

THE VERSIFICATION OF SAMSON AGONISTES

by

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PREFACE.

The text used for this study of Samson Agonistes is Helen Darbishire's edition of The Poetical Works of John Milton, published by the Oxford University Press in 1958.

I should like to express here my thanks to Professor Howarth for his encouragement, and for giving generously of his time and expert knowledge to the supervision of this work.

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INTRODUCTION.SUMMARY.

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- II. Reasons for silence.
- III. Survey of critical attitudes to Milton
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INTRODUCTION.

(1). Nearly three hundred years ago, in the seventh or eighth year of Charles II's reign, a quietly dressed middle-aged gentleman was generally to be seen on fine summer evenings at the porch of his little house near Bunhill Fields, enjoying the peace and freshness of the country air. (1).

It was known that Mr. Milton was blind; but he was more respected than pitied, for he had servants to attend him, an affectionate wife, young friends to read and write for him if his daughters were not at hand, and the occasional solace of visits from notable persons such as Andrew Marvell, John Dryden the new Laureate, William D'Avenant, Sir Robert Howard, Lady Ranelagh and the Earl of Anglesey. (2).

Some of these wrote accounts of their visits, noting for instance that their host appeared cheerfully resigned to his blindness, and that he was kindly and tolerant although his conversation was witty and satirical. (3).

Yet about the great dramatic poem on which he must then have been engaged they said nothing. It would seem that Milton himself spoke as little as he wrote on his motives for composing Samson Agonistes. If the outside world was a blank to him, he presented a front equally mystifying to the world and disclosed no trace of the emotional perplexity, turmoil and agony which must have accompanied, if not given rise to, the creation of Samson. One can only surmise in explanation that the bitter experiences of his life had now taught Milton that it was after all only in the exercise of his one great talent that he could serve and present his true account, and so he left his poetry to speak for itself.

(II). The comparative silence of his readers, then and since, on the subject of Samson Agonistes is easier to understand: at first, political considerations probably rendered timid those who admired the poetry but saw in the protagonist the ideal figure of rebellion triumphant; later, after the Bloodless Revolution of 1688, when sympathy with such great deliverers could be safely expressed, literary taste had swung to an extreme from which appreciation of the poetry was impossible; but it might have been hoped that today, as we pride ourselves on having evolved a practical and objective mode of criticism, Samson Agonistes would at last have come into its own.

Unfortunately, however, Milton's works have never aroused so much controversy and hostile criticism as in this century, and Samson Agonistes, when not ignored, has had its share of the general abuse heaped on Milton. A short examination of this state of affairs, together with the literary history leading up to it, provides a useful preliminary to the study of Samson Agonistes itself, and an explanation of the motives determining the choice of such a subject for study.

(III). Only too often have Milton's detractors reminded us of the poet's own estimate of his powers - for instance, his mention of the "inward prompting which now grew daily upon me that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might leave something so written to aftertimes as they might not willingly let it die."⁽⁴⁾ How seldom on the other hand are we told of the respect accorded him by his contemporaries - of the praise given by Henry Lawes and Sir Henry Wotton to Comus: in the latter's words: "I should much commend the tragical part if the lyrical

did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your songs and odes, whereto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language." (5).

The compliments of Italian writers who proclaimed that, thanks to Milton, the Thames now rivalled "Boeotian Parmessus" may be dismissed perhaps as no more than politeness; (6). the praise of such a man as Marvell, however, cannot be so ignored. In the poem prefixed to Paradise Lost he wrote:

"That majesty which through thy work doth reign
Draws the devout, deterring the profane....
Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?
Whence furnish such a vast expanse of mind?
Just Heaven, thee like Tiresias to requite,
Rewards with prophecy the loss of sight."

Furthermore, though Paradise Lost was sold to the publisher in 1667 for a mere ten pounds, it would be ridiculous to regard it as unpopular with the public to whom it was addressed, or as an unfortunate venture from the publisher's point of view, since the first edition of thirteen hundred copies was bought up within two years, at least as many more copies were taken by 1688, and altogether five editions had been run through by 1700 - no mean sale if the nature of the work and the size of the reading public at that time are taken into account. (7).

Jonathan Richardson reports a story that the poet Denham, when a Member of Parliament, one day entered the House with a copy of Paradise Lost, fresh from the printers, in his hand, and announced that it was "part of the noblest poem that ever was wrote in any language on any age."

Richardson is also the authority for Dryden's generous admission: "This man cuts us all out, and the ancients too." (8).
How much better for Dryden's own reputation as a poet if

he had paid no homage but direct praise, and foregone his imitations of Shakespeare and Milton: his versions may have been sincere compliments, but they were not on the whole good poetry.

In the next generation Addison maintained the admiring attitude, declaring "Our language sunk under him",⁽⁹⁾ but Johnson expressed Augustan disapproval of the liberties which he considered Milton had taken with the language - "he wrote no language" was his verdict -⁽¹⁰⁾ and in general showed himself unsympathetic towards Milton's type of genius, although he was ready to grant him "gigantic loftiness" and admit that "the characteristic of this poem" (Paradise Lost) "is sublimity.... What other author ever soared so high, or sustained his flight so long?".

Towards the end of the eighteenth century interest in Milton became concerned more with the content than the style of his poetry. Blake's heretical view - "Milton was of the Devil's Party without knowing it" - set the note for much future criticism. Later on Byron and Shelley also saw Milton as the great poet of spiritual rebellion; Shelley's eulogy is given in Adonais:

....He died

Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
Of lust and blood.

Naturally, Milton's Puritanism made little appeal to these poets. Yet had Shelley lived in the mid-seventeenth century, it is probable that he would have sympathised with Milton even in this - Milton's Puritanism, after all, was not really as quiet and submissive as some later poets, including Wordsworth, liked to think.

The Romantics' admiration of Milton was generally fervent and unalloyed: Coleridge had offered the first real criticism on the subject in his lectures on Shakespeare and Milton and in some comments in the Biographia Literaria; Wordsworth in his war-time sonnets set the note of praise with which we are familiar; and Keats's letters contain several passages of discerning criticism, while his Hyperion remains the noblest tribute of all. But the great prose writers were not behindhand with their homage: "Milton was not an author amongst authors, not a poet amongst poets, but a power amongst powers", wrote de Quincey; Hazlitt had a similar thought: "The spirit of the poet, the patriot, and the prophet, vied with each other in his breast..... he strives hard to say the finest things (11). in the world, and he does say them." Later on the attitude was no less admiring, as appears from Tennyson's verses -

God-gifted organ-voice of England,

Milton, a name to resound for ages.

and Arnold's unusually pontifical conclusion: "Milton, of all our English race, is by his diction and rhythm the one artist of the highest rank in the great style whom we have; this I take as requiring no discussion, this I take as certain." Judging from the tone of this and from the studies of Milton made by Masson, Saintsbury, Garnett, Raleigh and Pattison, Milton had become one of the most revered of British institutions. More discriminating praise was expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his correspondence with R.W.Dixon: "Milton's art is incomparable, not only in English literature, but, I should think, almost in any..... shewn especially in his

verse, his rhythm and metrical system.....equal, if not more than equal, to the finest of Greek or Roman." (12).

Such was the attitude of the cognoscenti; and by the common reader also, Milton was known and venerated as a great man and a great poet, his impression stamped upon the mind in Wordsworth's image:

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:

Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,

Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free.....

Yet what has happened to the image in our own time? By some ironic twist his own words paint the situation:

By how much from the top of wondrous glory

To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fallen!

(Samson: lines 167-9.).

The attempt to dislodge Milton from his supremacy began in 1918 with a lively sally by Ezra Pound, declaring his disgust for Milton's "asinine bigotry, his beastly Hebraism, the coarseness of his mentality". Not long afterwards this was followed up by T.S.Eliot in a less immoderate essay in which, taking up the cudgel from Johnson, he pronounced Milton's poetry to be "unsatisfactory" chiefly because of "blindness", (i.e. indifference to detail), and an overwhelming rhetorical element which he has referred to elsewhere as evidence of "dissociation of sensibility" and leading to "dislocation" between the style and the feeling of a passage. (13). (14).

Furthermore, in the first of his studies on Milton, he condemned the poet not only for his own sins, but also for those of later generations: "Milton's poetry could only be an influence for the worse, upon any poet whatsoever." (15). Soon others were joining these iconoclasts. Bonamy Dobrée, Middleton Murry - "There is death in

(16)

Milton", according to the latter - and Herbert Read agreed entirely with Eliot in his first strictures.

But the disgruntled F.R. Leavis outdid all in condemnation: after mentioning "the routine gesture, the heavy fall of the verse, the foreseeable thud that comes so inevitably", he described himself as "ready to surrender at last to the inescapable monotony of the ritual".

This statement contains at least one inaccuracy since, far from surrendering, the writer was able to continue:

Samson Agonistes read aloud would be hardly tolerable, because of its desolating exposure of utter loss - loss in the poet of all feeling for his native English. The rhythmic deadness, the mechanical externality with which the movement is varied, is the more pitifully evident because of the personal urgency of the theme, and the austerity: there is no magniloquence here.....The belief that "architectonic" qualities like Milton's represent a higher kind of unity goes with the kind of intellectual bent that produced Humanism - that takes satisfaction in inertly orthodox generalities, is impressed by invocation of order from minds that have no glimmer of intelligence about contemporary literature and could not safely risk even elementary particular appreciation.

It would be a pity to omit his last remark from a self-indictment so willingly penned: "How many cultivated adults could honestly swear that they had ever read it"

(17).

Samson) "through with enjoyment."

Yet the attackers have not had it all their own way, since support for Milton was soon forthcoming, and this time as persuasive by the force of its reasoning and wealth of detailed discussion as earlier adulation was by its rhetorical enthusiasm. The controversy has been bitter, partly because of the wide cleavage already

existing between the two critical camps involved, but principally because, as Tillyard pointed out, a writer so consistent and strong-minded as Milton is bound to (18). rouse powerful personal reactions. On the defending side, Douglas Bush has dealt fully and fairly with the subject of Milton's influence and popularity today, in his book "Paradise Lost In Our Time", and other studies on the epic remarkable for their insight or new material have been written by Charles Williams, Tillyard, Grierson, Wilson Knight, Waldock, Bush, Pearsall Smith, C.S. Lewis and Saurat. Belloc and, more recently, J.H. Hanford, Daiches and Visiak have produced general studies of Milton; (19). and there have appeared several excellent specialized studies such as The Italian Element in Milton's Verse, by Prince, and Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton, by Rosamund Tuve. In fact, the result - though no doubt an unintentional one - of the onslaught led by Pound and Eliot has been an improvement in the criticism and understanding of Milton, so making possible a deeper appreciation for which we may well be thankful, as being more than we deserve: for when the great are censured, we, not they, are the sufferers. Little would Milton himself, confident in his poetical genius, have cared for ill-judged praise or blame, although he would probably have derived a good deal of satirical amusement from both the fulminations and the arid disquisitions of which he has lately been made the subject. In the course of the recent controversy the real victims were those who were persuaded to accept Milton's dethronement and thenceforth to ignore his poetry or else read it carelessly, without discrimination. Given a few teachers in one generation with this unfortunate prejudice, countless pupils in the next may be led to despise Milton as a priggish and bombastic moralist,

a master of "sound and fury, signifying nothing", and in this way they will be deaf to the splendour of sound, blind to the richness, variety and extent of his vision, and insensible to his mental and moral vigour. They will know nothing of the ecstatic amazement which is the natural response of the young and avid reader, while in imagination he surveys new realms of experience, apparently limitless heavens open to the flight of the human spirit.....

adventurous song,

That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme. (20).

IV From this point of view, every attempt to avert hostility from Milton is an act of benefit to ourselves just as much as a tribute to the poet himself. He has probably exerted a greater influence on the national character than any other English poet except Shakespeare, and the inspiration of his writings and personal integrity is needed even more now, to raise us from the mindless depths of our Brave New World, than it was in Milton's own time, or in Wordsworth's. In making that assessment of previous writers which, as Eliot so often points out, every generation needs to make for its own good, we should be on our guard against excess, against making originality or reaction our objects, instead of pursuing that objectivity itself, generous and well-balanced, which alone will bless our efforts. If the critic forms his assessment or valuation as part of his own mental and technical development, in as honest a spirit as possible, and is prepared to find his assessment the same perhaps as that of other critics, whether previous or contemporary, all well and good. This is bearing in mind Milton's own dictum, "Words must be conformable to things, not things

(22).
to words." But, if from the first, he thinks of assessment as being reassessment, necessarily different from that of his predecessors, and if he proscribes all findings except those which will provide what he considers to be the corrective emphasis or balance required in contemporary literature, then he would seem to be hamstrung from the start: practitioners of this kind of literary criticism are well on the road to forming a closed circle.

Traces of this attitude may sometimes be detected in Eliot's criticism; for instance, in his second study on Milton, he outlines what he suggests should be some of the tenets of criticism, and then concludes:

If the poetry of the rest of this century takes the line of development which seems to me, reviewing the progress of poetry through the last three centuries, the right course, it will discover new and more elaborate patterns of a diction now established. In this search it might have much to learn from Milton's extended verse structure..... in short, it now seems to me that poets are sufficiently liberated from Milton's reputation to approach the study of his work without danger, and with profit to their poetry and to the English language.
(23).

This conviction that literature should be of a certain kind at a certain time biases study of the past, and explains such peculiarities as the aggrandisement of Donne at Milton's expense, and the criticism of selected passages from Milton in a fashion which it would be kind to call summary. (e.g., condemning the deliberately generalized imagery in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" for being general; misinterpreting Samson's line about

the moon "hid in her vacant interlunar cave"; and quoting a passage from Henry James as a lesson to Milton on when and how to indulge in obscurity!). In justice to Eliot, however, it should be admitted at once that these examples come from the 1936 essay, and that in his second study on Milton, a lecture delivered in 1947, he recanted some opinions and modified others. While reiterating his antipathy to Milton the man, he revealed a generous sympathy with Milton the poet - generous but still guarded. A confession that now "the remoteness of Milton's verse from ordinary speech, his invention of his own poetic language, seems to me one of the marks of his greatness" is followed by doubtful praise of "his inerrancy", conscious or unconscious, in writing so as to make the best display of his talents, and the best concealment of his weakness." Later on comes a warning that "the emphasis is on the sound, not the vision, upon the word, not the idea; and in the end it is the unique versification that is the most certain sign of Milton's mastership." But the close is pure praise: Milton, he says, is "outside the theatre, the greatest master in our language of freedom within form. A study of Samson should sharpen anyone's appreciation of the justified irregularity, and put him on guard against the pointless irregularity."

These and other remarks on Samson and versification occurring in the lecture are of special interest here. Samson, as already pointed out, has always been the most neglected of the poetical works; but the versification in general has seldom lacked appreciation, some critics going so far as to suggest that it is Milton's greatest gift and that in it he surpasses all other poets. Yet his verse technique is nowhere so interesting as in

Samson Agonistes, the verse drama which shows us the final stage in his handling of both blank and irregular verse after the study and practice of a lifetime; and so it is all the more puzzling that this last great work has received comparatively little attention. Whereas rows and rows of critical works have been published on the subject of Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, and these two works have received the major share of attention in nearly all the general studies of Milton's poetry, Samson Agonistes is seldom given more than a page or two's notice at the end - in which the writer is sure to expatiate on the equation of Milton with his hero, Cavaliers with Philistines, and the like. Apart from the essays prefacing the various separate editions of the play, the only serious studies on the subject are Samson Agonistes and the Hellenic Drama, by Jebb, and Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy, by W.R.Parker, though mention must also be made of the penetrating observations occurring here and there in the letters of G.M. Hopkins. Nor is neglect all that the play has had to suffer, as may be seen from the remarks of F.R. Leavis already quoted. On rereading his final note on the subject - "How many cultivated adults could honestly say that they had ever read it through with enjoyment?" - one is tempted to add the query, "How many cultivated adults could honestly say that they had ever read it through?" since to read it and ignore it - or read it and condemn it - argues a lack of response surprising in a trained critic. As so often is the case, the best remark on the subject is Hazlitt's: "The way to defend Milton against all impugnors, is to take down (24). the book and read it."

The following pages constitute an attempt to examine the versification of Samson Agonistes - not with any presumptuous hope of supplying the deficiency of

criticism indicated above, but only as the humble effort of one reader to understand more clearly what Milton thought and felt, and intended us to think and feel, in the last poem he wrote. Like virtue itself, the study of Milton is its own reward.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION.

1. Jonathan Richardson's account in The Early Lives of Milton, ed. H. Darbishire, p.203.
- 2.(1). D.Masson, Life of Milton in Connexion with the History of His Time (1880), vol. VI. According to this (p.649) Milton's daughters left home in 1670, and Samson was written between 1666 and 1670. (p.662).
- (11).J.Aubrey's account in The Early Lives of Milton (p.7): "The only inducement of several foreigners that came over into England was chiefly to see Oliver Protector and Mr. J. Milton".
3. Aubrey's account in The Early Lives of Milton, pp.5-6.
4. Milton,"The Reason of Church Government",
"Areopagitica and Other Prose Works (Dent), p.301.
5. See Letters by Lawes and Wotton, prefixed to Comus.
6. Milton, "Second Defence of the English People,"
Areopagitica and Other Prose Works, pp. 291-2; and Francini's Ode.
7. J.H. Hanford, A Milton Handbook (1954), pp. 191-2.
8. Richardson's account in The Early Lives of Milton, pp. 295-6.
9. J. Addison,"On The Criticism of Paradise Lost,"
The Spectator.
10. S. Johnson,"John Milton," Lives of The English Poets ..
11. W.Hazlitt,"On Shakespeare and Milton," Lectures on The English Poets (Dent), p.57.
12. The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.W.Dixon, ed. Abbott (1935), p.13.
13. Quoted by Logan Pearsall Smith, Milton and His Modern Critics (1940).
14. T.S.Eliot, "Milton II," On Poetry and Poets (1947),p.152.
15. T.S.Eliot, "Milton I", On Poetry and Poets, p.138.

16. J. Middleton Murry, "Tendering The Whole",
Heaven and Earth (1938), p.183.
17. F.R. Leavis, "Milton's Verse", Revaluation:
Tradition and Development in English Poetry
(1936), pp.42-64.
18. E.M.W. Tillyard, Milton (1930), p.361.
19. See Bibliography.
20. Paradise Lost, Book I, lines 13-16.
21. For example, in "Milton II", On Poetry and Poets.
22. Milton, Defence of Church Government.
23. Eliot, "Milton II", On Poetry and Poets, p.147.
24. Hazlitt, "On Shakespeare and Milton",
Lectures on The English Poets, p. 61.

GENERAL REMARKS ON SAMSON AGONISTES.

SUMMARY.

- I. The Samson theme long in Milton's mind.
- II. General interest in the theme before Milton's time.
- III. Characteristics of Samson peculiar to Milton's interpretation; Milton's interest in Job.
- IV. Reasons for personal sympathy with his hero.
- V. Significance of the theme; outline of Samson's spiritual development.
- VI. Reasons for modelling play on ancient Greek tragedy.
- VII. How far is Samson Agonistes a classical tragedy?
- VIII. Nature of effect in accord with ancient tragedy.
- IX. Samson Agonistes hellenic in spirit.
- X. Use of irony.
- XI. Nature of diction.
- XII. Hostile criticism often the result of careless reading.
- XIII. General remarks on versification.

GENERAL REMARKS on SAMSON AGONISTES.

I. We may regard Samson Agonistes as Milton's most mature poetical work - bearing in mind, of course, much more than the simple facts that it was written near the end of his life, and that all his later compositions were in prose. A work may be termed mature if it shows that the writer has achieved mastery of his nature and his art and has chosen a theme which exercises his talent or genius to the full. Such themes are not arrived at suddenly: they may enter the writer's mind in youth and lodge there many years before he feels able to build for them their true and lasting home. There is evidence that Milton was considering Samson as a subject for a long dramatic poem as early as 1641, for in the Introduction to Book II of The Reason of Church Government, in the midst of a digression outlining his plans for future poems, he gave a list of titles and sketches which included five connected with Samson: "Samson Pursophorus or Hybristes; or Samson Marrying, or Ramoth-Lechi. Dagonalia". All of these were envisaged as poetic dramas. When, however, the first of his major works came to be written it was on a different theme - the story of the Fall - and of a different kind, the Puritan aversion from theatrical productions, possibly, though not probably, swaying Milton in favour of the epic form at this time. As the story of Samson had evidently impressed itself upon his mind as requiring dramatic treatment, it was perforce set aside for the time being. But that it was not put out of mind in the interim may be deduced from two facts: first, the recurrent references to Samson, always most powerfully phrased, in other writings; and second, the use of

the Samson image, not named as such it is true, but implicit in a context which includes other images associated in Milton's mind with Samson. For example, there is direct mention of Samson at the end of Book II of The Reason of Church Government: "I cannot better liken the state and person of a king than to that mighty Nazarite Samson"; and again in Book IX of Paradise Lost when Adam in his sensual shame is compared to Samson when shorn of his hair. (1). The famous passage from the Areopagitica, the panegyric on his ideal of the British people, belongs to this image group: "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks..." In this last example there is obvious association of awakening, or of opening the eyes and seeing, with perception of truth, and of flowing hair with physical power and the might of the law; the former set of images, of course, occurs independently in several other places - most notably in the invocation to light at the beginning of Book III of Paradise Lost. Much of the deepening interest in Samson was no doubt due to the poet's knowledge that he would eventually become totally blind, as indeed happened in 1652.

II Milton, therefore, felt a strong personal affinity to the Old Testament hero, to whose life his own seemed to be running parallel: each had experienced a sense of election to perform a noble task, the championing of his people against the ungodly, marriage with a daughter of the enemy, and later, the overthrow of his cause, personal suffering, and the loss of sight. Nor was Milton alone in recognizing the literary possibilities of the story, which had always been a popular theme for sermons and, in lay literature, had passed through the hands of Boccaccio (providing one of the instances in De Casibus

Illustrium Virorum), Chaucer (as the third tragedy in The Monk's Tale), and Quarles (A Historie of Samson, 1632); furthermore, it had appeared in dramatic form in Italian, French and Spanish. ⁽²⁾ In some of these versions the story was treated literally, on the lines of mediaeval tragedy, in others allegorically, representing Samson as a foreshadowing of the Christian hero, or mystical combination of all the virtues, or his fate as exemplifying the punishment of pride and unchastity. Finally, the famous Dutch poet Vondel, Milton's contemporary, had just published his dramatic version of the story in 1660.

III. Had Milton wanted it, therefore, there was ample precedent for a dramatization of the old Biblical tale; moreover, at the time when he was considering it, that is the middle 1660's, Puritan hostility to the drama had expended itself and had provoked a reaction in favour of plays, so that there was a renewal of popular interest quite independent of the enthusiasm of the newly-returned Court writers. Milton, however, had shown himself so independent of popular taste as well as of learned opinion in other matters, that it would be ill-judged to stress what was outwardly opportune in the writing of Samson Agonistes, at the expense of the "inward prompting" which was probably all that he himself was aware of. His motives were not as other men's, any more than his conception of Samson's character resembled theirs.

Several of the episodes given in Judges are omitted, since they fall below the dignity of the theme; for instance, there is no mention of the harlot in Gaza or the three hundred foxes tied in pairs tail to tail, and only once is there a vague reference to the riddle of the lion and the honey. Samson is no longer a

primitive superman, boisterous, wilful and passionate, and with an almost schoolboyish delight in practical jokes and physical prowess: he has become instead the moral leader of his people. The emphasis has shifted from the bodily sufferings of Samson to his mental torment, from his revenge on the Philistines to his moral regeneration, from the ready embracing of a hero's death to absolute resignation. The limitations of the Biblical Samson are clearly revealed in the last verses of the account in Judges:⁽⁴⁾.

Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.

And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.

Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying place of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.

Milton's Samson, on the other hand, is utterly regardless

of personal suffering and revenge as he prays for the necessary strength to punish the enemies of his God:

...with head a while enclin'd,
 And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd,
 Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd.
 At last with head erect thus cry'd aloud,
 Hitherto, Lords, what^a your commands impos'd
 I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying,
 Nor without wonder or delight beheld.
 Now of my own accord such other tryal
 I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater;
 As with amaze shall strike all who behold.
 This utterd, straining all his nerves he bowd;
 As with the force of winds and waters pent,
 When Mountains tremble, those two massie Pillars
 With horrible convulsion to and fro,
 He tuggd, he shook, till down they came and drew
 The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder
 Upon the heads of all who sate beneath,
 Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councillors, or Priests,
 Their choice nobility and flower, not onely
 Of this but each Philistian City round
 Met from all parts to solemnize this Feast.
 Samson with these inmixt, inevitably
 Pull'd down the same destruction on himself;
 The vulgar only scap'd who stood without.

(lines 1636-59.)

In considering the differences between this conception of Samson and the accepted one, it is interesting to note that the passage from the Introduction to The Reason of Church Government alluded to at the beginning of this chapter reveals Milton's interest in another Old Testament character, Job, whose situation he evidently regarded as having much in common with Samson's. At that time the

Book of Job appeared to him as "a brief model of the epic form," but although he renounced it as an epic theme in favour of the story of the Fall he did not abandon it entirely but took from it what probably had always interested him most - Job's interrogation of his Maker - and put it wherever appropriate in the mouth of Samson. As a result his interpretation of Samson is a highly individual and selective one with so many elements of Job interfused that it might almost be taken as the actions of Samson experienced by Job. The emphasis has shifted from the physical sufferings of Samson to his mental torment, from his revenge on the Philistines to his moral regeneration. So Manoah, although glorying in his son's achievement in freeing Israel, finds most consolation in the thought:

...which is best and happiest yet, all this
 With God not parted from him, as was feared,
 But favouring and assisting to the end.
 Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
 Or knock the brest, no weakness, no contempt,
 Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
 And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

(lines 1718-24.).

IV. This idea would have been in accordance with the train of Milton's thought in his later years, when, beset with misfortunes that would have overwhelmed all but the indomitable, he resigned himself to earthly disappointments and fixed his hopes more ardently than ever on the recognition of spiritual triumph. The early days of the Restoration had seen his life in danger, his fortune reduced, his books burnt, and, worst of all to him, the recession of his countrymen from righteousness; at the same time loss of sight and the pain of his humiliating gout attacks prevented the untrammelled

working of his mind. Jonathan Richardson has left us the pathetic description of the greatest poet of his age - and one of the greatest of any - seated at an elbow chair in his obscure little upstairs room, in "black clothes but neat enough, pale but not cadaverous, his hands and fingers gouty and with chalkstones. Among other discourse he expressed himself to this purpose that, was he free from the pain this gave him, his blindness would be tolerable." (3). This is his only recorded complaint: nearly all the other accounts bear witness to his "cheerful" manner. But it would have been no wonder if sometimes, in solitude or during those strolls in his garden, accompanied yet still solitary, he questioned mutely the ways of a God who chastised just and unjust alike. If his faith ever wavered in the consolations of heavenly reward and posthumous fame, then what an inspiration the image of Samson must have been to him - in this vicarious triumph he could overcome all his enemies, Priests, Prelates, Presbyters, Court, Cavaliers, the lot - even perhaps the troubling ghost of Mary Powell, his first wife, and the rest of the improvident Powells.

That Milton experienced such moods and that they give depth and intensity to the character of Samson there seems no denying; but that is not the same thing as asserting that he wrote Samson Agonistes in order to express his opinions on such subjects as female character, the relationship of Church and State (which Grierson and Wilson Knight imply), or the history of England. (5). His opinions on such topics are openly - and fully - stated in his prose pamphlets.

V. What then did the story of Samson mean to Milton? Generally speaking, it represented a culmination of the thought of his two epic poems, or perhaps a complement to them. They had shown the Divine Hero atoning for

the sins of Man's pride, whereas Samson shows a human hero who is both sinner and redeemer. Man at last saves himself. Like the ancient tragedies, the play plunges in medias res with the entrance at the beginning of a Samson who has already erred through pride, having presumed from the portents accompanying his birth and from his mighty strength that he would be blessed by God in all he did. He now realizes that in several of his actions he has offended God - notably in his marriages with Philistine women, his revelation of the secret of his strength, and his wanton provocation of the Philistines themselves. The result has been disastrous not only to himself but also to Israel, the people whom he had believed himself destined to deliver. Brought to a sudden halt by his blindness and imprisonment, he blames alternately God and himself in his frustration until, after the comments of his various visitors have prompted him to submit his conscience to a closer examination, he now realizes more precisely the nature of his sin: his first fault had been pride, the second despair, which may be regarded as the obverse of pride. In other words, he has been sinning as much by denying his possible usefulness to God as he had formerly done in exaggerating it. (This aspect of Samson's character is peculiar to Milton's interpretation, and may have been suggested by his own inner experience, or have been borrowed from the character of Job; whatever the cause, it is thoroughly in accord with the spirit of Greek tragedy.) Once Samson has reached a proper state of mind, submissive to God's disposal, he is deemed ready for his great task and is granted the knowledge that, after all, his great strength is to be the means of his people's deliverance from the Philistines. While his friends wait in perplexity and his father tells them that his son's miseries will soon be ended if the

plans for ransom are effective, Samson goes willingly to the heathen festival place, knowing it will indeed be a place of execution for him and his enemies. He entertains his captors for a while by performing whatever feats of strength they call for, then he offers them a further exhibition of his own devising - and pulls down ruin on their heads. In this way his destiny is fulfilled, God having foreseen His servant's errors and their punishment and used them in the accomplishment of His purpose.

VI. A theme so unified and austere naturally demands a form conceived in the same spirit, from which point of view Milton's decision to model his work on ancient Greek tragedy seems readily understandable, even without reference to his introductory epistle "Of that sort of dramatic poem which is called tragedy." There he makes it clear that he chooses the classical model in preference to later forms because he thinks it had produced the most moving kind of tragedy. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are to him "unequall'd yet by any", therefore they provide "the best rule to all who endeavour to write Tragedy." And tragedy to Milton is a dramatic representation retaining its ritual and moral nature, just as it had been in fifth century Athens:

Tragedy, as it was antiently compos'd, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems; therefore said by Aristotle to be of power, by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, - that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.

Milton's scholarship enabled him to grasp what is often only vaguely perceived - the exact nature of the cathartic

effect that Aristotle had in mind: that is, to clear man's soul of dread by showing him the worst that can befall. It was probably with a similar purpose that the Anglo Saxon lament of Deor was composed long ago: "ƿæs ofer eode, ƿisses swā maeg" - "that passed away, so may this". There is more than resignation in these words, for they imply that after wrong and suffering comes a restoration of order. By the representation of such experiences man sees that even the worst can be borne and made the stuff of greatness; and, furthermore, he senses that the very act and art of representation constitute a triumph, showing human skill in ordering and shaping events.

On the other hand, it is not so clear whether Milton's condemnation of writers who were guilty of "intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity, or introducing trivial and vulgar persons: which by all judicious hath bin counted absurd, and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratifie the people" was meant to extend to the great Elizabethans as well, and whether if so it could be justified: but this is beside the point, which is consideration of the most appropriate vehicle for the drama of Samson. And even the critic who is most fervently anti-Milton and pro-Elizabethan would probably agree that to introduce a couple of bawdy millers, camel drivers or wandering beggars into the scene at Gaza would destroy its Biblical solemnity. Few besides Johnson and Macaulay have ever questioned Milton's judgment in preferring the classic form of tragedy and so keeping within the range of his genius.

VII. As it stands, Samson Agonistes is generally

acknowledged to be the drama in English most closely approximating to the ancient Greek model. The title itself reminds us that, like Oedipus Tryannus or Prometheus Vincetus, it is concentrating on a particular stage of the hero's life. Every reader knows the story before ever he opens the book, since it has been a part of Christian "Holy Writ" for nearly twenty centuries - but whether it is derived from myth or legend no-one knows. More interesting than such speculations is the question whether the author has succeeded in making the story appear significant to his own people, as Sophocles did, for instance, in Oedipus Tyrannus. A brief comparison with this play will show how closely Samson resembles the Greek model in externals, at any rate. Both are short plays, by modern standards - Oedipus has fifteen hundred and thirty lines, Samson seventeen hundred and fifty-eight-and have few characters: in addition to the hero, chorus and messenger, there are six persons in Oedipus and four in Samson. In both the functions of the characters are similar; the heroes are shown suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, then taking arms against their sea of troubles, while the chorus alternately commiserate and encourage, comment and wonder, thus helping to explain the situation and express the reaction of the spectators. The other characters are important only as they assist in the unfolding of the action: for instance, in Oedipus, the priest's request underlines the king's readiness to do anything the gods require of him in order to avert their anger and end the pestilence then raging in Thebes. The nature of his task becomes clear when Creon arrives

bearing the message of the oracle, and its implications emerge with terrifying inevitability as first Tiresias speaks, then Iocasta, the messenger from Corinth and finally the shepherd. In Milton's tragedy, Manoah, Dalila and Harapha are brought onto the scene in order to offer temptations to Samson which in each case he overcomes; he has conquered his former weaknesses and can resist succumbing to self-pity at his father's words, to the blandishments of Dalila, and the longing for personal glory reawakened by Harapha. Until these conditions are fulfilled he is not worthy to perform his task.

Furthermore, the unities of time, place and action are observed as strictly but naturally in Samson as in the Greek play. The time required for the real action runs parallel with the time taken up by representation, there are no act or scene divisions, the scene remains the same throughout, though only vaguely indicated, and the attention of the spectators is focused on Samson, even when he has left the scene - for the culminating act of violence takes place off stage, according to classical convention. The messenger gives the waiting Danites an account of the ghastly event at the Philistine festival and after they have exulted over his triumph, old Manoah reminds them of the more practical service due to the dead Samson - burial rites and the erection of a monument - and as his listeners muse on the significance of the tragedy, the drama is brought to a tranquil close.

His servants hee with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismiss,
And calm of mind all passion spent.

(lines 1755-8.).

The classical conception of tragedy, according to which the passions are stirred to excess for cathartic effect, the final object being precisely this state of "calm of mind, all passion spent", is reflected perfectly in these lines. The close of Oedipus itself cannot compare, since it leaves us with a feeling of haunting uneasiness:

Therefore O Man, beware, and look toward the
 end of things that be,
 The last of nights, the last of days; and no
 man's life account as gain
 Ere the full tale be finished and the darkness
 (6).
 find him without pain.

VIII. On the other hand, it must be admitted that there are some readers who consider the cathartic effect of tragedy to be over-rated, since it is not lasting; according to this view, every new experience of suffering would call for the balm of expression in art, of creating or participating in creating a pattern out of terrible events in which man is sometimes caught and submerged. The only answer to this is, that although tragedy can have only a limited power to soothe us, it is more effective than any other. After feeling with a character such as Samson, in his dejection, his temptations and finally his heroic sacrifice and triumph, we are encouraged to continue our own struggles of the moment, and prepared to face future trials more bravely in the knowledge that the human spirit has found a way to conquer its griefs.

IX. On the exact nature of the emotion experienced at the end of the tragedy there is some difference of opinion, as indeed there has been on the larger question also, whether the drama is Greek in spirit. The great

nineteenth century classicist, Jebb, came to the conclusion in Samson Agonistes and the Hellenic Drama that it was Hebraic rather than Hellenic in mood. A more recent assessment in the same vein has been made by G. and M. Bullough, who argue, in their introduction to Milton's Dramatic Poems, that the themes of temptation and salvation are not Greek in spirit - although they are willing to regard Samson's egotistic dejection as a form of inverted hubris. It must be granted that preoccupation with personal righteousness is not found in the ancient tragedies; on the other hand, Samson is no less ready to serve his people and suffer for them than Oedipus or Prometheus. This comes about, not in spite of his self-questionings, but because of them, since his idea of virtue comprises usefulness to God and man. On the whole, therefore, it is not so difficult to reconcile the Old Testament hero and the classical form as may at first be supposed. If labels are disregarded it may even prove difficult to distinguish between a hero (like Samson) who errs in trying too zealously and pridefully to fulfil his destiny, and another (like Oedipus) who struggles equally desperately and unavailingly to avoid his. The Power who rules each is inexplicable, either cruel or indifferent to man: so while the first hero is allowed to attain glory on earth only by his death, the other, after inflicting on himself a ghastly mutilation, is granted further years in which to expiate his "wrongdoing". Another modern writer, David Daiches, discussing the subject in his book Milton, takes the argument further, denying that there is any tragic element in Samson Agonistes. "That he" (Samson, in performing God's work) "dies in the process cannot be tragic

to a Christian who believes that death, and certainly such a death, is but the prelude to greater and eternal glory". He assumes, apparently, that Samson's death is the most important part of the play: but is it? Samson himself does not think so, nor does it appear that Milton intended us to think so. Samson grieves over his own unworthiness but he is also concerned to know more of the nature of God: Why has God allowed him to sin and thus merit punishment, even although he had wanted to please and obey? In effect, Samson's attitude to the Deity in the course of the action is not typical of a naïve, submissive nature - not the attitude of a mediæval saint, for instance, which would be highly inappropriate, in any case. In the end he achieves a conquest of self and balance of mind which, in a sense, make further questionings irrelevant; he is content not to know the nature of God, or of his own future on earth or in heaven;

Happ'n what may, of mee expect to hear
Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy
Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self,
The last of me or no I cannot warrant.

(lines 1423 -26).

This resigned farewell is surely little or no different from the note of stoicism on which most ancient tragic dramas close. Such is the conclusion reached by Hanford, in his essay "Samson Agonistes and Milton in Old Age",⁽⁷⁾ and by Parker, in his book Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes. Jebb has stated that "The first characteristic of Hellenic tragedy in the hands of its greatest masters was an ideal grandeur of agony depending on a real

grandeur of contrast... between man and fate."

According to the Greek conception, fate is a divine law which sometimes clashes with human law but which is always triumphant in the end. "It may sometimes be hidden from the hearts of men, but disobedience is nevertheless punished." Everything is predestined, the error, the punishment and the outcome. In the case of Samson Agonistes, Parker argues, "whether the dramatist speaks of Fate, or whether he tells us that 'all is best', we have witnessed pain, and have seen that triumph of the human spirit over pain which alone, in the end, makes it endurable. It has been, to borrow a fine phrase from the earlier Milton, 'rightful doom remediles'." (8).

X. No discussion on the degree of Samson's approximation to the Greek model would be complete without some consideration of the use of irony in the play. Here again, summary judgments have been passed, which an attentive reading proves unfair. If Milton had ignored the irony in ancient tragedy or failed to recognise it, then his own play would have lacked one of the most powerful factors in inducing that pity for the hero and that dread of destiny which are essential to tragedy. He would, indeed, have deserved censure such as this from a recent scholarly critic:

It is in this (Sophoclean irony) that the later poets fail, and because they fail in it they are dramatically uninteresting. Consider for instance Milton's Samson Agonistes. Of course it was not meant to be acted, and that might be a reason for not seeking any dramatic effects. But it may perhaps be taken for certain that Milton never

divined the resources of tragic irony. For that is shown in words as well as in situations. Throughout the greater part of the Oedipus almost every utterance means more than the speaker realizes, and this rivets our attention as much as the action itself. Now Milton attempts (9). nothing like that.

In reply to this, it is sufficient to let the facts speak for themselves: while it cannot be claimed that the greater part of Samson's utterances are ironic, either consciously or unconsciously, a glance of even the most cursory nature at the last five hundred lines will serve to discover numerous instances of peripeteia:

commenting on Harapha's retreat, Samson concludes:

"Yet so it may fall out, because thir end
Is hate, not help to me, it may with mine
Draw their own ruin who attempt the deed."

(lines 1265 - 7-).

when Samson refuses to attend the Philistine festival the official warns him:

"I am sorry what this stoutness will produce."
to which Samson replies:

"Perhaps thou shalt have cause to sorrow indeed."

(lines 1346-7).

Manoah tells the Chorus of his hopes of ransoming his son, even while Samson is paying a greater, eternal ransom:

"But that which mov'd my coming now, was chiefly
To give ye part with me what hope I have
With good success to work his liberty....."

(lines 1452-1507).

Conscious irony, or anagnorisis, comes in Samson's answer at the official's second coming:

"I could be well content to try their Art,
Which to no few of them would prove pernicious..."

(lines 1399-1400).

and most effectively of all in his last words
which the messenger reports to Manoah:

"Now of my own accord such other tryal
I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater;
As with amaze shall strike all who behold."

(lines 1643-5).

XI. From this examination of the dramatic aspect of the play it would appear, as the only conclusion, that Milton chose the form most suitable for his purpose. A similar appropriateness is to be observed in the diction. On the one hand it is not so extensive in vocabulary, nor so sweet in sound, nor so rich in imagery as the early poems; and on the other, although the diction is even more latinized than in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained it has less of the "chaunt" and more of the tone of natural utterance. Its condensation of thought suggests the expression of a character of immense energy, one who is lonely, frustrated, and neither expecting nor finding sympathy from his own kind; restless but as swift in action as the eagle whose "cloudless thunder bolted on their heads". This was how his countrymen pictured him. The language is, in fact, perfectly adapted to the expression of Samson's character and to the spirit of the drama as a whole, both being austere and intense or concentrated. The chief criticisms levelled against it have been, firstly, that it has so many Latin and Greek constructions that it is no longer English; and secondly, that it is harsh in sound. Both these arguments may be countered, but it will be more convenient to defer discussion of them to a later section where language is considered as it affects versification.

XII. The above outline of the state of critical opinion towards Samson Agonistes has been prepared in the hope that it will show how often this great play has been misjudged as the result of careless or prejudiced reading. In every case, the attacks on Milton have been refuted by writers - scholars, critics or poets in their own right - whose authority, number and cogency of argument carry conviction. Is the power of dramatic construction questioned? Saurat and Parker have answered for it. Is the Hellenism of the approach in doubt? Not as Hanford and Parker see it. Has the play been censured for its lack of irony? Tillyard has pointed out that Milton was keenly aware of the significance of this quality. Or has the versification been attacked? There have been many to praise it, but none more effectively than Eliot, the most famous of modern poets. The remarkable thing about the praise of the tragedy, however, is this - that it depends first and foremost on the most readily available evidence - the text of Samson Agonistes itself. Most of the hostile criticisms levelled against it fall to the ground when the play is read in its entirety.

XIII. Mention of the text brings us now to a consideration of an aspect of the play which compels close attention to every individual word, line and paragraph, for Milton's verse technique is the height of art, and the position of every word is the result of thought and discrimination. Strangely enough, though praise of the versification has been almost unanimous, and though penetrating comments have been made on it by many modern critics, it has not been made the subject of detailed study. (Bridges' fine study was limited to prosody.).

Saintsbury, for instance, remarked on the various elements necessary to the building up of the verse paragraph which, he said, "distinguished Milton's verse," and which are "almost the central secret and peculiarity of the Miltonic manner."⁽¹⁰⁾ Eliot's conclusion is that "in the end it is the unique versification that is the most certain sign of Milton's intellectual mastership." Nevertheless, he has some warnings to give of the difficulties attending the study of Milton's technique: in the course of admiring Bridges' analysis of the prosody he remarks "it is not by such means that we gain an appreciation of the peculiar rhythm of a poet. It seems to me also that Milton's verse is especially refractory to yielding up its secrets to examination of the single line. For his verse is not formed in this way. It is the period, the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse."⁽¹¹⁾

The following study of the versification is undertaken with these perceptive and illuminating words in mind.

NOTES

to

GENERAL REMARKS on SAMSON AGONISTES.

1. Paradise Lost, Book IX, line 1060.
2. A.J.Wyatt, editorial introduction to Samson Agonistes, p. 4.
3. Richardson's account, The Early Lives of Milton.
4. Judges, ch. XVI, verses 27 -31.
5. W.Knight, Chariot of Wrath (1942), p.85;
also H.J.C.Grierson, Cross Currents in the Literature of the Seventeenth Century, vol. VII.
6. Translated by Gilbert Murray.
7. Studies in Shakespeare, Milton and Donne,
University of Michigan (1925).
8. W.R.Parker, Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes, (1937), pp.211 and 226.
9. J.A.Thomson, Classical Influences on English Poetry, (1951), p.103.
10. G. Saintsbury, "Milton", Cambridge History of English Literature, vol. VII.
11. Eliot, "Milton II", On Poetry and Poets, p.157.

THE VERSE FORM.SUMMARY.

- I. Demands of theme: austerity; differentiation between choral and non-choral parts; flexibility.
- II. Milton's solution outlined; choice of form apparently natural but in fact most unconventional. Blank verse unfashionable for drama after Restoration.
- III. Influence of French drama, the taste of Charles II, and desire for smoothness in English verse.
- IV. Popularity of the heroic couplet.
- V. Views of Milton's contemporaries on Milton's style.
- VI. Milton's reasons for preferring blank verse to heroic couplets. The "Note on Verse".
- VII. Milton's objections to meaningless rhyme.
- VIII. His impatience with constraints of rhyme which prevented construction of verse paragraphs. Extended periodic passages the best form of expression for his ideas and themes.
- IX. Contrast between Dryden's and Milton's treatment of a theme.
- X. Use of rhyme in Samson Agonistes not inconsistent with the "Note on Verse".
- XI. Distinction between regular and irregular rhyme; Milton did not object to latter.
- XII. Summary of advantages of form chosen by Milton.
- XIII. Rhyme as it affects the verse paragraph.
- XIV. Verse form as it suggests severity of tone; a deliberate effect, suitable to character of Samson.
- XV. Verse form serving to differentiate between

choral and non-choral parts.

XVI. Capacity of verse form to cover whole range of feeling by providing reserve of power.

XVII. Rhyme used to express contempt.

XVIII. Rhyme stressing key-words.

XIX. Perfect rhyme reinforced by imperfect rhyme.

Total effect suggests that rhyme is used more often than in fact it is.

XX. Conclusion: Milton master of a form that answers all the demands of the theme, and provides a unique range of expression.

VERSE FORM.

I. The object of the foregoing consideration of the play as a whole has been to clarify the demands made by the theme on the verse technique of the dramatist. These demands may be summarised as follows: firstly, it may be seen that the austere dignity of the theme required an austere form of expression; secondly, no single verse form could provide the solution, since the tragedy was modelled on the Greek and the choral odes had to be made to stand out clearly from individual dialogue; and thirdly, besides possessing austerity of tone and variety of form, it was essential that the verse should have flexibility in order to be a fit vehicle for moderately colloquial dialogue (of the Miltonic kind) and for expressing moods and emotions of various kinds and intensity.

II. How then did Milton meet these demands for austere expression, differentiation between individual and choral passages, and flexibility of style? His solution was to use blank verse for the individual characters' speeches and what may for the present be called a modified blank verse with occasional rhyme for the choral passages. To a modern reader the choice of blank verse seems natural enough, and the use of rhyme is surprising only because it had been rejected in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Why should Milton not have used the same verse form for his tragedy as the great Elizabethan playwrights had used for theirs, we wonder. And with the sound of Milton's own verse, and later echoes from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Arnold ringing in our ears, it is easy for us to take Milton's decision in this respect for granted. But this would be a mistake. By 1667

or thereabouts, the time when Milton was writing Samson Agonistes, the licence taken by the later Stuart playwrights had led to such a disjointed and formless kind of blank verse that most poets regarded it with disfavour. The extreme laxity of versification is clearly illustrated in a passage like the following, for instance, from Suckling's Aglaure (1646), where the lamentable overcrowding of unaccented syllables not only at the end but at any place in the line, and the exaggerated number of breaks combine to reduce the verse to the level of semi-rhythmical prose:

Ziriff: ...I thank you, sir.

For him I will not trouble you: his life
Is mine - I won it fairly - and his is yours -
He lost it foully to you. To him, sir, now!
A man so wicked that he knew no good,
But so as't made his sins the greater for't.
Those ills, which, singly acted, bred despair
In others, he acted daily, and ne'er thought
upon them.

The grievance each particular has against him
I will not meddle with; it were to give him
A long life to give them hearing. I'll only speak
My own.

(Act III, Scene I.)

D'Avenant's blank verse is equally broken and formless; here is one of Evandra's speeches, from Love and Honour (1649):

Sir, can you find no pity yet within
Your breast? You have already shown enough
Of your stern father's spirit; is there not
In all your heart so much of softness as
Declare you had a mother too, must I
Be led a captive, and in a cruel land
Lament your victory?

Vasco addresses the Duke as follows:

Vasco: I shall observe him, sir, I do not like
This employment; the prince will find no
Enemies in all my tribe.

Duke: If you have any words from Millmain, that
Imports their knowledge, ere they die, in brief,
Mr Lords Embassadors, I give you leave
To whisper your affair; or, if you please
To make it public to the world.

(Act I, Scene I.)

III. This is unsatisfactory, whether one regards it
as verse or prose. The poet playwrights of the later
seventeenth century must have been well aware of the
danger of the prose tendency in dramatic blank verse,
and were therefore ready, for literary reasons, to experi-
ment in other verse forms. At the same time the heroic
couplet was becoming popular among the Court wits, and
not the less so because of Charles II's openly expressed
preference for this form. The Earl of Orrery, for instance,
admitted that he "wrote in a new way", "in the French
Manner, because I heard the King declare himself more
in favour of their way of writing than ours." (1).

The King's taste had naturally been formed by the perform-
ances which he had seen during his exile in France. Yet
while admitting the existence of a somewhat superficial-
but very lively - Royal interest in the stage, and its
influence in favour of the new style, one should not
discount the effects of the genuine admiration which
many English writers felt for French heroic drama.
The genius of Corneille and Racine inspired them with
the desire to imitate both the themes and the form
of heroic verse. Some of these English playwrights may
have prided themselves on following a new and popular
fashion, but others may have quieted their insular pride
by reminding themselves that the heroic couplet was

already well-established in English poetry - Marlowe's Hero and Leander, Drayton's Heroical Epistles, and Cowley's Davideis would have seemed to them good precedents - and, furthermore, that the Love and Honour theme had already been emerging on the English stage before the interdict on dramatic performances. Shakespeare had played with the idea in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Beaumont and Fletcher had used it in many plays, and D'Avenant had even made it the very title of one of his dramas. For all these reasons, little was written in blank verse for a while, and from about 1664, when Dryden's Indian Queen was performed, to 1678, most verse plays were on heroic themes and written in heroic couplets.

IV. Dramatic verse in this form was regular, melodious, demanding from the writer the utmost that he could give it in the way of wit and superficial gloss; and yet it was limited and limiting. Much critical effort has been expended of recent years to persuade us not only that this tightening up of verse was a good thing - (2). which it probably was - but that the fancy dress given by Dryden to Shakespeare and Milton was a good thing too. To comment on such opinions at this stage would be to beg the question, but it is perhaps permissible to refer to the attitude of Milton himself to Dryden's treatment, since it illustrates clearly the elder poet's serene confidence in his poetic genius and in the judgment of posterity. When Dryden approached him in 1674 for permission to paraphrase Paradise Lost in rhymed verse as libretto for an opera, The State of Innocence and The Fall of Man, "Mr. Milton received him civilly, and told him he would give him his leave to tagge his verses." (3).

It is true that Dryden himself declared in the preface to his opera that the original was "undoubtedly one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems, which either this age or nation has produced."

It does not seem unreasonable to suppose, however, that he preferred his own version; at any rate he published it and allowed Nathaniel Lee's commendatory verses to stand:

Milton did the wealthy mine disclose,
And rudely cast what you could well dispose;
He roughly drew, on an old-fashioned ground,
A chaos, for no perfect world were found,
Till through the heap, your mighty genius shined.

Incidentally, Eliot's view of this situation is worth quoting: he considers the opera to be "on the whole a feeble work", but believes that "Dryden is already stirring; he has assimilated what he could from Milton; and he has shown himself capable of producing as splendid verse." Unfortunately - or fortunately - this statement is vitiated by a later reflection that Dryden "is best in his plays when dealing with situations which do not demand great emotional concentration."⁽⁴⁾

How to write great epic and dramatic verse without the faculty of "great emotional concentration" is a mystery still to be elucidated.

V. The contemptuous tolerance of the answer to Dryden indicates the extent to which Milton was deliberately running counter to the literary fashion of the age when he resolved to write his tragedy in blank verse. Far from being the natural thing to do, it was, as Saintsbury has put it, a piece of "magnificent audacity." From the contemporary point of view Miltonic

blank verse was as old-fashioned as the poet himself, and the only innovations for which he was responsible were innovations in language: "Our language sunk under him" was Addison's opinion, "and "Milton wrote no language," as Johnson said later. But though the paradox of being considered retrogressive while actually being engaged in forging a new verse form would no doubt have amused Milton - and probably did so - he was the last of all poets to seek attention by flaunting an unusual style; in his opinion, "to make verbal curiosities the end - that were toilsome vanity." Where poetry was concerned he went his own way, very rarely troubling to explain his aims and principles; for instance, he had to be persuaded by the printer before he would point out, in a note to the Argument of Paradise Lost, that his non-rhyming verse "rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to Heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing." His reasons for employing blank verse grew naturally out of the theme. No other English verse form could so well convey a tone of dignified simplicity in a long poem; no other could admit of such variation and merge so easily into passages of other line-lengths; no other could soar to the heights in transports of passion and imagination, and then travel comfortably on the level of ordinary experience.

VI. Besides these general reasons, which would strike most modern readers as being sufficient, Milton had reasons peculiarly his own for deciding on this "measure". He wanted his poetry to achieve certain effects which were obviously beyond the range of the popular heroic

couplets, but which, it seemed to him, might be obtained from blank verse or a modified form of it. As already mentioned, he left very little explanation of most of these effects, but they appear so consistently and are so remarkable that it is safe to assume that they were aimed at deliberately; and the few remarks that he did let fall on the subject support this view. The longest of these meagre utterances (meagre on poetry, his personal concern, never meagre on those subjects of public importance such as Church, King and State) is the note attached to the Argument of Paradise Lost. For the existence of this note we have to thank the obliging printer who procured it for some of Milton's "courteous but puzzled" readers, to offer "a reason of that which stumbled many others why the Poem rimes not." This note runs as follows:

The Measure is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter; grac't indeed since by the use of some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to thir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have exprest them. Not without cause therefore some both Italian and Spanish Poets of prime note have rejected Rime both in longer and shorter Works, as have also long since our best English Tragedies, as a thing of it self, to all judicious ears, trivial

and of no true musical delight; which consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoided by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory. This neglect then of Rime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to Heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing.

VII.

Here we have a catalogue of sins of omission as well as commission. On the positive side, Milton asserts that rhyme has often been used by clumsy writers to distract attention from poverty of ideas and faults in metre; that when skilled poets have used rhyme in longer works it has hindered and marred exact expression of their thoughts. Furthermore, it is often used without close relation to the thought or feeling of the passage, merely as an ornament, so that it annoys the mind by its irrelevance and the ear by its obtrusiveness. On the negative side, he claims that adherence to a regular rhyme scheme is incompatible with the "true musical delight" which depends upon three things: the employment of suitable rhythms; regularity of metre or close attention to the stress or quality of sounds; and the construction of long and intricate sentences to form verse paragraphs.

The positive objections, in so far as they relate to other writers, are of little importance here - it would be easy to support them with illustrations from the works of bad poets, or "disprove" them by

"exceptions" drawn from the works of good poets.

VIII. Milton was obviously out of sympathy with the fashionable mode of writing in heroic couplets, which he referred to on occasions as "tagging". Probably his extraordinarily sensitive ear was irritated by the monotony of carelessly constructed passages, or perhaps meaningless parallelism, which must sometimes occur in a long run of heroic couplets, even by the best of poets in the genre, had evoked his scorn. The really important fact arising out of his objections to rhyme is, however, his impatience at the idea of the constraints which rhyme would necessarily impose on him in a long poem: not so much the petty constraints which would involve the hunt for a substitute word or the rearrangement of a phrase, ⁽⁵⁾ as the inherent incapacity of rhyming verse, "the trencher fury of rhyming parasites", ⁽⁶⁾ to permit the exercise of "the very critical art of composition" ⁽⁷⁾ as he understood that art. If he were tied to regular rhyme schemes the composition of verse paragraphs would be impossible; and without this instrument of expression he would feel himself dumb as well as blind, since the characteristic grandeur of his ideas demanded a powerful and long-sustained form of utterance. ⁽⁸⁾ To prove that beyond all doubt would be impossible, since Milton never wasted time on unsuccessful experiments and never wrote other than at his best, so that the material does not exist whereby one might compare one kind of Miltonic style with another having the same object. But some idea of the gulf separating one kind of poetic treatment from another is provided by setting side by side two passages on the same theme, one being taken from Paradise Lost and the

other from Dryden's "opera", The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man." Here are the opening lines from the latter:

Lucifer: Is this the Seat our Conqueror has given?
 And this the Climate we must change for Heaven?
 These Regions and this Realm my Wars have got;
 This mournful Empire is the Loser's Lot.
 In Liquid Burnings or on Dry to dwell,
 Is all the sad Variety of Hell.

The original runs as follows : (Book I, lines 242-58).

Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime,
 Said then the lost Arch-Angel, this the seat
 That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom
 For that celestial light? Be it so, since hee
 Who now is Sovran can dispose and bid
 What shall be right: fardest from him is best
 Whom reason hath equald, force hath made supream
 Above his equals. Farewel happy Fields
 Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail
 Infernal World, and thou profoundest Hell
 Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
 A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.
 The mind is its own place, and in it self
 Can make a Heav'n, of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
 What matter where, if I be still the same,
 And what I should be, all but less then hee
 Whom Thunder hath made greater?

Another interesting contrast is provided by the speeches of Lucifer on first viewing Eden. The Milton passage lasts for one hundred and ten lines; the Dryden is much shorter:

Fair place; yet what is this to Heav'n, where I

Sate next, so almost equalled the most high,
 I doubted, measuring both, who was most strong;
 Then, willing to forget time since so long,
 Scarce thought I was created: vain desire
 Of Empire, in my thought still shot me higher,
 To move above his sacred Head: ah why,
 When he so kind, was so ungrateful I?
 He bounteously bestowed unenvied good
 On me: in arbitrary Grace I stood:
 T'acknowledge this, was all he did exact;
 Small tribute, where the will to pay was act.
 I mourn it now, unable to repent,
 As he, who knows my hatred to relent,
 Jealous of power once questioned: hope, farewell;
 And with hope, fear; no depth below my Hell
 Can be prepared: then, ill be thou my good;
 And vast destruction, be my envy's food.
 Thus I, with Heav'n, divided empire gain;
 Seducing Man, I make his project vain,
 And, in one hour, destroy his six days pain.

The Milton passage is of course spoilt by cutting, but
 here for the sake of the contrast are the corresponding
 thoughts:

(Book IV, lines 32-113).

O thou that with surpassing Glory crown'd,
 Look'st from thy sole Dominion like the God
 Of this new World; at whose sight all the Starrs
 Hide thir diminisht heads; to thee I call,
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
 O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
 That bring to my remembrance from what state
 I fell, how glorious once above thy Spheare;
 Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down

Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King:
 Ah wherefore? he deserv'd no such return
 From mee, whom he created what I was
 In that bright eminence, and with his good
 Upbraided none; nor was his service hard.
 What could be less then to afford him praise,
 The easiest recompence, and pay him thanks,
 How due! yet all his good prov'd ill in me,
 And wrought but malice; lifted up so high
 I sdeind subjection, and thought one step higher
 Would set me highest, and in a moment quit
 The debt immense of endless gratitude,
 So burdensome, still paying, still to ow;.....
 Mee miserable! which way shall I flie
 Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire?
 Which way I flie is Hell; myself am Hell;
 And in the lowest deep a lower deep
 Still threatning to devour me op'ns wide,
 To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.
 O then at last relent: is there no place
 Left for Repentance, none for Pardon left?
 None left but by submission;

therefore as farr
 From granting hee, as I from begging peace:
 All hope excluded thus, behold in stead
 Of us out-cast, exil'd, his new delight,
 Mankind created, and for him this World.
 So farwel Hope, and with Hope farwel Fear,
 Farwel Remorse: all Good to me is lost;
 Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least
 Divided Empire with Heav'ns King I hold,
 By thee, and more then half perhaps will reigne;
 As Man ere long, and this new World shall know.

IX. Champions of Dryden may fetort that shorter
 speeches and compression of thought within the couplet

were necessary for dramatic purposes; and probably, for the kind of play which Dryden usually wrote, they were: but that does not really excuse him for failing to see that the theme of Paradise Lost demanded different treatment so that the majesty of the ideas could be expressed untrammelled by rhyme and the bounds of the couplet. It is therefore surprising to find so notable a critic as Bonamy Dobrée defending Dryden in this case:

His (Dryden's) artistry is most apparent in that he never tried to make his words or his form carry anything weightier than they could bear. Thus it is absurd to belittle his rhymed, operative version of Paradise Lost. Given the form of the verse which he was endeavouring his best to make perfect, given the sort of play in which he found himself most at ease, it would have been fatal to aim at the solid grandeur of Milton's poem. Read the State of Innocence without thinking of the source, and it is a delightful thing.

Surely the same might be said, with far better reason, of the script of My Fair Lady and Pygmalion? Or of modern dance-tune arrangements of themes taken from the works of great composers?

Whether this be so or not, there can be little doubt that Milton's conversation was exceptionally satirical on the evening when he and Marvell read through the transcript of Dryden's opera. "Dryden was a rhymster but no poet" was the blind poet's conclusion. (9).

X. It may be objected that Milton's discussion of rhyme, quoted on a preceding page, is attached to Paradise Lost, and related to the epic or epics only:

else why should rhyme appear in Samson Agonistes? According to this view he became impatient of rhyme and condemned it outright during the period when Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained were being written, but changed his mind and returned to it later in Samson Agonistes; alternatively, his strictures must be understood as excluding tragedy. But on examination there seems to be no valid reason for either of these opinions. In the first place, Samson Agonistes was written within three years of the completion of Paradise Lost, within two years of the note on verse, and was actually published in the same volume as Paradise Regained; and it is most unlikely that so violent a change in his verse technique would have occurred in such a short time. His poetic development was consistent and gradual, and exhibits no other change of this nature. Secondly, in his note on the verse he makes a point of including tragedies and oratory in the scope of his remarks. The best English tragedies were written in blank verse, and therefore his tragedy of Samson would have blank verse for its basic measure. That at any rate seems perfectly consistent and argues that his opinions on verse form were the same in 1670 as they had been in 1668.

XI. The apparent contradiction - of his condemning rhyme at one stage and using it two or three years later - is explained if full attention is given to certain phrases, particularly the modifying phrases, in his note on verse. For instance, it is stated that "Rime is no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially." Abrupt though this is, it does not exclude the possibility that in certain circumstances rhyme could serve as an adjunct, or as both

adjunct and ornament to any kind of poem, short or long, although it is more likely to be so in a longer poem. As for the difficulties of rhyming to pattern, everything that Milton wrote before Paradise Lost is evidence that these did not deter him. The vital point, however, is surely the interpretation of "Rimeing". While granting that a perfectionist like Milton might condemn much of his early work because it employed what he later termed "the invention of a barbarous age", one can hardly credit that he would resume that very invention in a year or two. But the use of rhyme in Samson Agonistes is very different from that in most of the early poems: in most of those it is regular; in Samson it is both rare and irregular in the extreme. Moreover, these early poems were totally different from the drama in aim, scope and effect; but even in them, when a theme of deep significance to him stirred his whole being, as in "Lycidas", it is to be noted that rhyme fades into the background to enable the architectonic quality of the poetry to become more apparent. It seems to have been regular rhyming that Milton was opposed to, when he wrote of "the jingling sound of like endings", or stressed the "vexation, hindrance and constraint" occasioned by the necessity to rhyme at fixed intervals. After all, when one reads such lines as these:

Sabrina fair,
 Listen where thou art sitting
 Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave,
 In twisted braids of Lillies knitting
 The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair,
 Listen for dear honours sake,
 Goddess of the silver lake,
 Listen and save.

it is unthinkable that their author should ever have condemned or renounced rhyme utterly. As Sprott has observed in Milton's Art of Prosody, the fact that rhyme does appear occasionally in Samson is:

a sign that Milton's abdication from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming was perhaps never so absolute as his words might be taken to imply if we do not remember that sound in rhyme was only an emphasis for cadences which were already present (10).
at the ends of the lines.

XII. It may fairly be concluded, therefore, that in composing Samson Agonistes, as in composing Paradise Lost, Milton had strong reasons for modelling his verse on the basic pattern of the unrhymed iambic pentameter, chief among such reasons being the opportunity afforded by this verse-form for the poem to achieve its own organic unity. This decision to rely upon blank verse as a cohesive agent was in opposition to the practice of his contemporaries, who favoured the use of a more artificial unifying force - rhyme. But by excluding rhyme almost entirely from the non-choral parts of the poem, and using it rarely even in the choral odes, Milton secured also his three primary objects, in that he was provided with two verse forms that were at once allied and yet clearly distinguishable; that matched the theme in dignity and severity; and that proved capable of expressing every kind and intensity of emotion. Yet these were by no means all the advantages gained.

XIII. It is now proposed to examine these points one by one, with the exception of the first - freedom for the construction of verse paragraphs - since that

merges into discussion of the construction of such passages, and at the present stage there is no need to do more than point out the existence of this function. It should be emphasized, however, that rhyme is important in this connection even more by reason of its absence than by its presence. The absence of rhyme facilitates greater freedom of thought, and the occasional presence of rhyme contributes towards sustaining the thought or attention in a long passage.

XIV. The next major advantage resulting from the verse form is its severity of tone. It is astonishing that this should for so long have been considered a blemish rising either from carelessness or lack of skill on Milton's part, since no one who had any acquaintance with his poetry could deny that he possessed the power to write exquisitely sweet and harmonious verse - as, for instance, in the "Nativity Ode", "At a Solemn Music", and the songs from Comus. But even supposing that a sensitive reader came to the study of Samson Agonistes without having had any previous knowledge of Milton's poetry or opinions, it is barely credible that he should fail to see why Milton had employed so bare and severe a form of expression. What could be more appropriate in the mouth of a character like Samson? - surely not the dulcet tones of Spenser's knights, or the plaintive and fanciful musings of a Richard III, or the breathless bombast of Dryden's monarchs? It is not so surprising, perhaps, that earlier critics missed the point of the innovation in form and style: after all, time is always needed for critics as well as general public to accustom themselves to new ways, as can be seen by reference

to the reputation of any poet who has introduced a radical change - Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Browning and Eliot are only the most outstanding examples.

So that, considering the nature and duration of the classical period in English literature, and its uncommonly strong influence, one cannot blame Johnson overmuch for his judgment of "Lycidas" and his opinion that much of Milton's verse was a harsh and barbarous "Babylonish dialect." (11). One must also allow for the

fact that Johnson's ear was not over-sensitive; how otherwise could he have claimed that Milton's verse was never modified by the theme? "What is found with greater extent in Paradise Lost may be found in Comus" was one of his pronouncements. All the same, Johnson arrived at a conclusion that shows that he could respond to the spirit, and the total effect of the verses, though failing to appreciate it in detail: despite the harshness and barbarity he finds that Milton's poetry is made, "by exalted genius and extensive learning, the vehicle of so much instruction and so much pleasure, that, like other lovers, we find grace in its deformity." And, later in the same essay, he admits, "But, whatever be the advantage of rhyme, I cannot prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymers; for I cannot wish his work to be otherwise than as it is".....

In moderation, at any rate, Johnson sets a high standard, and Leavis could certainly learn from him in that respect. He has nothing but censure for Milton's last work: towards the end of his account of "Milton's Verse" in "Revaluation" he writes: Samson Agonistes read aloud would be hardly tolerable, because

of its desolate exposure of utter loss - loss in the poet of all feeling for his native

English. The rhythmic deadness, the mechanical

externality with which the movement is varied, is the more pitifully evident because of the personal urgency of the theme, and the austerity: there is no magniloquence here."

In the note following this essay he goes further:

It might, of course, be said that the jerky, ejaculatory stiffness is dramatically appropriate, expressing an arid, exhausted, uneloquent desperation of agony - but what may be held to be locally a virtue is not a virtue elsewhere..... It is when the verse falls into rhyme that the insensitiveness appears at its shocking worst."

The points of special interest in these remarks are first, the admission that the style might be considered dramatically appropriate; second, a refusal to accept this point of view - "what may be held to be locally a virtue is not a virtue elsewhere"; and third, condemnation of the rhymed passages as "insensitive". The cardinal statement here is surely the second. If the style were indeed unvaried, invariably stiff, arid and jerky, that would lend some support to the view that it is neither dramatically appropriate nor sensitive. But is this the case? The main object of these and succeeding remarks is to prove otherwise - that the style has an unrivalled range and is adapted with extraordinary sensitivity to the feelings of the characters. For the present, however, it is best to confine the argument to a consideration of Milton's use of rhyme and blank verse as the means whereby he attains that note of austerity which, it is claimed here, is expressive of Samson's character and of the general mood of the tragedy.

The first hundred lines or so are sufficient to give

some indication of the process. Samson is visualized as he is helped to grope his way forward to the grassy bank where he hopes to rest on this rare holiday:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
 To these dark steps, a little further on;
 For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade;
 There I am wont to sit, when any chance
 Relieves me from my task of servil toil,
 Daily in the common Prison else enjoind me,
 Where I a Pris'ner chaind, scarce freely draw
 The air imprisond also, close and damp,
 Unwholsom draught: but here I feel amends,
 The breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,
 With day-spring born; here leave me to respire.

Here the meaning is expressed simply and directly: there are no elaborate figures of speech, no extraneous beauty, no lulling monotony of sound in rhyme, alliteration or assonance. The imagery is so restrained as almost to pass unnoticed; the adjectives are few, the thought natural and logical: in fact, only the order of the phrasing and the metre distinguish the passage as poetry and not prose. Thus there is dignity arising from the unusual phrasing, but the simplicity of the diction prevents any stiffness obstructing the flow of the verse. On the contrary, the repetition of ideas and the pauses in the first lines make them sound hesitating and uncertain. Then Samson has time for reflection, though that can provide no ease to the mind:

From restless thoughts, that, like a deadly swarm
 Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone
 But rush upon me thronging, and present
 Times past, what once I was, and what am now.

As his agony of mind increases the rhythm becomes more

powerful, sometimes utilizing metre to reinforce it, sometimes over-riding metre in its sweep, but never, in the general effect, obscuring the underlying unity of metrical arrangement. As Samson's passion reaches its height it demands still more freedom, metre yields entirely or almost entirely to rhythm, all superfluity is discarded, and the ideas are proclaimed one by one in splendid, deliberate purity. Now and again sounds recur, like sonorous echoes to the beating of a mighty gong:

But chief of all,
 O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
 Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
 Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
 Light the prime work of God to mee is extinct,
 And all her various objects of delight
 Annul'd, which might in part my grief have eas'd,
 Inferiour to the vilest now become
 Of man or worm; the vilest here excell me,
 They creep, yet see, I dark in light expos'd
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
 Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
 In power of others, never in my own;
 Scarcely half I seem to live, dead more then half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
 Without all hope of day!
 O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
 Let ther be light, and light was over all;
 Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?
 The Sun to me is dark
 And silent as the Moon,

When she deserts the night

Hid in her vacant interlunar cave....

(lines 66-89).

Technically speaking, this may be rhyme: but its effect is so alien to the usual conception of rhyme as an added grace and source of sweetness of sound, that the name hardly suits it.

It has already been said that the opening lines illustrate Milton's method; they also convey the note that is to prevail in the tragedy, a note expressive of high passion still enclosed in a mundane body, fretting at mundane toil and contact with mundane companions. Since the tragedy was modelled on the ancient Greek drama, it required such unity of feeling, and therefore to condemn it for the lack of individual characterization in minor parts is to miss the point entirely; it is Samson's character that has to be - and that is - fully represented. Other individuals serve merely to provoke or carry forward the action, while the chorus is there to speak for the common man or, sometimes, for Man exalted by the spectacle of his fate and inspired with fore-knowledge. Hence the strain (far from "uneloquent") of the "desperation of agony" ⁽¹²⁾ (Leavis) or of "settled ferocity" (Tillyard) ⁽¹³⁾ naturally prevails throughout the drama. Yet occasionally there is a lighter note in contrast, such as the Chorus's running commentary on Dalila's approach:

But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land?

Female of sex it seems,

That so bedeckt, ornate and gay,

Comes this way sailing

Like a stately Ship

Of Tarsus, bound for th'Isles

Of Javan or Gadier

With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,

Sails fill'd, and streamers waving,
 Court'd by all the winds that hold them play,
 An Amber sent of odorous perfume
 Her harbinger, a damsel train behind.

(lines 710-24).

The purpose of rhyme and assonance in these lines is obviously to heighten the contrast of the appearance of Dalila, gay, fickle, lovely and plausible, to Samson's "state calamitous". This passage alone should dispose of any imputation that the style is uniformly sombre.

All the same, there is no denying that there is in Samson Agonistes a prevalence of stern and severely simple expression, and, furthermore, that this happens to be in line with the general development of Milton's versification. One is even led to wonder whether he was not perhaps drawn to this subject as much by the opportunities it afforded for writing in this style, as by its dramatic interest or other aspects. But whatever the cause, Samson presents a perfect unity of dramatic theme and expression. Even in his first boyhood attempts to write verse, Milton appears to have been conscious of the necessity to adapt style to theme, a lesson which study of the classics should - but does not always - inculcate. His early work shows him experimenting in a very wide field, though always with a clear conception of the effect he intended to make, and always with a sense of obligation to recent and contemporary Italian literati. For instance, as Prince has pointed out, the "Lines on the Circumcision" are modelled on the Italian canzone, but "On Time" and "At a Solemn Music" on the madrigal, since the latter form approaches more nearly to an inscription or "picture" stanza. The concern

with appropriateness is shown in a different way in the "Nativity Ode" and in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso", where it manifests itself in the choice of setting and general form, rather than in fitting every part of the verse to the demands of the sense. In the last two poems referred to, for instance, the form remains the same - octosyllabic couplets - whether the poet is in cheerful or melancholy mood.

The development of a fully appropriate style became more marked in "Lycidas" since it was accompanied in this case by a casting aside of the shackles of regular rhyme and metre. The poem follows the canzone model in most respects, although it contains a few lines that do not rhyme at all. This innovation in English poetry may have been inspired by the Italian practice of introducing irregularly rhymed passages into pastorals, as in Tasso's Aminta and Guarini's Il Pastor Fido. The rhyme undoubtedly sweetens the tone of the poem as a whole, besides giving the verse a new kind of impetus. "Lycidas" is no ponderous elegy in measured tones, but a lament in which grief upwells naturally and ebbs away as gentle sadness, memory sharpens realization of loss, and rebelliousness yields to the consolations found in religion and in the very act of transmuting passion into art. Such fluctuations of emotion may be observed in the following passage:

Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well,
That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring,
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.
Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,
So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.

For we were nurst upon the self-came hill,
Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill.

(lines 15-24).

In the second pair of rhyming lines the unexpected brevity of the second line - "so may some gentle Muse" - attracts attention to the subtle change in mood, since for a time the promise to "somewhat loudly sweep the string" is not being fulfilled. The verse slows and comes to a halt, as the poet wonders doubtfully what his own fate will be. In the next two lines:

With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn,
And as he passes turn,

the shortening of the second line serves a more obvious purpose, drawing attention to the "turn" and acting like a hinge joining the preceding and the following lines: the sound refers to the previous line, while the abbreviation, though forcing a pause, prompts a faster movement in the line that follows. When used in this way rhyme helps to make the verse more sensitive, and enables a number of ideas to be linked closely in large units.

These devices play a smaller part in the sonnets, which are necessarily regular in rhyme and metrical form. This same regularity also renders it possible for rhyme to be used in yet another way, to counterpoint the rhythm in lines which have no terminal pause. This gives emphasis to a large proportion of the words (the normal stress and the super-imposed stress both being present in the reader's mind), while it prevents monotony and long measured pauses. The best example is "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont", where rhyme, rhythm and sense all contribute to the steadily mounting emphasis, giving maximum force to every word. It may be concluded, therefore,

that by the time that Milton was preparing to write Samson Agonistes, he had mastered all the uses of rhyme then known, and was able to employ them, as indeed he did, to make the verse more sensitive to the emotion of the speaker.

XV. The next advantage secured by the use of rhyme is undoubtedly that it serves to distinguish between the individual and choral speeches. In ancient tragedy, iambic trimeters were used for the former, while elaborate ode patterns were designed for the more impassioned or prophetic moods of the chorus. Uniform blank verse could not suggest the very real difference between these two kinds of speech, but a blank verse subject to frequent modification could slide very easily and naturally from one to another. The following passage contains two instances of this: first there are the concluding words of Samson's dour farewell, followed by the benediction of the Chorus in a tone that changes rapidly from resignation to the ecstasy of hopeful vision; and secondly, there is the decline from exaltation as Manoah is seen approaching, and the sweeping rhythms yield to the slower, steadier pace of blank verse and colloquial speech. The rhyming lines in the middle, of course, are those in which the emotion is most powerful:

Samson: Happ'n what may, of mee expect to hear
Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy
Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self,
The last of me or no I cannot warrant.

Chorus: Go, and the Holy One
Of Israel be thy guide

To what may serve his glory best, and spread
his name

Great among the Heathen round:

Send thee the Angel of thy Birth, to stand

Fast by thy side, who from thy Fathers field
 Rode up in flames after his message told
 Of thy conception, and be now a shield
 Of fire; that Spirit that first rushd on thee
 In the camp of Dan
 Be efficacious in thee now at need.
 For never was from Heav'n imparted
 Measure of strength so great to mortal seed,
 As in thy wond'rous actions hath bin seen.
 But wherefore comes old Manoah in such hast
 With youthful steps? much livelier then ere while
 He seems: supposing here to find his Son,
 Or of him bringing to us some glad news?

(lines 1423-44).

In nearly all such cases there is a parallel contrast to emphasize the effect - metrical irregularity alternating with fairly regular blank verse, just as rhymed alternate with unrhymed passages.

XVI. Fourthly, coming now to minor advantages, we find that the scarcity of rhyme makes the actual appearance of rhyme all the more striking, whether it appears in individual or choral speeches. In other words, it provided Milton with a reserve of power upon which he could draw whenever there was need to heighten the dramatic tension or suggest the upward surge and drive of powerful feeling. These "rhymed" passages occur mainly, be it noted, in the speeches between Samson and the Chorus, at times when the hero unburdens his soul or the Chorus ponder on the significance of his degradation, or both wonder at the appearance of Samson's visitors and try to guess at God's purpose in sending them; that is, at moments of deepest emotion and insight. There are only two exceptions, the first occurring in the opening

scene where Samson's soliloquy shows a steadily mounting excitement which is dramatically necessary to command our interest. After seventy-five lines of fairly regular blank verse the climax is reached in a passionate outburst lamenting his blindness: the lines adapt themselves to the emotional impetus, while the gradually increasing use of rhyme gives them dignity and sonority:

I, dark in light expos'd
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
 Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
 In power of others , never in my own;
 Scarce half I seem to live, dead more then half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
 Without all hope of day!
 O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
 Let ther be light, and light was over all;
 Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?
 The Sun to me is dark
 And silent as the Moon,
 When she deserts the night
 Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.
 Since light so necessary is to life,
 And almost life itself, if it be true
 That light is in the Soul,
 She all in every part; why was the sight
 To such a tender ball as th'eye confin'd?
 So obvious and so easie to be quencht,
 And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd,
 That she might look at will through every pore?
 Then had I not bin thus exil'd from light;
 As in the land of darkness yet in light;

To live a life half dead, a living death,
 And buried; but O yet more miserable!
 My self, my Sepulcher, a moving Grave,
 Buried, yet not exempt
 By privilege of death and burial
 From worst of other evils, pains and wrongs,
 But made hereby obnoxious more
 To all the miseries of life,
 Life in captivity
 Among inhuman foes.

(lines 75-109).

The second and last exception is at the end of the play when the Chorus exult at Samson's victory, and the climax of the whole drama is crowned with their triumphal chant. It is in this latter case, where it appears for the first time in two hundred and twenty lines, that rhyme is used most effectively, enforcing the rhythm, and imparting a sense of inevitability by the suggestion of entranced, irresistibly impelled motion and pause in the symbolic figures of the Chorus:

Chorus: O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!
 Living or dying thou has fulfilld
 The work for which thou wast foretold
 To Israel, and now ly'st victorious
 Among thy slain self-killd
 Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold
 Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoind
 Thee with thy slaughterd foes in number more
 Than all thy life had slain before.

Semichorus: While thir hearts were jocond and sublime,
 Drunk with Idolatry, drunk with Wine,
 And fat regorg'd of Bulls and Goats,
 Chaunting thir Idol, and preferring
 Before our living Dread who dwells
 In Silo his bright Sanctuary:

Among them hee a spirit of phrenzie sent,
 Who hurt thir minds,
 And urg'd them on with mad desire
 To call in hast for their destroyer;
 They onely set on sport and play
 Unweetingly importun'd
 Thir own destruction to come speedy upon them.
 So fond are mortal men
 Fall'n into wrauth divine,
 As thir own ruin on themselves to invite,
 Insensat left, or to sense reprobate,
 And with blindness internal strook.
 Semichorus: But hee though blind of sight,
 Despis'd and thought extinguisht quite,
 With inward eyes illuminated
 His fierie vertue rous'd
 From under ashes into sudden flame,
 And as an ev'ning Dragon came,
 Assailant on the perched roosts,
 And nests in order rang'd
 Of tame villatic Fowl; but as an Eagle
 His cloudless thunder bolted on thir heads.
 So vertue giv'n for lost,
 Deprest, and overthrown, as seemd,
 Like that self-begott'n bird
 In the Arabian woods embost,
 That no second knows nor third,
 And lay ere while a Holocaust,
 From out her ashie womb now teemd
 Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
 When most unactive deemd,
 And through her body die, her fame survives,
 A secular bird ages of lives.

(lines 1660-1707).

It may be noted that rhyme is not evenly distributed throughout this passage. Nearly all the lines in the chorus are rhymed, and surprise and startle the ear because of the contrast with the long unrhymed speeches that precede them. The speech of the first semichorus is practically unrhymed (assonance being substituted for rhyme in the first two lines) and the uneasiness which this creates, the repeated disappointment at failing to hear the expected sound, conditions us to feel in ourselves something of the restlessness of the deluded Philistines. In the second semichorus the paean is resumed as their thoughts return to the hero; once more the occasional chime or echo of sounds is heard with pleasure, pleasure all the greater since the intervening lines have heightened the desire for it.

A great deal of the exquisite tranquillity which we experience as we read the last speech of the Chorus at the conclusion of the drama is due to this device of contrasting rhymed and rhymeless passages. Here and here only every line fits into a rhyme pattern (strangely enough, the Shakespearean sonnet pattern, except for the last two lines), contributing to the perfect harmony of sound and feeling: at last the diapason is sounded:

All is best, though we oft doubt,
 What th'unsearchable dispose
 Of highest wisdom brings about,
 And ever best found in the close.
 Oft he seems to hide his face,
 But unexpectedly returns
 And to his faithful Champion hath in place

Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns
 And all that band them to resist
 His uncontrollable intent;
 His servants hee with new acquist
 Of true experience from this great event
 With peace and consolation hath dismiss,
 And calm of mind all passion spent.

XVII. The passages containing rhyme which occur between the Chorus and Samson show these and still other devices employing rhyme to enrich and support the meaning. For instance, it is sometimes so obvious that it becomes a parody of itself when the speaker is jeering at a listener, or some other object, or even at himself. A simple example of this is seen in lines 293 - 299 where the Chorus are sadly agreeing with Samson that God's ways, though hard, are yet justifiable to all reasonable men. Two unexpected and abrupt rhyming lines convey their contempt for the self-centred man who will not raise his head to read the larger workings of Fate:

Just are the ways of God,
 And justifiable to Men;
 Unless ther be who think not God at all,
 If any be, they walk obscure;
 For of such doctrin never was ther School,
 But the heart of the Fool,
 And no man therein Doctor but himself.

A more subtle use of this device occurs in lines 1010 - 1017, where the Chorus remind Samson that women do not appear to be attracted to men by the qualities which men admire in one another (the light tone is deceptive, however; the remark is barbed to pierce Samson's vanity and it would only amuse Dalila):

It is not vertue, wisdom, valour, wit,
 Strength, comliness of shape, or amplest merit
 That womans love can win or long inherit;
 But what it is, hard is to say,
 Harder to hit,
 (Which way soever men referr it)
 Much like thy riddle, Samson, in one day
 Or seven, though one should musing sit;

XVIII. Another kind of effect achieved by rhyme is the emphasis of certain significant words; naturally these stand out the more in proportion to their distance from other rhyming lines. For instance, when the Chorus first come upon Samson they pity his blindness, then reflect that inward blindness is a worse torture:

Thou art become (O worst imprisonment!)
 The Dungeon of thy self; thy Soul
 (Which Men enjoying sight oft without cause complain)
 Imprisond now indeed,
 In real darkness of the body dwells,
 Shut up from outward light
 To incorporate with gloomy night;
 For inward light alas
 Puts forth no visual beam.
 O mirror of our fickle state,
 Since man on earth unparalleled!

(lines 155 -65).

In these lines the rhyme attracts attention and focuses it on the pitiable condition of the hero - on what he has lost, and what he now suffers: that is, on light and night. An even more striking example of this pointing of a key-word occurs later on, after Manoah has come to talk with his son - one can hardly say, to comfort him, since fatherly affection does not always win the

battle against disappointment of a father's hopes; in fact, the influence of the Book of Job on this tragedy is nowhere stronger than in the character of Manoah, who is indeed a Job's comforter. After he has rubbed salt in Samson's wounds and reduced him to such a state of abasement that only one wish remains to him -

speedy death,

The close of all my miseries, and the balm,
the Chorus commiserate. They agree that the "sayings
of the wise" are often no more than

..... a tune

Harsh, and of dissonant mood from his complaint.
to the victim, unless divine grace upholds him. Then
their sympathy with Samson's sufferings moves them to
exclaim:

God of our Fathers, what is Man!

That thou towards him with hand so various,

Or might I say contrarious,

Temperst thy providence through his short course....

(lines 667 -670).

XIX. What has so far been said on the effect of rhyme in this play applies with little less force to assonance and part-rhyme. These take the place of perfect rhyme so often that it is difficult to give the precise proportion of rhymed verses, or even to agree on the lengths of "rhymed" passages. Actually, a strict count of lines ending in rhyme gives 138; in part rhymes 49; and in assonance 62: a total of 249. Few though they are, the occasional rhymes induce an expectancy which not only heightens the effect of the word that is rhymed, but also assumes a larger number of rhymes than in fact there are. Prince has given a clear and convincing explanation of this phenomenon in his study of

The Italian Element in Milton's Verse. According to his view, Milton learnt much of the art of versification from the theories and practice of the sixteenth century Italian writers, particularly Bembo, Della Casa, Guarini and Tasso, and their influence on his poetry is observable chiefly in the treatment of sustained rhythm, elevated style and the rhyming of the canzone. Already in the lines "On Time" and "At a Solemn Music" and in "Lycidas" Milton had experimented with irregularly rhymed stanzas, but he was to find precedent for further experiments in Italian pastorals such as Tasso's "Aminta" and Guarini's Il Pastor Fido - although the proportion of rhyme in these works was higher than Milton's.

But as rhyming is so simple a matter in Italian, so its effect is less noticeable in that language, and therefore a few rhymes in English are as effective as a much higher number in Italian. Hence, in Samson Agonistes, "the use of rhyme in the Chorus is an enrichment of their music out of all proportion to the number of words which actually rhyme."

XX. From this discussion of the verse form it would appear that Milton's employment of rhyme was consistent with his other views: when he did use rhyme he used it with conscious artistry and purpose, not letting it have its way "as a thing of itself", but subordinating it always to the temper and dramatic requirements of the scene. This in turn suggests a solution to the old problem of why he preferred this novel form of verse to the elaborate stanzas that he might have been expected to use for the choral odes. Belloc, for instance, thought it strange that Milton "should have missed that lyrical opportunity." After all, for the non-lyrical parts Milton had used blank verse, which might be regarded

as the English equivalent of Greek iambic trimeters, so why did he not compose the speeches of the Chorus in stanzaic patterns modelled on the odes of Pindar or the tragic playwrights? The "Nativity Ode" and the Sonnets provide plenty of evidence that he could handle such forms with ease..... The answer lies partly in Milton's expressed opinions on the subject of regular rhyme in long poems and in his determination to have rhyme his slave, not his master: and partly in the poetry itself. Surpassing all other verse forms in its scope, it ranges from unrhymed verse through part-rhyme and assonance to occasional perfect rhyme and a final fully-rhymed stanzaic passage, so enabling the hero to run the gamut of passion in his battle with the evil men do and the evil in himself.

NOTES

to

The VERSE FORM. PART III.

1. Orrery was referring to his rhymed tragedy,
The Black Prince.
2. Eliot, "John Dryden", Selected Essays (1932).
3. Aubrey's account, Early Lives of Milton, p.7.
4. Eliot, "John Dryden", Selected Essays, p.312.
5. The writers of plays in heroic couplets are
amusingly burlesqued in The Rehearsal (1671).
The ridicule heaped on "Bayes" shows that
Dryden, Laureate since 1670, was not held
in universal esteem.
6. Milton, "Reason of Church Government",
Areopagitica and other Prose Works, p.305.
7. " " " " " p.303.
8. S.E.Sprott, Milton's Art of Prosody (1953), ch. V.
9. Masson, Life of Milton, vol. VI, pp. 710, and 682.
10. Sprott, Milton's Art of Prosody, ch. X.
11. Johnson, "John Milton", Lives of the English Poets.
12. Leavis, Revaluation: Tradition and Development, p. 64.
13. Tillyard, Milton, p. 333.
14. F.T. Prince, The Italian Element in Milton's
Verse (1954), ch. IV.

RHYTHM and METRE

SUMMARY

- I. Rhythm the source of the peculiar greatness of Samson.
- II. Difficulties of analysis of rhythm.
- III. Justification of attempts to analyse rhythm.
- IV. Difficulties of analysis heightened by differences of opinion on scansion of English poetry.
- V. General diversity of opinion in early seventeenth century.
- VI. Diversity in theory and practice of versification.
- VII. Interest in classical measures.
- VIII. Syllabic - accentual verse.
- IX. Speech accent in lyric.
- X. Speech accent in dramatic verse.
- XI. Diversity in verse form.
- XII. Development of blank verse.
- XIII. Situation when Milton came to write.
- XIV. Prosodic systems available to Milton.
- XV. Tendency towards smoothness in seventeenth century verse.
- XVI. Milton's actual practice in composition, from early poems to Paradise Lost.
- XVII. Milton's blank verse in the epics.
- XVIII. Milton a master of verse technique and of decorum; shows leaning towards greater freedom and larger form of utterance - the verse paragraph.
- XIX. What might have been expected of Milton after Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.
- XX. First impression of Samson Agonistes.
- XXI. The degree to which rhythm is responsible for this impression. Adjustment of rhythmical movement to sense.

- XXII. Basic rhythm.
- XXIII. Variations: stress inversion.
- XXIV. Counterpoint.
- XXV. Opinions on scansion of Milton's verse in Samson.
Arguments for the elision theory.
- XXVI. Arguments for the theory of equivalence.
- XXVII. Half and Half theory.
- XXVIII. Secondary rhythm -line formation.
- XXIX. Suggestion of chant and movement.
- XXX. Rhythm as entering into construction of the
verse paragraph.
- XXXI. Thought units of verse paragraph joined by
loose connectives.
- XXXII. Appositional and adjectival phrases used as
connectives.
- XXXIII. Effects of interrupted statement or suspension.
- XXXIV. Inversion of word order.
- XXXV. Contrast and antithesis.
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- XXXVII. Pausation.
- XXXVIII. General pattern of the verse paragraphs in
the choral odes.

RHYTHM and METRE.

I. So far, discussion of the versification of Samson Agonistes has been concerned with the general verse form and the use of occasional rhyme, and this has led to the conclusion that this mixture of blank verse and rhyme extends the range of expression. It is now time to consider the rhythmical arrangement of that expression, and to study it with all the more interest since it undoubtedly held a higher place in Milton's regard than the question of rhyme: rhyme, as he used it, could be an added source of power, but was not essential to his poetry; whereas it is the rhythm that is the chief element in the expression of the tragedy, conveying the sense of dour implacability and irresistible power mounting in and around Samson until the catastrophe. The tragedy owes its unique character largely to the rhythm.

II. Many scholars and critics have recognized the importance of this factor and have commented upon it, usually in connection with the verse paragraph, in a way that shows their awareness of the creative and mental powers required for this use of rhythm. (For rhythmical energy is a very different thing from metrical virtuosity such as may be found in Tennyson or Swinburne, or Auden or Dylan Thomas.) Yet although the most astute critics have evidently felt that the secret of Milton's peculiar genius lies here, few have attempted to carry examination further: some, perhaps, are repelled by the difficulties of such analysis, while others regard investigation as pointless since no formula can explain the process of artistic synthesis. Even Bridges remarked at one point in his examination of Milton's prosody:

The varieties are numberless; for when the metrical components of a verse are parts of sentences, the other parts of which go to the composition of the next verses before and after, the breaks of such verses cannot be considered apart; and were these varieties exhausted, the variations of these, as effected by the position of weak or inverted stresses, would remain to reckon, before the changes possible in the mere formal rhythm, apart from all that is introduced by the language, were enumerated. It is few who (1). will pursue this path any further.

Eliot was evidently of the same opinion when writing his second study on Milton, for after praising Bridges' work he added that it could not be:

by such means that we gain an appreciation of the peculiar rhythm of a poet. It seems to me also that Milton's verse is especially refractory to yielding up its secrets to examination of the single line. For his verse is not formed in this way. It is the period, the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse; and emphasis on the line structure is the minimum necessary to provide a counter-pattern to the period structure. It is only in the period that the wavelength of Milton's verse is to be found: it is his ability to give a perfect and unique pattern to every paragraph, such that the full beauty of the line is found in its context, and his ability to work in larger musical units than any other poet - that is to me the most conclusive evidence of Milton's supreme mastery. The peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a breathless leap, communicated by Milton's long periods, and by his alone, is impossible to procure from rhymed verse.

Indeed, this mastery is more conclusive evidence of his intellectual power, than is his grasp of any ideas that he borrowed or invented. To be able to control so many words at once is the token of a mind of most exceptional energy. (2).

There is more than one debatable assumption here - for instance, the implication that it is possible to distinguish absolutely between the rhythm and the language of a poem - but there is no denying the truth of the opening statement that Milton's verse is "especially refractory to yielding up its secrets" whether of the single line or the sentence or the paragraph. And it is, after all, only too easy to ridicule the graphs and tables provided by painstaking members or imitators of the American school of statistical criticism, and to hint at the possibility of missing the wood for the trees, as Eliot suggests. Perhaps there is incongruity in attempting to subject the poetry of Milton - Milton the champion of personal freedom and individual judgment - to word by word, sometimes even syllable by syllable analysis.

III. The answer to these objections is of course that labours of love are never laborious and never useless, at any rate to those who undertake them. Close study of the work of a great poet like Milton, whether it be analysis of rhyme, spelling, syntax, rhythm, vocabulary, or imagery, is bound to reveal some hitherto unsuspected subtleties in the writing and thus to increase our appreciation. It may serve other purposes too - elucidating meaning in some cases as Helen Darbishire's work on the spelling and punctuation has done, or confirming dates of composition in the way shown by Sprott, Ants Oras and W.R.Parker. (3). - but its main justification

is its contribution, however small, to the understanding of Milton's total meaning in the passage or work studied.

IV. No doubt it was in the hope of making such contributions that the various studies of Milton's prosody were undertaken. The first analytical study was made by Masson in his "Essay on Milton's Versification" published in 1882. Saintsbury's essay on Milton which appeared in 1911 naturally pays a good deal of attention to prosody, although in a far less mechanical manner than Masson, and includes several passages of interesting observation on possible methods of scansion, synthesis and variety of line. The next work on the subject, and by far the best known, was Bridges' Milton's Prosody; this was not published until 1894 but that Bridges had been engaged on this study for a long time seems clear, not only from his introduction, which gives 1888 as the date of his first serious study of the subject, but also from the references to it in the correspondence between Bridges and Hopkins from as early as 1877. It is not unlikely that Hopkins' stimulating comments first suggested the idea of such a study to Bridges; as Bridges was himself inclined to be a strict metrist he no doubt enjoyed proving his thesis that Milton had evolved ^a certain system of prosody, depending on elision, and scarcely ever deviated from it. A more recent book on the subject, Spratt's Milton's Art of Prosody, is no less searching and illuminating. What each writer has to say is contradicted to some extent by the others, which is inevitably the case whenever prosody is under discussion. Each, too, is persuasive. It would, therefore, seem wisest to postpone discussion of their main theories until one has a

clearer picture of versification at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and of Milton's own pronouncements on the subject; only after attempting an analysis of his practice in the light of this knowledge will it be possible to assess the truth and value of the various studies of his versification.

V. It would be as well to pause here for a moment in order to envisage the state of affairs in matters other than literature at this time, that is just before and during the quarter century when Milton was growing up. One may indeed wonder whether any period, except perhaps the inter-war years of our own century, could have been more confusing for a young and aspiring poet who was deeply conscious of his obligations both as patriot and poet. The country was rent by religious and political differences, not into two but into dozens of parties, factions, sects, synods, cliques and councils. Milton's family history, though not showing the worst extremes of the cleavage, yet reflects the intensity of opinion at this time and the private tragedies which often resulted. The poet's grandfather, a staunch Roman Catholic, had been so outraged by the defection of his son, the elder John Milton, to the Protestants, that he had cast him off and there had been no further communication between the two. Much later there was a reversion to the old faith when one of the old man's grandsons, Christopher Milton, turned Catholic and accepted a knighthood from Charles II. Milton himself was no sojourner in the ivory tower but even in youth had declared his support of the Protestant and anti-Royalist side. Whether his action in committing himself to participation in the conflict which was to absorb so many precious years proved of eventual benefit to

literature, in that it widened his experience and strengthened his character, or whether it deprived us of many other works as fine as, or finer than, those we have, is a subject for endless speculation. But it was certainly inevitable that a youth of so serious a temper should act as Milton actually did, despite occasional moods of longing for "som still removed place", "high lonely tower" or "studious cloysters pale". It was probably his anti-prelatical fervour that accounted for some of his early unpopularity at Cambridge, and the withholding of a fellowship. For this he may have cared very little, since it gave him the opportunity he craved for study and meditation in the peace of his father's home at Horton. However that may be, it was during those years at Cambridge and then at Horton that Milton was reading and assessing the poetry of others, experimenting in composition, and discovering his own powers and the principles which in his opinion governed English versification.

VI. In the last years of the sixteenth and the first years of the new century there was as much variety in the world of letters, particularly of poetry, as there was in the spheres of politics and religion: but, happily for the poets, there was more tolerance. The greatest writers - and at the turn of the century Shakespeare, Chapman, Jonson, Donne were all at work, and Spenser had been dead only a year - are generally too conscious of the need for freedom of expression to attempt to impose restrictions on the initiative of others. It is true that certain strictures have remained on record, such as Jonson's on Shakespeare and on Donne - "Done, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging" and "for not being understood, would

(4).
 perish" - but it is fairly clear from the contexts that Jonson was aware of the larger issues involved and was quite ready to condone what he considered faults in the works of his great contemporaries, if those were indeed necessary concomitants of their particular kinds of greatness. As the century advanced Jonson's opinions became more influential; in his earlier years, however, it could hardly be said that there was any general agreement on the principles governing English versification, except the assumption, implicit in the poetry of the age, that accent was not to be ignored. Yet this variety of opinion and practice was not a mark of indifference on the subject, for several examinations of the art of poetry had been produced by the Elizabethans, and there was no lack of dispute and experiment.

VII. One of the most interesting of these experiments had been the hexameter movement. Some poets, notably Spenser, Sidney and Campion, and a few scholars like Ascham and Harvey and the members of the Areopagus, had at various times dallied with classical metres, but the poets at any rate soon learned to temper their enthusiasm. Spenser, for instance, ended his youthful experiments with the petulant query in a letter to Harvey in 1579: "Why a Gods name may not we, as else the Greekes, have the kingdome of our owne Language, and measure our Accentos, by the soundes, reseruing the Quantitie to the Verse".

The supporters of the hexameter movement in England were no doubt acquainted with the theories of foreign poets on the subject of imitation of the classic writers. One of the most advanced and interesting groups of theorists was the Florentine Camerata, an

academy which flourished in the 1570's. Its members concentrated on the relationship between music and poetry, basing their principles on what they understood to have been classical Greek practice. They regarded rhythm and harmony as being implicit in words, thus the musician's task was simply to note "definite quantities and definite pitches for the different syllables, according to their position in the verse. Counterpoint was unknown. Choirs sang in unison, and the accompanying instrument of a soloist merely doubled the voice part." So Pattison puts it, and concludes that the result would be a kind of recitative, "talking in music".⁽⁵⁾ These ideas do not appear to have inspired any imitators among Elizabethan poets, but it is highly probable that they came to Milton's notice later, and that their union of classical, musical and poetic interests impressed him deeply. The choruses of Samson could certainly be regarded as compositions of this kind, "talking in music".

The founding of the Camerata and the publication of Samson were, however, separated by a century. After the Spenser - Harvey discussion there was little interest shown in classical measures until about twenty years later when Campion published his songs. Although he did not go as far as to advocate the introduction of purely quantitative measures, he asserted that English poetry would be improved if rhyme were used only sparingly, or even not at all, and if greater attention were paid to quantity. As he himself had a faultless ear and was both musician and poet he could experiment to advantage. Certainly his own exquisite songs support his theories, and none more so than "Rose-cheeked Laura, come", which is in unrhymed measures remarkable for their "linked sweetness"

and gentle cadences. (Milton's "Sabrina fair" song from Comus is one of the few lyrics that stand comparison with it.) Despite the artistic perfection of "Laura", Campion wrote most of his songs in rhymed quantitative verse, and his unrhymed verse had few imitators.

Even before Campion had published his theories, the importance of quantity must have been recognized by lyric writers as a whole: the number of collections of airs, songs, ditties, ballads and madrigals published during this period is evidence of the close relation of music and poetry, of an insatiable demand for words to sing; and the prime necessity of words written for singing to a tune is that their syllables should equal the notes in number or length, coupling "Words and Notes lovingly together" as Campion expressed it. (6). "There is nothing more offensive to the eare than to place a long sillable with a short note, or a short sillable with a long note". (7). It is surely recognition of this fact that accounts for the felicity of, such (8). songs as, for instance, "Fain would I change that note", (9). "Weepe you no more sad Fountaines", or "Since first I saw your face", (10) or dozens of other beautiful airs from the Gorgious Galleries, Bowres of Delights, Handefuls, Helicons and Paradises that proclaim by their very name and number the common man's joy in music and poetry during the English Renaissance.

VIII. Although the necessity to consider quantity was evidently recognized, and particularly so by the lyric writers, quantity never emerged as the guiding principle in English versification. Most of the later Elizabethan poets wrote the kind of verse fashioned by Chaucer and later revived by Surrey and then by Spenser, all of whom owed much to foreign example and desired to produce English poetry equal to the

polished style of writing fashionable in the Romance languages: that is, they wrote lines of a fixed number of syllables, with the words so arranged that the natural word or rhetorical accents fell at regular intervals. Since, as in French, the syllable grouping did not always suffice to make clear the unity of the individual line, rhyme was brought into play to mark the line endings and give the verse cohesion. The syllable groups or patterns within the line were, by common consent, referred to by the names of the feet in classical measures, accents and unaccented syllables being substituted for longs and shorts. As Sidney explained it, in the Apology for Poetry -- which was not published until 1595, after his death -- "Of versifying there are two sorts, the one ancient, the other modern: the ancient marked the quantity of each syllable, and according to that framed his verse; the modern observing only number (with some regard of the accent), the chief life of it standeth in that like sounding of the words, which we call rhyme." (11). This was the form of versification, then, which was used generally for lyric and narrative poetry, and which tended to encourage metrical regularity or "smoothness", whether the particular verse form was the sonnet, the madrigal, blank verse, couplets or original stanza forms. In Professor Howarth's opinion, this was not the natural tendency for English verse, and poets like Chaucer and Waller whose verse was strictly measured were working against the spirit of the language: "Chaucer combined stress, time and number: all that remained for the next

great prosodic technician to harmonize was quantity or length of syllable (from classical practice):
 (12).
 he was, of course, Milton."

IX. At the same time, however, there were certain forces running counter to this general tendency towards the establishment of a strictly regular syllabic-accentual versification. One such influence, carried over into Elizabeth's reign and possibly affecting Donne's style, was the poetry of Wyatt. Though his name was so often coupled with Surrey's and the poems of both were published posthumously in Tottel's Miscellany in 1557, Wyatt was in fact a poet of a very different kind from Surrey. Whereas Surrey's verse was flowing and regular in metre, elegiac and controlled in tone, Wyatt's was uneven and impetuous, in his best as well as his worst poems. His lines are nearly always regular in number, that is, the number of syllables matches the chosen pattern of the stanza; and it is quite often possible to scan them as syllabic accentual verse: but it is just as often impossible to scan them in this way, and in fact the verse sounds best if read with no more than an ordinary rhetorical stress. This is probably what Wyatt intended, and he may, therefore, be regarded as one of the last poets to show the influence of the old tripping measure. In these lines, for instance, the rhythm is a speech rhythm flowing fairly smoothly until the last two lines, where uneven rapid stresses suggest the fluctuations of superficial passion, and, also, the distress in the mind of the writer:

They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
 With naked fote stalking in my chambre.
 I have sene theim gentill tame and meke
 That nowe are wyld and do not remembre
 That sometyme they put theimself in daunger
 To take bred at my hand; and nowe thay raunge
 Besely seking with a continuell chaunge. (13).

In the use of natural speech rhythms, often rugged and broken, and in the tone of much of his verse, Wyatt may well be regarded as the inheritor of the O.E. tradition, and as a precursor of Donne, although, as Bruce Pattison points out in Music and Poetry of the English Renaissance, the earlier poet's verses were still true lyrics, in that they were intended to have musical accompaniment - the lute itself. By the time Donne was beginning to write, in 1593, the two arts of music and poetry were already diverging, and however deeply Donne may have been stirred by music and the idea or the experience of poetry accompanied by music, his verses show clearly enough that they were not composed to a tune, but evolved their own form in keeping with the initial speech rhythms. It is possible that the popularity of Donne's poetry was due almost as much to the vigorous and dramatic rhythm as to the originality of thought, imagery and language: at any rate, Carew suggested so in his "Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne", where he praises Donne's "line / Of masculine expression", and "his imperious wit", which, unlike that of other poets, Our stubborne language bends, made only fit
 With her tough-thick-rib'd hoopes to gird about

Thy giant phanero, which had prov'd too stout
For their soft melting Phrases.

The influence of Donne is certainly evident in these lines, so different from the usual smooth and polished style of Carew's verse. On the whole, however, there are few serious imitators of Donne's rhythmical innovations in the lyric, apart from Cleveland and Crashaw in the sixteen-forties. In conformity with Jonson's views the Cavalier and religious poets chose to write in syllabic accentual metres of ever-increasing regularity. And exquisite though many of their lyrics are, they lack the freshness, boldness and variety of the earlier songs.

V. In drama too the tide was ebbing, during the second decade of the new century: of all the great poet-playwrights who had glorified the English stage in its heyday, only Heywood, Jonson, Dekker, Webster, Fletcher and Middleton were to continue producing important work after 1614. But the decline of passion and originality in the drama was accompanied by a development of versification quite different from that in lyrical and narrative poetry. Blank verse, the chief medium of dramatic expression, was shedding its stiffness and metrical regularity and rapidly attaining comparative rhythmical freedom. This was because the verse dramatist could claim a licence in versification denied to other branches of poetry: whenever metrical accents and speech accents conflicted - which they were bound to do at some point in the course of a play - the speech accent was likely to predominate. The amazingly

rapid development of Elizabethan dramatic blank verse, most notable of course in the works of Shakespeare, shows the strength of this tendency to give speech stress its head. It is not necessary to open Corboque and then turn to Fletcher 's last plays to illustrate the point, since a change almost' equally marked may be seen if passages from Love's Labour's Lost and The Tempest are set side by side. Here, for instance, is Biron in love:

A lover's eye will gaze an eagle blind;
 A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,
 When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd;
 Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
 Than are the tender horns of cockled snails;
 Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste;
 For valour, is not love a Hercules?
 Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?
 Subtle as sphinx; as sweet and musical
 As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair?
 And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods
 Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.

(Act IV, Scene III.)

And here are Ferdinand and Miranda:

Miranda: Do you love me?

Ferdinand: O heaven, O earth, bear witness
 to this sound,

And crown what I profess with kind event,
 If I speak true! if hollowly, invert
 What best is boded me to mischief! I,
 Beyond all limit of what else i' the world,
 Do love, prize, honour you.

Miranda: I am a fool
 To weep at what I am glad of.

.....

Ferdinand: Wherefore weep you?

Miranda: At mine unworthiness, that dare not offer
 What I desire to give; and much less take
 What I shall die to want. But this is
 trifling;

And all the more it seeks to hide itself,
 The bigger bulk it shows. Hence, bashful
 cunning;

And prompt me, plain and holy innocence!
 I am your wife, if you will marry me;
 If not, I'll die your maid -to be your
 fellow

You may deny me; but I'll be your servant
 Whether you will or no.

(Act III, Scene I.)

In the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher and, later,
 of Shirley, speech rhythm so overcame metre that
 their blank verse became almost indistinguishable
 from prose. The following lines from The Two Noble
Kinsmen by Shakespeare and Fletcher illustrate the
 tendency:

Arcite: "Take Emilia

And with her all the world's joy. Reach
 thy hand;

Farewell! I have told my last hour.

I was false,

Yet never treacherous. Forgive me, cousin!

One kiss from fair Emilia. 'Tis done:

Take her. I die!"

Palamon: "Thy brave soul seek Elysium!

Emilia: "I'll close thine eyes, prince; blessed
 souls be with thee!

Thou art a right good man; and while I live,
 This day I give to tears."

Palamon: "And I to honour."

Theseus: "In this place first you fought;
even very here

I sunder'd you: acknowledge to the gods
Our thanks that you are living."

(Act V, Scene VI.)

XI. In this brief mention of the kinds of versification then practised, scarcely anything has been said of the larger units of verse form. In this field - though setting aside the drama, where there was a common acceptance of blank verse - the fertility and variety were amazing. There is no doubt that some of the stimulating influences were foreign - for instance, Wyatt's importation of terza rima and the Petrarchan sonnet, Surrey's translations and his introduction of blank verse. Others again were musical: as song music changed, either evolving naturally or imitating foreign styles, so the song words had to be adapted to the new forms (it must be admitted, however, that the two arts were often inter-acting). But it would be unwise to discount the original force of English poetic genius at this period. The ballad and many lyric forms were of native growth; and even in the "borrowed" forms the eclectic nature of the borrowing, and the degree of change to which the new forms were subjected, demonstrate the independence of English writers. The treatment of the sonnet provides one example: Wyatt introduced it in the Petrarchan form - two quatrains followed by two tercets - but this was modified by Surrey who gave it the form later adopted by Shakespeare. In the interim Sidney and Spenser experimented with new variations, the latter inventing a happy compromise between the Italian form

and Surrey's - abab bcbe cded ee.

XII. Another example of inspired borrowing and ^basorption into the language is the introduction of blank verse by Surrey in his translation of Books II and IV of the Aeneid. The inspiration was again mainly Italian, since Surrey was translating an Italian translation, but also classical to some extent: for instance, in the decision to abandon rhyme, which the ancients had never used, and in the occasional running on of the sense from line to line, in imitation of Virgil. The next essay in blank verse, Gascoigne's satire Steel Glass (1576), had even less variety than Surrey's translation. Meanwhile, in 1562, Gorboduc had appeared, using blank verse for the first time in a play, and though stiff and clumsy in treatment it justified its existence if only in that it suggested the verse form for the dramatists of the end of the century. When the great age of the drama opened in the 1580's with the production of Kyd's Spanish Tragedy and Marlowe's Tamburlaine, blank verse was the form used. Although for a time it bore the stamp of Marlowe's passion, resounding rhythms and rhetorical stress, its extreme pliability was not fully evident until Shakespeare's plays appeared; and from then on dramatic blank verse was permeated with speech rhythms.

XIII. By the end of the first quarter of the seventeenth century, therefore, versification and prosody were still fluid; Emile Legouis has summed up the position well, as follows:

For all the extensive borrowing from abroad and avowed respect for ancient precedents and traditional rules of conduct, and in

spite of the passing fashions which temporarily made a law of the strange or the eccentric, the general impression conveyed is one of frank and free boldness. A wide initiative was left to individuals. This is apparent if the language and versification, the common instruments of the poets, be studied.....Prosody also maintained a mobility and pliability which had the happiest effect on true artists, although it misled the others to such licence that in the end verse relapsed to prose. It cannot be said that a fixed prosody existed at this time, and that the value of each word had been established once for all and independently of its use. While in lyrics and solemn poetry words had their full and constant phonetic value, in dramatic verse they were increasingly governed by circumstances, and suffered contractions and extensions entailed by the need of speed or emphasis. One word might be taken to contain a varying number of syllables. Words were elastic, could shrink or expand. The astonishing blank verse of the theatre, especially of Shakespeare's plays, provides inexhaustible material for the study of these varying inflections which almost always are found to conform to one law, to follow nature, that is true passion or feeling.

Versification was not reduced to a single principle, but sometimes acknowledged the syllabic and sometimes the accentual law.

Some verses are governed by no rule except that of the recurring ictus, or beats. They disregard both number of syllables and number of regular feet.

The great mass of the verse is at once syllabic and accentual. The heroic or decasyllabic line, either blank or rhymed, has precedence, and is found on analysis to contain, as a rule, five iambic feet. But it remains syllabic only in virtue of the elastic prosody. And it allows of very great diversity in the placing of accents and the character of feet. It is much varied, sometimes a very subtle, (14). subject of study.

XIV. Of all these various systems of prosody which had been known to English poets it may be assumed that Milton knew all except the earliest type, that is, the Old English. But that still left him with a bewildering diversity from which to choose: one may imagine, for instance, that he was at one time drawn to attempt classical quantitative verse, no less by his scholarly instincts than by his love for the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. On the other hand, his prevailing good sense and his ear for music would have warned him that such an attempt would be contrary to the genius of the English language, and that experiments such as his translation of the "Quis multa gracilis" ode were not worth repeating:

What slender Youth bedew'd with liquid odours
Courts thee on Roses in some pleasant Cave,
Pyrrha for whom bind'st thou
In wreaths thy golden hair,
Plain in thy neatness.....

The lines are but a pleasing curiosity, and pleasing only in so far as they echo Horace. Yet if the ancients could be no useful guide here, what could past and contemporary English poets offer as a model? One may hazard a guess that he found the blank verse of the theatres too irregular, too close to prose; and the heroic couplet, whether used for drama or narrative, and stanzaic forms depending on rhyme were, he found, irksome to compose and cloying and over-emphatic in effect; in this his attitude was much like Campion's.

XV. It may be noted incidentally that the diversity and licence of versification during these years aggravated and accelerated the general reaction towards a more regular kind of verse. The extreme adulation offered later to Waller and Cowley was a tribute not so much to their talent as to their compliance with popular taste: the reading public wanted the poetry of the age to have such qualities as smoothness and refinement, and Waller, Denham and Cowley only satisfied a taste already implanted and encouraged by such poets as Drummond and Jonson and his followers. Naturally this demand for regularity and restraint was accompanied by an increased regard for similar qualities in other branches of composition. Restraint in form, for example, was manifested in the acceptance of the unities in drama in the Restoration period, while restraint in subject matter resulted in the exclusion of many themes which had been favourites of the

Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists: what had been viewed as the problems and failings of individual heroes in the earlier drama - revenge, jealousy, pride, ambition, sensuality, etc. - were rejected in favour of variations on the more generalized and more social theme of love and honour.

To return to Milton: reasons have been suggested for his refusal to conform to contemporary literary practice, and it has now to be shown what his actual course was, and why he chose it.

XVI. The earliest of his works to have survived are the paraphrase on Psalm 114 and the translation of Psalm 136, both written when he was only fifteen. Both are in couplets, the first in decasyllabic and the second in octosyllabic lines. The adoption of a popular verse form was natural enough in a boy, but the same could not be said of some of the devices he used, such as elision, and division of epithets (e.g., "amongst her spangled sisters bright"). Already Milton was working with conscious artistry and respect for decorum, elaborating the style of the paraphrase but rendering the psalm for musical accompaniment in clear, simple language.

The "Lines on the Death of a Fair Infant" followed when he was seventeen. These were in seven-lined stanzas rhyming ababbcc, all the iambic lines being pentameters except for the last, which was a hexameter. It hardly needed this, however, to point to Spenser as the

inspiration and chief influence. Two years later came the "Vacation Exercise", part Latin, part English: the latter is in iambic pentameters rhyming in couplets, and contains a declaration of the writer's ambitions which emphasizes the amazing consistency of his character. He beseeches his "Native Language" to furnish him with:

Thy chiefest treasure,
 Not those new fangled toys, and trimming slight
 Which takes our late fantasticks with delight,
 But cull those richest Robes and gay'st attire
 Which deepest Spirits, and choicest Wits desire:
 I have some naked thoughts that rove about
 And loudly knock to have their passage out:
 And wearie of their place do only stay
 Till thou hast deck't them in thy best array;....
 Yet I had rather if I were to chuse,
 Thy service in some graver subject use,
 Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,
 Before thou cloath my fancy in fit sound:
 Such where the deep transported mind may soare
 Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav'ns dore
 Look in, and see each blissful Deitie
 How he before the thunderous throne doth lie,
 Listening to what unshorn Apollo sings
 To th'touch of golden wires, while Hebe brings
 Immortal Nectar to her Kingly Sire.....
 Such as the wise Demodocus once told
 In solemn Songs at King Alcinous feast,
 While sad Ulisses soul and all the rest
 Are held with his melodious harmonie
 In willing chains and sweet captivitie.

(lines 18-52)

Two years later still the "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity" was composed; at the beginning of this he reverts to the same seven-lined stanza form as he had used for the "Death of a Fair Infant", but with the immeasurable difference created by widening mental powers and command of technique. The hymn that follows is in eight-lined stanzas rhyming aabcbdd; the metre is iambic and the lines vary in length from three to six feet (3,3,5,3,3,5,4 and 8). One of the most important and obvious developments is the increased use of adjective division; that is, besides the normal arrangement of one or two adjectives either preceding or following a noun, as in:

"harping in loud and solemn quire"

there now appears the pattern of adjective, noun, adjective:

"and cast the dark foundations deep"

"with timbrel'd Anthems dark"

"the flocking shadows pale"

By an extension of the same principle another pattern is produced, that of object, verb, object:

"The lonely mountains o're,

And the resounding shore,

A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;"

This type of inversion of normal word order appears with ever-increasing frequency in Milton's poetry. Its function will be analysed in a later section, but for the present its emergence may be noted, together with the suggestion advanced by F.T.Prince that it was a device borrowed direct from the Italians rather than from Chaucer or Spenser. (15).

The seven-lined stanza was used again, but for the last time, in the lines on "The Passion"; on this Milton made the comment that he "nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinished." Next came the delightful "Song on a May Morning", which is of added interest since it is the first of Milton's mature poems to show form submitting freely to the mood and requirements of the theme. Reminine rhymes appear among the couplets, and in lines five to eight there is both shortening of the line from ten to eight syllables and a change from iambic to trochaic metre. The lines "On Shakespear" and "On the University Carrier" are also in iambic pentameter couplets, though differing greatly in tone and diction. The "Epitaph of the Marchioness of Winchester" is in octosyllabic couplets, and so too are "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso". The variations in the last two poems have puzzled many readers, who have found it impossible to decide whether the metre is iambic throughout with a considerable number of catalectic lines and extra-metrical final syllables, or whether it is interspersed with trochaic lines and passages. However this may be, the scansion seems to be rather syllabic than accentual, if allowance is made for elision, catalexis and final extra-metrical syllables. Certainly the metrical accent falls far too often on syllables which are naturally too light to bear them, for the system to be classed as regularly accentual; e.g.,

"Black, but such as in esteem," (Il Penseroso, line 17)

"In her sweetest , saddest plight," (" " " 57)

"He met her, and in secret shades" (" " " 28)

Also of interest here is a passage from near the end of "L'Allegro", since it reminds one of Milton's never-failing love of music and his delight in a kind of verse which possessed many of the qualities of music:

Such as the meeting soul may pierce
In notes, with many a winding bout
Of lincked sweetness long drawn out,
With wanton heed, and giddy cunning,
The melting voice through mazes running;
Untwisting all the chains that ty
The hidden soul of harmony.

(lines 138 -44)

There are hints of this new kind of verse and rhythm in the third song in "Arcades": the following lines may lack the "long drawn out" quality but they undoubtedly excel in "lincked sweetness" and in the "Giddy cunning" with which vowels and consonants are interlaced:

Nymphs and Shepherds dance no more
By sandy Ladons Lillied banks;
On old Lycaeus or Cullene hoar,
Trip no more in twilight ranks,
Though Erymanth your loss deplore,
A better soyl shall give you thanks.

After reviewing the work of those early years one can only conclude that Milton, although unwillingly, was falling in with contemporary practice in writing to a syllabic-accentual formula. Despite the fact that his verse became increasingly smooth and regular, there is evidence that he regarded both rhyme and adherence to a strict metrical pattern as

a disagreeable necessity. In a letter to Thomas Yonge, written when Milton was only seventeen, he complained of "that cramped mode of speech, straitened by fixed feet and syllables", and declared his preference for "a free oration, or, (16). were it possible, an Asiatic exuberance of words".

Later he insisted that "my love is not hemmed within close gripping measures, nor does it come whole and sound to feet that are lame." His problem would appear to have been how to write poetry while finding the constraints of both rhyme and regular metre irksome: how much freedom could he take in expressing his ideas without crossing the line dividing prose from poetry? The answer would have been hard to find if he had searched for it in the field of English poetry then open to his view. Certainly neither Chaucer nor Spenser, the English poets whom he revered most, had appeared to chafe at the constraints of verse. Yet, transcending these were "far other worlds, far other seas" of intellectual and literary discovery - the world of the ancients and of their modern imitators in Italy and France. The ancients had managed very well without rhyme; the modern Italian poets also had discovered how to dispense with it; so too had certain non-dramatic poets before Milton: Surrey, for instance, had used it in his translations from the Aeneid. One can imagine with what delight he must have studied the poetry and critical theories of such (17). writers as Bembo, Della Casa and Tasso, and found

there detailed and closely-reasoned discussions of all the problems worrying him - advice not only on the use of rhyme and metre, but also on the elevation of style, enrichment of the texture of the verse, and sustaining the rhythm.

His next two poems show clearly the influence exerted on him by Italian precept and practice on the subject. As Prince has pointed out, the lines "At a Solemn Music" and "On Time", though at first glance they appear to be completely irregular in rhyme scheme and line length, are in fact modelled on the Italian madrigal, a single stanza form resembling part of a canzone, and more limited in theme. Incidentally, two centuries before Prince made this observation Dr. Johnson had shown that he too was aware of Milton's debt to the Italian writers, which, as he put it, "may be discovered by a mixture of longer and shorter verses, according to the rules of Tuscan poetry!" (18).

In both the poems just mentioned and in the lines "Upon the Circumcision" (which is modelled upon a canzone stanza like that used by Petrarch for his canzone to the Virgin) the lines range in length from four or six to twelve syllables, the rhymes are spaced out considerably, and the sense is thus enabled to flow on a free rhythmical tide from start to finish. Such poetry is well on the way that leads to vers libre.

The same characteristics are apparent in the songs in Comus. In the blank verse parts of the poem, however, the lines are regular in length and fairly regular in accent, probably to atone

for the lack of rhyme. This supposition is borne out by the fact that wherever Comus' speech is given in rhymed couplets the line length is allowed to vary again; e.g., after Comus has urged on his monsters to dance he hears the Lady approaching, and his words then fall into a steadier and more sober pace:

We that are of purer fire
 Imitate the Starry Quire,
 Who in their nightly watchfull Sphears,
 Lead in swift round the Months and Years.
 The Sounds, and Seas with all their finny drove
 Now to the Moon in wavering Morrice move,
 And on the Tawny Sands and Shelves,
 Trip the pert Fairies and the dapper Elves....
 In a light fantastick round.

Break off, break off, I feel the different pace,
 Of som chast footing neer about this ground.
 Run to your shrouds, within these Brakes and Trees,
 Our number may affright: Som Virgin sure
 (For so I can distinguish by mine Art)
 Benighted in these Woods.....

(lines 111-8, 143-50).

Despite all this experiment and variety of form one can discern certain principles governing Milton's verse composition at this time: it would seem that he had admitted the necessity for form to give the poem a basis of accentual rhythm suitable to the theme, and to weld the sense into a whole either by rhyme, if feet and line lengths fluctuated a great deal, or by greater regularity of syllabic division and accent, if rhyme were missing; but he

did not appear to be ready to give more than this amount of attention to form.

Furthermore, these principles seem to have governed Milton's poetry from that time onwards, although their application naturally shows development. "Lycidas" continues the course of development indicated in "On Time" and "At a Solemn Music", revealing an increased beauty of rhythmical phrasing and growing mastery of the verse paragraph. The variation in line length is balanced by the use of rhyme, even though the rhyme itself is irregular in occurrence and ten lines do not rhyme at all. In the last two respects it differs from the canzone pattern, but on the other hand it resembles the Italian stanzas in the more important ways: for instance, it concludes with a fully-rhymed short stanza at the close, equivalent to the *commiato* at the conclusion of the Italian canzone; then there are several cases of the linking up of the two parts of a stanza by a special arrangement of two rhyming lines, a long followed by a short line:

"Mean while the Rural ditties were not mute,
Temper'd to th'Oaten Flute;"

"The white Pink, and the Pansie freakt with jeat,
The glowing Violet."

Even the irregularly rhymed passages had a precedent in other kinds of Italian verse written by Milton's contemporaries; for instance in Tasso's Aminta and Guarini's Il Pastor Fido, as well as in later pastoral poetry. It would be unwise, however, when pointing out the influences at work on Milton - or

on any poet, for that matter - to ignore or underestimate the younger poet's natural bent and strength of style, and the purposes guiding him in his selection of literary models. Milton, for example, might have borrowed much more than he did from the Italians. There was nothing except his own judgment to prevent him from importing Italian verse forms unaltered into the English language, in the way that Swinburne and lesser Victorian poets later imported French villanelles, ballades and triolets. More clearly than any of his previous works, "Lycidas" shows how Milton utilized the discoveries of the Italians in verse technique, whenever he found them suiting his purpose, but always with greater freedom than was found in Italian verse, and always in order to gain greater freedom. In Prince's words:

what he found in them, and what he could not have found in any other modern language, was a variety of verbal and metrical devices which they had worked out with the help of earlier Italian poetry, but with their eyes fixed on the new literary ideals.....These experiments were useful to Milton because they were in a modern language, nearer to his own in syntax and idiom than Greek or Latin, and in a tradition of prosody which had already been proved (19). capable of giving something to English verse.

After the technical advance evident in "Lycidas", and the realization that the effect of full rhyme and conformity to pattern could be achieved without actually using full rhyme, Milton rather surprisingly turned next to the exacting form of the sonnet.

However little his sonnets show that is new in Milton's versification, they are important to the general study of verse technique in that they display a more compact and closely unified form that the sonnet had hitherto attained in English. Most of his sonnets are animated by a single impulse which achieves clarity only in the poem as a whole, so that there is no mental pause possible until the last word is reached. This is not to deny that the thought or feeling constituting the impulse may itself be complex - it always is - but to emphasize that the impulse is expressed in a powerful controlling image so that it is, and can be, stated only once. This tendency is evident in his earliest sonnets, such as that to Lady Margaret Ley, but becomes steadily more marked with the passage of time. The fact that in some cases a sentence break occurs at the eighth line is immaterial, since the sense runs across it, as in "Avenge O Lord":

Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd
Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans
The Vales redoubl'd to the Hills, and they
To Heav'n.

The full extent of the originality of Milton's treatment of the sonnet is best appreciated when his sonnets are compared with Shakespeare's, which are constructed more in the earlier Italian manner with the theme first stated, then illustrated in various images, commented upon, and finally summed up in the couplet. Of course, the full force of the concept cannot be comprehended until the whole sonnet is read, since the full meaning of every poem is only in the words as they stand, but the theme

is clear from the very beginning as it never is in Milton's sonnets. Milton, like some of the later Italian sonnet writers, ignores a strict octave-sestet division, and builds up an isolated but immensely powerful verse paragraph. For this effect the unified conception of the theme is largely but not wholly responsible: the words themselves are so placed as to hold together what has been said and to point forward to what is still to come. And this is achieved not, as in "Lycidas", with the help of varying line lengths and rhyme links, but by means of careful phrasing and arranging of pauses, periodic sentence construction, appositional phrases, loose clause connectives, adjective spacing, and the like, all within the regular framework of the sonnet in syllabic-accentual verse.

XVII. The syllabic-accentual nature of the verse in the sonnets was probably a result of Milton's respect for the principle of decorum: the sonnet was the most polished of lyric forms, and syllabic irregularities in it would have been unwarrantable. The syllabic regularity of his epic verse, however, is no doubt to be attributed to other reasons. Some of the reasons for his choosing blank verse as the form of expression have already been stated in the discussion of rhyme: blank verse had dignity and range, both necessary for a story that moves through all the space in Hell, Heaven and Earth: furthermore, it seemed to him the English equivalent of the classical epic measures - Greek

iambic trimeters or Latin hexameters,—and it imposed less constraint than other forms. Having adopted it, however, and at a time when the verse paragraph was becoming his characteristic form of expression, he had to guard very carefully against the danger of allowing his verse to sink to the level of prose, as the blank verse of Beaumont and Fletcher or Shirley had done, for example. As a result, language and word order were greatly affected, and the verse itself — here taking "verse" to mean the movement and mass of the line — had to achieve a unity of its own, since rhyme was not there to mark the line divisions. Hence the remarkable regularity of Milton's blank verse, for it is indeed a remarkable achievement to have satisfied the demands of all systems of versification in poems of 10,558 and 2070 lines respectively. And even more remarkable, in the way that only genius knows, to have been able to do this without any sacrifice of meaning and individuality.

Earlier non-dramatic blank verse, that of Surrey and Gascoigne, had also been remarkable for its metrical and syllabic regularity. But Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained had these qualities too (for regularity must be admitted, whether the equivalence or the elision theory is accepted) and went even further, since in both epics Milton appeared as keenly aware of quantity as he was of accent. On the other hand, however, he had discovered the secret — of which Surrey had obviously been aware, though it had always eluded him, and which so many of the verse dramatists had ignored — the secret of variety within the pattern.

In Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained the sense generally runs on, not only from one line to another, but from beginning to end of a whole period. This practice, and the variety in position of the pause within the line, probably owed much to the example of the dramatists. But the periodic nature of much of the construction, the Latinized diction and phrasing, and the inversions of word order, all point to Virgil as Milton's ultimate inspiration, whether the tone be threatening, or sweet, or stern. Here, for instance, is the description of the "four infernal Rivers":

Abhorred Styx the flood of deadly hate;
 Sad Acheron of sorrow, black and deep;
 Cocytus, nam'd of lamentation loud
 Heard on the ruful stream; fierce Phlegeton
 Whose waves of torrent fire inflame with rage.
 Farr off from these a slow and silent stream,
 Lethe the River of Oblivion roules
 Her watrie Labyrinth, whereof who drinks,
 Forthwith his former state and being forgets,
 Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.

(P.L., Book II, lines 577-86)

Then, in such contrasting passages as Eve's expression of love for Adam, Milton shows that the entrancing sweetness of his early verse is still at his command:

With thee conversing I forget all time,
 All seasons and thir change, all please alike.
 Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
 With charm of earliest Birds: pleasant the Sun
 When first on this delightful Land he spreads
 His orient Beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flour,
 Glistring with dew; fragrant the fertil earth

After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
 Of grateful Eevning milde, then silent Night
 With this her solemn Bird and this fair Moon,
 And these the Gemms of Heav'n, her starrie train:
 But neither breath of Morn when she ascends
 With charm of earliest Birds, nor rising Sun
 On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, floure,
 Glistring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
 Nor grateful Eevning milde, nor silent Night
 With this her solemn Bird, nor walk by Moon,
 Or glittering Starr-light without thee is sweet.

(P.L., Book IV, lines 639-56)

In Paradise Regain'd the versification is similar but the style is less ornate and the tone is often severe. The following lines from the Saviour's rejection of the offer of earthly power show Milton once more struggling with, and subduing, his familiar demon, the desire for fame:

For what is glory but the blaze of fame,
 The peoples praise, if always praise unmixt?
 And what the people but a herd confus'd,
 A miscellaneous rabble, who extoll
 Things vulgar, and well weigh'd, scarce worth the praise
 They praise and they admire they know not what,
 And know not whom, but as one leads the other;
 And what delight to be by such extoll'd,
 To live upon their tongues and be their talk,
 Of whom to be disprais'd were no small praise?
 His lot who dares be singularly good.
 Th'intelligent among them and the wise
 Are few, and glory scarce of few is rais'd.
 This is true glory and renown, when God
 Looking on th'Earth, with approbation marks

The just man, and divulges him through Heaven
 To all his Angels, who with true applause
 Recount his praises; thus he did to Job....

(P.R., Book III, lines 47-64)

XVIII. What then can be gained from this sketch of Milton's technical progress? If it is asked whether he accepted unquestioningly the prevailing ideas and followed contemporary tendencies, the answer would seem to be no: in his youth he showed independence in his occasional abandonment of rhyme and regular lines - that is, in devising forms new to English poetry - and also in his return to original form in the sonnet; just as, in later life, he flaunted his contempt for smoothness in style by writing two epics in the unpopular form of blank verse and, after that, a verse drama in a mixture of blank verse and broken lines which seemed to his contemporaries utterly unmusical and unscannable. If this leads next to the question whether this stern individualist showed a preference for any particular verse form or measure, the answer is still no; rhyme, apparently rejected when Paradise Lost was in preparation, reappears in his last poetry; in some of his poems syllabic and accentual regularity prevail, whereas others are irregular in one or another respect. But it is possible to say more than that Milton was a master of variety in verse technique: he was - and this he would probably have considered more important - a master of decorum. As each poem differed from every other in conception, so it demanded clothing in appropriate form, rhythm and diction, etc.. Had it been known that the author

of Paradise Lost would compose more great works before he died, and one of them in dramatic form, all that the discerning seventeenth century reader could have justly surmised would have been that form and style would match the theme, possibly in a novel and original manner, and that the mental energy of the poet would be manifest in the large periodic structures of the verse paragraph which he had made his own.

XIX. It might perhaps be useful as well as interesting to picture such a reader - The Earl of Anglesey, perhaps, or Andrew Marvell - opening his copy of the latest of Mr. John Milton's poems sometime in the year 1671, and coming at last to the rather smudged print of the title page of Samson Agonistes, A Dramatic Poem. He would glance at the quotation on the function of tragedy (from Aristotle's Poetics), and study the introductory epistle, noting probably with some surprise that the drama was modelled on the Greek. Later on he might have felt apprehensive as he read that:

The measure of Verse us'd in the Chorus is of all sorts, call'd by the Greeks Monostrophic, or rather Apolelymenon, without regard had to Strophe, Antistrophe or Epod, which were a kind of Stanza's fram'd only for the Music, then us'd with the Chorus that sung; not essential to the Poem, and therefore not material or being divided into Stanza's or Pauses, they may be call'd Allaeostropha.

Next he would read through the Argument, and feel a little disappointed at the nature of the fare

promised. Dalila appeared on the list of persons, it was true, but not much on the theme of love and honour could be hoped for from the brief statement that Samson, after Manoah's departure, is "visited by other persons"..... Surely more was expected of Mr. Milton, after his tender delineation of the fallen Eve? Why had he not chosen to rival the Earl of Orrery's Mustapha or Sir Robert Howard's Indian Queen, or Dryden's Indian Emperor and Conquest of Granada? And why had the author of the "Nativity Ode," Arcades and Comus apparently renounced the lyrical opportunity offered to him in the Greek chorus? It would be with a rather resentful bewilderment that the reader would come at last to the words of Samson himself.

XX. It is as well that one should understand the attitude of a contemporary of Milton to Samson, if only because it reminds one that this is a poem that has never made any appeal to literary fashion but that demands only a ready and unbiased response from the reader. It begins with none of the superb claims of the two epics, it has no striking or mysterious opening scene; all that we are conscious of at first are the figures of the blind man and his guide, and his quiet hesitating words:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on;
For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade,
There I am wont to sit, when any chance
Relieves me from my task of servile toyl,
Daily in the common Prison else enjoyn'd me,
Where I a Prisoner chain'd, scarce freely draw
The air imprison'd also, close and damp,

Unwholsom draught: but here I feel amends,
 The breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,
 With day-spring born; here leave me to respire.....

It does not seem possible that a sensitive reader, whether of Milton's time or our own, could fail to be moved by the sadness of these lines or to respond to the momentary upsurge of hopefulness at the touch of the breeze "fresh-blowing, pure and sweet, With day-spring born". It is verse which compels mind and even breath to echo the words of the character. And when that early reader had gone on to the end of the parados, past the soliloquy revealing Samson's mental agony, and past the first choral passage which so successfully mingles awe with pity, he would then have understood what was meant by the author's introductory epistle:

O mirror of our fickle state,
 Since man on earth unparallel'd!
 The rarer thy example stands,
 By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
 Strongest of mortal men,
 To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall'n.
 For him I reck'n not in high estate
 Whom long descent of birth
 Or the spear of fortune raises;
 But thee whose strength, while vertue was her mate,
 Might have subdu'd the Earth,
 Universally crown'd with highest praises.

(lines 164-75)

This indeed was tragedy - no playing with artificially contrived conflicts between love and honour, both limited concepts since they are essentially social -

but that "gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems", which shows man facing the problem of his creation. The theme of high tragedy could not be more succinctly and clearly stated. Meditating on those lines Milton's contemporary might well have granted that here were noble thoughts and noble words, and the most powerful of human feelings animating the whole, despite the unpoetical look of the verse.

Since the end of the seventeenth century there have been several revivals of interest in the theory of metre, and it is hardly surprising that Milton's works have usually been one of the principal subjects of study and interest to the metrist, whether he be critic or poet, or both. Coleridge, who was both, noted an important function of rhythm in Milton's poetry when he remarked that "Milton attempted to make the English language obey the logic of passion as perfectly as the Greek and Latin." Nearly a century later Hopkins, while working out his own theories of rhythm, metre and counterpoint, found it useful to refer frequently to the words of the great Puritan poet, as will be shown later. Bridges shared this interest, and his study of "Milton's Prosody" came out in 1921. In more recent years, when Milton has been the object of so much criticism, several critics have been drawn to consider the importance of rhythm in Milton's poetry, one of the latest of such studies being "Milton's Art of Prosody" by Sprott.

XXI. Most of these writers have been concerned mainly with Paradise Lost, and the question of how far rhythm and metre are responsible for the

atmosphere and general effect of Samson Agonistes still remains to be discussed. The problem seems to have two aspects: first, as most obvious, the manner in which rhythm is matched with emotional emphasis and the natural expression of thought and feeling, so that the movement of the verse becomes both reflection and suggestion of the sense; and secondly, the part played by rhythm in the construction of the verse paragraph, stamping the whole drama with the impression of the hero's (and the poet's) moral and intellectual vigour, and creating an effect of austerity and concentrated power, mainly by reason of the spontaneity allowed it and the exclusion of irrelevant matter and expanded phraseology. Both questions are complex and demand detailed treatment, and to simplify matters as far as possible the common terminology is used: i.e. "foot" indicates a metrically complete syllabic group, and iambic, anapaestic, trochaic and dactylic describe feet in which stress is substituted for length as the chief factor in metre. It is difficult to describe changes in rhythm without the use of terms conveying these meanings, and these particular terms are used only because they are the most widely understood; even Hopkins, though on occasion he would argue (20) against calling English feet iambs and trochees, used those very terms in some of his lectures and correspondence on the subject, when he wished to make his meaning clear beyond all doubt.

XXII. In these terms the verse of Samson Agonistes may be described as being of two kinds: the

ordinary dialogue is in blank verse showing variation ~~in~~ only in stress pattern; but the choral passages are in a mixture of blank verse with iambic lines of all lengths from two to six feet, these passages also being subject to stress variation. So far as the first function of rhythm referred to above - sense suggestion and embodiment - is concerned, the difference between the choral and non-choral passages is one of degree rather than of kind, despite the superficial differences. The blank verse line is the basic pattern for the poem as a whole. As to the reasons governing Milton's choice of this form, they have already been indicated under the heading of rhyme, and at this stage the variations are generally of more interest than the regular verse.

XXIII. Of such variations, the commonest is stress inversion. The normal line consists of ten syllables, the even ones bearing the stress, but inversion may take place at any point in the line except the last foot. Sprott provides an interesting table of comparison between Milton's practice here and in his other major works: in Samson first foot inversion amounts to 15.7% in the lyrical parts and to 17.5% in the blank verse (in Paradise Lost, 18.2% and in Paradise Regained 17.6%); second foot inversion falls to 2.9 and .7% respectively (in P.L. .5 and in P.R. .7%); third foot inversion rises slightly to 1.3 and 2.2% (in P.L. and P.R. the rise is higher - 2.6 and 2.5%); and fourth foot inversion is almost as frequent, decreasing only to 1.5 and 1.2% (2.4 in P.L. and 2.3 in P.R.) ^{(21).} The only possible case of fifth foot inversion in Samson is in line 222:

"That what I motion'd was of God; I knew
From intimat impulse....."

Furthermore, Sprott deduces that Milton never practised inversion in this poem unless there was diaeresis between the inverted and the preceding foot: either the stress syllable of the preceding foot had to be strongly accented or there would be a definite compensatory break. From this it followed that enjambement and first foot inversion were incompatible, and as, in Samson, enjambement was the more important, first foot inversion shows a decrease compared with the practice in the epics.

From this it appears, somewhat surprisingly at first, that the tendency towards stress irregularity was on the whole weaker in Samson than in the epics. The notable exception to this is the increased proportion of second foot inversions in the lyrical sections, coupled with a reduction in first foot inversions. This fact, however, is not really a strange one, if considered in relation to the poem as a whole. The extreme variation in line length, the general tendency towards stress variation, the lack of rhyme, the sustained enjambement, all call for some compensating quality to mark the beginning of the line, and this need is consequently greater in the choral passages where the line pattern is faintest. But once the first foot has been clearly marked, it is safe to vary the second foot, and so Samson has more inversion than the other long poems at that point. The following lines may serve to illustrate both stress inversion in various feet, and the rhetorical emphasis which is always the

purpose of such inversion:

(first foot) Bondage with ease then strenuous
Liberty (line 270)

(second foot) With this Heav'n-gifted strength?
O glorious strength (36)

(third foot) They creep, yet see, I dark in light
expos'd (75)

(fourth foot) She all in every part; why was the sight
Many lines contain double or even triple inversions, (93)
one of which is generally the first foot:

(in first and second foot) Universally crown'd with
highest praises (175)

(in first and third) Rode up in flames after his
message told (1433)

(in first and fourth) Nothing is here for tears,
nothing to wail (1721)

(triple inversion) Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse.
(81)

It should be pointed out here that inversion, particularly single inversion, can only be effective when it is noticeable, which in turn depends on recognition of the basic rhythm; i.e. if there were no regular pattern, then no single irregularity would stand out. In the lines referred to above, for instance, the metrical irregularity stresses the contrast between bondage and liberty, heaven-gifted strength and labour of a beast, sight and blindness. Recognition of the basic rhythm is also a prerequisite to the effectiveness of passages containing a great deal of inversion, amounting almost to a change of metre. If one reads too rapidly or carelessly to notice these subtle differences, then one misses the gradations and transitions of feeling which make

the characters dramatic, and the excitement of tension between two kinds of rhythm and two kinds of thought, behaviour or emotion. This kind of excitement is partly dramatic, partly aesthetic, since in some respects it is analogous to counter-point in music. The most sensitive critics of Milton's versification have all been aware of this latter element in his poetry. Egerton Smith states the analogy clearly in his book on The Principles of English Metre, (1923), when he defines counter-point as:

"the harmonious combination of concurrent but distinct melodies ('note against note'); these in verse-rhythm cannot be quite audible, since there is only a single voice, but the counter-point exists mentally, and two rhythms - the strict ideal metrical rhythm, and the natural cadence suggested by the actual speech-sounds used - are held concurrently in mind, the result being a peculiar compromise in the actual or imaginary enunciation." Elsewhere he writes that "The technical problem of the poet is to take the strict metrical scheme of rhythm, and on this basis counterpoint the rhythmic material provided by the normal stress relations of prose speech."

and he studies the work of several poets including Milton from this point of view. ⁽²²⁾ It is not unlikely that Smith was influenced by Hopkins here, as Bridges' edition of Hopkins' poems and their preface had been published in 1918.

XXIV. This technique of large-scale inversion had of course been noticed much earlier - both Masson

and Saintsbury noted it, but without speculating much beyond whether elision or the equivalence theory should decide the scansion - and Raleigh was moved to comment: "He (Milton) never forgets the pattern; yet he never stoops to teach it by the repetition of a monotonous tattoo..... In the choruses of Samson Agonistes, where he reaches the top of his skill, Milton varies even the length of the line. So he has hardly a rule left, save the iambic pattern, which he treats merely as a point of departure or reference, a background or framework to carry the variations imposed upon it by the luxuriance of a perfectly controlled art." (23).

Hopkins returned again and again to the study of Milton while he was formulating his principles of sprung rhythm. In a letter to R.W.Dixon, for instance, he remarked:

Milton's art is incomparable, not only in English literature, but, I should think, almost in any.... shewn especially in his verse, his rhythm and metrical system.... I have paid a good deal of attention to Milton's versification and collected his later rhythms.... I found his most advanced efforts in the Paradise Regained and, lyrically, in the Agonistes.... Milton is the great standard in the use of counterpoint. In Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, in the last more freely, it being an advance in his art, he employs counterpoint more or less everywhere, markedly now and then; but the choruses of Samson Agonistes are in my judgment counterpointed throughout; that is, each line (or nearly so) has two different

(24).

coexisting scansions.

A year earlier in a letter to Bridges he had carried the argument further:

The choruses of Samson Agonistes are intermediate between counterpointed and sprung rhythm. In reality they are sprung, but Milton keeps up a fiction of counterpointing the head rhythm (which is the same as the ^umounted rhythm) upon a standard rhythm which is never heard but only counted and therefore really does not exist. The want of a metrical notation and the feat of being thought to write mere rhythmic or (who knows what the critics might not have said?) even unrhythmic prose drove him to this. Such rhythm as French or Welsh poetry has is sprung, counterpointed upon a counted rhythm, but it differs from Milton's in being little calculated, not more perhaps than prose consciously written rhythmically, like orations for instance; it is in fact the native rhythm of the words used bodily imported into verse; whereas Milton's mounted rhythm is a real poetical rhythm, having its own laws and recurrence, but further embarrassed by having
(25).
to count.

Bridges was in agreement with Hopkins on the subject of counterpointed rhythms, but evidently reserved some independence of opinion on the deductions Hopkins had drawn: far from expressing any regret that Milton had not carried his experiments further, he pointed out the dangers of extreme forms of accentual verse:

"Theoretically the problem is this, whether in poetry the speech as determined by its accent and rhythm can be made so persistently beautiful in form as to dispense with all the subtle assistance which it derives from interplay with a fundamental metrical form, which never relaxing its conscious guidance gives special significance to every deviation from it, and overriding all irregularities blends them into a consistent whole; or whether, in renouncing this it must not, if it should do well, create a prosody of its own?" (26).

However this may be, on the point at issue he echoed Hopkins, observing that in Samson, "where the 'iambic' system seems entirely to disappear, it is maintained as a fictitious structure and scansion, not intended to be read, but to be imagined as a time-beat on which the free rhythm is, so to speak, syncopated, as a melody." (27).

A similar observation appears in Eliot's second study on Milton, after an admission that:

A study of the Samson Agonistes should sharpen anyone's appreciation of the justified irregularity, and put him on guard against the pointless irregularity...In studying Paradise Lost we come to perceive that the verse is continuously animated by the departure from and return to the regular measure; and that, in comparison with Milton, hardly any subsequent writer of blank verse appears to exercise any freedom

at all. We can also be led to the reflection that a monotony of unscannable verse fatigues the attention even more quickly than a monotony of exact feet. (28).

If one agrees with this theory of counterpoint, one arrives eventually at a conclusion like that reached by Sprott when he came to describe the prosody of the lyrical parts of Samson:

The choruses are composed by prosodic rules quite similar to these (blank verse), with the one important exception that they may have any number of feet in the line from three to six. The rules of inversion, elision and syllabic principles continue to apply, and the whole secret of the rhythms is comprehended in the understanding that the so-called lyric choruses are essentially heroic blank verse which has thrown off the bondage of preserving a uniform length of line.

Sprott is strongly opposed to Hanford's suggestion that the choruses have not even a theoretical conformity to English pattern, but are reproductions of Greek and Roman rhythms; he insists that all that Milton was doing:

was to write a verse which being emancipated from the presence of the unpliant fifth foot allowed an inversion at any point where sense or mood demanded it, and permitted composition on a basis of free sweeping paragraphs which were not peremptorily narrowed to a close by the exigencies of any metrical device.... Samson Agonistes is metrically the pinnacle of its author's achievement. (29).

XXV. Before proceeding to illustrate the use of multiple inversion or counterpoint it seems advisable to consider the question of how the verse should ^{be} scanned, particularly in lines which without elision would contain an extra-metrical syllable: in other words, one must take one's stand in the debate on elision versus equivalence. On one side are ranged those who believe that the verse of Samson is almost entirely syllabic, apart from the recognized liberty to add final extra-metrical syllables, and who therefore scan all the feet as either iambic or trochaic. Bridges' study of Milton's prosody states these views most clearly. After referring to the well-known trochaic - iambic passages in "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro" he points out that in Samson the scansion is complicated by:

these further conditions, that the inversions are not confined to the first foot of the line, and the lines are of various lengths: and Milton has purposely used these liberties together, on account of their various rhythmical resources, in order to introduce new trisyllabic rhythms into his verse, which is all the while composed strictly of disyllabic feet.

In support of his argument that Milton intended his verse to have syllabic regularity and used elision as a means to that end, Bridges examines the verse, enumerates the principles of elision, and shows that the number of exceptions to the "rules" amounts to fewer than a score in Paradise Regained and Samson combined - surely an inconsiderable proportion in a total of 3838 lines. According to his deductions

the principles of elision are as follows:

In English verse when there is poetic elision of the terminal vowel of one word before the initial vowel of the next word, the sound of it is not lost, the two vowels are glided together, and the conditions may be called synaloepha."(e.g., "Above th'Aonian Mount")

In Milton's prosody, this terminal 'elision' is not confined to naked vowels, he treats the semivowels l, n, and r as vowels, so that his terminal 'elisions' require different phonetic explanations....Moreover, when these same collisions of vowels and semi-vowels occur (under the same phonetic conditions) within the words, he subjects them to the same prosodical law as when they are terminal, that is between two words....

But he hastens to add that:

as a matter of rhythm it may well enough be maintained that Milton's elisions are trisyllabic feet.

And elsewhere he remarks that:

the rhythm overrides the prosody that creates it. The prosody is only the means for the great rhythmical effects, and is not exposed but rather disguised in the reading. (30).

Further evidence of this kind is provided by Helen Darbishire's careful editing of Milton's works - in the introduction to the first volume she stresses the importance of Milton's punctuation and spelling as a guide to meaning and pronunciation - and by an interesting examination of "Milton's Blank Verse and the Chronology of His Major Poems"

by Oras. This writer points out, for instance, that types of phrase like "compleat steel" or "divine property", which left the reader in doubt as to pronunciation and rhythm and which were common in the earlier poems, were avoided in the last works in the interests of "rhythmical certainty."

These views were shared by Sprott, who finds that midverse supernumerary syllables in Samson can be accounted for by elision in all except two cases, and that elision occurs far more frequently in Samson than in the epics. Like Bridges, he too is concerned to point out that "The deciding factor must be to what extent vocalized elision contributes to the music of the line". He thinks that elision "whereby Milton mentally removes a syllable which will not otherwise fit into his prosodical scheme should be regarded merely as a technique of verse theory", and then "most of our difficulties over its acceptance will have vanished. If one wishes to forego the superior artistic unity conferred on a work by this restriction, one is at liberty to do so." (31).

XVI. On the other side in the debate stand Masson and Saintsbury, as the champions of equivalence and accentual scansion. Masson's views were expressed in the "Essay on Milton's English and Versification" which appeared in Volume III of the 1882 edition of the Poetical Works, and may be gauged from such remarks as these:

On the whole, the verse of the choral and lyric parts of Samson Agonistes may be described

as Blank Verse of various lengths of the Iambic metre, from 2xa (iambic) to 6 xa, with occasional touches of the Anapaestic and other metres.....Although the normal formula of Milton's Blank Verse may be said to be 5 xa, and although a good many scattered lines answer exactly to this formula by consisting of five consecutive Iambi, an immeasurably larger proportion of his lines deviate from this formula by either (I) Disyllabic Variation, i.e. the substitution of a Trochee (ax), a Pyrrhic (xx), or a Spondee (aa), for the normal Iambus in one, two, three, or more of the five metrical places, or (II) Trisyllabic Variation, i.e. the substitution of a trisyllabic foot, such as the Anapaest (xxa), the Dactyl (axx), the Tribrach (xxx), the Amphibrach (xax), the Cretic (axa), the Bacchius (xaa), or the Antibacchius (aax), for the normal Iambus, on one or more of the places.

Saintsbury's views were given in his Historical Manual of English Prosody and also in the chapter on Milton in the Cambridge History of English Literature. The latter provides a very clear summing-up of the scansion problems:

The various opinions on the subject may be reduced to the usual three. The older opinion.....is that Milton's blank verse lines are strictly decasyllabic, apparent exceptions being due to actual elision or running together of syllables; ...The opposite view is that Milton, not more from his study of the classics than from that of English poets and, especially,

Shakespeare, was fully conversant with the practice, if not the theory, of substitution of equivalent feet - disyllabic or trisyllabic, trochee, spondee, dactyl, anapaest - for the iambic; and that he used this deliberately for the purpose of obtaining varied and concerted music. This opinion, which is that of the present writer, grew up slowly during the eighteenth century, but has been increasingly common in the nineteenth, though not often thoroughly worked out. Between the two, and held by some critics of great distinction, is a theory (or, perhaps, more than one) according to which Milton always intended the strict five-foot ten-syllabled line, but gave himself certain intricate dispensations, capable of being more or less rigidly systematised, by which a larger number of syllables than ten could be written in the line; could (in some cases, though not in all) be actually pronounced in it; but could be metrically elided. To put the thing, perhaps, more intelligibly by examples: according to theory (i) 'ominous', when the 'i' makes an eleventh syllable, and 'the Eternal' when 'the' is in the same case, should be pronounced 'om'nous' and 'th'Eternal' and, in at least the latter case, printed so. According to (ii) 'ominous' and 'the Eternal' should be written in full, pronounced in full, and reckoned metrically as trisyllabic feet, or (in another notation) as combinations of two unaccented and one accented syllables. According to (iii) they should be written and pronounced

in full, but the 'i' and the first 'e' should be regarded as metrically 'vanished'.

XXVII. To the writer of this essay the last solution, the half and half theory, seems the most satisfactory: faced with the almost absolute conformity to rule shown in the epics and Samson, one can only agree that it must have been Milton's intention to satisfy the demands of syllabic scansion. The fact that so much of the verse is also satisfying from the point of view of quantity would support this argument, since it shows Milton's consummate craftsmanship at work to reinforce accent in poems where rhyme has not been used. On the other hand, one would be losing as much as this theoretical perfection, if not more, if one were to deny the truth of Masson's and Saintsbury's observations in favour of accepting equivalence in actual pronunciation of syllables, since the inverted or trisyllabic feet are so often rhetorically effective. For instance, it is the emergence of anapaestic metre in the speech of the chorus when they applaud Samson's stand against Harapha:

O how comely it is and how reviving
To the Spirits of just men long opprest!
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might
To quell the mighty of the Earth, th'oppressour,
The brute and boist'rous force of violent men
Hardy and industrious to support
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue
The righteous and all such as honour Truth;....

(lines 1268-76)

that is chiefly responsible for the suggestion of rising hope and resurgence of energy: the change in rhythm is part of the change in feeling. An even more striking effect is obtained by the use of dactylic substitution at the beginning of the first semichorus near the end of the drama:

While thir hearts were jocund and sublime,
 Drunk with Idolatry, drunk with Wine,
 And fat regorg'd of Bulls and Goats,
 Chaunting thir Idol, and preferring
 Before our living Dread who dwells
 In Silo his bright Sanctuary....

(lines 1669-74).

In this case the sudden change of rhythm in "drunk with idolatry" exposes savagely the irony of the preceding words, "hearts jocund and sublime".

It may be noted that this compromise solution was in the minds of both parties to the debate: Saintsbury's reference to it, as his third theory, has already been quoted; and both Bridges and Sprott were careful to leave the way open to its acceptance by inserting into the discussion such remarks as "as a matter of rhythm it may well enough be maintained that Milton's elisions are trisyllabic" (Bridges), and "Elision should be regarded merely as a technique of verse theory" (Sprott). Other writers have not hesitated to declare outright their support for the compromise, as in this passage from Egerton Smith's Principles of English Metre:

The evidence that Milton 'came to scan his verses one way and read them another' indicates that he probably held to the syllabic theory, but in practice wrote according to a

very fine ear for primary rhythm as well as secondary - i.e. according to time as marked by beats - and to square theory with practice had to scan by means of fictions, namely, that in certain conditions two syllables might be considered prosodically equivalent to one, although phonetically distinct. To get the full value of Milton's or any similar verse, we must not start with a rigid preconceived scheme and read a particular tune (the iambic) into the lines, but rather let the music of the verse arise freely out of a natural reading of what we actually find. (32).

XXVIII. A problem of almost equal difficulty is encountered in the next stage of discussion, when secondary rhythm, or the line formation, is examined. It is customary to regard the verse of Samson as being of two kinds - blank verse in the dialogues between Samson and individual "persons", and lines of various lengths, ranging from two to six feet, mostly in iambic metre, in the choral and lyric parts. Milton explains this in the introduction:

The measure of Verse us'd in the Chorus is of all sorts, call'd by the Greeks Monostrophic, or rather Apolelymenon, without regard had to Strophe, Antistrophe or Epod, which were a kind of Stanza's fram'd only for the Music, then us'd with the Chorus that sung; not essential to the Poem, and therefore not material; or being divided into Stanza's or Pauses, they may be call'd Allaeostropha.

This bare statement of what is found in the text is, however, hardly just to the effect on the ear and the understanding, which are conscious of the irregular

lines as a kind of counterpoint on the basic blank verse line. The facts that the irregular passages do not appear until the blank verse rhythm is well established (at line 82), that they never exceed 72 lines in length, and that their total is no more than 541 in a work of 1758 lines, and that they themselves contain many blank verse lines, may all be adduced in support of this view.

The strongest argument of all for believing the verse to be counterpointed is closely connected with modern poetic theory and practice, and probably could not be fully appreciated by any except those who are acquainted with the works of recent poets: that is, the beauty of the variation depends upon our recognition of the pattern. Early critics had disapproved of the choral verse because it was "unscannable", whereas some later ones have questioned why it was made to scan at all. That certainly seems to be the implication of a remark made by Hopkins in one of his letters to Bridges: "Milton's mounted rhythm is a real poetical rhythm, having its own laws and recurrence, but further embarrassed by having to count."⁽³³⁾ The same thought occurs in a letter to Dixon:

The choruses of Samson Agonistes are in my judgment counterpointed throughout; that is, each line (or nearly so) has two different coexisting scansion. But when you reach that point the secondary or 'mounted' rhythm, which is necessarily a sprung rhythm, overpowers the original or conventional one and then this becomes superfluous and may be got rid of;

by taking that last step you reach simple sprung rhythm. Milton must have known this (34). but had reasons for not taking it.

This is a fascinating speculation and leads one to wonder, for example, whether the last chorus of Samson would have been greater if Milton had abandoned his metrical scheme and ended each line only at a pause in the sense, in the way that Eliot ends the last chorus in The Rock:

In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light.

We are glad when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy is too much pain.

We are children quickly tired; children who are up in the night and fall asleep as the rocket is fired; and the day is long for work or play.

We tire of distraction or concentration, we sleep and are glad to sleep,

Controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the seasons.

And we must extinguish the candle, put out the light and relight it;

Forever must quench, forever relight the flame.

Therefore we thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled with shadow.

We thank Thee who hast moved us to building, to finding, to forming at the ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.

And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made.

And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.
O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for
Thy great glory!

There is, it is true, a very marked rhythmical balance in this passage, but the lack of tension and of the feeling of inevitability and rightness which inform every word in the kommos which concludes Samson, point the difference between the techniques of the two poets. The succinctness of Milton's phrasing implies an immense reserve of power, a sense of right and rule, and an ease, which are in the nature of things denied to less carefully-formed works. Without the perfection of order in language as much as in theme, tragedy cannot induce in us that serenity and reconciliation, however transient, which are its true aims. Eliot himself, as a critic, is certainly aware of the need for order, for he writes of Milton as "outside the theatre, the greatest master in our language of freedom within form." (35).

A recent book on Milton, E.H. Visiak's The Portent of Milton, (36), states the case more strongly: he praised Milton's verse for:

its obedience to the canons of poetic art, being radically different from the hybrid licence of vers libre and of present-day colloquial versification.....The synthesis of emotion and intellect is the condition of poetic inspiration, so the essential function of poetry, as of all art, is to reproduce that synthesis in effect, if only for a moment, as by an incantation.

Douglas Bush, a critic with a wider view, is no less impressed by the technical mastery of Samson, for after explaining why he considers the choruses to be, not free verse but controlled arrangements of feet, with counterpoint, he continues: "But in plain statement

and broken, colloquial rhythms there is still Miltonic grandeur and sublimity, a new kind of "classical" writing: "Nothing is here for tears..." (37).

The effectiveness of the closing lines of Samson can be explained to some extent by the formula "form and variation": brevity and reserve are suggested by the change from blank verse in Manoah's speech visualizing the tomb of his heroic son: The Virgins also shall on feastful days
Visit his Tomb with flowers, onely bewailing
His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,
From whence captivity and loss of eyes.

(lines 1741-44).

to a truncated line length at the beginning of the chorus itself:

All is best, though we oft doubt
What th'unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about....

(lines 1745-7).

Tetrameters vary with pentameters, but the pattern of the full line is established, and without it the variation, counterpoint, call it what one will, would lose all its force. The long rests at the end of each line, where syllables are lacking to complete the pentameter, emphasize the sense of what is now only being implied, the whole of the rest of the drama having been occupied in stating it fully. These pauses are in a way as significant as the words.

In such choruses as these dramatic speech attains a rare combination of freedom, form and force. It would, of course, be unwise to say that it never could be surpassed; but it is hard to imagine how

it could be; writers of free verse might claim that complete freedom down to the shedding of the last iambic or syllabic shackle would result in greater power, but the claim can be recognized only when such writers have succeeded in the task. Until then one is justified in the twin assumptions that poetry is the most intense and powerful form of literary expression, and that pattern of some kind is essential to its nature: the poet is making as well as saying, and his hearers also joy in the "making" side of it. Naturally, appreciation of form varies considerably, but it is always present to some extent in a cultured society, and often renders possible the admiration of poetry completely alien to the spirit of the age or the individual reader. How else could Hopkins, a Jesuit, have admired the poetry of Milton, or Milton himself have turned to Ovid for solace in his leisure? The truth of the matter would seem to be that rhythmical form or pattern is no constraint to some poets: it is rather one of the main sources of their strength:

.....Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness.....

as Eliot has written in Burnt Norton.

No better illustration could be given of the adaptation of rhythm to sense within the bounds of form than the first lines of the chorus as they approach Samson. Bridges wrote a masterly commentary on these, which analyses the metrical nature and effect of every line. He concludes:

the relation of the form of the verse to the

sense is not intended to be taken exactly; it is a matter of feeling between the two, and is misrepresented by any definition. Poetry would be absurd in which there was perfect verbal mimicry of the sense; but this is not to deny that matter and form (38). should be in live harmonious relation.

There are, of course, many examples of the more superficial kind of relation between rhythm and sense. The craftsmanship is straightforward in such lines as these:

Sleep hath forsook and giv'n me ore
To deaths benumbing Opium as my onely cure.
Thence faintings, swoonings of despair,
And sense of Heav'n's desertion.

(lines 629-32)

where the long-drawn-out vowels and length of the hexameter suggest lethargy, and the shortness of the last line leaves one with a sense of emptiness.

And in the lines that follow:

I was his nursling once and choice delight,
His destined from the womb,
Promised by Heav'nly message twice descending.

(lines 633-35)

the length of the last line in this case, and the change to the slower dactylic and trochaic metres, help one to see the angel messenger, a powerful and splendid figure, gradually approaching earth in majestic wheeling flight. But what Bridges was really concerned with was the more subtle relation of rhythm to sense, such as Hazlitt had in mind when he said:

I imagine that there are more perfect examples in Milton of musical expression, or of an

adaptation of the sound and movement of the verse to the meaning of the passage, than in all our other writers, whether of rhyme or blank verse, put together (with the exception of Shakespeare)...in neither (Spenser nor Dryden) is there anything like the same ear for music, the same power of approximating the varieties of poetical to those of musical rhythm, as there is in our great epic poet. The sound of his lines is moulded into the expression of the sentiment, almost of the very image. They rise or fall, pause or hurry rapidly on, with exquisite art, but without the least trick or affectation, as the occasion seems to require. (39)

An example is provided by the speech of Samson immediately preceding the lines just quoted. Manoah's assumption that Samson's day is over, and that all that can be hoped for is deliverance from the physical evils of imprisonment - justified as these assumptions seem - have caused Samson more anguish than any of his previous sufferings; he is pictured writhing with shame and despair as he exclaims:

O that torment should not be confin'd
 To the bodies wounds and sores
 With maladies innumerable
 In heart, head, brest, and reins;
 But must secret passage find
 To th'inmost mind,
 There exercise all his fierce accidents,
 And on her purest spirits prey,
 As on entrails, joints, and limbs,
 With answerable pains, but more intense,
 Though void of corporal sense.

(lines 606-16).

Of this one can only say, that this is the way in which mental agony is uttered - in phrases as short and rapid as the breathing, and marked by the recurrence of extra-heavy stresses. If scanned according to metre the lines are found to range from dimeters ("To th'inmost mind") to pentameters; but as they are read they are more remarkable for the heavy stresses they bear, generally two to a line.

XXIX. Incidentally, there is an interesting reference to this matter also in Hopkins' correspondence; in a letter to Patmore he discussed the "blank stresses, as I am accustomed to call them of the ten-syllable line and other lines; for in fact in Milton few lines have five real stresses, one or two being blank, though in idea there are always five; However, you hold that the ten-syllable line has three bars..." ⁽⁴⁰⁾. A later critic, Prince, discerns yet another pattern: according to him Milton's blank verse line has a theoretic ten syllables and the last syllable must always have or be capable of being given a stress, while one other stress falls elsewhere in the line, generally on either the ⁽⁴¹⁾ fourth or sixth syllable.

Many of the most stirring and deeply-felt passages demand not a musical but a chanting form of delivery, with whole lines or even groups of lines spoken in a monotone, and the pitch only shifting when the emotion is changed or intensified. For instance, in the passage quoted, the tone would be lowered at "But must secret passage find" and again at "To th' inmost mind", but would revert to the original pitch at "There exercise....." There is

no need to stress the perfect adaptation to choral delivery, but perhaps it may be pointed out - since other mention is lacking - that there is a very strong suggestion of movement - pacing, turning, halting - in these lines. Controlled and concerted movement to accompany lyrical expression is now only a dream and best left as a dream: the days of the great choral dances of hundreds on the orchestra floor are unfortunately gone for ever. Milton appears to be the only one of our great poets to have imagined clearly what performances of the ancient Attic tragedies were like, and to have written verse to suit this function of the chorus. It is at any rate abundantly clear that his feeling for rhythm was far too deep and sensitive for it ever to be subordinated to measure. Perhaps the ideas for the choral lyrics came to him already formed as rhythms, - "felt in the blood and felt along the heart". After all, have not many poets, Eliot included, admitted that their poems occur to them originally as "tunes" or rhythms? This seems the only possible explanation of the unique power of the choral odes in Samson to evoke in us a bodily response to their rhythms, as though we too moved and swayed in the ancient dance. (42).

XXX. The next stage in study of rhythm is the examination of tertiary rhythm, that is, the metrical arrangement of stanzas or verse paragraphs. The verse paragraph has long been recognized as one of the main characteristics of Milton's style, and fundamental to his whole conception and practice of poetry. Saintsbury summed up the general attitude

in his chapter on Milton in the Cambridge History, when he wrote that "Verse paragraphs themselves are almost the central secret and peculiarity of the Miltonic manner, serving as a bridge between his style proper and his versification". Eliot's comment, in his second study on Milton, is more illuminating:

It is the period, the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse; and emphasis on the line structure is the minimum necessary to provide a counter-pattern to the period structure. It is only in the period that the wave-length of Milton's verse is to be found: it is his ability to give a perfect and unique pattern to every paragraph, such that the full beauty of the line is found in its context, and his ability to work in larger musical units than any other poet - that is to me the most conclusive evidence of Milton's supreme mastery. The peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a breathless leap, communicated by Milton's long periods, and by his alone, is impossible to procure from rhymed from rhymed verse. Indeed, this mastery is more conclusive evidence of his intellectual power, than is his grasp of any ideas that he borrowed or invented. To be able to control so many words at once is the token of a mind of most exceptional energy.

To isolate rhythm and consider it apart from words is virtually impossible, and it is therefore extremely difficult to prove that rhythm is as powerful a factor as language in producing the Miltonic note. The two epics provide me useful evidence on

this point at all, since in them the style is deliberately heightened almost throughout, and both rhythm and language serve to further this purpose. But Samson Agonistes is not a heroic poem dealing with divine and demonic powers and prototypes of humanity, but a drama concerned with all too faulty men and women, and depending for its effect on evoking sympathy with the protagonist. Hence the language is not uniformly heightened but contains natural turns of speech here and there, enough to convince us of the reality of the speaker. At the same time, the spirit of the hero must shine through his words, and this, in all its energy and power, is conveyed by the rhythm. The "out, out Hyaena" tirade against Dalila will serve as an example:

Out, out Hyaena; these are thy wonted arts,
 And arts of every woman false like thee,
 To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray,
 Then, as repentant to submit, beseech,
 And reconciliation move with feign'd remorse,
 Confess, and promise wonders in her change,
 Not truly penitent, but chief to try
 Her husband, how farr urg'd his patience bears,
 His vertue or weakness which way to assail;
 Then with more cautious and instructed skill
 Again transgresses, and again submits;
 That wisest and best men full oft beguil'd
 With goodness principl'd not to reject
 The penitent, but ever to forgive,
 Are drawn to wear out miserable days,
 Entangl'd with a poisonous bosom snake,
 If not by quick destruction soon cut off
 As I by thee, to Ages an example. (lines 748-65).

When this rhythmical power shapes the utterance in a moment of dramatic climax, and situation, language and rhythm all rise to a height, there is nothing more exalted or moving in English literature.

XXXI. One of the most useful clues to follow when one is attempting to discover the general structure of the verse paragraph, is the paradox that these apparently involved and complex constructions are in fact easily comprehended: i.e. there is simplicity in their complexity.

Whenever the sense is at all obscure, the reason is nearly always to be found in the diction or the form of a short phrase, and only very seldom in the method of synthesis used for the paragraph as a whole. In fact, the passage is surprisingly often loose, not periodic, in construction, and tends to advance by a series of extensions rather than follow a course already clearly marked from the beginning. Samson's reply to Dalila (lines 748-765 already quoted) might be cited in illustration of this point. First there are the two main statements, that Dalila is trying to entrap him again and that her wiles are the usual stock-in-trade of the designing woman, followed by a string of appositional phrases to illustrate her methods. The sense moves forward again at the words "then as repentant", which represent two condensed clauses and which have the effect of contrasting with her earlier behaviour and pointing forward to her next pose. This is indicated in three more lines of infinitives. After this comes a short adjectival phrase, "not truly penitent", doing duty for a

concession clause, and leading on to the next main statement that she acts in this way chiefly to try her husband ("chief to try"); the extent of her provocation and his sufferings is indicated in the following noun clauses and phrases.

Another "then" echoes the earlier one and helps the pattern of verse and action to stand out clearly: it also leads on to the next stage in female duplicity, given in an adverbial phrase and two more main statements. Now comes the melancholy conclusion, its inevitability stressed by the conjunction "that" and the use of a result clause, but its point carefully reserved until the end of the passage---"Are drawn to wear out miserable days". This idea is amplified in the last three lines, first in the metaphor in the adjectival phrase "Entangl'd with a poisonous bosom snake", and then by a change from the general to the particular in the conditional and manner clauses at the end.

When subjected to analysis in this way the passage is seen to be composed of four thought groups:

- i. Dalila is employing the arts of the temptress.
- ii. That is, she betrays, then begs forgiveness.
- iii. She is not really repentant but only
scheming how to get her own way.
- iv. She will succeed in making her husband's
life miserable or in cutting it short.

These thoughts do not constitute separate sentences, however, but are joined by loose connectives (the adverb "then" twice used, and the subordinating conjunction "that", which modifies the whole preceding part of the passage). The progress of

thought and the method of synthesis are perfectly clear. What of course is not so clear, at any rate to the reader coming to Milton for the first time, is the phrasing within the phrase or clause; for instance, the ellipsis in "as repentant", the transposition of verb and object in "and reconciliation move", the enallage of adjective for adverb in "but chief to try", and the condensed construction in "try her husband" (and try) how farr...."etc.. In brief, it might be said that the paragraph is composed of a number of complex thought units, most of which are periodic in structure, but that these thought units are fairly loosely strung together. In this way the reader is enabled to concentrate his main attention on the detail of phrase or clause, since no great effort is needed to follow the logical thread of the passage. It might be pointed out, at this stage, that not all readers are agreed that Milton's syntax and language are exceptionally difficult: both Tillyard and Helen Darbishire, for instance, think that the unusualness of his syntax has been greatly exaggerated, although (43). they do not deny its existence in some measure.

This doubt may be borne in mind while the following passage is read for further illustration of the method of synthesis. This time the mood is not one of smouldering rage but of more exalted feeling: the chorus are rejoicing at Samson's unexpected revolt and triumph, and their idea of his action is expressed in three remarkable images. First there is the "dragon" simile, reminding us that the Philistines had thought themselves perfectly safe in the presence of their blinded prisoner. Next there appears the picture of the

eagle, suggesting the swiftness and unexpectedness of the retribution Samson metes out to them. And thirdly there is the comparison with the Phoenix, evoking all its magical, literary and religious associations to signify the climax of Samson's existence on earth, the fulfilment of his purpose, and the freeing of his soul from shame, frustration and despair:

But hee though blind of sight,
 Despisd and thought extinguisht quite,
 With inward eyes illuminated
 His fierie vertue rouz'd
 From under ashes into sudden flame,
 And as an ev'ning Dragon came,
 Assailant on the perched roosts,
 And nests in order rang'd
 Of tame villatic Fowl; but as an Eagle
 His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads.
 So vertue gov'n for lost,
 Deprest, and overthrown, as seemd,
 Like that self-begott'n bird
 In the Arabian woods embost
 That no second knows nor third,
 And lay ere while a Holocaust,
 From out her ashie womb now teemd
 Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
 When most unactive deemd,
 And though her body die, her fame survives,
 A secular bird ages of lives.

(lines 1687-1707).

It is worth noting how clearly Milton points the way to the reader: the first statement is hinted

at in the introductory words "but hee", then is delayed for a moment by the condensed concession clauses - "though blind of sight" etc. - and an adverbial phrase, and then emerges triumphantly in the fourth and fifth lines:

His fierie vertue rouz'd

From under ashes into sudden flame.

Here there is a slight pause as the images form, then the first is introduced by "And as an ev'ning Dragon came", followed by its qualifying phrase; the commencement of the second image is just as strongly marked - "But as an Eagle....". There is a stop there but only a momentary one: the sense is carried on to the consummation in the vision of the Phoenix, heralded by the phrase "So vertue giv'n for lost..." The main statement of the last thought group is withheld to the end: "So vertue....." is followed by a phrase and condensed concession clause, the falsity of the appearance of defeat is underlined by the parenthesis "as seemd", and then the phoenix simile is suggested with its adjectival phrase and clause until finally subject and simile, virtue and Phoenix merge into one:

From out her ashie womb now teemd

Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most

When most unactive deemd,

And though her body die, her fame survives,

A secular bird ages of lives.

And the passage concludes with the comment, again modified, "her fame survives".

In these lines sense and rhythm are fused and the lines themselves are welded together no less by the sustained enjambement than by the flame-lit imagery of the whole, the recurrent image of air and flight,

either swooping or soaring, and completing the cycle of thought from "His fierie vertu rouz'd / From under ashes into sudden flame" to "From out her ashie womb now teemd".

This particular method of synthesis used by Milton for the verse paragraph has been noted by several critics. Egerton Smith describes the verse paragraph as:

the result of a continuous process; the parts are not merely added, like books which lie side by side, or on one another, but they are closely dove-tailed, or.....one grows out of another without losing its organic relation to the central idea of the whole. It is constantly putting forth new shoots; before we have realized that one aspect has been unfolded the point of view has changed, and we find before us another aspect. (44).

Tillyard analyses the process more closely and reaches the conclusion that Milton wanted a form of expression that was both concentrated and simple:

to achieve this, he packs his statements close, but, that he may avoid any staccato effect, links them loosely by means of and's or or's.... or of vague appositions, or of participial constructions. By this same looseness of linkage Milton is entirely alien to the precise periodic structure of Latin oratory, or to the elegant logical neatness of a poet like Ovid. (45).

XXXII. There are several types of connective for which Milton shows a particular fondness; one of these is the use of appositional and adjectival phrases as a means of allowing the sense to pause

momentarily and then to continue with renewed impetus. Without these it is difficult to imagine how the sense could be sustained throughout the whole paragraph. Overmuch use of the subordinate clause makes the flow of the verse seem too fast; the parenthetical comment is effective only when used sparingly; and too many heavy pauses in the form of stops, colons and semicolons impede the thought and obscure its comprehensive nature: Pegasus is held down to the pace of a lumbering cart horse. The phrase in apposition or the adjectival phrase, on the other hand, is never superfluous if it is a genuine addition to the sense, and it serves a double purpose, as both resting place and connective. In the reply to Dalila there is such a phrase in the third line, and another in the third line from the end. (And what a line that is: "Entangl'd with a poisonous bosom snake" - what agonies of loathing and frustration, what lifetimes of wretchedness it implies...) In the chant of the semichorus there are examples in the seventh and twelfth lines; each of these examples constitutes a full line, and so serves to emphasize the rhythm.

XXXIII. One of the most important devices characteristic of Milton's verse paragraphs is interruption or suspension of a clause or clauses, main or subordinate. Its main purpose is to weld ideas together into larger units and to render them comprehensible as units by sustaining the interest until the end of the thought group. As already observed, the suspended statement very seldom spans a whole period, but in several of the choral odes it is used so consistently in the

thought groups within the paragraph that the total effect is hardly different from periodic construction of the whole paragraph. Although many of the sentences in the rest of the poem are periodic, they are on average shorter than these in the choral speeches, and they are scattered amongst simple sentences and sentences of loose construction, so that their number is not so noticeable. The sequences of interrupted statements are all concurrent with scenes of emotional intensity, such as the Chorus's lament for Samson when they first see him at Gaza ("Which shall I first bewail".... (lines 151-175), their sympathy with him after Manoah's departure ("God of our Fathers....", lines 667 -704), their rejoicing at his subduing of Harapha ("O how comely it is....", lines 1268-96), their farewell to him ("Go, and the Holy One...." lines 1427 - 1440), and the choruses that follow the catastrophe ("O dearly bought revenge....", lines 1660 -1668, "While their hearts....", 1669-1686, "But he though blind of sight....", 1687 - 1707, and "All is best....", 1745-1758).

The device of suspension had not been employed systematically in English poetry before Milton's time, and it is probable that he was encouraged to develop it by the advice and example of Italian poets, particularly Della Casa, who carried it to the greatest lengths, in pursuit of the grand style, and a copy of whose observation on style was still part of Milton's library at his death. It is not improbable, however, that Milton would have devised this or a similar technique of his own, even had he never read a word by Bembo or Della Casa, since his earliest poetry, written before he could have become acquainted with their ideas, shows a fondness

for inverted and periodic constructions. Some of these may have been imitations of Spenser: according to Dryden, Milton had acknowledged that Spenser was "his original".

XXXIV. This tendency to break up the verse was present in Milton's earliest verse, but was most probably encouraged by contemporary Italian practice, as Prince has suggested. Often it resulted in the inversion of natural word order and the casting of a fairly simple idea into periodic form. Although by no means infrequent in Samson, it does not appear there to anything like the extent that it does in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Probably Milton regarded consistent inversion as inappropriate to dramatic verse, for it is not specially noticeable in Comus, either. In the first hundred lines of Samson there are no more than five cases of strong inversion (i.e. of subject, object or verb). In most of these examples the need for emphasis on a certain word or phrase would alone justify the inversion - for instance, "this day" and "unwillingly" obviously require extra emphasis in these lines:

This day a solemn Feast the people hold
To Dagon, their Sea-Idol, and forbid
Laborious works, unwillingly this rest
Their Superstition yeilds me....

(lines 12 - 15).

In other cases, however, the natural word order has been distorted in order to sustain the flow of the sentence:

Whom have I to complain of but my self?
Who this high gift of strength committed to me,

In what part lodg'd, how easily bereft me,
Under the Seal of silence could not keep,
But weakly to a woman must reveal it,
Orecome with importunity and tears.

(lines 46 - 51).

XXXV. Another favourite device with Milton is the use of contrast: sometimes, in the form of antithesis, giving an exceptionally balanced line (e.g. the penultimate line of the semichorus: "And though her body die, her fame survives"); sometimes in a "not this....but that..." pattern, as in the reply to Dalila: "Not truly penitent, but chief to try..." and "Principl'd not to reject the penitent, but ever to forgive"; and sometimes by means of concession clauses such as those already quoted from the semichorus. All these constructions tend to expression in short condensed phrases, breaking up the line but at the same time advancing and enriching the sense.

XXXVI. Another kind of connective, not between clauses but between lines, and therefore tending to overrun the basic rhythm, is the ending of a line on an unstressed or very lightly stressed syllable. In this way enjambement is facilitated and a colloquial tone is given to the verse. Oras, besides showing that there is a higher proportion of feminine endings in Samson than elsewhere in Milton, has observed Milton's fondness for closing the line on the lightly stressed terminal syllable of a word of three or more syllables, quoting the line: "Than to love bondage more than liberty" as example. (46). The normal function of the practice is more clearly seen when the sense runs on, as in the conversation

between Dalila and Samson when Dalila says:

.....I knew that liberty
 Would draw thee forth to perilous enterprises,
 While I at home sate full of cares and fears
 Wailing thy absence in my widowed bed;

(lines 803 - 6).

The lightness of the stress in the tenth syllable of "liberty" and the final extrametrical syllable in "enterprises" introduce variety to the metre and naturalness to the tone of the speech. This rippling rhythm and light tone are exactly suited to the graceful persuasions of Dalila, and there is accordingly a high proportion of such lines in her speeches. To Oras, however, there is still greater significance in these lightly stressed line endings: he sees in the occasional groupings of such endings "a recurrent rhythmical motif helping to organize a passage" and produce the effect of chant.

It should seem clear that, aesthetically speaking, the nature of Milton's terminal use of pyrrhics in Samson Agonistes stands at the opposite pole from Comus: it makes one think of the ancient prophets, of Aeschylus and Sophocles, rather than of the music of pastoral or of the seductions of the romance of chivalry.

One is hardly likely to disagree with this comment so far as the general mood of Samson goes - indeed, nothing could be farther from "the seductions of the romance of chivalry"! But it is open to doubt whether the occasional use of pyrrhics is instrumental in producing such an effect: they are too scattered

and too often placed at the end of run-on lines to be noticeable, and then the very fact that they are generally combined with enjambement leads one to suppose that their main function is to assist in a freer and more conversational flow to the verse.

XXXVII. An essential element in the construction of long verse paragraphs is the arrangement of the words in groups that can be spoken without strain, and understood in their relation to one another. The pauses must be varied in occurrence to prevent monotony, and varied in kind to introduce changes in tempo; and yet, at the same time, they must never be allowed to result in a slackening or loss of rhythm. Milton was never guilty of monotony in anything he wrote: he was certainly not guilty of it in Samson, where variation is pushed as far as is consistent with preservation of form. The connectives vary exceedingly in their position in the line, just as much as in Shakespeare's verse. Instead of confining the mid-verse pause to its customary position following the fourth syllable, Milton often breaks the line at any point between the first and tenth syllables, although nearly fifty per cent of these lines break at the fourth, fifth or sixth syllable. The variety of pause-arrangement within the line may be gauged by reference once again to the passage in which Samson replies to Dalila, where the pauses occur as follows, (the first figure represents the number of syllables before the break, and the second gives the number of syllables in the line): 5,10; 0,10; 6,10; 5,10; 6,10; 2,10; 6,10; 3,10; 6,10; 1,10; 5,10; 6,10; 0,10; 4,10; 0,10; 0,10; 0,10; 4,10.

Of these eighteen lines two are run-on and five have no pause within the line.

The choral passage is even more fluent and varied, for its twenty-one lines include five that are run-on and thirteen that have no mid-verse pause; 2,6; 2,8; 0,9; 0,8; 0,10; 0,8; 0,8; 0,6; 6,11; 0,10; 3,6; 6,8; 0,7; 0,7; 0,7; 0,8; 0,8; 6,10; 0,6; 6,10; 5,9.

Another conclusion suggested by examination of these lines is that in this last work Milton was using fewer medial but more final pauses than in his other long poems. Comus comes nearest to Samson in this respect, so it seems likely that Milton intended to emphasize the line rhythm in dramatic poetry. In this connection it is interesting to note that the choral passage, which is of different line lengths, has the higher proportion of lines without medial pauses - thirteen out of twenty-one, as compared with five out of eighteen in the blank verse passage.

The whole question of pausation - of the frequency, weight and position of pauses - is closely connected with that of cadence. It was necessary, on the one hand, to prevent too marked a fall in tone at the end of a phrase or thought group within the paragraph; and, on the other, to emphasize the cadence at the close of the paragraph. One way in which the mid-verse pause is sometimes smoothed over is by placing it after an unstressed syllable, as in the line: "So vertue giv'n for lost," where the pause comes after "vertue". When a mid-paragraph pause has to fall at the end of a line, the pause is

counteracted by the lengthening of that line and the shortening of the next, with a consequent feeling that the rhythm is spilling over from the first to the second line, as in these passages:

Unweetingly importun'd
 Their own destruction to come speedy upon them.
 So fond are mortal men
 Fall'n into wrauth divine...

(lines 1680-3).

I was his nursling once and choice delight,
 His destined from the womb,
 Promisd by Heav'nly message twice descending.
 Under his special eie
 Abstemious I grew up and thriv'd amain;

(lines 631-6).

Study of the pausation in Samson Agonistes, therefore, reveals yet another example of Milton's technical skill. On a framework of regularity or implied regularity - that is, the iambic pentameter - he weaves a pattern that is subtly and endlessly varied.

XXVIII. Besides all these minor characteristics, it is possible to discern in the verse paragraphs of the choral odes a more general pattern of sense and rhythm: first there is a direct reply or a comment on the present situation; then a generalization; and finally, though not always, a return to the individual and the affairs of the moment. These changes in attitude are paralleled by variations to the metre, ranging from conversational, lightly stressed rhythms to a slower and more emphatic beat, and then back again to idiomatic verse. The means

whereby these changes in mood and tempo are effected are various. The choral ode, "Oh how comely it is and how reviving", which is spoken after Harapha's departure, is an excellent example of this type of speech. The rising hopes of Samson's supporters are expressed in anapaestic rhythm but as their enthusiasm steadies into an ode of general thanksgiving to God for enabling the righteous to prevail, the regular iambic metre supervenes, but the lines are shortened and each one marked by two very heavy stresses:

Oh how comely it is and how reviving
 To the Spirits of just men long opprest!
 When God into the hands of their deliverer
 Puts invincible might
 To quell the mighty of the Earth, th'oppressour,
 The brute and boist'rous force of violent men
 Hardy and industrious to support
 Tyrannic power, but raging to persue
 The righteous and all such as honour Truth;
 Hee all thir Ammunition
 And feats of Warr defeats
 With plain Heroic magnitude of mind,
 And celestial vigour arm'd,
 Thir Armories and Magazines contemns,
 Renders them useless, while
 With winged expedition
 Swift as the lightning glance he executes
 His errand on the wicked, who surpris'd
 Lose thir defence distracted and amaz'd.

(lines 1268-1307)

After this climax comes the gradual return to normal feeling and interests, and renewed awareness

of Samson's state of mind, while the rhythm wavers
and then ceases to hold the attention:

But patience is more oft the exercise
Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude,
Making them each his own Deliverer,
And Victor over all
That tyrannie or fortune can inflict;
Either of these is in they lot,
Samson, with might endur'd
Above the Sons of men; but sight bereav'd
May chance to number thee with those
Whom Patience finally must crown.
This Idols day hath bin to thee no day of rest,
Labouring thy mind
More then the working day thy hands
And yet perhaps more trouble is behind.
For I descry this way
Some other tending, in his hand
A Scepter or quaint staff he bears,
Comes on amain, speed in his look.
By his habit I discern him now
A Public Officer, and now at hand.
His message will be short and voluble.

Nearly all the longer choral passages are of this pattern with the return to normal feeling at the close, given perfect rhythmical expression in the return to the basic rhythm of the pentameter at the end of the speech. This is not true, however, of the final choruses which are spoken after the report of Samson's victory, and which by the very nature of the situation differ from all that has gone before: the Israelites' hero is now proved

a hero, he is one with the divine purpose, and so their feelings are pure and sublime joy with no pattern of rise and fall. Most of the lines, including the last one of each passage, are short and compact, and it is left to Manoah's speech to sustain the basic line rhythm.

When Raleigh came to read these lines he could only exclaim, "To try to explain this marvel of beauty is to beat the air." It goes without saying that he was right: despite all attempts the rhythmical construction of the Miltonic verse paragraph escapes and always will escape definition. No more can be done in the way of analysis than to sketch in lightly a few of the many aspects of the subject. The thing itself is there, alive in Milton's words, and can live in no others. Words and rhythm, thought and form are one and indivisible. Yet even if analysis has enabled one to gain only a slightly clearer conception of the poet who had intellectual power to think and sustain ideas on such a scale, and aesthetic power to animate them, then it is justified.

The student of Milton is indeed happy, not only because the subject offers so much to mind and imagination, but also because its mystery will for ever elude him - he cannot leave the song, "nor ever can those trees be bare."

NOTES

to

RHYTHM. and METRE;

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5. B.Pattison, Music and Poetry in the English
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6. Two Bookes of Ayres (1613).
7. Campion, Works, ed.Vivian, p.35.
8. From Capt.Tobias Hume's First Part of Ayres (1605).
9. From John Dowland's Third and Last Book of Songs
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10. From Thomas Ford's Music of Sundry Kinds (1607).
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16. Translations from the Works of John Milton, ed.
F.A.Patterson, p.5.
17. Bembo, Prose della Volgar Lingua.
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41. Prince, The Italian Element in Milton's Verse,
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42. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, p.38.
43. H.Darbishire, "Milton's Poetic Language",
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44. Smith, The Principles of English Metre, p.218.
45. Tillyard, The Miltonic Setting, ch.III.
46. Oras, "Milton's Blank Verse and the Chronology
of his Major Poems."

DICTION AS AN ELEMENT OF VERSIFICATION.

SUMMARY.

- I. Diction to be studied as it contributes to tone and metrical composition.
- II. Diction as it suggests austerity of tone; compact expression.
- III. Concision resulting in occasional obscurity; kinds of obscurity.
- IV. Concision versus luxuriance in Milton's work.
- V. Concision as mark of seriousness,
- VI. Compact expression excluding irrelevant and inappropriate matter.
- VII. Restrained use of imagery.
- VIII. Restrained use of epithets.
- IX. Puns.
- X. Allusions; suggesting much in little space.
- XI. Mixing and merging of metaphors.
- XII. Use of abstract and general terms to suggest both austerity and loftiness of tone.
- XIII. Modern criticism of generalizing tendency.
- XIV. Defence of the generalizing tendency.
- XV. Importance of decorum.
- XVI. Dignity of tone enhanced by classical diction.
- XVII. Classical constructions.
- XVIII. Extent of Latin element in Milton's verse.
- XIX. Enallage and distortions of meaning.
- XX. Archaisms and colloquialisms.
- XXI. Comparison between effects of archaic and borrowed diction.
- XXII. Diction as it adds to strength of thought and feeling; sound suggesting mood.
- XXIII. Diction as it establishes and strengthens metre.
- XXIV. Diction as it enters into construction of verse paragraphs.
- XXV. Conclusion: Milton a master of language.

Diction as an element of Versification.

I. The study of diction has a place here only as it affects the versification, hence it will be necessary to omit from discussion many interesting aspects of what one eminent modern scholar has called "a style sensuous and impassioned, elaborate, musical, a very cloth of gold" by "the supreme master of poetic evolution."⁽¹⁾ In this connection the chief considerations are bound to be the sound, the position and the connective value of words, as these are elements of the line and the verse as a whole, and as they contribute to the general effects of austerity, dignity and power.

II. There is no doubt that the spirit of austerity evident in the language of Samson is the result of the extraordinarily compact form of expression. As Hilaire Belloc has said, "the Samson Agonistes is, take it by and large, the strongest monument to Milton's genius.....There runs through it a packed intensity."⁽²⁾ This compactness takes several forms, being far more than a mere avoidance of repetition and redundancy. In ordinary speech men are accustomed to use a number of words and phrases - enclitics, repetition for the sake of clarity and emphasis, exclamations, modifying phrases and the like, which are not necessary, but which serve to elucidate meaning, and to allow time for the speaker on the one hand to formulate his next statement, and for the listener on the other hand to grasp the significance of what has been said. But though the majority of speakers and listeners find such redundancy helpful, the man of extraordinary mental powers is unlikely to

sympathize with their need - is far more likely, in fact, to be irritated by diffuseness in others, and to express his thoughts with a brevity which to him is the height of clarity, indifferent to the fact that many will find his utterances crabbed in style, perplexing and often incomprehensible.

III. There are, however, kinds and degrees of obscurity, and it is necessary to distinguish between the reasons which occasionally render comprehension of Milton's poetry difficult, and the nature of obscurity in the works of later poets: Browning, for instance, whose way of thinking was highly idiosyncratic, or Eliot, most of whose allusions were unknown even to the scholarly avant garde when his poems were first published. Such poets, one may feel, write for their own pleasure, or that of the congenial few; and since much of their poetry can only be understood by others if a key or explanation is provided, their work is rightly termed obscure. In this they are very different from Milton, who was addressing, not a small number of individuals with specialized interests and knowledge, but the educated public of his day. And he paid them the compliment of assuming that they could all follow his rapid and comprehensive manner of thinking. Poetry of this kind may be "difficult", but there is no justification for calling it obscure. If some of them, faced with a more than usually bold instance of anacoluthon, found themselves for a while in the same unhappy situation as that of Fred Hoyle's scientists while they were straining to understand "The Black Cloud", then the superior intelligence is hardly the one to

be blamed. And that Milton himself would have repelled such criticism and shown impatience with the mental limitations of others there is little doubt, if one may judge from the treatment his nephews received during their early schooling, or the gusto with which he rated Salmasius, or his swiftness in retort to a far more powerful enemy like Jeffreys. The Judge once visited Milton while he was living in retirement at Chalfont St. Giles and being rash enough "his own ruin on himself to invite", remarked sententiously that the poet's blindness was a "judgment from Heaven" for his treatment of Charles I. "Is not the loss of his head a still greater judgment on the King?" was Milton's immediate retort! (3).

IV. It seems natural that a mind like Milton's should express itself in concise forms, and that the tendency towards concision should become stronger with time until eventually it was matched with the ideally appropriate form and theme of a classically conceived tragedy based on the story of Samson. Whenever the matter of the verse is serious but requiring no appeal to the imagination and no luxuriance of imagery, then his diction becomes more compact, and the Elizabethan note fades away. Even in an early poem like "Lycidas" there is more than one hint that Milton himself was well aware of this process. After the high passion of the passage "Alas! What boots it with uncessant care...." comes the restraining note:

O Fountain Arethuse, and thou honour'd floud,
Smooth-sliding Mincius, crown'd with vocall reeds,
That strain I heard was of a higher mood:
But now my Oate proceeds.....

Again, St. Peter's onslaught on the corrupt members of the Anglican clergy is followed by:

Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,
That shrunk thy streams; Return Sicilian Muse,
And call the Vales, and bid them hither cast
Their Bels, and Flourets of a thousand hues;
Ye valleys low where the milde whispers use,
Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,
On whose fresh lap the swart Star sparely looks,
Throw hither all your quaint enameld eyes,
That on the green turf suck the honied showres,
And purple all the ground with vernal flowres....

The contrast between the two styles, the one "so sweet the sense faints picturing" and the other the note of high seriousness, could not be more marked.

V. In Samson the nature of the theme demands expression in the "higher mood" for the greater part of the poem, and sometimes in the "dread voice" as well. Here is a passage, selected almost at random, as an example of the prevailing tone (the Chorus reply to Samson's greeting and try to relieve him of the burden of self-reproach, but in vain, as his answer shows):

Chorus: Tax not divine disposal; wisest Men
Have errd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd;
And shall again, pretend they ne're so wise,
Deject not then so overmuch thy self,
Who hast of sorrow thy full load besides;
Yet truth to say, I oft have heard men wonder
Why thou shoudst wed Philistian women rather
Then of thine own Tribe fairer, or as fair,
At least of thy own Nation, and as noble.

Samson: The first I saw at Timna, and she pleas'd

Mee, not my Parents, that I sought to wed,
 The daughter of an Infidel: they knew not
 That what I motion'd was of God; I knew
 From intimat impulse, and therefore urg'd
 The Marriage on; that by occasion hence
 I might begin Israel's Deliverance,
 The work to which I was divinely call'd;
 She proving false, the next I took to Wife
 (O that I never had! fond wish too late)
 Was in the Vale of Sorec, Dalila,
 That specious Monster, my accomplisht snare.
 I thought it lawful from my former act,
 And the same end; still watching to oppress
 Israel's oppressours: of what now I suffer
 Shee was not the prime cause, but I my Self,
 Who vanquisht with a peal of words (O weakness!)
 Gave up my fort of silence to a Woman.

(lines 210-36).

The economy of statement in the first two lines quoted is sufficiently impressive, but the thought is even more concisely expressed in succeeding lines; there is an elliptical construction in the third line - "pretend they ne're so wise"; the "who" at the beginning of the fifth is doing double duty as "since thou" and "thou who hast"; and there is omission of the substantive "women" in the eighth and ninth lines:

..... rather

Than of thine own Tribe fairer, or as fair,

At least of thy own Nation, and as noble.

And in the first sentence of Samson's reply there is ellipsis of a whole clause - "she pleas'd / Mee (but

did please) not my Parents, that I sought to wed...."

A little later Dalila is mentioned, both her triumph and her seductive wiles conveyed in the one word "accomplisht", while Samson's attempt to justify this second match is given in two brief phrases - "from my former act,/ And the same end", which hardly convey their full meaning of "because God seemed to approve my former act, and this one had the same purpose of serving his will", at a first reading.

VI. It was probably after reading such passages as these that Raleigh was moved to comment: "Meaning (4). may be arranged too compactly in a sentence". Certainly the economy of expression in Samson is at the opposite pole from the general laxity and lavishness of Elizabethan dramatic diction, which Raleigh so much admired. A typical Elizabethan would hardly have been able to resist, for instance, the temptation to expatiate on the theme of "wisest Men have err'd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd", even though he might have been led into anachronism. In fact, many would claim that the diction here is too Puritanical for the thought. But Milton is really in the right in preserving the same tone throughout: it would not add to our impression of Samson's nobility if he were to be associated with the merely lascivious and profane. For the purposes of a tragedy in classic vein it is enough that Samson should admit and deplore his fault.

VII. This may be accepted as an adequate reason for the brevity and lack of imagery in this particular case, but the restrained use of imagery in general, and the limit

number of epithets, can only be justified on more general grounds. Appropriate images, associations that would enrich the thought, or useful contrasts, appear only rarely, and then they are rigorously pruned. Even the opening speech, which is less restrained in imagery than the rest of the tragedy, illustrates the control that Milton has exercised over exuberance of fancy; here are the images:

"The breath of Heav'n freshblowing, pure and sweet,
With day-spring born"

"Ease to the body some, none to the mind
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,
But rush upon me thronging"

"O wherefore was my birth from Heav'n foretold
Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight
Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
From off the altar, where an Off'ring burnd,
As in a fiery column charioting
His Godlike presence....?"

"Ask for that great Deliverer now and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves"

"Whom have I to complain of but myself?
Who this high gift of strength committed to me,
In what part lodg'd, how easily bereft me,
Under the Seal of Silence could not keep,
But weakly to a woman must reveal it,
Orecome with importunity and tears.
O impotence of mind, in body strong!"

"Suffices that to mee strength is my bane,
And proves the source of all my miseries;
So many, and so huge, that each apart
Would ask a life to wail"

"The Sun to me is dark
And silent as the Moon
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave
Since light so necessary is to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the Soul,
She all in every part; why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th'eye confin'd?
So obvious and so easie to be quencht,
And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd
That she might look at will through every pore?"

" My self, my Sepulcher, a moving Grave"

" Life in captivity
Among inhuman foes".

Surely, in these and similar lines, the brevity suggests that what is here given us is the very essence of emotion? The image is presented in the simplest terms: - "with day-spring born", "like a deadly swarm of Hornets arm'd", "as in a fiery column charioting his godlike presence", "eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves", and set in a context equally significant and severe.

VIII. The scarcity of epithets has been mentioned, and merits further discussion. There are, for instance, scarcely twenty-five in all the lines just quoted and of these epithets not one could be altered or omitted without serious loss of meaning, yet most of them are the short, common adjectives

of everyday speech:

pure	huge
sweet	dark
restless	silent
deadly	necessary
all	true
fiery	every
great	tender
high	obvious
strong	easy
many	inhuman

"Vacant" with its double meaning, "interlunar", "fresh-blowing", "godlike" and "eyeless" are the only epithets falling outside this category; and the adverbs are just as rare and as simple in kind as the adjectives. In this restrained use of epithets Milton's practice is certainly superior to that of the less skilled couplet writers of his time, who were sometimes guilty of verbosity and unnecessary antithesis in order to keep their lines "smooth". The very scarcity of such balanced phrases in Samson makes them all the more effective:

"To live a life half dead, a living death" (100-

"Life in captivity

Among **inhuman** foes" (108-9)

"O impotence of mind, in body strong" (53)

"They creep, yet see; I, dark in light" (75)

IX. The *ars celare artem* allows itself to be glimpsed here and there, however, in that form of scholarly punning which offends some critics. The only example of this among the lines quoted from the

opening speech is the reference to the Moon "Hid in her vacant interlunar cave", where "vacant" means not only that the cave is normally unoccupied but also that it is barren and, according to ancient belief, the place to which the moon retires when she is not appearing to the world.⁽⁵⁾ Examples occurring elsewhere are:

uncouth place, (rough, unknown) (line 333)
 that specious Monster, my accomplish snare,
 (deceitful; handsome, skilled, successful)(230)
 my capital secret, (chief, on my head) (394)
 will not connive. (help evil, literally ignore) (466)
crude old age, (rough, premature) (700)
 with amaze shall strike all who behold, (figurative
 and literal meanings) (1645).

It is hard to understand why such pleasant fancies aroused the ire of Raleigh, for instance.⁽⁶⁾ In these cases, by playing on the English and Latin meanings of a word, Milton is able to enrich the verse in the most economical way, while at the same time flattering his readers by the assumption that their knowledge is as extensive and cultured as his. In fact, the classically-trained reader seldom, if ever, needs to refer to editorial notes when he is reading Milton.

V. Such puns are admittedly rare; a practice more characteristic of Milton's verse generally is the peculiar use of allusions. In Samson it would appear that allusions have taken the place occupied by metaphor and simile in the earlier poetry, partly because, as already observed, it would not have suited his purpose to distract attention for too long from the main theme, but partly also because, like the writers of ancient Greek tragedy, he could

rely upon his hearers or readers to know the literature or mythology and to understand the story lying behind brief allusions to sacred literature. The fact that all references and allusions are necessarily biblical increases the seriousness of the tone, as when, for example, the Chorus recall the triumphs of Samson's youth, and refer to place-names rich in biblical associations.

.....The bold Ascalonite

Fled from his Lion ramp, old Warriors turn'd
 Their plated backs under his heel;
 Or grovling soild thir crested helmets in the dust.
 Then with what trivial weapon came to hand,
 The Jaw of a dead Ass, his sword of bone,
 A thousand fore-skins fell, the flower of Palestine
 In Ramath-lechi famous to this day:
 Then by main force pull'd up, and on his shoulders bore
 The Gates of Azza, Post, and massie Bar
 Up to the Hill by Hebron, seat of Giants old,
 No journey of a Sabbath day, and loaded so;
 Like whom the Gentiles feign to bear up Heav'n.

(lines 138-50).

Another series of proper nouns, each conveying its story and adding to Samson's renown, occurs later in this scene:

Chorus: Thy words to my remembrance bring
 How Succoth and the Fort of Penuel
 Their great Deliverer contemnd,
 The matchless Gideon in persuit
 Of Madian and her vanquisht Kings:
 And how ingrateful Ephraim
 Had dealt with Jephtha, who by argument,
 Not worse then by his shield and spear

Defended Israel from the Ammonite,
 Had not his prowess quell'd thir pride
 In that sore battel when so many dy'd
 Without Reprieve adjudg'd to death,
 For want of well pronouncing Shibboleth.

(lines 277-89).

Again, when Dalila appears, her exotic appearance is suggested by the place names that occur in the simile with which the Chorus describe her:

Like a stately Ship
 Of Tarsus, bound for th'Iles
 Of Javan or Gadier
 With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,
 Sails fill'd, and streamers waving,
 Courted by all the winds that hold them play,
 An Amber sent of odorous perfume
 Her harbinger, a damsel train behind;
 Some rich Philistian Matron she may seem,
 And now at nearer view, no other certain
 Than Dalila thy wife.

(lines 714-24).

And once Samson has stripped the mask of deception from her, she herself glories in the names of the places where she will be famed:

My name perhaps among the Circumcis'd
 In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering Tribes,
 To all posterity may stand defam'd,
 With malediction mention'd, and the blot
 Of falshood most unconjugal traduc't.
 But in my countrey where I most desire,
 In Ebron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath
 I shall be nam'd among the famoussest
 Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,

Living and dead recorded, who to save
 Her countrey from a fierce destroyer, chose
 Above the faith of wedlock-bands, my tomb
 With odours visited and annual flowers;
 Not less renowned then in Mount Ephraim,
 Jael, who with inhospitable guile
 Smote Sisera sleeping through the Temples naild.

(lines 975-90.)

XI. Any poet whose thoughts move swiftly is likely to use metaphor with extreme freedom, passing without pause from one to another, and sometimes mingling them. Shakespeare and Shelley are the exemplars of this type in pre-twentieth century poetry. But for mixing metaphors, a cool head is essential: Milton is not the only poet whose imagination has sometimes raced along too quickly, as in line 144, or in Manoah's complaint:

Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt
 Our earnest Prayers, then giv'n with solemn hand
 As Graces, draw a Scorpions tail behind?

(lines 358-60.)

or in the Chorus's tirade against women:

Seeming at first all heav'nly under virgin veil
 Soft, modest, meek, demure,
 Once join'd, the contrary she proves, a thorn
Intestin, farr within defensive arms
 Acleaving mischief. . .

(lines 1035-9).

On the other hand, few English poets have ever achieved such a solemn union of feeling, word, image and rhythm as in the second semichorus where dragon, eagle and phoenix mingle in the enchanted wood. When considering such passages

one appreciates all the more one of the earliest comments published on Milton's diction; this is what the elder Richardson had to say:

A Reader of Milton must be Always upon Duty;
 he is Surrounded with Sense, it rises in
 every Line, every Word is to the Purpose;
 There are no lazy intervals, All has been
 Consider'd and Demands, and Merits, Observation.
 Even in the Best Writers you Sometimes find
 Words and Sentences which hang on so Loosely
 you may Blow 'em off. Milton's are all
 Substance and Weight; Fewer would not have
 Serv'd the Turn, and More would have been
 Superfluous.....His Obscurity is Complaisant,
 not Vicious.

From this last sentence it appears that Richardson, though acknowledging that parts of Milton's poetry were difficult to comprehend, was nevertheless convinced that they were artistically necessary. They sprang from the nature of the theme, and not from carelessness, affectation or perverseness: they were therefore "complaisant".

Another image which merges imperceptibly into another occurs in lines 1660-8, where the Chorus first exult over Samson's triumph. We are first presented with the concrete image of the dead bodies of Samson and his foes lying crushed under the fallen masonry: then metaphor follows to express the realization that the ultimate cause of these deaths is something immeasurably more dread and powerful than the shattered temple - it is the grim necessities of a yet older belief:

Chorus: O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!
 Kiving or dying thou hast fulfill'd

The work for which thou was foretold
 To Israel, and now ly'st victorious
 Among thy slain self-killd
 Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold
 Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoind
 Thee with thy slaughterd foes in number more
 Than all thy life had slain before.

(lines 1660-8)

It is only rarely that this synthesis of images occurs in Samson, since imagery as a whole is comparatively restrained. Occasionally, however, one image will appear immediately after another, as when Manoah first hears of Samson's death: his emotions are in tumult; sympathy prompting him to feel relief that now his son's torment is over, while love and frustrated hope stir in him a sense of the irony of his attempts to secure a ransom:

What windy joy this day had I conceiv'd
 Hopeful of his Delivery, which now proves
 Abortive as the first-born bloom of spring
 Nipt with the lagging rear of winters frost.

(lines 1574-7).

XII. No consideration of the factors contributing to the impression of austerity in Samson would be complete if it did not include one of the most characteristic of all Miltonic stylistic devices - that is, the preference for abstract and general terms. This has a two-fold function, in that it is also largely responsible for the loftiness of the tone. It is not by any means so common in Samson as it is in Paradise Lost: in fact, there is a decided preponderance of particular statement in the later work: but in moments of stress and crisis

the generalizing form of expression supervenes.

In the Prologos, for instance, Samson, while railing at the forces which had led him to consider himself "a person separate to God", speaks of the deeds he had hoped to do:

..... some great act

Or benefit reveal'd to Abraham's race,

Then the details of his present humiliation are stressed:

..... I must dye

Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out.

Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze,

To grind in Brazen Fetters under task

With this Heav'n-gifted strength...

(lines 32-6).

Again he realizes the contrast to his dream of glory, and the tone changes:

..... Promise was that I

Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver,...

The same thought troubles the Chorus, as they draw near:

..... Motionless in might,

The glory late of Israel, now the grief.

(lines 178-9).

Later they try to soothe their champion and urge him:

Tax not divine disposal.

The abstract term "divine disposal" instead of "God" is echoed later by others - "Heav'n", "first created Beam", "our living dread", and "the Interminable".

Although such phrases always tend to exalt the style, they have an added significance here, since they discourage the idea of anthropomorphic deity

and substitute for it something much more like the Greek conception of Fate. In the majority of cases, however, the abstract or general term indicates a deepening of feeling in either Samson or his author, or both, as for example when Samson reflects bitterly on the failure of his countrymen to maintain the struggle for freedom, much as Milton himself must have heard with disgust of the failure of his book, A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, and of the riotous welcome to Charles II:

Had Judah that day joind or one whole Tribe,
 They had by this possesst the Towers of Gath,
 And lorded over them whom now they serve;
 But what more oft in Nations grown corrupt,
 And by their vices brought to servitude,
 Then to love Bondage more than Liberty,
 Bondage with ease then strenuous Liberty;
 And to despise, or envy, or suspect
 Whom God hath of his special favour rais'd
 As thir Deliverer; if he aught begin,
 How frequent to desert him, and at last
 To heap ingratitude on worthiest deeds!

(lines 265-76).

Other speeches of this kind, both deeply felt and generalized, are made by the chorus following Harapha's departure ("Oh how comely it is and how reviving", lines 1268-97), and at the close of the tragedy in the lines beginning "All is best..." (1745-58). Occasionally metonymy is employed to elevate the style still further, as in these lines:

"Promis'd by Heavenly message twice descending" (635)

"Heads without name no more rememberd" (677)

XIII. During this century, this generalizing aspect of Milton's Grand Style has been severely criticized by a number of writers, led by Pound and Eliot.

Their main contention has been that it results in an "impoverishment of sensibility"; according to their argument, the absence of clearly visualized or described detail lessens the impression of reality: the whole picture is blurred. Eliot, for instance, in his first study on Milton, ⁽⁸⁾ observed that "Milton's images do not give this (Shakespeare's) sense of particularity, nor are the separate words developed in significance. His language is, if one may use the term without disparagement, artificial and conventional." The lack of clear outline was attributed, in part at any rate, to Milton's blindness. ⁽⁹⁾ In his later essay on Milton, however, Eliot admitted that the generalized diction and imagery typical of Milton's later works, "turn out to be not merely a negligible defect but a positive virtue" in certain cases; but it is worth noting that Eliot still regarded this use of language as signifying "limitation of visual power", and as distracting attention from pictorial imagery. "We must then, in reading Paradise Lost, not expect to see clearly. Our sense of sight must be blurred, so that our hearing may become more acute." The same criticisms were made by Leavis in an essay published in the same year.

XIV. This is decidedly hard upon a poet who had dedicated himself from boyhood to the art and glory of poetry, who considered writing poetry his chief object in life and swerved from it only when his duties as citizen and Christian called him away

for a time, who had shown himself a master of clear, vivid imagery, and who meant every word he wrote, if ever man did. In effect, Eliot is saying that Milton wrote as he did because he could not write otherwise. The evidence rather goes to show that Milton could have written in any style, but very rightly adapted his style to the subject and kind of poem he was writing. But even if Eliot had been right in insisting that Milton's visual imagination was no longer clear after his blindness, he would still not have proved his point that the effects of the individual words and their meanings are subordinate to the effect of the sound. Stirring though the sound is, in both Paradise Lost and Samson, it cannot be accepted as the sole guide to the significance of these poems. Take, for instance, these lines from Samson:

"Yet Hope would fain subscribe, and tempts Belief"
(1535)

"...death to life is crown or shame" (1579)

"Maisters comands come with a power resistless
To such as owe them absolute subjection."
(lines 1405-6).

Is not the thought here so condensed that the reader's intellect, as well as hearing, must be brought to concentrate on them? Tillyard emphasizes this aspect of the matter in his reply to the anti-Miltonists - chiefly J.M.Murry, in this case - in The Miltonic Setting: he points out the fallacy in judging Milton by Shakespearean standards, since in his later poetry Milton was probably not so much concerned with subtle dialectics and refining on sensations:

In his reactions to the world around him he

seems to have heeded what to him were the bigger issues instead of keeping himself perpetually busy with every size and description of sensuous or intellectual datum. There was no unusual amount of traffic or of breeding among the surface inhabitants of his conscious mind. If the sole object of art were to bring into consciousness, to maintain in an unrelaxed awareness, the daily traffic of an intelligent mind with the world around it, then Milton is not a great artist.....it seems necessary to assert that a sense of greatness in poetry largely depends on the poet's having exploited mental regions other than the surface agitations of the intelligent mind; that Milton exploited them; and consequently that questions of his "simplicity" are of subordinate importance. (10).

Nearly a century and a half ago another interesting refutation of the points raised by Eliot was put forward by Hazlitt - a critic whom Eliot dislikes, and who would certainly have returned the dislike - in his lecture on Shakespeare and Milton in the course on the English Poets. Whatever his faults were as a critic, Hazlitt had far too generous and fine a taste to discredit one writer in order to add to the glory of another, as he makes clear in these observations on Milton's style, beginning with the very point concerning Milton's blindness which Eliot "introduces":

We might be tempted to suppose that the vividness with which he (Milton) describes visible objects, was owing to their having acquired an unusual degree of strength in his mind, after the

privation of his sight; but we find the same palpableness and truth in the descriptions which occur in his early poems..... It has indeed been objected to Milton, by a common perversity of criticism, that his ideas were musical rather than picturesque, as if because they were in the highest degree musical, they must be (to keep the sage critical balance even, and to allow no one man to possess two qualities at the same time) proportionably deficient in other respects. But Milton's poetry is not cast in any such narrow, commonplace mould; it is not so barren of resources. His worship of the Muse was not so simple or confined. A sound arises 'like a steam of rich distilled perfumes'; we hear the pealing organ, but the incense on the altars is also there, and the statues of the gods are ranged around! The ear indeed predominates over the eye, because it is more immediately affected, and because the language of music blends more immediately with, and forms a more natural accompaniment to, the variable and indefinite associations of ideas conveyed by words. But where the associations of the imagination are not the principal thing, the individual object is given by Milton with equal force and beauty.
(11).

XV. In the last sentence Hazlitt shows that he has recognized the distinction made by Milton between one kind of poetry and another. In fact, most objections to the style of Milton's three great works prove to be unfounded when due attention is paid to the principle of decorum, "the poet's task of decorously suiting his style to his subject

and purpose." (12)

XVI. Another characteristic of Milton's style in Samson which serves this purpose by rendering the language both more compact and elevated is the use of Latinized words, word order and constructions. There have always been some readers to object to this practice, even as far back as Addison and Johnson. According to the figures quoted by Hanford in A Milton Handbook only thirty-three per cent of Milton's poetic vocabulary is Anglo-Saxon in derivation, compared with sixty per cent in Shakespeare and the Authorised Version of the Bible. Furthermore, the Latin content of a word is often forced on one's notice by the emphasis placed on that word in the sentence, as in these examples:

"But made hereby obnoxious more
To all the miseries of life...." (= exposed) (106-7).

"But safest he who stood aloof,
When insupportable his foot advanc't"
(=irresistably) (135-6)

".....why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th'eye confin'd?
So obvious and so easie to be quencht..."
(=obvious) (93-5)

"Then with what trivial weapon came to hand
The jaw of a dead ass....."
(=to be picked up anywhere)
(142-3)

"They knew not
That what I motion'd was of God"
(=intended) (221-2)

".....into the snare I fell

Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains."

(= (deceitful looks, allurements of love).
(532-3).

"Consolatories writ

With studied argument, and much persuasion sought,

Lenient of grief...." (= (softening). (657-9).

"And though her body die, her fame survives,

A secular bird ages of lives."

(= (living for centuries) (1706-7).

In other lines the metre makes it clear that their Latin derivation governs the pronunciation of certain words:

".....in prosperous days

They swarm, but in adverse withdraw thir head."
(191-2)

".....I knew

From intimat impulse, and therefore urg'd"
(222-3).

".....the strife

With mee hath end; all the contest is now"
(460-1).

"Left me all helpless with th' irreparable loss"
(644)

"To dogs and fowls a prey, or else captiv'd"
(694).

It is quite probable that in some cases Milton preferred Latin words or words of Latin derivation for their sound values, and particularly, the weighty, impressive effect of polysyllables. If Anglo-Saxon derivatives were substituted for Latin ones in the following reflections of the Chorus, for instance, the total impression would be quite different:

Yet more ther be who doubt his ways not just,

As to his own edicts, found contradicting,

Then give the rains to wandring thought,

Regardless of his glories diminution;
 Till by thir own perplexities involv'd
 They ravel more, still less resolv'd,
 But never find self-satisfying solution.

As if they would confine th'interminable,
 And tie him to his own prescript,
 Who made our laws to bind us, not himself,
 And hath full right to exempt
 Whom so it pleases him by choice
 From National obstruction, without taint
 Of sin, or legal debt;
 For with his own Laws he can best dispence.

(lines 300-14).

XVII. No figures are available to indicate the extent of foreign sentence construction: Wyatt comments on a mere dozen Latin ones, and only two Greek (lines 1343, 1549) which seems a surprisingly low total until one remembers to take into account the cumulative effects of periodic and semi-periodic construction, Latinized diction, consistent inversion of natural word-order, and the like. In the following passage, for example, there are only two actual Latin constructions, though from a first glance one would suppose there to be far more, chiefly because of the numerous instances of unusual word order:

Bitterly hast thou paid, and still art paying
 That rigid score. A worse thing yet remains,
 This day the Philistines a popular Feast
 Here celebrate in Gaza; and proclaim
 Great Pomp, and Sacrifice, and Praises loud
 To Dagon, as thir God who hath deliverd
 Thee Samson bound and blind into thir hands,

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Them out of thine, who slew'st them many a slain.
 So Dagon shall be magnifi'd, and God,
 Besides whom is no God, compar'd with Idols,
 Disglorifi'd, blasphem'd and had in scorn
 By th'Idolatrous rout amidst thir wine;
Which to have come to pass by means of thee,
 Samson, of all thy sufferings think the heaviest,
 Of all reproach the most with shame that ever
 Could have befall'n thee and thy Fathers house.
(lines 433-77).

A further note of strangeness is introduced by the Miltonism "disglorifi'd".

XVIII. Most of the Latinisms in Samson, however, are ablative absolutes and other participial constructions as in these lines:

".....Dagon hath presum'd,
Mee overthrown, to enter lists with God."
(lines 464-5).

"God will relent, and quit thee all his debt;
 Who evermore approves and more accepts
 (Best pleas'd with humble and filial submission)
 Him who imploring mercy sues for life,
 Then who self-rigorous chooses death as due;
 Which argues over-just, and self-displeas'd
 For self-offence, more then for God offended."
(lines 509-15).

According to Professor J.A.K.Thomson, the Latin element in Milton's verse owes its existence to the reverence Milton and his predecessors and contemporaries, at home and abroad, felt for Virgil. ^{(13).} The Renaissance poets in France, Spain and above all in Italy, were employing Latin words and syntax freely in their eagerness to raise their native tongues to the cultural and artistic level of Latin. Nor,

of course, should it be forgotten that Milton wrote a quantity of verse in the ancient tongue and was as much a master of that language as any post-Classical writer, with results that were probably inevitable upon his syntax in English. But in giving it as his opinion that Milton failed to appreciate the difference in effect between a Latinized vocabulary introduced into a language derived from Latin (like French, Italian and Spanish) and a Latinized vocabulary introduced into a language like English, whose roots are Germanic, Professor Thomson implies a serious lack of sensitivity in Milton. On the other hand, an expert in Milton's diction like Helen Darbishire denies any such insensitivity, and points to Milton's fondness for mingling foreign and Teutonic elements in his verse as evidence that he was aware of the strength of each language individually, and admired the texture of English when interwoven with exotic threads. "Dignity is maintained by the presence of the stately Latin phrases, while the simple native words keep the bubbling current of life briskly flowing underneath."⁽¹⁴⁾ She draws attention particularly to the number of lines consisting of almost entirely monosyllabic words, and to the frequency of their occurrence in moving contexts. Her remarks are illustrated from the epics, but Samson provides examples equally convincing. For instance, there are eight practically monosyllabic lines in the first forty lines (i.e. lines 2, 11, 18, 22, 24, 34, 40, 41) and three of these eight are certainly the most deeply felt in the whole passage:

"Ease to the body some, none to the mind" (18)

"Times past, what once I was, and what am now." (22)

"Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
 Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves."
 (lines 41-2).

The next sixty lines provide further examples of emotion expressed not only in this simple diction, but also in mixed and in predominantly Latinized language:

".....but chief of all,
 O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!"
 (simple) (lines 67-8).

"Scaree half I seem to live, dead more than half,
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
 Without all hope of day!"
 (mixed) (lines 80-3).

"But hereby made obnoxious more
 To all the miseries of life,
 Life in captivity
 Among inhuman foes."
 (Latinized) (lines 106-9)

This mingling of different strains, whether the units are words or word groups, is maintained throughout the poem, the shorter words, those of Teutonic origin, tending to appear more often in the expression of feeling, and the longer Latinized words clustering more thickly when emotion is subdued by reason.

The last chorus provides a sublime example:

XIX. Whether Latinisms are as frequent as is generally supposed or not - and it seems reasonable to believe that the latter is the case - it is certain that they are not the only means of elevating the style in this poem. Enallage and the use of fairly common words with connotations different from those usually understood serve the same purpose; they appear the result of

deliberation and not, as in Shakespeare, of ease or impetuosity, as the following examples may show:

"...my redoubl'd love and care
With nursing diligence, to mee glad office,
May ever tend about thee to old age."
(lines 923-5).

"Am I not sung and proverbd for a Fool
In every street...."
(lines 203-4)

"Mean while the men of Judah to prevent
The harass of thir Land, beset me round;"
(lines 256-7).

".....my tomb
With odours visited and annual flowers"
(line 987).

Double enallage, as in the first example, occurs only once, the other types are repeated, and the last type, that of adjective for adverb, appears nearly a dozen times. Unusual or distorted meanings are far more common and appear not only in words derived from Latin and intended to bear the Latin meaning in the text, as already shown, but also in native words and in words borrowed from other sources. For instance, "appoint" in "Appoint not heav'nly disposition" (373) must mean "arraign" or "direct"; "tend" in line 925 quoted above has the meaning of "wait"; and "politician" in "your ill-meaning Politician Lords" (1195) obviously implies "cunning" or "crafty".

XX. Actual archaisms in the sense of words or forms already obsolete in Milton's day are rare in Samson: English words are used here to give depth, feeling and reality, not strangeness, to a situation. Milton's command of his native

idiom is as evident in some passages as in the challenges and retorts to Salmasius, and several phrases would fit into the latter context:

"tongue-daughty giant" (1181); "His giantship is gone somewhat crestfallen in a sultry chafe" (1244); "out, out, hyaena!" (748); and "avoided as a blab" (495). Such lines remind us of the mixture of colloquial and elevated style in the Greek choral odes. But English of the synthetic Spenserian sort is rare in this poem except in the first semichorus where "unweetingly" has been preferred to "unwittingly". Gerard Manley Hopkins made an interesting comment on this subject in one of his letters to Bridges:

It seems to me that the poetical language of an age should be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself, but not (I mean normally: passing freaks and graces are another thing) and obsolete one. This is Shakespeare's and Milton's practice and the want of it will be fatal to Tennyson's Idylls and plays, to Swinburne, and perhaps to Morris.
(15).

XXI. Hopkins showed uncanny percipience on the subject of Victorian poets, and was probably correct in attributing their decline in popularity to their preferance for outdated diction. One wishes, however, that he had carried his analysis further, and distinguished clearly between the effects, on the one hand, of language that is "obsolete" in that it contains words that have died out in the living language, and, on the other, of diction that is "heightened" in style by borrowing from other languages, including the "dead" ones.

It may be that the obsolete in one's own tongue is nearly always embarrassing, just as the efforts of someone of an older generation to talk modern slang, or of a youth to ape the tone of experienced and worldly-wise elders, is mildly ridiculous and distressing, because in each case it is clear that the idiom has not been thoroughly understood and mastered. In reading poetry, or prose fiction that attempts to revive bygone modes of speech, our uneasiness rises in proportion to the sketchiness of the writer's knowledge; "Beshrew me", "by my halidom" and "'Nay, marry", quoth Dick" and other examples of the "Black Arrow" school may be accepted by a ten year-old, but hardly by any intelligent fourteen year-old English schoolboy of today. Notwithstanding this, our masterpiece of historical fiction, "Henry Esmond", still unfortunately remains caviare to the general. On the other hand, borrowing from another language, particularly an older one with a great literature, is very seldom censured by either high or lowbrows: the naïve reader will admire what he thinks is a fashion and demonstration of superior knowledge, while the informed critic will appreciate borrowings for their appropriateness, evocation of suitable associations, echoes of other literature, and decorative beauty.

XXII. So far, examination of the part played by diction in sustaining the dignified tone of the tragedy has been concerned mainly with the meaning of words. But concentration on meaning and rhythm alone would leave one with an inadequate conception of Milton's powers: he was unfailingly conscious of the noise of words, that is, their sound and

rhythm. How he used this sense to guide him in using occasional rhyme and part-rhyme for line endings has already been discussed in Section 3, (page 74). What is of more interest at this stage of the discussion is the use of assonance and consonance - chiefly the former - to set the key, so to speak, for an important speech, organizing it, adding to its harmony, and suggesting its mood by rendering it in appropriate sounds. The very first speech of Samson, in the part where his degradation moves him to angry resentment, owes much of its extraordinary impressiveness to this kind of sound symbolism:

Why was my breeding orderd and prescrib'd
 As of a person separate to God,
 Design'd for great exploits; if I must dye
 Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out,
 Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;
 To grind in Brazen Fetters under task
 With this Heav'n-gifted strength? O glorious strength
 Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't
 Lower than bondslave! Promise was that I
 Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
 Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
 Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves,
 Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke;

(lines 30-42).

The key is set by the word "gaze", and maintained in the long "a" and "g" or "z" sounds in "brazen", "debased", "slave", "Israel", "Gaza", and "slaves". Nor can one be indifferent to the motor effect of enouncing, or imagining the enouncing of, such words, while one feels as much as pictures the mirthless

sneer on the speaker's face. Gradually this mood in Samson is succeeded by self-contempt, which in turn gives place to grief at his loss of sight, and the long "i" then emerges as the chief assonantal vowel. The ideas of light, sight, life and night are thus kept in the forefront of consciousness, while the long "i" itself and the occasional "o" exclamation affect us inexplicably by their echoing of an expression of grief common to all men in all ages. Later on, (line 80) the long "ar" note is sounded, and picked up again towards the end of the Chorus's answer in lines 154 and 159:

"Prison within Prison

Inseparably dark"

"In real darkness of the body dwells"

and half-echoed a few lines further on as "or":

"By how much from the top of wondrous glory,

Strongest of mortal men,

To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall'n"

These long vowels predominate at nearly all the great moments of Samson, giving unity of tone to the whole drama as well as to particular passages.

Remarkable though all these varied effects are, however, and vital to the total effect which Milton aimed at, they are not the source of that power to evoke and sustain exalted emotion which makes Samson Agonistes unique in English poetry; its dynamic force is its rhythm. This in turn is the expression of an intellectual vigour that has been developed and disciplined until it has achieved absolute mastery of its medium, so that for Milton not only are thought and symbol one, but the symbols - that is, the words, - are charged with

the utmost significance. They have the directness of language, the associative power of language; the euphony of music and the purity of emotional expression which is a common property of music but very rarely that of poetry; but they have, too, the motor sensitivity of rhythm which belongs to both arts.

XXIII. The question now to be asked is, how far the diction establishes and reinforces the rhythm. Firstly, it should be noted that although there are numerous instances of inversion in the first foot of the line, this practice is never so frequent as to obliterate the metre, and is seldom used unless rhetorically justified. In general, when the meaning does not demand emphasis by an irregularity in metre, such as the employment of a word with a stress pattern which cannot be fitted into the metre, or placed in such a position in the line that it does not scan, then the verse is regular to an unusual degree. The extent of Milton's concern in this respect may be gauged by the frequency of elision, coupled with other "smoothing" devices. Reference has already been made, for instance, to the observation of Ants Oras that in Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes there is what can only be a deliberate avoidance of metrically dubious phrases like "compleat steel" and "divine property" in which common pronunciation would perhaps have been at odds with the metrical pattern. Another device with the same object is the sounding of syllables generally mute in speech and often mute even in poetry by the end of the seventeenth century, such as the "ed" of the past

participle in "armed powers":⁽¹⁶⁾

"Went up with armed powers thee onely seeking" (1190).
or in "winged":

"With winged expedition." (1283).

Yet another means to smoothness is the occasional omission of consonants, such as the "v" in "over":

"Orecome with importunity and tears" (51).

"He should not so orewhelm, and as a thrall
Subject him to so foul indignities." (lines 370-1).

These were the tendencies which unskilled and uncritical admirers of Milton imitated in the belief that they were chiefly characteristic of his style, so making their verse unbearably monotonous as a result, whereas Milton's is endlessly varied. Sometimes a device will appear alone, sometimes in combination; but his chief means are unusual placing of the caesura, inversion of natural word order, and play on contrasting modes of expression: that is, he will juxtapose words of different derivation, Latin or Germanic, or of different idiom, or of different period, or of different length, pitch, and tone. To use Hillaire Belloc's phrase, this is the "right noise of words".

XXIV. The variety of Milton's diction - in particular, the complexity of his word order - is not however to be attributed merely to an intention of avoiding monotony, or of beautifying the verse: it is an essential factor of the extended and complex sentence, or verse paragraph. As a final quotation, to illustrate this point, let us look at one of the greatest speeches uttered by the Chorus - that following the departure of Manoah:

God of our Fathers, what is man!
 That thou towards him with hand so various,
 Or might I say contrarious,
 Temperst thy providence through his short course,
 Not evenly, as thou rul'st
 Th'Angelical orders and inferiour creatures mute,
 Irrational and brute.
 Nor do I name of men the common rout,
 That wandring loose about
 Grow up and perish, as the summer flie,
 Heads without name no more rememberd,
 But such as thou hast solemnly elected,
 With gifts and graces eminently adorn'd,
 To some great work, thy glory,
 And peoples safety, which in part they effect:
 Yet towards these thus dignifi'd, thou oft
 Amidst thir highth of noon,
 Changest thy countenance, and thy hand with no regard
 Of highest favours past
 From thee on them, or them to thee of service.

Nor onely dost degrade them, or remit
 To life obscur'd, which were a fair dismission,
 But throw'st them lower then thou did'st exalt
 Unseemly falls in human eie, them high,
 Too grievous for the trespass or omission,
 Oft leav'st them to the hostil sword
 Of Heathen and prophane, thir carcases
 To dogs and fowls a prey, or else captiv'd:
 Or to th'unjust tribunals, under change of times,
 And condemnation of th'ingrateful multitude.
 If these they scape, perhaps in poverty
 With sickness and disease thou bow'st them down,

Painful diseases and deformed,
 In crude old age;
 Though not disordinate, yet causless suffering
 The punishment of dissolute days, in fine,
 Just or unjust, alike seem miserable,
 For oft alike, both come to evil end.

(lines 667 - 704).

This entire passage is closely integrated in thought. As each idea is worked out it is followed by an apparently loose connective - "not evenly", "nor do I name", "but such", "yet towards these", "nor onely dost", and so on - to link it to the next idea. These short simple words are the chief means of articulating the whole passage. Meanwhile the logical and emotional unity is emphasized by other uses of words, such as assonance (rul'st, mute, brute; perish, heads, elected, eminently, effect, etc.) and rhyme. It is rhyme again which emphasizes the variation of line length, as in the second and third lines where the tension between actual length and pattern length is itself an expression of the tension in the speakers' minds: that is, between the desire to reproach and the desire to accept the Deity. And the language is as varied as the rhythm, ranging as it does from the lofty tone of "eminently adorn'd" to the homely simplicity of "To some great work thy glory", and keeping always in intimate contact with reality so that we are to some extent prepared for the directness of the gibe "In crude old age".

XXV. Milton, no less than Shakespeare, retained to the end that outstanding gift of the Elizabethans - mastery of the simple word and phrase. And perhaps that one word "mastery" conveys most adequately our impression of the language of Samson Agonistes.

NOTES

to

DICTION AS AN ELEMENT OF VERSIFICATION.

1. Grierson, Milton and Wordsworth, p.179.
2. Belloc, Milton, p.70.
3. Quoted by E.Visiak, The Portent of Milton, p.18.
4. Raleigh, Milton, p.226.
5. Tillyard, The Miltonic Setting, ch.VI. The point is discussed but evidently misunderstood by Eliot in On Poetry and Poets, p.141.
6. Raleigh, Milton, p.227.
7. Richardson's account, The Early Lives of Milton, p.312.
8. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, p.140.
9. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, pp. 156-7.
10. Tillyard, The Miltonic Setting, ch. III.
11. Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Poets and The Spirit of the Age, (Dent), pp.59-60.
12. R.Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery, p.243.
13. J.A.K.Thomson, Classical Influences on English Poetry, p.60.
14. Darbishire, "Milton's Poetic Language," Essays and Studies of the English Association, 1957.
15. The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, ed. Abbott, letter of August 1879.
16. E.J.Dobson, English Pronunciation, vol.II, p.885.

CONCLUSION.SUMMARY.

- I. The tragedy seen to have essential unity;
i.e. concentration throughout on the
character, situation and feeling of Samson.
- II. Verse form designed to allow freedom of
emotional expression.
- III. Rhythm and metre similarly effective in
suggesting feeling. Extensive use of the
verse paragraph appropriate to the expression.
- IV. Language supporting verse form and rhythm; also
of help in suggesting the moods characteristic
of Samson.
- V. Study of versification therefore results in
greater appreciation of the tragedy's style
and meaning.

CONCLUSION.

I. A study of the versification of Samson Agonistes can only increase the reader's admiration of Milton as both artist and man. For it is as impossible as it would be undesirable to examine the style without reference to the meaning, and the meaning without reference to the man, especially in a work like this, which, although a tragedy, is yet philosophic in spirit and predominantly lyrical in expression. In fact, there are many passages in Paradise Lost which are far more dramatic in the ordinary sense of the word than anything in Samson: obvious examples are the rhetorical speeches of Satan and the rebel angels at the beginning of Book I, Satan's tempting of Eve, and the pathetic interchanges of Adam and Eve after they have heard the decree of banishment. Subtleties of this kind, showing how one character is affected by another, are not introduced into Samson, since they would only distract attention from the main theme, which is the struggle of the hero to adjust himself to the supposed demands of his Creator.

The tragic situation brought about by Samson's past misunderstandings and failures is presented on various planes. On the level of the ordinary man's experience it is discussed by Manoah, Dalila, Harapha, the Messenger, the Officer, and occasionally by the Chorus. Samson's account of it is in the heroic mood; and at crises of emotion and action the Chorus exalt it to the universal plane. For such a logical and simple scheme the form of classical tragedy is obviously the most appropriate,

as it allows for the necessary concentration of interest, but it is no easy thing to recreate. Only too often a poet seems to exhaust his powers in the attempt to achieve formal perfection, and the spirit dies and the words are then lifeless --- as in Addison's Cato, for instance, or Arnold's Merope. What a close study of the versification of Samson has shown is that this tragedy does possess organic unity of art and meaning, in addition to the formal unities of time, place and action. Sound reinforces sense in the smallest details of phrasing - quantity, stress, pitch and tone.

II. Firstly, consideration of the verse form has led to the conclusion that the peculiar combination of blank verse and irregular blank verse is not formless. Milton was neither careless of effect nor a seeker of novelty for the sake of novelty. He rejected heroic couplets, in his time the most popular form of dramatic verse, because they did not answer the needs of the tragedy he had in mind, whereas blank verse and occasionally-rhyming irregular blank verse gave him just what he wanted. As they were allied forms, they provided a comparatively unified form of expression; and as they were dissimilar, they pointed the difference between the speeches and the choral lyrics. He had already found that blank verse was an appropriate vehicle for epic subjects and the grand style, and in Samson it proved equally suitable for concentrated dramatic expression, in tones of austerity, dignity and power. Rhyme was not altogether disdained: occasional rhyme was skilfully used for minor

purposes, such as the expression of contempt, and the stressing of key words. But the main advantage of the general verse form was its range and flexibility, enabling the characters to pass swiftly, without noticeable break, from one kind or degree of emotion to another, and to find perfect expression for the dramatic catharsis at the end.

III. Secondly, rhythm and metrical arrangement have been found to serve the same purpose. The basic metre is the iambic pentameter, but constantly varied in sympathy with the mood of the speaker and the situation. Every variation has meaning in the conception of the total effect, whether it is single variation in the rhythm of a line, or the multiple variation which is the verse equivalent of counterpoint. The most remarkable rhythmical achievement, however, is the construction of the long verse paragraphs, especially those of the great choral lyrics, where sound and meaning sustain the "high-raised phantasie", and show to all the joy of "divine sounds....singing everlastingly."

IV. Thirdly, it has been shown how language too suggests the characteristic qualities of the hero - austerity, loftiness and strength - within the framework of the form and rhythm, and how it supports form and rhythm in the expression of those qualities. Austerity is conveyed by the compactness of the language, the preference for condensed forms of expression such as puns and allusions, and the restrained use of epithets and comparisons. The tone is elevated by classical constructions and Latinized diction, and by deliberate distortions of ordinary word order and meaning. And the force of emotion in important

passages is intensified by assonance which stresses significant sounds. Finally, examination of the versification has revealed the suitability of every word to its place in the whole: sometimes Milton's care is perceived in the form of a word - either elided or given an additional syllable -- and sometimes in the placing of connectives to articulate verse paragraphs.

V. As a result of this increased awareness of the artistry and organic unity of Samson, the reader finds that his comprehension of the tragedy's meaning is enlarged. There is no longer any question of being troubled by criticisms that the monotony and bareness of the verse denote a flagging in Milton's poetical power, or that Samson's submission to his Creator is evasive on the part of the dramatist, or that the drama is not a tragedy because it accepts the Christian ethic and thus precludes the element of choice. On the contrary, the dramatic interest is found to consist entirely in watching Samson's struggle to conquer the unreasoning or ungodly side of his nature, as he reaches out towards that peace of mind - self-mastery, understanding, adjustment, acceptance, Christian ethic, call it what one will - which comes at last to the hero in Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy alike. One by one the temptations of Manoah, Dalila and Harapha are repulsed. Samson conquers himself and makes his peace with God. The destruction of the Philistines is in a sense irrelevant to his story, though it is of moment to his people and to us, the onlookers, for it comforts us with the assurance

that evil does not prevail for ever. But the poet who saw such visions despite his blindness, and sang and talked cheerfully through bouts of pain, and continued writing his Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth even while those about him were preparing to welcome back a king, made Samson significant to us in a deeper sense: his hero, like Beowulf in the first great English poem, shows us the full glory of those who fight the forces of evil, not once only, but whenever the call comes -- alone, undaunted and unyielding to the end.

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