

University of Szeged
Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of Literary Studies

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Protean Vicissitude
and Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Szeged
2011

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The Topic and Aims of the Dissertation

In the last two decades Milton scholarship has enjoyed an unprecedented diversity and a great variety of approaches, resulting in a change of how Milton is perceived: from a poet who portrays his certainties Milton became the champion of unresolved choices, of indeterminacies and incertitude.¹ The commencement of this change is hard to pinpoint. In 1987 Mary NYGUIST and Margaret FERGUSON were still able to claim, that “Milton continues to enjoy the status of the most monumentally unified author of the canon” (xii). Notwithstanding the poet’s status, the scholarship was far from being unified or uniform. The tendency of Milton criticism to fall into opposing camps appeared whenever the debate was over principles that were “ostensibly formal, theological, methodological, or overtly ideological” (NYGUIST & FERGUSON 1987, xiv), in other words, covering the whole spectrum of literary approaches. One needs only to remember or, better yet, become acquainted with T. S. Eliot’s criticism of Milton’s poetic style and the twentieth century’s “Milton Controversy” it launched which persisted well into the 1950s only to be recast, this time from a ideological/theological perspective, with C. S. Lewis and William Empson respectively championing the opposing fractions. There is a seamless continuity between the two controversies. For, although, the attack of the early 20th century Miltonoclast resulted in an ostensible demotion of Milton, the reassessment of his power as a poet expanded exponentially from 1940 to 1970, and it was Eliot’s remark on Milton that prompted C. S. Lewis’s defense of Milton’s reputation published in *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (1942). While appealing to the decorum of the epic genre and reclaiming for Milton’s

¹ Even a superficial glance at the subject of recent publications confirms this change. See for example R. A. Shoaf’s *Milton, Poet of Duality* (Univ. Press of Florida, 1993), Dayton Haskin’s *Milton Burden of Interpretation* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), John P. Rumrich’s *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge UP, 2006, first publ. in 1996), John T. Shawcross’s *The Uncertain World of ‘Samson Agonistes’* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), and Peter C. Herman’s *Destabilizing Milton: „Paradise Lost” and the Poet of Incertitude* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), to mention but a few.

verse greater visual achievements than Eliot would have admitted, Lewis placed *Paradise Lost* firmly within Christianity's central tradition. In 1961 William Empson challenged this claim rather pointedly in *Milton's God*, and expressed his dissatisfaction with what he called the "neo-Christian" interpretation of Milton. Although both Lewis and Empson addressed formal issues in their arguments, the ideological/theological questions prevailed and revolved around the figure of Satan and the responses it provoked from the readers.

However, by the mid 1990s the questions of Milton studies have been reformulated although still falling back on the ones stipulated earlier. The controversy is no longer about whether Milton is a good or a bad poet, or rather, if his influence is for the better or worse for making God bad (see EMPSON 1981/1961, 13), nor is it simply the question of whether or not Satan steals the hero's role of *Paradise Lost* (depending on whether one sees the mythopoeic grandeur of Satan as decisive of that role or as misleading and in need of correction by a narrative voice). The most recent tendency in Milton criticism, as FISH himself notes, is to present Milton either as "an absolutist poet with focused vision and a single overriding message" or "a more tentative, provisional poet alert to the ambiguities and dilemmas of the moral life" (2001, 5), the latter alternative increasingly becoming the vogue of present day Milton scholarship.

On the one hand, critics like Lucy Newlyn, John Rumrich and Peter Herman (to mention just a few) emphasize the conflicting, inconclusive, polysemous and paradoxical, indetermined nature of Milton's works, while, on the other hand, Stanley FISH (and the majority of American Milton scholars following in his footsteps) sees Milton's poem being "engaged in an act of containment", that is, "in a forcible undoing and dispelling of energies (of thought, action, language) that are protean in their resourcefulness" (2001, 11). Also, while the previous group sees ambivalence, open-endedness, the very variability of Milton's works as their chief engaging features, Fish, perfectly epitomizing the allegorical

sister Spirit, dismisses them, because “conflict, ambivalence, and openendedness [...] are not constitutive features of [Milton’s] poetry but products of a systematic misreading of it” (2001, 14). Consequently, just as Flesh finds her sister’s prospect bleak in Quarles’ emblem, many critics find Fish’s reading to be of equally pallid effect (notwithstanding its popularity), indeed to the point of suspecting Fish’s reader (and by extension Fish himself) of masochistic tendencies (FORSYTH 2003, 72; KERRIGAN & RUMRICH & FALLON 2007, 278). FISH in the preface to the second edition of his seminal work on Milton, *Surprised by Sin* (1997, first published in 1967), while addressing the charges against his bleak prospect, admits to selling short the “forces of difference” (1997, lxvi) for which he tries to find a more substantial place in his second monograph on Milton, *How Milton works* (2001). However, it is here that he alots them a role of mere temptations, of values that need to be dispelled because they can seen as values only by a “systematic misreading” of the poem (2001, 14), hence, Fish’s argument proves to be just as “suffocating” as the structure of his argument in *Surprised by Sin*.

Therefore, in my dissertation, I hope to find a place for “the forces of difference” in Milton’s works, and particularly in *Paradise Lost*, that would prove more liberating than Fish’s constraining notion which allows these differences mere cameo roles that are bound to consume themselves in Milton’s poetry and prose. In doing so, I also strive to decline the notions of incertitude and indeterminacy pervasive in Milton studies today (especially in the strand opposing Fish) and, instead, will interpret the multiple levels of meaning present in Milton as functions of fecundity rather than tokens of incertitude. On the one hand, variety forms the basis of reasoning — “Reason also is choice” and choice being possible only where there is a variety of options to choose from — and can be seen, indeed, as the habitat of temptation but certainly not restricted to it. Because, on the other hand, variety functions also as a token of divine creation, the abundance of which ascertains for Milton God’s benevolence and generosity, and, thus, functions as a source of both delight and pleasure.

In mapping out the constituent role of protean vicissitude in Milton's epic, I am relying on Michel JEANNERET's general study of Renaissance's "transformist sensibility" (2001) and on Richard WASWO's study of relational semantics of language in Renaissance (1987). Although none of them addresses Milton in their work, they both give a conspicuous treatment of Erasmus, which I hope to exploit by showing a connection between Erasmus and Milton, establishing the latter firmly in the intellectual milieu of Erasmian Christian humanism as opposed to the more recent scholarship emphasizing the poet's Puritanism. The distinction between humanism and Puritanism has been largely neglected because of their many overlaps, and a comparison of Milton and Erasmus hardly ever made because of Milton's alleged Ramism that all but erased Erasmus from the considerations of Miltonists. Even in the unlikely cases when Erasmus and Milton are brought together their comparison serves to reveal distinctions rather than similarities, which I hope to turn the other way around, especially by pointing at the similarity of their use of language as a means to move their audience. Also, a distinction between humanism and Puritanism does hold when it comes to the question of theodicy that puts Milton among the humanists. Although I make frequent recourse to theological issues in my dissertation, it is primarily a work of philology and cultural history.

The Structure and Methodology of the Dissertation

The *first chapter* delineates the currents of contemporary Milton scholarship and the role Fish played and is still playing in it. This is necessary because for the last half century Milton studies have been under the overwhelming influence of Stanley Fish, so much so, that a recent multi-author collection on authorship, text and terrorism by prominent Milton scholars, edited by Michael LIEB and Albert C. LABRIOLA, was entitled *Milton in the Age of Fish* (2007). This is not to say that Fish is unanimously accepted as defining both the content and the parameters of contemporary Milton scholarship, however, it has become almost impossible to launch a Miltonic subject without first addressing FISH and the

“Miltonic Paradigm” set forth in his *How Milton Works* (2001). In addressing Fish’s paradigm, I will also address Peter C. Herman’s criticism of it, for it offers a conspicuous departing point for my own dissertation. Since by claiming constituent role for protean vicissitude I seem to go against FISH’s own claim that Milton’s poems and prose are engaged “in the forcible undoing and dispelling of energies [...] that are protean in their resourcefulness” (2001, 11), *chapter two* accounts for the flexibility with which Proteus and the adjective *protean* were used in the Renaissance.² The copious occurrence of this “proverb of versatile mutability” is the more interesting when related to Milton who only seldom alluded to Proteus and never used the adjective *protean*. In *chapter three* I will outline the Renaissance language issues as pertaining to the notion of change and its bearing on the concept of creative reading and the perception of Renaissance works as susceptible to change themselves. I particularly focus on Erasmus’ treatment of language as praxis, and how this reverberates in Milton. Building both on Waswo and Jeanneret, I aim to present Milton as a poet of protean vicissitude who, like so many Renaissance thinkers, “gave positive value to change and celebrated the alteration of things and the flux of contingencies as a promise of renewal without denying that they are symptoms of sin, stigmata and mortality” (JEANNERET 2001, 3). The mythological figure of Proteus (discussed in chapter two), with his susceptibility to change, provides a narrative framework to the concept of vicissitude reemerging in my discussion for Proteus was equally regarded as a portentous sign and as a sign of positive flexibility. But equally important to my thesis is a frequently neglected aspect of the Proteus’ myth, namely that the old man of the sea also speak unambiguous truth. In the third, last (*fourth*) *chapter* of my dissertation I offer close reading of passages from *Paradise Lost* that exhibit protean fluctuation, and thus resist stability and fixed meaning, and point to the role this plays in Milton’s design of his epic

² I am deliberately choosing to use the general although contested term *Renaissance* instead of *Early Modern* mainly because of the metaphors of parturition employed in my study. In delineating the historical boundaries of my study, the Renaissance spans a period from the end of the 15th century to the middle of the seventeenth century – Erasmus marking its beginning and Milton its end – , thus, coinciding with the definition of Jules Michelet as far as its historical span is concerned.

and its reception. The chapter will itself exhibit a shift from thematic treatment towards a more formalist one, thus, premeditating the conclusion of my dissertation that delineates a shift in Milton scholarship towards the auditory features of the poem.

Results/Contributions

In *chapter two*, by including Erasmus into the discourse on Proteus (2.4), I managed to broaden the scope of the metaphor by introducing a neglected aspect of its academic processing, namely, its function as a metaphor of Christ (cf. "Proteus." *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 1990). Except for the alchemical interpretation, the two distinct notions of Proteus discussed in this chapter – the malignant one manifested predominantly in seventeenth century religious, political and antitheatrical pamphlets, and the beneficial one put forth in the writings of Renaissance humanist like Pico della Mirandola and Juan Luis Vives – are both present and applied to the life and works of Erasmus. Particularly, the debate between him and Luther puts forth the symbol of metamorphosis (and its embodiment in Proteus) illustrating the two extreme points of human mobility: not only does it stand for man's debasement and fall (and ultimately for the devil), but also for man's possibility for redemption. But of more importance is Erasmus's fascination with the many different aspects of Christ found in the Scriptures, and his regard of 1Cor 9:22 as the harmonizing principle of the apparent inconsistencies in Christ's life and teaching because Erasmus saw Christ as a kind of Proteus "representing the variety of life and teaching" (HOLBORN 214:31-33) and in Paul the most genuine accommodation of *philosophia Christi*. Erasmus's concept of *philosophia Christi*, far more pragmatic than philosophic, entailed Christ's spirit, or *philosophia*, to permeate every aspect of the Christians life, and become a way of life by imitation of Christ. And since Erasmus saw Christ as a Proteus figure, imitating him meant not only becoming Christ-like but Proteus-like too.

In *chapter three*, I regard my principal contribution to be in section 3.5 where I present a critical application of WASWO's notion of the "cosmetic" aspect of language in the

Renaissance. Namely, he perceives a discrepancy between theory and practice in Renaissance language debates: "When language is talked about, it is consciously regarded as the clothing of preexistent meanings, but when language is employed to reflect on its various functions [...] it is often implicitly regarded as constitutive of meaning" (1987, 60). The former, Waswo calls the "cosmetic view" while the latter he terms the "constitutive mode." However, I think that his choice of term "cosmetic" is misleading in respect to Renaissance way of thinking about words as clothing thoughts. The adjective "cosmetic" is definitively derogatory in Waswo's use, indicating the subjected status of words in a binary hierarchy with words. It allows words/clothes a mere decorative role that has no constitutive value. Hence, I don't think that cosmetic(s) appropriately describes what Renaissance thinkers thought clothes (and words) do. Clothes do make a man, and they especially did so in the Renaissance. The sumptuary laws, dictated both by the national and local government, and legislating what items of dress could be worn by various ranks of people, were enacted in the spirit of this commonplace. The theoretical opposition between the referential (Waswo's cosmetic) and relational (constitutive) views is, as WASWO himself notes, "a product of all the subsequent reflection on language" (1987, 61). And the reason why one perceives such a discrepancy in the first place is that Renaissance thinkers thought about language doing both: referring to their thoughts and construing them at the same time, just as their metaphors on clothing suggest. And it is precisely this "adulterating" power of clothes/words to change by addition that is facilitated by the ability to turn one idea into more shapes than Proteus.

In *chapter four*, I come to the core of my dissertation by claiming that the protean vicissitude of words and syntax perceived in Milton's work has primarily a poetical function of propelling the reader onward by escaping fixation and arrest of images that would allow the reader an unduly rest and an "occasion for an adventure in indirection" with "every epithet, every image, every assertion" of the poem (ADAMS 1955, 123).

In *conclusion* Eliot's numerous reference to Milton's musical unit (a syntax determined by the musical significance) brings my dissertation full circle, encircling Milton, Erasmus, and Waswo's semantical shift from referential to relational with the reoccurring musical analogy that connects them. Erasmus and Milton both recourse to music for illustration when they are arguing the benefit of variety and its contribution to unity of thought. According to Milton, "[v]ariety (as both music and rhetoric teacheth us) erects and rouses an audience, like the masterful running over many chords and divisions; whereas if men should ever be thumbing the drone of one plain song, it would be a dull opiate to the most wakeful attention" (FLETCHER 1835, 62). Erasmus assures us that variety does not disturb the harmony of Christ, "but as a composition of different voices is rendered more agreeable, the variety of Christ makes harmony more complete" (HOLBORN 211:28-31). Waswo, on his part, illustrates the constitutive function of language with music "just as a melody is constituted by, and is inseparable from, its sounds and the relations among them" so does language constitute thoughts, feelings, objects and meanings in the very act of articulating them (1987, 60-61).

But there is another aspect of a melody that has a bearing on the interpretative praxis – it is not prone to fixation. Therefore, the challenge Eliot poses to Milton scholarship to explore the interconnection of sound and sense, the constitutive way in which the matter of Milton's verse weave the fabric of his poem, might prove a Penelope's loom for the critic as it comes apart as it is woven, leaving a task of repeated attempts of construction while knowing that the very difficulty of such construction may invalidate the critical efforts. Hence, foreshadowing possible vistas for further thought, at the end of my conclusion I turn to Waler J. Ong's seminal work *Orality and Literacy* (1982) and redirect my focus from the text of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to its public readings. The question to be addressed in view of Eliot's criticism of Milton and Ong's notion of "oral literature" is whether or not we should readjust our mode of apprehension of Milton's work by letting its aural and oral features enter the arenas of conflict of his thought. Especially since Milton's *Paradise Lost* is, in HALE's words, "being oral in conception, execution, and first reception; so why not also in a present-day reception?" (2007, 17).

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lewde, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions; condemned in all ages, as intolerable mischiefs to churches, to republickes, to the manners, mindes, and soules of men. And that the profession of play-poets, of stage-players; together with the penning, acting, and frequenting of stage-playes, are unlawfull, infamous and misbeseeming Christians. All pretences to the contrary are here likewise fully answered; and the unlawfulness of acting, of beholding academicall enterludes, briefly discussed; besides sundry other particulars concerning dancing, dicing, health-drinking, &c. of which the table will informe you. London : Printed by E. A. and W. I. for Michael Sparke, and are to be sold at the Blue Bible, in Greene Arbour. Early English books, 1475-1640, 933:20.

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Conference Presentations Pertaining to the Topic of Dissertation

- 2011 “Milton and the Cherubim in Embrace.” Szegedi Tudományegyetem, Szeged, July 6-10
(*ESSWE3: Lux in Tenebris. The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism*)
- 2009 “The proper shape of Milton’s angels.” Pécsi Tudományegyetem, Pécs, január 22-24 (*HUSSE
9*)
- 2008 “Naked innocence, or the representation of Milton’s unfallen angels”, Károli Gáspár
Református Egyetem, Budapest, szeptember 4-7 (*Milton Through the Centuries.
International Milton Conference*)
- 2008 “Surprised by Sin, Again” University of London, London, July 7-11 (*The 9th International
Milton Symposium*)
- 2008 ““That complication of Horrors’: Milton’s Sin through the eyes of Henry Fuseli”, Szegedi
Tudományegyetem, IEAS, június (*VampireSympo II*).
- 2007 “Raphael, an angel of Milton’s own”, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, Szeged, January 25-27
(*HUSSE 8*)
- 2006 “Poetics of incertitude and intangling in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” Brunauerzentrum,
Salzburg, November 3-4 (Joint PhD Network Symposium: *Communicative Strategies in
Literature*)
- 2006 “Lilith: Fantastic Female Representations of Sin”, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, IEAS, Szeged,
június 9-10 (*Bilateral PhD/Post-Doc Seminar: What Constitutes the Fantastic?*)
- 2005 “Milton and Defension Prima on the Frontier”, Université Pierre Mendès France, Grenoble,
június 7-11 June (*The 8th International Milton Symposium: Milton, rights and liberties.*)