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*I often reflect that since many days of darkness are destined to everyone, as the wise man warns, mine thus far, by the signal kindness of Providence, between leisure and study, and the voices and visits of friends, are much more mild than those lethal ones.*

John Milton, "To Leonard Philaras"

I.

I faced two challenges last week, one concerning the interpretation of early modern English literature (ca. 1500-1680); the other, parking four centuries later. Somehow, they intersected.

While hidden away in my dorm room, studying for PhD general exams, I got a ticket for situating my car in a lot that was designated for "visitors" to Princeton's campus. Scratch that: a warning—and one with no fine attached. Somehow this supposed largesse stung more. It was as if these parking gods to whom I hadn't sacrificed the right cut of meat knew they were acting out. They had seen the disability placard in my windshield and—although this spot was the closest to campus,

although there was plenty of other parking available—were concerned only with my transgression, only with restoring the proper order of things.

To be fair, I had been put on warning before. In fact, it was made clear to me at the start of this year that, as a graduate student with a valid disability placard, I could not park in just any “handicapped” spot. Perhaps this sounds counterintuitive, but let me explain. After sending an email to confirm what I thought was an uncontroversial reading of the website-published policy, after explaining that eight years ago I had been struck down by a truck, paralyzed below the waist, that I now walk with a cane and brace—after asking pretty please, could I park in the nearest lot to the undergraduate college where I live as an advisor—I received a mere two sentences in reply: “As a student living on campus you are only eligible to park in the handicap spaces in Lot 20.” Lot 20, needless to say, is *not* the closest one to where I live. “If you need access to other places on campus you can take tigertransit,” *i.e.*, the intracampus bus.

Everything about this note suggested that explaining how a few yards can make a difference—explaining why it isn’t so easy to wait for campus transportation when everything already takes longer, explaining that Tiger Transit’s stops often don’t align with where I need to go—would only try the patience of my interlocutor, perhaps harried by cares of her own, further.

So I did nothing, and still haven’t, besides vaguely strategizing what can be done in response and scanning the Office of Disability Services’ unhelpful website and ignoring the dampened fronts of my shirts, the wheezy exhalations of my body, when I finish my trek from the lot to my apartment door.

II.

Well, not quite nothing: I’ve reflected upon how the English poet John Milton (1608-1674) is the crip ancestor whose lines resonate in just the right, and different, ways every time I return to them. [1]

Take, for example, his dramatic poem which I reviewed this week for my exams: *Samson Agonistes*, published in 1671 with *Paradise Regained*, between the two editions of *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). [2] By then, Milton was internationally known, and reviled, as a dangerously-compelling defender of regicide, divorce, separation of church and state, and free speech—not to mention as a poet who could hold his own with the ancients, and perhaps even overgo them, along with his English peers. But for nearly twenty years, Milton had also been blind, after about a decade of losing his eyesight gradually. He even discusses this challenging process (by way of several literary personae) throughout his oeuvre: Sonnets 19, 22, and 23; his *Second Defense*—a great apology for the king-killing English people; a letter to his acquaintance Leonard Philaras; *Paradise Lost*, such as in the glorious hymn to light that initiates us into Book III; and of course, the neo-Attic tragedy *Samson*, which elaborates upon the barebones story of the Old Testament’s Book of Judges (13-6).

Immediately in Milton’s closet drama, we meet a weary and hopeless titular character, enslaved by the Philistines, who also gouged out his eyes, on the day of the festival of their god Dagon. Samson

waxes eloquent, and angry, about his sightlessness. It is tempting, now, to quote these lines which first impelled me to fall in love with Milton, reading them, as I did, shortly after my spinal-cord injury when this seventeenth-century poet was the only disabled person I could claim to know in any real sense of the word. It's tempting to reside within his intoxicating ability to evoke the despair that almost always accompanies at least acquired disability—and violently acquired disability, in Samson's case—*along with* the burgeoning cognizance that part of what makes living with impairments so difficult is the cultural stigmas affixed to them. For just as Milton in his own day wrote back to calumnious epithets like “blind adder,” so Samson rails against his transformation into a spectacle, “[m]ade of his enemies the scorn and gaze” (34).<sup>[3]</sup> It is tempting, yes, to close-read the extraordinary monologue that ushers us into this world which feels so different from those of either of Milton's epics. But these first lines are not what astounded me on this re-reading.

What did it do that in a poem distanced from my own struggles by almost 400 years, the disabled hero demands that an able-bodied authority allows for his equal participation in society by, at the very least, making a few, basic tweaks to the status quo. Much happens before we get to this pivotal moment, however, even if (as Samuel Johnson once bemoaned) the play can seem scant on action until the controversial finale. Samson's father Manoa visits him; his quisling wife Dalila (sort of) tries to get him back; and then Harapha, the giant warrior, father of Goliath, drops by to taunt the beleaguered, and ostensibly abandoned, Hebrew champion. Along the way, Samson also learns a thing or two about surviving life as a person with a disability and dignity alike: for example, the importance of disabusing others of the idea that what he needs is a facile cure (as strategized by Manoa's medicalizing mind) or pitying charity (which Dalila offers), rather than, say, reciprocal interdependence.

By the time Harapha saunters over, Samson has therefore begun to resist the devaluation of disability from his inner circle, to accept that his body—however changed—is anything but worthless, and to realize that the most practical first step to living with impairment in a disabling world is to change one's built environment rather than fantasize about having erstwhile *ability* restored in full. After the looming antagonist has heckled him long enough, an idea comes to the onetime Israelite strongman: “let be assigned / Some narrow place enclosed, where sight may give thee, / Or rather flight, no great advantage” (1116-8); as part of the deal, Harapha would also be allowed to “put on all [his] gorgeous arms” (1119), while Samson would best him “only with an oaken staff” (1123)—the signature prosthetic of the premodern blind.

Let me say it again, straightforwardly now: this is a request for an accommodation—albeit one to participate in a truculent, potentially anathema activity—and, what's more, a prognostication that *if* the playing field were leveled, the disabled guy would best his able-bodied opponent at the opponent's own game.<sup>[4]</sup> (Note the deft, parenthetical, obviously mordant pivot from *sight* to rhymed *flight* in a poem without end-rhyme, by a poet notoriously antipathetic to the device—which corrodes ability's lustrous surface in the process.) Now that's an unnerving thought.

Harapha's retort, we might already guess, is just as dismissive as the one I received, though certainly far more egregious. In the compulsory ablebodiedness of the play, and Milton's increasingly medicalized world, Samson's is a ludicrous claim. Unsurprisingly, then, Harapha insists that the erstwhile standard-bearer is fit only "to grind / Among the slaves and assess [his] comrades, / As good for nothing else, no better service" (1161-3); no longer can he be considered a "worthy match" (1164). "To fight with thee no man of arms will deign" (1226), Harapha summarizes, for Samson is "a man condemned," blind, a "slave enrolled" (1225) (the language of slavery proving an obvious problem here, but not one I can dwell upon at the moment). These two denunciations bear recapitulation: first, Harapha demurs from fighting with the excuse, "honor / Certain to have won by mortal duel from thee, / I lose, prevented by thy eyes put out" (1101-3); then, he reasserts, "To combat with a blind man I disdain, / And thou hast need much washing to be touched" (1106-7). Harapha thus dehumanizes Samson beyond even Dalila by denouncing him as unworthy of any rivalry, any relationship, suitable only to gawk at with derision. Blindness marks the end of the only career Samson has ever known, and the beginning of a new one, as objectified aberrance.

It also marks the beginning of his posing a problem. Two problems really: the hermeneutical problem of disability—which must be solved, defanged, rendered harmless by way of some interpretive framework[5]—and the nuisance of disability that asserts itself in a world of people who feel they needn't take the time to make that possible. (What, for one, for two, for three individuals?) Or who don't want to. Or who are scared to.

In this moment of appeal for an accommodation, Milton likewise poses a problem to his readers, most of whom are primed to understand the later report of the massive carnage in the Philistine theater (1596-1659)—carnage which Samson has effected, and which his father and the Chorus daftly, gratuitously celebrate—as the climax of the play. But what if, instead, its real apogee is the *relatively* nonviolent request I have discussed here—and the requester's immediate, visceral realization that such an entreaty will never be honored in full, or honored at all. In this light, the process of regeneration, and efflorescing self-awareness, that unfolds throughout the poem might lead not to the act of terrorism that follows but to this gesture of fanciful creativity undergirded by desperate necessity, to this potential for a new order of things wherein the disabled body is afforded a role fuller than that of spectacle—a (dis)order, in fact, that hinges not just on the accommodation itself but its larger stakes, and ramifications.[6] First, the extirpation of quotidian, ableist complacencies. And second, the eventual acceptance that disability can, and should, be embraced, rather than merely accommodated, for the vast resources it offers (among much else). In this reading, we of course cannot forget Samson's frenetic, murderous action whose recollection dominates the end of the tragedy—action which definitively forestalls the unethical gazing at his disability, but which must be condemned all the same[7]—and yet construe it as an untenable perversion of what might have been, to what the plot, the introspection, the change in built environment, all might have led.

III.

I have left much unsaid or only partially explicated, of course: that Milton's Samson is no hero in our modern—or even any conventional—sense (for his misogynistic stance towards Dalila as much as for his violence).[8] That the poet surely brings this tension into relief rather than simply endorsing the annihilation of the Philistines' upper echelon.[9] That Milton himself would have had some idea of what it means to receive accommodations, such as those from the Commonwealth/Cromwellian governments for which he worked. But that, as he suggests in my epigraph, the poet would also have known the importance of receiving more than, and even escaping from, mere accommodation—in the fleshy, supportive, interdependent forms of his amanuenses, friends (like Thomas Ellwood, in the attached sketch), and daughters (not an uncontroversial part of his legacy). That our precise identity category of “disability” was not operative in the seventeenth century, though very much alive was the idea of stigmatizing disability-like difference. That scholars have only recently started to “crip” Milton's texts in any kind of serious way—and that I hope to situate the ideas I limned here within the context of this galvanizing work as I revise and develop them.[10] That “accommodation” has carried quite a different meaning in traditional Milton scholarship—as the process of relating “things invisible to mortal sight” (*PL* 3.55) [11]—from its disability-related connotation here, but that these two versions of the word can, and should be, reconciled. And that perhaps the bridging of this chasm could be the beginning, even, of a history of literary accommodation requests, which are often freighted with important but unacknowledged imagistic, thematic, and generic significances.

Yet what I have hoped to clarify—what I was reminded of over the past week—is that this problematic understanding of an accommodation request as unnecessary nuisance—or worse still, condemnable overreaching—this feeling of loneliness Samson experiences, that I was experiencing, is nothing new. And that literature can foreground these damning continuities, as well as the imaginative feats such callous obtuseness can provoke in turn: characters', authors', our own.

For his part, Samson transforms, if only momentarily, into something far more than scholars have often thought him to be: a thinker, even activist, who anticipates recent disability theory by pointing up the importance and, more importantly still, the limits of *ad hoc* accommodations. Their fecklessness become especially clear in worlds, both his and ours, where the burdens of proof and of maverick problem-solving so often are infeasible or exhausting or, when they can be borne, endlessly thwarted and easily ignored, especially for multiply-marginalized individuals.[12] Perhaps, then, we can appreciate Samson's threefold realization—that what he requested marks a necessary corrective to the ableist imaginary; that even if it were to be realized, such an intervention is, in the end, insufficient; that change must unfold systematically, and on an ideological plane—while simultaneously refusing to countenance the drastic measures he eventually adopts.

For my part, I am constantly learning from, and beyond, Samson, even while identifying with him. *Because* I identify with him—and Milton, who surely identified with his hero as well. This means not resorting to violence. Not attacking those who gape at my efforts to trundle a small cart—a wiry near-wheelbarrow, really, in which precarious heaps of groceries are often packed—up the hill to

campus. I look back at them, as Samson cannot, and then away again, intent upon admiring my own imaginative response to a ridiculous predicament. Just maybe my audience will get the point. But this also means suggesting those things I know will seem risible to all the non-crips in the room. Astounding them with tales of daily disability gain. And remembering—when I can no longer suppress the flares and firings of rage that curl up from my stomach and into my throat, that I wasn't persuasive enough, good enough, sharp enough to solve the problem of parking on Princeton's campus—indeed, *remembering* not only Samson but the lines of poetry which ground me and created him. The fact that his author understands. That I am not alone. That my (relatively minor) struggle is one light in a constellation our protests can set ablaze.

To this end, there's more to do, of course, collective action to take and communities to join, other privileges to leverage and voices to amplify.[13] Such work is ongoing, on Princeton's campus and elsewhere, even as I write this—and admit that neither this essay nor the request that inspired it is any great act of disability activism. Just a meager attempt to preserve my energy for musing, reading, and writing as I take my solitary way towards a degree.

My one solace is that I think Milton would tell us there's a need for activism and meager attempting alike.

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\*For Milton's letter to Philaras, which I quoted in my epigraph, see “To Leonard Philaras,” *The Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 17-19.

[1] For more on the idea of “crip ancestor” and “crip lineage,” see Stacey Milbern, “On the Ancestral Plane: Crip Hand Me Downs and the Legacy of Our Movements,” Disability Visibility Project (curated by Alice Wong), 10 March 2019: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2019/03/10/on-the-ancestral-plane-crip-hand-me-downs-and-the-legacy-of-our-movements/>; and Jennifer Natalya Fink, *All Our Families: Disability Language and the Future of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon, 2022), esp. pp. 158-68.

[2] All quotes from *Samson Agonistes* come from William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, eds, *Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes and the Complete Shorter Poems* (New York: Modern Library, 2007). Line numbers are given parenthetically in the text itself.

[3] For the abuses to which Milton was subjected by his contemporaries see Angelia Duran's astounding article, "The Blind Bard, According to John Milton and his Contemporaries," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 46.3 (2013): 141-157.

[4] For the contemporary legal significations of "accommodation" in the U.S., see <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/employers/accommodations>.

[5] For more on this point—and the disability theorists who undergird it—see Pasquale S. Toscano, "A Parliament of Monsters': Genre, Disability, and the Revival of Epic Ability in Wordsworth's *Prelude*," *DSQ* 39.4 (Fall 2019): n.p.

[6] On calling Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple an act of terrorism, see John Carey, "A Work in Praise of Terrorism," *TSL* (6 Sept. 2021); for an alternative perspective, see Feisal Mohamed, "Confronting Religious Violence in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 327-40.

[7] On unethical staring at disability, see, *e.g.*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); and Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, "Introduction: Ethical Staring," *Rediscovering Disability in Early Modern England*, ed. Hobgood and Wood (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 1-22.

[8] Dalila hasn't emerged from my critical account faring too well, but she nonetheless remains a supremely interesting character in her own right, as William Empson pointed out in the critical classic *Milton's God* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961).

[9] For more on *Samson Agonistes*, see, *e.g.*, Laura Lunger Knoppers, "General Introduction," *The Complete Works of John Milton, Vol. 11, The 1671 Poems* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), pp. xix-lxxiv; Alan Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship and the 'Agon' over 'Samson Agonistes,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65.3/4 (2002): 465-88; Joseph Wittreich, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986); and Gordon Teskey, *The Poetry of John Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), esp. pp. 502-9.

[10] *E.g.*, Amrita Dhar, "Toward Blind Language: John Milton Writing, 1648-1656," *Milton Studies* 60.1-2 (2018): 75-107; Angelica Duran, "John Milton and Disability Studies in Literature Courses," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 6.3 (2012): 327-339; Susannah B. Mintz, "Dalila's Touch: Disability and Recognition in *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 40 (2001): 150-180; and Andrew McKendry, "Blind or Blindfolded? Disability, Religious Difference, and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *Imagining Religious Toleration: A Literary History of an Idea, 1600-1830*, ed. Alison Conway and David Alvarez (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 58-96. See also the early, groundbreaking, highly personal treatment in Eleanor Gertrude Brown's *Milton's Blindness* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1934).

[11] Cf. C.A. Patrides, "Paradise Lost and the Theory of Accommodation," *TSL* 5.1 (Spring 1963): 58-63.

[12] Particularly important here is Margaret Price's brilliant discussion of the "accommodations loop," such as in "Time Harms: Disabled Faculty Navigating the Accommodations Loop," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120.2 (April 2021): 257-77.

[13] For a glimpse of various perspectives on disability activism today, see Alice Wong, ed., *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Knopf, 2020).

**Image:** "Milton Dictating to Ellwood the Quaker," James Barry (1806), via the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license), <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/758862001>. **Description:** In the foreground, John Milton looks off into the distance as he dictates to Ellwood, quill in hand. In the background, a woman—presumably one of Milton's daughters—pulls books from the shelf.