

"Downcast Eyes" on a "Downward Path to Wisdom": Reading Milton's "Darkness Visible" through a Derridean Perspective

[Miriam Piedade Mansur Andrade](#)

Abstract

A reading of the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost* will prove that the dialectics of traditional philosophy on the issue of vision/blindness should be placed "under erasure". The above-mentioned operation is accomplished in the epic through a "darkness visible" perspective in the establishment of an (in)stance in the matters of interpretation.

Keywords: John Milton. *Paradise Lost*. Jacques Derrida. Visual Metaphors. "Darkness Visible".

The purpose of this research upon the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost* is to show that Milton's phrase "darkness visible" (1.63),¹ and other lines of *Paradise Lost*, adumbrated the poststructuralist's stance upon vision, that is, the need to mistrust in the immediacy of the physical sight and search for a more deeply reflection upon the superficiality of images. The poststructuralist perspective on sight, particularly with the one of Jacques Derrida in his book *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993) and in his theories, is compatible, in the view of this project, with Milton's "darkness visible" perspective. This research, as a product of an informed reading, displays a careful interpretation of the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost* and it may prove that Milton would have proposed in his epic poem of the seventeenth century that the dialectics of the traditional philosophy on the issue of vision/blindness should be placed "under erasure".² Such attempt follows with a cancellation of the literal eye and the insertion of the figural "I" in the scope of interpretation. The methodology of this text will provide a critical guide for the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost* which will be negotiated with the Derridean questions on the contemporary philosophical problematic over sight.

The ambivalences of the visual words in *Paradise Lost* demonstrate an oscillation between the use of the figural and the literal vision. This oscillation suggests that a type of threshold is established and its reference leaves the scope of stabilized concepts for a more debatable perspective. An analysis on *Paradise Lost's* textual structures may uncover questions over the metaphysical conceptions that constitute the Western philosophy and attack the symbolic order of the *logos*. The line of thought of traditional philosophy is characterized by the orderly distinctions of the binary oppositions. Questions on the presence and the establishment of the binary oppositions mark the main locus of discussion of logocentrism.

Logocentrism is a term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida that refers to traditional philosophy as based on the "metaphysics of presence".

Logocentrism demonstrates how the structures of the binary oppositions work as determinate forms that serve as the basis of Western philosophical thought. The interpretation of the sign, according to Derrida, should perform an act that "must proceed in the night" and escape "the field of vision" (DERRIDA, 1993, p. 45). For the accounts related to the experience of darkness to reach visibility, Derrida's book *Memoirs of the Blind* demonstrates the articulations of two types of blindnesses, the "transcendental" and the "sacrificial". These two blindnesses intervene and repeat each other. Derrida's "transcendental" and "sacrificial" blindnesses are indeed two scopes of interpretation and rhetoric that proliferate meaning in the powerless aspect of the literal, and consequently, decentralize the essence of the physical eye leading interpretation to a "darkness visible" realm.

The phrase "darkness visible" appears in the first Book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The "darkness visible" perspective is a type of experience that takes one to a blind state. There is the undecidability of these two elements, darkness and visible. Milton, like the poststructuralist view of Derrida, plays and (de)stabilizes a concrete division between these two signs. In this phrase, these two opposing concepts are conflated and there is no evidence of the privilege of one over the other, on the contrary, their meanings cannot be approached independently. "Darkness visible" orients the direction of the ambiguities of the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost*, for it implies the experience of the loss of an external and physically visible paradise and the accomplishment of seeing through darkness the unveiling of a "paradise within" (12.311).

The visual metaphors of Book 1 demonstrate that there is an oscillation between two points of signification. The sentence "darkness visible" contributes to mark these two extremes. Darkness is outside and inside the words of this Book. It is outside in the whole description of Hell as the setting of the fall. It is also inside because the reader can have access to the mixture of doubt, hopelessness, and fear that confuses the choices of the fallen angels.

The oscillation of the visual metaphors between darkness and visibility comes to terms with Derrida's blindnesses. Darkness corresponds to the sacrificial blindness, especially because its meaning involves a loss that is represented by a sacrifice. The fall for the fallen angels stands for the loss of the presence of God and, at the same time, serves as a symbol of their deprivation from the light of Heaven. In this manner, it seems that in their state they face the dark realm of blindness. Visibility, on the other hand, represents the awakening after the fall and is similar to the transcendental blindness. Out of darkness, the angels' inward attempt may symbolize the possibility of reaching light again. The fallen angels' traces recall the inner capacity of their minds that open their (in)sight and motivate their fight for the conquest of their paradise. In their recovery attempt their outward frailties can be overcome by their inward resistance for submission. The position of these two extremes does not conduct this study to the frame of two distinct possibilities of signification, on the contrary, it is exactly on the oscillation of these two possibilities that the experience of blindness takes place.

The blind state of Satan in the beginning of Book 1 is repeated when he falls in the profound abyss of chaos in the end of Book 2. The inner strength that helps the recovery after the fall comes up again in the dark abyss of chaos when "the sacred influence of light appears" (2.1034-1035). All the darkness of Satan's experiences is replaced by the visibility of a "pendent World, in bigness as a star" (1.1052). In the

seeing of light out of dark surroundings, darkness becomes visible, and blindness brings the restoration of sight.

Darkness leaves Hell with Satan's attempt to violate boundaries and perform his conquest and the visibility of light apparently takes control of the narrative in the beginning of Book 3. For the persona, who in the first lines of Book 3 seems to represent the blind poet himself, light is the purest expression from within and, through it, one may erase the literal eye, "that roll in vain" (3.23) and insert the figural I with its "shine inward" that sees and tells "things invisible to mortal sight" (3.52-55). Yet for Satan, the light from within is symbolized by all the negative features that sprung from his mind to motivate the revenge against God's new creation and aspire to possess God's power.

Satan's losses continue tempting him in the beginning of Book 4. The traces of his memories "of what he was, what is, and what must be" (4.25) keep on affecting his view in his enterprise. In his despair, "The Hell within him, for within Hell" (4.20) continue assailing his mind wherever he goes to. When he sees the beauty and order of the Earth, his "bitter memory" (4.24) is recalled fiercely, and his former state comes to his mind to reinforce the differences on his shape and condition. With the views of the new world, he contrasts his deformed shape and realizes his fallen and weak being. Satan's thoughts turn inwardly and outwardly up to the moment that he comes to the conclusion that he is to blame God for his fall. Satan's inconsistency in blaming God reflects his doubtful experience of losing God's light as well as the reference of God in his being. In this sense, Satan's losses represent his detachment from his only referent, or better saying, from order itself, which symbolizes God, and, because of it, he experiences disorder and confusion.

From Book 5 to Book 8, the retelling of the stories of creation is all invaded with the light of God. The first temptation of Eve in Book 5 brings forth the need to open the eyes of the two human creatures for the risks of the external beauty and seducement. The light of God is represented by the presence of Raphael in Eden and his efforts to convey the goodness of God are attempts to make God visible for Adam and Eve. Raphael stands for the visible aspect of the invisibility of God's acts. The presence of Raphael with his view and report of the world before Adam's eyes, may suggest Adam's need to find his personal fulfillment in the other. When Adam is together with Raphael, he disregards Eve's presence and she becomes sightless to them. The presence of the other reinforces Adam's own presence. Adam's passivity before Eve's power foreshadows the events to come, already implying the dangers of the external unwise seducement in denigration of an inward expression.

The problematic instance posed by the previous books is summed up in Book 9 in which the losses and the envious state of Satan are fulfilled in the shallowness of Adam and Eve, and, in this matter, their falls will be intermixed in their different types of blindnesses. The visual metaphors support the two conditions of the characters' behavior. Satan's eyes cannot cope with what they see: all brightness of his former state presently lost at the view of the new magnificent creation of man. Adam and Eve also experience blindness, however their blindness is demonstrated by their inner lack that controls their outer dependence.

In Books 10, 11, and 12, Milton's lesson is settled and the visual metaphors used in these final lines of the epic support his words. It is in these three last books that the oscillation in the usage of the visual metaphors helps prove their importance in Milton's approach towards vision. The evocation of the literal eye in the first lines of Book 10 seems to set the two opposing views to show how Milton's lesson concentrates on the

variation that slides from the need to erase the literal eye and validate a deeper concern with the exercise of the figural eye as placed in the end of Books 11 and 12.

The traces and the sliding movement from the literal to the figural sight, from darkness to visibility, from blindness to evidence, help reinforce the major concentration of Milton's lesson, that is, a search for an inner light, a reason, that may guide one through the best path to choose. The dialectics of the visible at the service of the invisible parallels the Derridean questions of logocentrism or the matters of the "metaphysics of presence". In Derrida's views the invisible stands for the figural aspect of language that de-stabilizes the notion of a fixed present as a determinant of immediacy or a bearer of true essence. In this case, the best way to meaning may follow an operation that does not rely on the pure exercise of the physical eyes, but rather on the one that expresses the placement of the (in)stance in the realm of interpretation and resists the immediate risk of the superficiality of the visual.

The experience of the Derridean blindnesses, the movement from the outward vision towards the (in)sight, in a "downward path to wisdom" (SHATTUCK, 1996) is mastered into an inward process of self-formation and inner reflection. The articulation of the visual metaphors in *Paradise Lost* does take the reading to a dimension in which perception must be exercised. The elevation of the reading to the realm of external and internal senses gives life to the lines of the poem. Sight, for the sake of reading or interpretation, should be exposed to blindness in an attempt to erase the act from the outside and invite the exercise of the inner one.

The reference to blindness as the exercise of vision establishes these two writers as deconstructive readers of the dialectics of traditional philosophy on the issue of sight. Both writings, *Paradise Lost* and *Memoirs of the Blind*, invite the readers to reflect on the use of the eyes and place the issue of vision/blindness "under erasure". In their transformative attempts, the common denominator on sight is the "darkness visible" perspective, in which the literal eye is cancelled and the figural "I" exercises vision. Through the exercise of a "darkness visible" perspective, the immediate use of sight is replaced by a more reflective attempt, avoiding the risks of this act. Out of darkness, blindness is the experience of evidence. In this sense, Milton and Derrida suggest the opening of the eyes as an attempt, through a process of (in)visible interiorization on a "downward path to wisdom", to cancel them out and place the exercise of the (in)stance in the act of reading.

NOTES

¹ The references to *Paradise Lost* are taken from MILTON, John. *Paradise Lost*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996, and will be cited parenthetically throughout this essay with the number of the book first, followed by the number of the line(s), e.g. (1.63).

² The term "under erasure" is introduced by Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology* (1976). Derrida adopted from Heidegger the operation of writing "sous rature" (under erasure). In this operation, the printed word is crossed out, and this act is intended to indicate that although the word is inaccurate, it still needs to be used. However, in this reading, the "under erasure" operation will work as an attempt to deconstruct the visual metaphors of *Paradise Lost* and uncover the philosophical traces they contain.

Resumo

Uma leitura das metáforas visuais de *Paraíso Perdido* prova que a dialética da filosofia tradicional, no que diz respeito a questão visão/cegueira, deve ser colocada "sob rasura". Tal operação é

realizada no épico através da perspectiva "darkness visible", com o estabelecimento da visão interior na problemática da interpretação.

Palavras-chave: John Milton. *Paraíso Perdido*. Jacques Derrida. Metáforas visuais. "Darkness Visible".

Referências

DERRIDA, Jacques. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

JAY, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. California: University of California Press, 1993.

MILTON, John. *Paradise Lost*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996.

SHATTUCK, Roger. *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.