

The Language(s) in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: A Deconstructive View*

Wei-min Sun

Intergrams 13.2(2013):
<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/intergrams/132/132-sun.pdf>
ISSN: 1683-4186

Abstract

Critics frequently divide the language of Milton's *Paradise Lost* into two contrary categories, that is, the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language. The former is usually considered direct, flat and logical, while the latter is charged with tropes and verbal tricks, and thus both of them form a binary opposition. In this analysis, I try to demonstrate that such a division between the two languages is actually invalid, that the so-called prelapsarian language in *Paradise Lost* is also that of rhetoricity and, accordingly, of the postlapsarian state. My discussion is based mainly on de Man's deconstructive strategy of language. Miller's and Derrida's related theories of the sign are also referred to.

Keywords: *Paradise Lost*, prelapsarian, postlapsarian, deconstruction, de Man, Miller, Derrida

* This article is a revised version of "Prelapsarian or Postlapsarian?: The Language(s)," a chapter in *A Deconstructive Reading of Milton's Paradise Lost*, my Ph. D. dissertation.

It is generally recognized that, during the course of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, there is a continuous tension between the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language, and the struggle between these two languages for dominance corresponds to that between good and evil. The language of God, the Son, loyal angels and the still innocent Adam and Eve is supposed to possess a quality of purity, directness, plainness and tonelessness, whereas the language of Satan, bad angels and the degraded Adam and Eve is filled with rhetoric and verbal tricks.

Most critics of *Paradise Lost* have stated this tension between the two languages. Stanley E. Fish, for instance, suggests that "the loss of the perfect language is more than anything else the sign of the Fall, since in Eden speech is the outward manifestation of the inner Paradise" (*Surprised by Sin* 118). And logic and rhetoric, in Fish's opinion, are the two different qualities assigned to the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language respectively:

Rhetoric is the verbal equivalent of the fleshly lures that seek to enthrall us and divert our thoughts from Heaven, the reflection of our own cupidinous desires, while logic comes from God and speaks to that part of us which retains his image. Through rhetoric man continues in the error of the Fall, through logic he can at least attempt a return to the clarity Adam lost. (*Surprised by Sin* 61)

When discussing the language employed by Satan, Fish maintains that his is a "loose style, irresponsibly digressive, moving away steadily from logical coherence (despite the appearance of logic) and calling attention finally to the virtuosity of the speaker" (*Surprised by Sin* 74-75). By contrast, Fish argues,

God practises a Stoic austerity; his syntax is close and sinewy, adhering to the ideal of brevity (*brevitas*) by "employing only what is strictly necessary for making the matter clear"; the intrusion of personality is minimal, the figures of speech are unobtrusive and to the point, and one has little sense of a style apart from the thought.... As we read, God is innocent of Milton's skill; his eloquence is not eloquence at all, but the natural persuasiveness that is inseparable from wisdom. The distinction between the truth and the form the truth takes in speech disappears, as it does in Stoic theory. (*Surprised by Sin* 75-76)

Irene Samuel expresses a similar viewpoint regarding the difference between the two languages. God's language, Samuel postulates, is

the flat statement of fact, past, present, and future, the calm analysis and judgment of deeds and principles—these naturally strike the ear that has heard Satan’s ringing utterance as cold and impersonal. They should. For the omniscient voice of the omnipotent moral law speaks simply what is. Here is no orator using rhetoric to persuade, but the nature of things expounding itself in order to present fact and principle unadorned. (235)

Comparing the two languages, Stevie Davies also proclaims that “*Paradise Lost* fabricates a language of men and of angels in its original purity and charts the fall of that language into a linguistic field of ambiguity, double entendre, pun, innuendo, self-deception and rancorous abuse” (25). Likewise, Anne Ferry draws a distinction between the two languages. She postulates that “irony” belongs to the postlapsarian condition because this rhetorical device depends upon the divided nature of fallen experience. “To God in Heaven or to Adam in Eden there can be no discrepancies between appearance and reality because inner and outer realities are one. The unified vision of unfallen beings therefore cannot be ironic...” (145-146).

Milton critics are right when suggesting that in *Paradise Lost* the fallen characters have demonstrated the power of eloquence. Satan, for instance, is not only a liar but also an “orator” (9.670) acquainted with and employing lusciously the art of rhetoric. A liar is not essentially an orator, and a liar does not always succeed when telling lies. However, an orator, when utilizing the art of rhetoric, can often succeed in lying. It is no wonder that in Christian mythology the sea-god Proteus is associated with Satan (Neil Rhodes 18). As shape-changing is considered the perversion of nature, rhetoric is regarded as the perversion of truth. (It should be reminded that Satan constantly changes his shape in *Paradise Lost*.) In the first few lines of Satan’s speech after he has allured his legion to the North, one discovers various figures of speech which evidence Satan’s talent for being an orator:

If these magnificent titles yet remain
Not merely titular, since by decree
Another now hath to himself engrossed
All power, and us eclipsed under the name
Of King anointed, for whom all this haste
Of midnight march, and hurried meeting here,
This only to consult how we may best
With what may be devised of honours new
Receive him coming to receive from us

Knee-tribute yet unpaid, prostration vile,
Too much to one, but double how endured,
To one and to his image now proclaimed?
But what if better counsels might erect
Our minds and teach us to cast off this yoke?
Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend
The supple knee? (5. 773-788)

In these lines, one detects at least the use of irony (779-782), rhetorical questions (783-784; 785-786; 787-788), metaphor (“his image,” 784), metonymy (“this yoke,” 786) and synecdoche (“your necks,” 787; “The supple knee,” 788). In rhetoric, these figures of speech belong to the field of the trope, which involves the transference of meaning, the “deviation from the ordinary and principal signification of a word” (P. J. Edward Corbett 426). Namely, Satan’s language should not be taken literally.

The difficulty of reading arises as words are to be taken either literally or figuratively. How can the reader be certain of the meaning of a word or a sentence when the literal meaning and the figurative meaning are both available? Is there any effective criterion for choosing between them? As Wayne C. Booth rightly argues, it is barely possible to know whether an utterance is ironical or not (47). Similarly, as Paul de Man demonstrates, it is difficult to judge a question to be a rhetorical one requiring no reply or simply a question to be answered. Such a difficulty equally confronts the reader who has to decide on the meanings of the words potential to become metaphors, synecdoches and metonymies. Is the “yoke” literal or metonymic in Satan’s speech quoted above? Are the “necks” and the “supple knee” synecdoches, substituting the entire person? Or do they practically refer to what they apparently say?

The rhetorical subversion of the referential meaning of words is what interests de Man, whose preoccupation is language per se along with the difficulties of reading caused by language. As de Man suggests, “[t]he main point of the reading has been to show that the resulting predicament is linguistic rather than ontological or hermeneutic” (*Allegories of Reading* 300). According to de Man, such a linguistic predicament results mainly from the symbiosis of the referentiality and the rhetoricity in language. The rhetoricity abiding in language necessarily undermines the referential mode of language. By “rhetoricity” or “rhetoric,” de Man means “tropes and figures” (*Allegories of Reading* 6).

In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “tropes and figures” appear not only in the diabolic rhetoric but also in the utterances of good angels, the unfallen Adam and Eve, the Son and God. It may be just to proclaim that, in comparison, the heavenly rhetoric in *Paradise Lost* is less adorned and less crooked than the diabolic rhetoric. Sometimes,

nonetheless, the heavenly rhetoric puzzles and manipulates the reader no less than the diabolic rhetoric. In this analysis, I will first provide some examples of the “tropes and figures” in the language of the unfallen characters in *Paradise Lost* to disclose that these characters are unable to get rid of tropology. Secondly, I will explain how the tropological language “radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (*Allegories of Reading* 10), in contradiction to the opinions of those Milton critics, such as Fish, Samuel, Davies and Ferry, who postulate that the heavenly rhetoric is one of “logic,” “the flat statement of fact,” “original purity,” the unity of “inner and outer realities.” The supposed distinction between the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language, consequently, proves to be nonexistent.

In *Paradise Lost*, loyal angels employ figurative language. When defying Satan, Abdiel equips his language with such rhetorical devices as metonymy and the rhetorical question at least. In each of the first two quotations below, there is a rhetorical question. The “regal sceptre” in the first quotation and the “yoke / Of God’s Messiah,” the “golden sceptre” and the “iron rod” in the third quotation are metonymies:

Canst thou with impious obloquy condemn
The just decree of God, pronounced and sworn,
That to his only Son, by right endued
With regal sceptre, every soul in Heav’n
Shall bend the knee, and in that honour due
Confess him rightful King? (5. 813-818)

Shalt thou give Law to God, shalt thou dispute
With him the points of liberty, who made
Thee what thou art, and formed the Powers of Heav’n
Such as he pleased, and circumscribed their being? (5. 822-825)

henceforth

No more be troubled how to quit the yoke
Of God’s Messiah; those indulgent Laws
Will not now be vouchsafed, other decrees
Against thee are gone forth without recall;
That golden sceptre which thou didst reject
Is now an iron rod to bruise and break
Thy disobedience. (5. 881-888)

Warning his fellow soldiers to prepare to fight, Zophiel compares Satan to a thick “cloud” (6. 539), which is a metaphor. Metaphor is utilized again by this same angel to delineate the battle to come. Zophiel says, “for this day will pour down, / If I conjecture aught, no drizzling show’r, / But rattling *storm of arrows* barbed with fire” (6. 544-546, italics mine).

In Book 6, Raphael employs rhetorical questions, retelling the civil war in heaven: “In Heav’nly Spirits could such perverseness dwell? / But to convince the proud what signs avail, / Or wonders move th’ obdurate to relent?” (788-790). After the six-day creation, the celestial angels celebrate the work of God, and their hymns also begin with a series of rhetorical questions: “Great are thy works, Jehovah, infinite / Thy power; what thought can measure thee or tongue / Relate thee...” (7. 602-604), “Who can impair thee, mighty King, or bound / Thy empire?” (7. 608-609). In Book 12, Michael brings rhetorical questions into play to criticize the later churches: “What will they then / But force the Spirit of grace itself, and bind / His consort Liberty; what, but unbuild / His living temples, built by faith to stand, / Their own faith not another’s: for on earth / Who against faith and conscience can be heard / Infallible?” (524-530).

Irony is also used by unsuspecting angels. Encountering Satan in the Garden of Eden, Gabriel ridicules the archfiend by employing irony in his speech: “O loss of one in Heav’n to judge of wise, / Since Satan fell...” (4. 904-905), “So judge thou still, presumptuous, till the wrath, / Which thou incur’st by flying, meet thy flight / Sevenfold, and scourge that wisdom back to Hell...” (4. 912-914), “Courageous Chief, / The first in flight from pain...” (4. 920-921).

In *Paradise Lost*, Raphael’s account of the warfare in heaven in Book 5 and Book 6 deserves special attention and more discussion owing to its length and complexity. Raphael prefaces his narrative with the following lines:

High matter thou enjoin’st me, O prime of men,
Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate
To human sense th’ invisible exploits
Of warring Spirits; how without remorse
The ruin of so many glorious once
And perfect while they stood; how last unfold
The secrets of another world, perhaps
Not lawful to reveal? yet for thy good
This is dispensed, and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense I shall delineate so,

By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,
As may express them best, though what if earth
Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought? (5. 563-576)

The use of rhetorical questions here is not our primal concern at the moment. What is significant in these lines is that, to relate to Adam the war in heaven, Raphael must measure "things in Heav'n by things on earth" (6. 893). That is, he has to employ analogies. The language Raphael uses is therefore that of accommodation instead of realism.

Although the analogies Raphael has utilized are intended for human understanding, it is questionable that Adam is capable of comprehending all the vehicles. It may not be difficult for Adam to acquaint himself with the stars, dewdrops and birds in the comparison of Satan's legions to the innumerable "stars of night, / Or stars of morning," which resemble the "dew-drops" on leaves and flowers (5. 745-747) and the comparison of the good angels' march to the birds on wing in Eden (6. 74); the vehicles in some of Raphael's similes, however, appear rather alienated from the still innocent Adam, such as the comparison of Abdiel's strike on Satan's helmet to the strong winds or waters pushing a mountain from his seat (6. 196-197) and the comparison of the fight between Michael and Satan to the collision of "two planets rushing from aspect malign / Of fiercest opposition in mid sky" (6. 313-314). The disorder or calamities in the natural world, on the earth or in the skies, seems somewhat unlikely to happen in Paradise. Disease, a manifestation of the disorder in the human body as well as in the human soul,¹ should be strange to Adam too. Accordingly, the analogy below, in Book 6, is possibly futile:

in his right hand
Grasping ten thousand thunders, which he sent
Before him, such as in their souls infixed
Plagues; (835-838)

¹ Diseases, for people both in the Middle Ages and in the Elizabethan age, are caused by the failure of maintaining equilibrium between humors, and humors are related to passions. "It is apparent that in the thinking of the Renaissance, humors might move passions, and passions might cause the distemperature of the humors" (Lily B. Campbell 77). In short, inordinate passions may cause diseases. As Campbell points out, "no modern psychologist has more strenuously insisted upon the fundamental relationship between body and mind or body and soul than did these writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. That to a great extent this moral philosophy came to center about the struggle between the sensitive appetite and the reason meant that to the moral philosopher as well as to the physician the abnormal or diseased conditions of mind and body, where the connection of mind and body was most apparent, were of absorbing interest" (79).

For the same reason, phrases like “storming fury” (6. 207), “fiery darts” (6. 213), “fiery cope” (6. 215) and “scorched and blasted” (6. 372), all of which imply analogy, are equally enigmatic for Adam because they are beyond his experience of the prelapsarian world.

Raphael’s analogies are admittedly perplexing and appear inadequate when one makes a clear-cut distinction between the prelapsarian world and the postlapsarian world. When such a distinction is obliterated, however, Raphael’s analogies remain sound. In other words, Raphael may not be making a mistake when employing the disease and the disorder and calamities in the natural world as the vehicles in his similes, because he is assured that Adam is not alienated from expressions of this kind. If this is indeed the case, one detects in Raphael’s account the hint that the prelapsarian world is actually penetrated by the postlapsarian world. That is, the binary opposition of the prelapsarian world and the postlapsarian world in *Paradise Lost* is dismantled, and critics who are convinced of that binary polarity, such as Fish, Samuel, Davies and Ferry, apparently commit a mistake. John Leonard, when discussing the language used in *Paradise Lost*, also becomes refutable as he asserts that “[b]oth in Raphael’s lines and the poet’s, Milton reaches ‘back to an earlier purity’...” (*Naming in Paradise* 238).

Raphael’s “likening” of the spiritual to the corporal is perplexing to the reader even if not to Adam. As the reader tries to give the entirety of Raphael’s narrative a critical term, neither “allegory” nor the “extended metaphor” appears to fit perfectly. As William G. Madsen observes, Raphael’s mode of discourse “differs from allegory in that the first term is not a fiction; it differs from ordinary metaphorical discourse in that we cannot test the validity of the metaphor by pointing behind it to the reality which is being described” (263). More simply put, in Raphael’s account, it is difficult to discern vehicles from tenors, and the “‘sign’ falls short of the thing ‘signified’” (Mindele Anne Treip 193) even when the entirety of the Raphael passage is treated as an allegory or an extended metaphor. Madsen recognizes that Raphael’s depiction is “obviously not meant to be literally true” and that, on the other hand, “Milton would certainly claim for it more than ‘imaginative’ or ‘poetic’ truth” (263); therefore, Madsen suggests that Raphael’s account is typological, that it is “a shadow of things to come” and, more particularly, “a shadow of this last age of the world and of the Second Coming of Christ” (259).

However, Madsen’s interpretation is not without dispute.² We can simply

² As Treip suggests, “[t]he point is rather that by trying to see these reiterative episodes and speeches exclusively within a framework of typological, that is, doctrinal allusion, or even of devotional allusion, we distort the poem’s metaphorical structure. We not only miss other important relevances which such allusions may contain, but we may fail to perceive the true artistic interrelationship of all these echoing

postulate that his is one of the possible interpretations pertaining to Raphael's account. For the purpose of our discussion here, it is sufficient to know that Raphael's language is in other than its literal sense.

When seen in the light of deconstruction, the analogies Raphael employs in his account of the heavenly war are significant. As mentioned, Adam in his innocent state is incapable of comprehending the disorder or calamities in the natural world, just as he is unfamiliar with any of the "plagues." The vehicles in some of Raphael's analogies are therefore suspicious, suggesting that either Raphael or the poet/narrator of *Paradise Lost* is careless enough to make a mistake. If it is truly a mistake, no matter who makes it, it reveals the fact that the binary distinction between the prelapsarian world and the postlapsarian world is actually nonexistent. The analogies mistakenly employed are thus among the fractures or the incisions by means of which the deconstructionist may finally overturn or dismantle the apparent system of meaning, or the univocal truth, of a writing. These fractures or incisions are what ought to be located in a deconstructive reading. They are the moments in a writing which appear to transgress the writing's own system of values. As Jacques Derrida indicates, the deconstructive reading "must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses" (*Of Grammatology* 158). This is also what J. Hillis Miller means when he argues that

[d]econstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumspect entering of each textual labyrinth....The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly and unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. (*Theory Now and Then* 126)

The prelapsarian Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* also make use of figurative language. Adam, for example, employs metaphor when pronouncing the "timely dew of sleep" in Book 4: "and the timely dew of sleep, / Now falling with soft slumb'rous weight inclines / Our eye-lids" (614-616). In Book 8, Adam asks rhetorical questions

narrative configurations to other forms of implication, allusion, echo or cross-reference within the poem" (215-216).

when he is in conversation with God. Making a request for a consort, Adam says, “Thou hast provided all things: but with me / I see not who partakes. In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?” (363-366), “Hast thou not made me here thy substitute, / And these inferior far beneath me set? / Among unequals what society / Can sort, what harmony or true delight?” (381-384). In Book 9, Eve also speaks rhetorical questions before she is seduced by the serpent: “If this be our condition, thus to dwell / In narrow circuit straitened by a Foe, / Subtle or violent, we not endued / Single with like defence, wherever met, / How are we happy, still in fear of harm?” (322-326), “And what is faith, love, virtue unassayed / Alone, without exterior help sustained?” (335-336). When addressing Adam as her “head” (4. 442) and her “law” (4. 637), Eve uses metaphors, analogous with the metaphors Adam employs when he calls her his “other half” (4. 488) and “Best image” (5. 95). Metaphor is located again when Eve places the “gems of heav’n” (4. 649) in apposition with the stars in the night.

The Son of God employs tropes, too. In one of his speeches to the Father, the Son makes use of metaphor to allude to Sin as the “mortal sting” (3. 253) of Death. A few lines later, the Son employs another metaphor, the “cloud / Of anger” (262-263) when consoling the Father with the victory and glory to come.

After Adam and Eve have fallen, the Son pleads with the Father for his forgiveness, saying that the first parents have repented of their sin:

See Father, what first fruits on earth are sprung
From thy implanted grace in man, these sighs
And prayers, which in this golden censer, mixed
With incense, I thy priest before thee bring.... (11. 22-25)

The “sighs and prayers” of Adam and Eve are compared to the “first fruits on earth” implanted in mankind by the Father. In the opening lines of his speech, the Son’s reference to the tenor is comparatively slight. After the “sighs and prayers” are mentioned as an appositive, he goes on with the elaboration of the “first fruits,” the vehicle, adding furthermore another comparison by using “more...than,” one of the copulas:³

³ “Comparisons are introduced by the canonical ‘like’ or ‘as.’ Metaphor in absentia is a substitution pure and simple. Between the two extremes, authors have used a wide variety of intermediary grammatical structures generally as attenuation of the rational character of like, which insists on the partial character of the similarity, consequently avoiding the affirmation of total commutability” (*A General Rhetoric* 116). As Jacques Dubois et al suggest, “better than” is among the copulas of this category (117).

Fruits of more pleasing savour from thy seed
Sown with contrition in his heart, than those
Which his own hand manuring all the trees
Of Paradise could have produced, ere fall'n
From innocence. (11. 26-30)

God in *Paradise Lost* employs figurative language no less frequently than the other prelapsarian characters. The desperate revenge of Satan, God announces, shall redound upon his own “rebellious head” (3. 86), which is an example of synecdoche. When God proclaims that “Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut” (3. 193), the use of either synecdoche or metonymy is detected. It is an example of synecdoche if the “ear” and the “eye” stand for God; it is an example of metonymy when they substitute, respectively, hearing and sight. In the following lines, God employs first a simile to refer to Christ as the “second root” of mankind. Out of that simile, there is the metaphorical use of the verb “transplant:”

As in him perish all men, so in thee
As from a second root shall be restored,
As many as are restored, without thee none.
His crime makes guilty all his sons; thy merit
Imputed shall absolve them who renounce
Their own both righteous and unrighteous deeds,
And live in thee transplanted, and from thee
Receive new life. (3. 287-294)

In God’s declaration, in Book 5, that “This day I have begot whom I declare / My only Son, and on this holy hill / Him have anointed...” (603-605), the word “begot” is used in other than its ordinary locution, indicating the Son’s exaltation above the angels rather than the Son’s creation.⁴ In Book 10, God calls Satan and his followers “these dogs of Hell” (616). In the same speech, such a metaphor is extended and joins with other metaphors:

And know not that I called and drew them thither
My *Hell-hounds*, to lick up the draff and filth

⁴ As Roy Flannagan makes it explicit, the word “begot” has a special double meaning here. ‘Production of the Son’ is the first and literal definition. But second, the phrase of Psalm 2, ‘This day I have begotten thee,’ on which this passage is based, is interpreted metaphorically in Acts 13.33, Hebrews 1.5 and 5.5, and 2 Peter 1.17 as the exaltation of the Son” (329n174).

Which man's polluting sin with taint hath shed
On what was pure, *till crammed and gorged, nigh burst*
With sucked and glutted offal.... (629-633, italics mine)

In *Paradise Lost*, God seldom goes short of rhetorical questions. In Book 3, his speech on free will is charged with such a verbal device: "Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant faith or love, / Where only what they needs must do, appeared, / Not what they would? What praise could they receive? / What pleasure I from such obedience paid, / When will and reason (reason also is choice) / Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled, / Made passive both, had served necessity, / Not me" (103-111).

When seeing Satan alluring one third of the angels to the North, God speaks to the Son. Though given in a positive statement instead of the form of questions, God's utterance is intended to be a test:

Son, thou in whom my glory I behold
In full resplendence, heir of all my might,
Nearly it now concerns us to be sure
Of our omnipotence, and with what arms
We mean to hold what anciently we claim
Of deity or empire, such a foe
Is rising, who intends to erect his throne
Equal to ours, throughout the spacious North;
Nor so content, hath in his thought to try
In battle what our power is, or our right.
Let us advise, and to this hazard draw
With speed what force is left, and all employ
In our defence, lest unawares we lose
This our high place, our sanctuary, our hill. (5. 719-732)

Afterwards, God's announcement, ostensibly serious and urgent, is answered by the Son, whose reply makes it explicit that the previous speech of God is in reality ironical for the purpose of ridiculing Satan. The Son says: "Mighty Father, thou thy foes / Justly hast in derision, and secure / Laugh'st at their vain designs and tumults vain..." (5. 735-737). Though the Son says so, the reader may still take God for his word because it would appear quite reasonable for the Son to encourage or console the Father at such a critical moment. Later, in Book 7, God himself testifies that the earlier expression of worry and fear in his speech is merely fictitious:

At least our envious Foe hath failed, who thought
All like himself rebellious, by whose aid
This inaccessible high strength, the seat
Of Deity supreme, us dispossessed.... (139-142)

The irony in Book 5 is called a “joke” of God’s by William Empson (96). For the purpose of his argument, Empson goes further to conclude that such a joke “does not suggest a transcendent God whose Godhead is mysteriously identical with Goodness” (97).⁵ Ironies are frequently treated as jokes. Whether to call God’s utterance an irony or a joke seems to matter little because both terms point to the fact that God’s pronouncement is not to be taken literally. What God apparently says differs from what he actually means. Moreover, diverging from other ironies or jokes, in which one may frequently detect the laughable overtones, God’s mocking speech in Book 5 reveals nothing but seriousness and urgency. God succeeds undoubtedly if his intent is to delude the reader as the listener.

God sometimes employs other verbal tricks when he speaks. In Book 8, for instance, an example of “aporia” is found when God is confronted with Adam’s request for a companion to shun loneliness. “Aporia,” also called “dubitatio,” is an expression of doubt, often feigned, by which the speaker appears uncertain as to what he/she should do, think or say. The speaker already knows the answer, but he/she still asks himself/herself or his/her audience what the appropriate way to approach some matter is. God’s questions in reply to Adam’s request for a spouse are as follows:

What think’st thou then of me, and this my state?
Seem I to thee sufficiently possessed
Of happiness, or not? who am alone
From all eternity, for none I know
Second to me or like, equal much less.
How have I then with whom to hold converse
Save with the creatures which I made, and those
To me inferior, infinite descents
Beneath what other creatures are to thee? (403-411)

Later the reader discovers that, before Adam makes his request, God has already decided that it is “not good for man to be alone” (445) and that none of the creatures

⁵ One of the purposes of writing *Milton’s God* is, in Empson’s own words, to show that the traditional God of Christianity is “very wicked” (10) though Milton struggles to make Him appear less so (11).

Adam sees and names in the Garden is intended for him as a spouse (446-447). Hence God's earlier questions in reply to Adam are in reality to "try" (437) him.

So far it is evident that, when ridiculing Satan, God can employ irony just as Gabriel can (4. 904-905; 912-914; 920-921; as mentioned), and the sarcasm in the language of both figures is not drastically different in nature from that of Satan and his followers in making bitter remarks. Ferry apparently makes a mistake when affirming that irony belongs exclusively to the prelapsarian world (145-146). Given the fact that the unfallen characters in *Paradise Lost* can equally be ironic, the strictly polar, binary opposition between the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language thus becomes destabilized.

Since ironies are evidently present in the speeches of the unfallen characters, we may even go further to suspect that in the heavenly rhetoric there may be more ironies, undetected or unacknowledged. Owing to the difficulty of discerning which is and is not irony, every utterance of every unfallen character in *Paradise Lost* may be ironical. Every prelapsarian utterance thus becomes suspicious, resembling the magnificent stairs connecting the new world to heaven. It is uncertain whether the letting down of it is an irony or not:

The stairs were then let down, whether to dare
The Fiend by easy ascent, or aggravate
His sad exclusion from the doors of bliss. (3. 523-525)

As Miller pronounces it, "[i]rony can only be stabilized by an arbitrary act of the interpreter stilling the unstillable and ignoring other possibilities of meaning" (*Reading Narrative* 175). The deconstructionist, however, refuses to do so. Furthermore, an irony is a statement in which the intended meaning is the direct opposite of the ostensible meaning. In other words, a potential irony always creates an impasse, an unsolvable deadlock of contradictory and incompatible meanings, and there cannot be a clear-cut choice of signification. The result is the undecidability of the meaning not only of a few words but also of the entire text. When a word or a sentence in a text is an irony, the meaning of the entire text is changed. As de Man observes, "[i]rony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course" (*Blindness and Insight* 215). The text, trapped in such an aporetic situation, will eventually deconstruct itself.

When discussing *Paradise Lost*, Fish considers logic one of the virtues of the prelapsarian language, postulating that "logic comes from God and speaks to that part of us which retains his image.... [T]hrough logic he[man] can at least attempt a return to the clarity Adam lost" (*Surprised by Sin* 61). The "logical perfection" (*Surprised*

by *Sin* 86) becomes problematic, however, whenever irony is taken into consideration. According to the foundations of Western logic, which stems from Aristotle, something cannot be something and not something at one and the same time, which is the principle of non-contradiction.⁶ A statement and the negation of that statement can never be identical. If a statement is true, then its negation is false, and vice versa. Also, a statement must be either true or false. It cannot be both true and false, nor can it be neither true nor false; otherwise an argument will not be able to proceed. Irony is exactly what contradicts and defies the Aristotelian logic. An ironical statement is double-voiced, possessing both a meaning and the opposite meaning of it in one utterance. Double-voiced and undecidable in meaning, a potentially ironical statement is always self-contradictory. With irony, a logical reference or a valid argument becomes an impossibility.

Considering logic essential to the prelapsarian language in *Paradise Lost*, Fish maintains that such a language is “objective” and scientific” (*Surprised by Sin* 61). It is of “bareness and clarity or organization” (*Surprised by Sin* 61), or “its mode is exfoliation; that is, the speech does not build, it unfolds according to the rules of method” (*Surprised by Sin* 62). Logical methods tend to universality; in other words, they can be applied to an infinity of versions. In this respect, logic appears identical with grammar. As de Man points out, “[g]rammar and logic stand to each other in a dyadic relationship of unsubverted support” (*Allegories of Reading* 7).

In language, nonetheless, there is not only the grammatical structure but also the rhetorical structure, and the meanings engendered by these two structures often collide with each other. The rhetorical question is perhaps the most convenient example to illustrate such a symbiosis of grammar and rhetoric. In his *Allegories of Reading*, de Man demonstrates the incompatibility of grammatical and rhetorical structures in a question taken from a television show. When asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers, “What’s the difference?” His wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, yet she provokes only ire. Here, apparently, the single grammatical form produces two possible meanings which are mutually exclusive. Archie’s question asks for no answer; instead, it means “I don’t care about the difference.” Archie’s wife, on the contrary, considers the question to be answered. While Archie gives the primacy to its rhetoric, his wife takes the question totally literal. The literal meaning and the figural meaning coexist and form an aporia, because “it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings...prevails” (*Allegories of Reading* 10). Accordingly, rhetoric radically suspends logic.

⁶ See Vasilis Politis, *Aristotle and the Metaphysics*, Chapter 5.

Discussing Stephane Mallarme's "Mimique," Derrida once refers to the symbiosis of grammar and rhetoric. Words like "hymen," "pharmakon," and so forth, Derrida points out,

have a double, contradictory, undecidable value that always derives from their syntax, whether the latter is in a sense "internal," articulating and combining under the same yoke, hup' hen, two incompatible meanings, or "external," dependent on the code in which the word is made to function. (*Dissemination* 221)

The meaning of a word is determined according to its definition in the dictionary as well as to how it is interpreted in a certain situation. In this sense, the "external syntax" in Derrida is similar to the rhetorical structure which de Man considers the major barrier to a univocal reading.

The "external syntax" in Derrida is also reminiscent of Fish's emphasis on the "interpretive community." Fish postulates that a sentence is always the construct or product of a certain situation or context. "A sentence, however, is never in the abstract; it is always in a situation..." (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 291). And this situation or context will already have determined the purpose for which the sentence can be used. Fish explains,

[a] sentence neither means anything at all nor does it always mean the same thing; it always has the meaning that has been conferred on it by the situation in which it is uttered. Listeners always know what speech act is being performed, not because there are limits to the illocutionary uses to which sentences can be put but because in any set of circumstances the illocutionary force a sentence may have will already have been determined....What I have been saying again and again is that there are such constraints; they do not, however, inhere in language but in situations, and because they inhere in situations, the constraints we are always under are not always the same ones. Thus we can see how it is neither the case that meanings are objectively fixed nor that the meanings one construes are arbitrary. (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 292)

It is apparent that, in his discussion, Fish disassociates himself from a common characterization of deconstruction. He still believes that determinacy and decidability are always available in that the interpreter of an utterance is able to recognize the situation or context in which he/she is embedded. Viewed in the

deconstructive light, however, such a confidence in interpretation appears a bit too optimistic. Even if Fish is right about the importance of discerning the situation or context of an utterance, it still remains questionable that the interpreter may always and definitely know what situation or context he/she is in. As demonstrated, Archie's wife apparently fails to apprehend Archie's question, though the two people, husband and wife, should reasonably belong to the same "interpretive community." In daily life, the difficulty of knowing the situation or context in order to interpret an utterance correctly is a fact which can stand the test. One does not always know what other people truly mean when they say "I am glad that you like it," "It's a fine day" or "Tell me about it," even though these people belong to the "interpretive community" to which one also belongs. That is why one of the overwhelming questions in one's life is: "What did he/she actually mean when he/she said that?" When such a question is raised, it is already implied that language is not a transparent repository of meaning.

Irony, simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and the rhetorical question are among the tropes most frequently used. It is hardly possible to locate any text that can get rid of them. These tropes generate undecidability and undermines signification.⁷ They are sufficient, I assume, to refute any critical statement such as Christopher Ricks's when he postulates that "he[Milton] can...re-create something of the pre-lapsarian state of language" (110). The prelapsarian language can never be

⁷ A brief discussion of simile, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche is given here to demonstrate the nature of these tropes from the deconstructive perspective. Simile or metaphor is, it is traditionally believed, constructed on the basis of affinity. In simile or metaphor, however, the properties shared by both the vehicle and the tenor is frequently far less than the difference between the two. In Miller's words, the relationship of the entities in this world is based on difference rather than identity. "Their similarity to one another arises against the ground of this basic dissimilarity" ("Nature and the Linguistic Moment" 450). Simile or metaphor is sometimes depicted as two circles, representing the tenor and the vehicle respectively, with an overlap, signifying the shared properties by both. Starting from the similarity indicated by the intersection, the operation of a simile or a metaphor proceeds to affirm the identity of the totality of the two circles. That is to say, "[i]t extends to the union of the two terms a property that, in fact, is true only of their intersection" (Dubois 108). In other words, a simile or a metaphor is allowed to function only when the nonidentity between the tenor and the vehicle is either disregarded or suppressed. In metaphor, according to Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, a sign is substituted for another sign because they are somehow similar to each other. In metonymy, on the other hand, a sign is employed because it is associated with another sign (95). While there is an intersection between the tenor and the vehicle in metaphor, there is not any between the two terms in a metonymy. In other words, "while metaphor is based on the semic intersection of two classes, metonymy rests on a void" (Dubois 120). More arbitrary in the process of signification than a metaphor, therefore, a metonymy is also an undecidable. In a synecdoche, a part of something is taken to refer to the whole. A synecdoche may sometimes be illustrated as a small circle, representing the part or the particular, inside of a big circle, representing the whole or the general. The small circle is to comprehend the big circle, so to speak, when a synecdoche functions, which is apparently illogical. Moreover, like the tropes already discussed, there is always the undecidability of signification between the two terms in a synecdoche. To designate a clear and definite meaning in a synecdoche is groundless because the small circle may refer to different circles which contain it.

restored. As Vincent B. Leitch suggests,

[r]eading uncovers and confronts a language that vacillates uncontrollably between the promise of referential meaning and the rhetorical subversion of that promise. Truth is permanently threatened. A disruptive tropological language endlessly repeats the threat. (184)

When distinguishing the literal meaning from the figural meaning, de Man is still convinced of the possibility of a literal meaning; that is, referentiality is never totally renounced by de Man. He simply “problematizes it, undermines it, explodes it—yet preserves it” (Leitch 188). What de Man brings to the fore is the predicament of reading caused by the rhetoricity of language. In this regard, de Man is different from Miller, who believes that “all words are metaphors” (*The Linguistic Moment* 264) in that the relationship between words and their referents is difference. As Miller pronounces it, “[l]anguage is from the start fictive, illusory, displaced from any direct reference to things as they are” (*Theory Now and Then* 89), or “[signs] are fictions, arbitrary emblems, rather than substantial analogies or symbols. They do not participate in what they name, nor is the sign similar to its referent” (*The Linguistic Moment* 237). When inscribed in the sign system, the real is permanently suspended. It is therefore impossible to re-present the referent in language. By negating the possibility of any literal meaning in language, Miller’s opinion thus diverges from de Man’s. For Miller, the referential function of language is thoroughly undermined. Miller argues:

Rather than figures of speech being derived or “translated” from proper uses of language, all language is figurative at the beginning. The notion of a literal or referential use of language is only an illusion born of the forgetting of the metaphorical “roots” of language. (*Theory Now and Then* 89)

Miller’s theory of the sign also derives from Derrida. As Derrida suggests in his *Speech and Phenomena*, “[a] sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but ‘once’ would not be a sign” (50). An event takes place only once, while a sign functions by way of repetition. When it is repeated, a sign is able to designate the referent simply because there is a certain process which enables it to be recognized. The so-called linkage between the sign and the referent is, however, necessarily illusory and ideal (*Speech and Phenomena* 50). This linkage is in fact the production

of the trace, the effect produced in the structure of difference or supplementarity. In Derrida's words, the sign is "originally wrought by fiction" (*Speech and Phenomena* 56). To employ the sign is always already the violent act which expels the referent permanently. Discussing Mallarmé's writing, Derrida restates such a point, "'the word,' the particles of its decomposition or of its reinscription, without ever being identifiable in their singular presence, finally refer only to their own game, and never really move toward anything else" (*Acts of Literature* 121).

De Man recognizes the difficulties of reading caused by the symbiosis of the referentiality and the rhetoricity in language, while Miller believes that all words are rhetorical figures and hence denies the possibility of referentiality. They are not always the same, but, according to either de Man or Miller, we may conclude that it is questionable to draw a distinction between the prelapsarian language and the postlapsarian language in *Paradise Lost*. Milton critics who make such a polarization appear to have ignored the rhetoricity in language as well as the disparity between the sign and the referent, both of which appear not only in the postlapsarian language but in the prelapsarian language.

When newly created in the Garden of Eden, Adam is given the authority for naming all the creatures, and to name also means to know. As Adam pronounces it,

I name them, as they passed, and understood
Their nature, with such knowledge God endued
My sudden apprehension.... (8, 352-4)

That is, there is once a mystical bond between language and knowledge, or between word and thing, before the Fall of mankind. Milton makes this point clear in his "Tetrachordon," asserting that "Adam who had the wisdom giv'n him to know all creatures, and to name them according to their properties, no doubt but had the gift to discern perfectly" (*Complete Prose Works* 2: 602). In other words, the ultimate signified is once present in the signifier. However, a deconstructionist would disagree drastically with whoever holds such a viewpoint. As Derrida argues,

[t]o name, to give names..., such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of... (*Of Grammatology* 112).

To name suggests to inscribe the referent in the differential system of language. A name is a linguistic sign which essentially designates the absence, instead of the presence, of the referent. As Leitch proclaims, “the sign marks an absent presence. Rather than present the object, we employ the sign” (44). When the referent is given a name, the presence of the referent is alienated and irreducible. A name is necessary only when the presence of the referent is unattainable. To employ names is already the indication of the impossibility of unmediated presence. When viewed deconstructively, Adam’s assertion that he can understand the nature of all the creatures when he gives names to them is problematic.

Even though one supposes that there is indeed the so-called prelapsarian world in which the ultimate signified is once present in the signifier, the story of the prelapsarian Eden is inevitably caught up in the postlapsarian condition as long as it is put into words. Milton is, admittedly, an epic poet/narrator in the postlapsarian world, employing a language which has already fallen. As Leonard suggests, it is possible that Hebrew is closer to the prelapsarian language than any other language of the fallen world is, but “it is still a language of the fallen world” (*Naming in Paradise* 17). Ricks also remarks that “[w]ith the Fall of Man, language falls too” (109). At the origin, Derrida reminds us, “there is nothing simple, but a composition, a contamination...” (*Paper Machine* 139). In Book 10 of *Paradise Lost*, Sin is hideously right when she foretells that Death should feed on “herbs, and fruits, and flow’rs” first and on “each beast next, and fish, and fowl” (603-604)

Till I in man residing through the race,
His thoughts, his looks, words, actions all infect.... (607-608)

Works Cited

- Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.
- Campbell, Lily B. *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961.
- Corbett, P. J. Edward. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Davies, Stevie. *Milton*. Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1991.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- . *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- . *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . *Paper Machine*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.
- . *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.
- Dubois, Jacques, et al. *A General Rhetoric*. Trans. Paul B. Burrell and Edgar M. Slotkin. London: John Hopkins UP, 1981.
- Empson, William. *Milton's God*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Fish, Stanley E. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- . *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1971.
- Flanagan, Roy. ed. *John Milton: Paradise Lost*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.
- Jakobson, Roman, and Morris Halle. *Fundamentals of Language*. New York: Mouton, 1956.
- Leitch, Vincent B. *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983.
- Leonard, John. *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.
- Madsen, William G. "Earth the Shadow of Heaven: Typological Symbolism in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Arthur E. Barker. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. 246-263.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.
- . *Reading Narrative*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998.

- . *Theory Now and Then*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Leonard. New York: Penguin, 1998. All quotations are taken from this edition.
- . *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*. Ed. Don. M. Wolfe et al. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-82.
- Politis, Vasilis. *Aristotle and the Metaphysics*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Milton's Grand Style*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1963.
- Samuel, Irene. "The Dialogue in Heaven: A Reconsideration of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Arthur E. Barker. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. 233-245.
- Treip, Mindele Anne. *Allegorical Poetics and the Epic: The Renaissance Tradition to Paradise Lost*. Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1994.

Wei-min Sun, Associate Professor, Department of Tourism English, Far East University
Email: 35tempe@gmail.com