in the present, the other in the future. By introducing his description of his feeling of the 'rousing motions' in him with the word 'begin', Samson creates a temporal succession between the first 'I', which he situates in the present ('I begin to feel'), and the second 'I', which he situates in the future ('I with this messenger will go along'). Samson's creation of these two consecutive I's, by which he integrates his present and future experiences, supplements and completes his earlier formation of the two consecutive I's, by which he integrated his past and present experiences. In these earlier I's he first took responsibility for his actions: 'Of what *now* I suffer / She was not the prime cause, but I myself' (233-4). Initiated by a moral action, Samson's movement towards an integrated self across the full scope of time finds its

completion in this passage in Samson's first decision to act ('I with this messenger will go along'). In Milton's representation of Samson's development of an independent self the individual's capacity to act is grounded in the individual's moral stature.

Having unified all of his experiences over time and achieved an understanding of God as present in all the different times in which he exists, Samson is now capable of situating two consecutive I's in the two consecutive nows he has just formed. In Milton's drama, it is only after Samson has successfully formed a temporal succession between two different nows and between two different I's that he is ready to perform one last heroic act. Bidding farewell to his friends Samson defines this act in vague terms ('Happen what may' [1423]) and situates it in the future:

Happen what may, of me expect to hear
Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy
Our God, our Law, my nation, or myself,
The last of me or no I cannot warrant. (SA, 1423-6).

Yet unlike the deed the doer is defined here in no uncertain terms. Having formed a concept of himself and his relationship to God as enduring in time, Samson is capable of situating his now unified person in relation to God, Law, and Nation, all of which he now sees as his own.

In his final speech, reported by the messenger, Samson forms two consecutive I's in two consecutive nows. The first now is marked implicitly by employing the temporal adverb 'hitherto' to designate a passage from the past into the future:

Hitherto, lords, what your commands imposed
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,
Not without wonder or delight beheld.
Now of my own accord such other trial
I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater;
As with amaze shall strike all who behold. (SA, 1640-5; emphases added).

By using the first now, implicit in *hitherto*, until now, as the boundary between his past experience as the Philistines' prisoner and his future activity as the author of 'some great act' Samson forms a concept of time that is now fully extended temporally. In this newly formed concept of temporal succession, which encompasses the full scope of time, Samson situates two consecutive I's, the first identical to his fallen experience up to now, the second extending to his future time in which he is ready to act. Following Aristotle,

Milton represents Samson's achievement of forming a concept of time by creating a series of two consecutive nows. But here, again, Milton reaches beyond Aristotle by situating two I's in these two nows. These represent Samson's fallen and regenerating dimensions of his self. In the same way that for Aristotle the mind conceives of what is bound between two different nows as time, Samson conceives of what is bound between his two different dimensions of his self as his unitary 'I'. Extended over the full scope of time, this 'I' is by now capable of controlling, modifying, organizing and integrating all of his experiences – glorious, fallen and regenerated – into one coherent self.