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Term Paper

Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Paradise Lost:

Fore-Structure, Structure, (And De-Structure)

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Gospel of John, 1: 1) In the beginning, the Word was hovering upon the waters, creating all beings as well as humans. In the East, He created a paradise, opening the first chapter of the human race. The rise and fall of humans’ ancestors, Adam and Eve, initiate and inspire Milton’s writing of *Paradise Lost*, a forever memorable epic in Western literature. And this paper is designed to methodologically research the way of interpreting the Word in order to dialectically apply a possibly proper method of uncovering the significance or meaning in Milton’s work. At first, I will adopt the conception of fore-structure delineated in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* to pinpoint the conscious meaning, which is expected to control the semantic development of all books of the epic. Concerning this point, I will associate the idea of fore-structure with Gadamer’s “hermeneutic circle,” a theological way of interpreting the Word and literary texts. It is noted that Heidegger’s fore-structure is very similar to the idea of pre-understanding or presupposition in hermeneutics. And “self” and “I” combine to create a personal horizon of reading or interpreting the texts, resulting, to some extent, in prejudice and a vicious circle of misreading. However,

this is paradoxically a necessary evil in constructing a fore-structure. The redeeming way is to use a well-applied hermeneutical circle in which the individual parts of the text can remedy the pre-understanding or the personal horizon of the reader. Second, I will use the concept of binary opposition portrayed in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism to point out the impossibility of fusion of horizons, especially on the part of main characters in the epic. It is worth mentioning that some critics hold that Adam and Eve make a form of binary opposition. Here, I will advance some different opinions on this. And finally, the idea of de-structure will be introduced and debated. Could the Word or the text of *Paradise Lost* be deconstructed in a critical way? That is, would the self and the "I" combine to achieve an intention of deconstructing them?

The epic poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton was written during a time of religious revolution in England. John Milton did not want his epic to be just a traditional one, a story of a nation or a people. Instead, he would make the entire story about the human race, therefore making his epic important to all mankind, not just to England. Milton loads the first twenty-six lines with references to classical literature and biblical references. Also in those lines he presents his proclaimed subject, identifies a muse, declares that his epic will surpass those epics written before, and states his goal in writing the poem. Milton, in addition to that, manages to personalize his poem with references to his blindness and political happenings in England in his day. Only a great poet could fit so graciously all this pertinent information into the first twenty-six lines of a twelve book poem. All these qualities insure that his epic will truly exceed all the rest.

Based on this, in this paper, a Heidegger's concept of fore-structure will be applied to discuss the theme as well as a general meaning of *Paradise Lost*, which is

well portrayed in the first twenty six lines of the epic. Heidegger raises this notion with the belief that interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something given in advance. Therefore, it is almost impossible to understand anything without prejudice and presupposition. For historicity and temporality may affect the formation of the pre(ore)-structure of understanding. And since historicity and temporality are deeply related to personal lived experience, understanding has something to do with human existence. Accordingly, Heidegger explains the meaning of understanding as follows:

In every case this interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance—in a fore-having (fore-structure). As the appropriation of understanding, the interpretation operates in Being towards a totality of involvements which is already understood—a Being which stands (Heidegger 191).

Understanding is thus prior to every act of existing. But since the pre-understanding of the text is to some extent prejudicial, the validity of the pre-understanding needs to be based on the “hermeneutic circle.” For the validity of the presupposition (fore-structure) is expected to correspond to the interpretation of the individual parts.

Fundamentally speaking, the subject matter of this epic poem, in the words of Milton, is “of man’s first disobedience” (line 1). In this blank verse, Milton refers to the story in Genesis where Eve tempts Adam to eat the “forbidden fruit.” In the first five lines of the poem he describes the beginning of mortality, suffering, and man’s restoration, as “the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe, with the loss of Eden, till one greater Man restored us, and regained the blissful seat” (lines 1-5). “Death” is human mortality, and “all our woe” is man’s suffering (line 3). When he says “till one greater Man restored us,”

Milton is referring to Christ, and how He came to regain man's seat in heaven. In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, man, Adam, lived immortally in the paradise with his wife, Eve. Milton's goal in writing *Paradise Lost* was to "justify God's ways to men" (line 26). He hoped to explain God's mysterious plan for mankind. In short, when applying the conception of fore-structure to interpret the epic, we cannot neglect the whole picture provided by the first twenty-six lines, forming a pre-understanding to control and affect the description of other individual parts of the epic.

In addition, interpreting the epic, in the perspective of hermeneutics, is a dialogue between the author's horizon and the reader's horizon. The pre-understanding, that is, the fore-structure of the reader, in the perspective of Christian theology, might be primarily based upon the first three chapters of Genesis. Actually, only grounded on a mutual understanding of Genesis, can the fusion of horizons be reached.

The first three chapters of Genesis could create a microcosm of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The epic seems to be their elaboration and amplification. A brief review of some parts of these three chapters closely related to the text will be stated as follows. By this, not only intertextuality but the fusion of horizons can be shown. Furthermore, the essence of the literary artistic value of the epic might be appreciated on the axis of the Word.

First, in Chapter One, we can see how Jehovah created the world through the remarkably powerful speaking of Logos. Everything is created after His speaking and the hovering of the intrinsic nature of the Word, namely, the Spirit. And it is pointed out that there is a coordination conjunction between 1: 1 and 1: 2, which signifies that God's creation may indeed be a re-making of a fallen world destroyed

and judged by the Supreme Being for the rebellion of Satan and his followers, one third of heavenly angels. The suspending duration between 1:1 and 1: 2 could be an unfolding stage on which a war had been waged between good and evil, between anointed Christ and the fallen archangel. Thus, it takes time and efforts for Milton to elaborate on the suspending time space. In others words, abundant imagination of Milton has been flying between the extremely limited recorded biblical history and his poetic narration of the spiritual war. Besides uncovering the between-verse hidden meaning, we can see that man is created “in Triune God’s image and after Triune God’s likeness” (Genesis 1: 26). It follows that man is like God either in outer appearance or in intrinsic nature. In Hebrew, image refers to intrinsic nature, while likeness is associated with the outer appearance. As a head in the re-made heaven and earth, man bears the responsibilities of having dominion over, namely, managing the world. And God also promised that man will be so blessed that his descendants will be multiplied all over the world.

And then, in Chapter Two, unfolded are the construction of Eden, the creation of good and evil, the creation of Eve, the naming of all creatures, and the innocence of the first couple’s sex and love.

First of all, “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (Genesis 2: 8). In Eden, the Lord God grew two trees—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil—which are both symbolic of two sources of the universe: God’s eternal divine life and the Satanic force. This design put man in an existential choice of dilemma: either to obey God’s command to keep himself, in the eyes of the Creator, morally pure or to choose to know good and evil, enlightening his own eyes to go beyond the horizon of God’s absolute knowledge. To be obedient to follow the absolute Being or to choose a

self-conscious life? Obedience would lead to immortality and glory, whereas disobedience, death and curses. Indeed, this is a choice of the human dilemma: a choice between innocence and self-consciousness.

In addition, according to Genesis 2: 20b to 2: 22, it can be seen that Eve was made from one of Adam's ribs. The first man of the universe was made from dust (Genesis 2: 6), while the first woman on earth was a refined artistic work made from a rib rather than dust. This story of creation logically results in a patriarchal society. For in terms of creation, woman is out of man. Since woman is second to man, obedience is supposed to be her duty and responsibility. Breaking the logic could result in a human tragedy, just as the temptation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil leads to the downfall of human ancestors.

What's more, judging from the naming of all creatures (Genesis 2: 20), we can see the abundance of Adam's wisdom as well as the origin of human languages. Adam was supposed to have a so good understanding of the characteristics of each creature that he was capable of naming each of them. Actually, this has proven the unfathomable depth of his knowledge and wisdom.

And in the end of Chapter Two, we can see the innocence of love and sex, as well. Love is a destined union because Eve is the bone of Adam's bones, the flesh of Adam's flesh. Furthermore, sex is of no shame since "they [Adam and Eve] were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2: 25). So, in the paradise, before the downfall of the first couple, love and sex are pre-ordained to be impeccable and innocent.

Moreover, in Chapter Three, no less important than the downfall of the first couple and the temptation of the snake is the promise of Christ's salvation, which is well elaborated in Book IV and Book V. After eating the forbidden fruit, the first

couple's eyes were opened, "and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3: 7). The fig leaves are symbolic of man's self-righteousness, which, however, can not endure the wear and tear of time to essentially justify man's deeds. Thanks to God's mercy, "unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (Genesis 3: 21). The coats of skins refer to the salvation of Christ, Who, as the lamb of God, made Himself an offering to God and save and justify those who believe in Him. According to Genesis 3: 15—"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Galatians 3: 16), the seed of the woman indeed refers to the descendant of Abraham, the forefather of Israelites. The descendant of Abraham will fulfill the promise of salvation, redeeming man out of ordained curses and receiving the blessing of the Spirit. Only based on the theological consideration, can the amplification in the literary text show forth the essence of human history. Book IV and Book V combine to elaborate on the promised salvation of Christ, which is well portrayed in Apostle Paul's epistles, especially in Galatians. Actually, the promise of salvation overshadows all other theological doctrines in the third chapter of Genesis.

The essence and literary value are reinforced by Milton's elaboration and amplification of the biblical truth. How can a literary work survive the wear and tear of ages and time without showing forth universal truths? In fact, Milton's unfolding of the human history does parallel the description of the biblical history. His personal horizon is intimately associated with the theological record. Accordingly, the first three chapters of Genesis lays a foundation for his telling of the rise and fall of humans' ancestors, Adam and Eve. And the first twenty-six lines of the First Book forms a solid fore-structure, instrumental in the reader's full understanding of

the whole twelve books. In other words, a grasp of the first twenty-six lines makes a method of gaining the truth. The other individual parts of the epic play the role of circularly amplifying the pre-understanding. The pre-structure and the other individual parts are basically an organism, supporting and connecting each other. This circular relationship is in the principle of the so-called hermeneutic circle.

On top of that, it's pointed out that there seems to be a unifying power and united structure in *Paradise Lost*. The central facts of God's redemption and man's fall construct the central meaning or significance of the long epic: man was created of matter; pure, noble, but curiously fallible, having freedom of will. His mental levity and gregariousness expose him to the assaults of passion, which, while it sways reason, robs him of liberty and subjects him to slavery both within and without; but by the operation of Christ he may establish reason once again in his mind and reach a higher state than that from which he fell. As mentioned before, the central meaning forms a fore-structure controlling the whole semantic development of the twelve books of the epic. And without the fore-structure, a hermeneutical reading of the Milton's work will be likely to be in vain, and a fusion of horizons would be of no foundation.

Fore-structure forms a pre-understanding of interpreting the whole epic. However, a structural analysis is instrumental in understanding the thematic narration. Therefore, I will use Saussure's conception of binary opposition to analyze the thematic structure of the epic, uncovering the relationship of the main characters. Furthermore, a theological notion of fusion of horizons mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his epistles will also be introduced to broaden the reader's understanding of the existing binary opposition in the epic. Moreover, a biblical tradition concerning the formation of the patriarchal society will be concisely told in an attempt to help with a

better understanding of the cause of man's fall.

Contemporary critics known as structuralists have been arguing that binarism is fundamental and indispensable to human languages, cognition, and communication. Through binary ideas, man categorizes the seemingly chaotic world and imposes the notion of system on it. Therefore, binary oppositions help us to shape the entire world views and mark differences in an otherwise unorganized universe (Selden 56). Indeed, binarism underlies human acts and practices. Culture and languages more often than not work through binary oppositions. Be it in philosophy or in religion, paired opposites (body and soul, cause and effect, good and evil, matter and form, subject and object, dark and light, male and female, and so on) serve as the very foundations of human thoughts.

When it comes to literary studies, the discovery of thematic binary oppositions within literary texts is one of the most important reading and interpretive strategies. As Jonathan Culler suggests, certain oppositions are "pertinent to larger thematic structures which encompass other antitheses presented in the text" (226) and therefore are capable of generating thematic significance of the whole text.

As far as the interpretation of *Paradise Lost* is concerned, the quest for crucial binary pairs and their mutual references will therefore be essential and rewarding. And a brief survey of the notion of fusion of horizons will be stated as follows, serving as a complement of the linguistic binary opposition.

"Be not diversely yoked with unbelievers; for what participation is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship of light with darkness? And what consent of Christ with Beliar, or what part for a believer along with an unbeliever? And what agreement of God's temple with idols?" (2 Corinthians 6: 14-16) Apostle Paul holds that no participation or fusion between righteousness and

lawlessness, between light and darkness, and between Christ and Belair. It was actually an effective prescription for the sickening situation of the local church in Corinth, which was then in a chaotic state. In modern literary critics' words, the orthodox Christian practice and doctrine were deconstructed in those days. In an attempt to settle all the thorny problems such as fornication and church split, Apostle Paul demanded a clear-cut distinction between light and darkness, between Christ and Satan. To resist the fall of the church, Apostle Paul upheld the idea of no fusion between good and evil. In this way when tracing back to the fall of human ancestors, we can also find a linguistically and theologically binary opposition in *Paradise Lost*.

It's easy for the reader to find out binary oppositions that contribute to the complexity of this poem: God's heaven/Satan's hell, light/darkness, authority/freedom, domination/subordination, reason/passion, and obedience/transgression are all thematically important paired opposites. In view of the fact that binary oppositions pervade *Paradise Lost*, we might well go on the assumption that Milton, consciously or unconsciously, composes this epic on the basis of binarism, just as John T. Shawcross claims that "The complexity of Milton's simulated creation of a world is seen in the poem's intricate structures; its philosophical technique is sustained by the literary device of opposites" (209).

Among these opposites, Adam and Eve's relationship will be pinpointed and analyzed in this paper since their relationship is closely connected with the fore-structured: disobedience was the cause of man's fall. Most certainly all theologians and readers of the Bible interpret Genesis' story of the creation of Earth's first human couple, Adam and Eve, as one of comedy-turned-tragedy: their blissful lives were shattered when Satan tempted Eve with the promise of knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the one tree in the garden that

God designated as untouchable. However, Genesis does not fill in the missing background information as to the reasons why man and woman came to be the first rational, mortal creations of God's divinity. Moreover, most believers in the Bible do not know the specific similarities and differences regarding the two humans' characteristics, and how their relationship impact each other as well as all other living creatures in the garden.

Humans were created in the image and likeness of God. This testimony of a human's innate likeness and godlike image can be traced back to these lines in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: "Two of far nobler shape erect and tall/Godlike erect, with native honor clad/ In naked Majesty seem'd Lords of all/and worthy seem'd, for in their looks divine/ The image of their glorious Maker shone" (Book IV, lines 287-91). The modeling of the first parents can be seen as a model of God's love and divinity: proving their perfections by making them flawless in flesh and spirituality, providing the necessities for their well-being, and having them mirror the roles that God already plays out on a physical, mortal level in Eden. However, even though God created them to be in His likeness, He created them to be both physically, spiritually, and psychologically different.

The contrasting relationship between Adam and Eve might well be discussed within the horizon of the biblical tradition. As mentioned before, man's fall resulted from "disobedience"—the first couple's disobedience to God and Eve's disobedience to Adam. And Eve's disobedience was in essence against the patriarchal tradition of the Old Testament and Apostles' teaching in the New Testament.

When tracing back to the tradition of the Old testament, we can see that the leaders of the Hebrew society, whether kings or prophets or priests, were all male. Women in those days played a subordinate role. The kingship male tradition can be

proven by 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, and 2 Chronicles. Furthermore, according to Leviticus, the priests leading worship in the temple were also all male. In addition, the male tradition existed in the tradition of prophets, as well. Take Isaiah and Jeremiah, for instance. The major prophets in the Old Testament were all male. And all minor prophets were also chosen by God from males. So the patriarchal society was pre-ordained and practiced in the Hebrew society. Breaking the power rule would only lead to humans' fall in case we observe human history on the axis of the Word.

No less important in explaining the patriarchal tradition is Apostle Paul's teaching in the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians. According to 2 Corinthians 11: 3, "...the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." This verse is invaluable for clearly pointing out the divine power relationship of the whole universe. Besides, according to 2 Corinthians 11: 8-9, "the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man." Here, Apostle Paul teaches that Eve was of Adam, and that Eve was created for Adam. Based upon this, Eve's disobedience was against the divine power logic, leading to the loss of Paradise.

(Until now, I interpret the epic within the horizon of theology confined by Trine God, Who is the center of the universe. However, dialectically speaking, would the divine reason be deconstructed, paving a way for a postmodernist reading of the epic? And if *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted in a deconstructionist way, what will be the center holding the whole text? It is assumed that God plays the part of being the center of the text of origins. In a critical reading, God's perfect nature and unsurpassable wisdom can be challenged by such questions—is God responsible for the fall of mankind as well as Satan? Is God responsible for creating good and evil?

If the critic is not equipped with theological knowledge, these kinds of critical readings are likely to fall into valueless debates. In addition, the humanistic literary judgment would be overshadowed by prejudice and blindness. That is, “self” and “I” could combine to spark the endless debates on couples of controversial issues. Falling off the axis of the Word, the interpretations would become endlessly uncertain. Thus, a vicious circle of misreading could emerge. And since the center of the text is deconstructed, its eternal artistic and philosophical value would fall into uncertainty, prejudice, and blindness.)

In conclusion, this paper is designed to simultaneously use fore-structure, structure, and de-structure to uncover the hidden meaning of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. First, we can see that the fore-structure forms a solid foundation of interpreting the whole semantic development of the twelve books. The pre-understanding shown by the first twenty-six lines of Book One is very instrumental in uncovering and interpreting the other individual parts of the poem. It’s just like a the hub holding together the spokes of a wheel. Second, the thematic analysis of structurism, especially the use of binary opposition, is also vitally important in interpreting the contrasting relations existing among the main characters. The divine power relation pre-ordained by God was subverted, eventually leading to the fall of Satan as well as the human race. No fusion of horizons exists between God/Christ and Satan, while the binary opposition of the first Earth’s couple is associated with mutual conversation and dialogue. And finally, de-structure is advanced as a suggestion for a maverick reading of the theologically traditional epic. However, it is suggested that the validity of the interpretations can not be separated from the certainty of the Word, Which is the essence of the Supreme Being and the house of reason and wisdom.

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