

Liberty as progression: a study of the revolutions idealized in *Areopagitica*, *The marriage of heaven and hell*, and *The matrix*

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Abstract:

I address the assumptions of *Areopagitica*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Matrix* as well as provoke their ideals in order to expose the status of their liberty and progression towards truth as one that is in no sense absolute, but time and space specific.

Keywords: Milton, Blake, *The Matrix*, Hutcheon, liberty

According to the reading I make, John Milton's *Areopagitica*, William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* idealize liberties and call for revolutions exalting a progression towards conditions that are portrayed as superior. Each text urges its reader to perceive ideological standards in which people once were or still are immersed. They urge their readers not to be subjected to these standards imposed by their times. Though a less informed reader may presume otherwise, this aspiration certainly does not produce texts insusceptible to other ideological standards. I here propose that at the same time that these texts strive for an evasion from the dominant ideology of their times, each work presents the reader with its own set of ideological standards. The prospect of reducing the scope of my work by leaving behind one of these three texts was not taken for granted. But in addressing assumptions, provoking ideals and exposing the status of formulations on liberty and truth, my work has benefited from the fact that I approach these three distant texts. By delving into historically distant texts, the reader is given perspective through contrast. S/he then becomes more easily aware of how formulations of truth and liberty change according to historical sites. The contrastive effect produced in the distances between these three texts is the reason I have maintained a wider scope. This effect justifies my choice and my personal perseverance.

If someone were to read *Areopagitica*, s/he would put it down convinced of having read a political pamphlet entirely devoted to the cause of freedom of speech, idealized as the essential path towards truth. Many are the libraries and public institutions that display plaques with one of *Areopagitica*'s many aphorisms celebrating truth and falsehood grappling in a free and open encounter (Milton 181), or truth as strong next to the Almighty in need of no policies and stratagems to make her

victorious, needing only room, or books as works that are "not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are [. . .]" (149) or asserting "as good almost kill a man as kill a good book [. . .] the image of God as it were in the eye" (149-50). But these heroic images should not elude the reader into thinking Milton idealized an absolute freedom of speech. In other words, exemptions are made in *Areopagitica*. Milton specifies: "I mean not tolerated popery, and open superstition, which, as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate provided first that all charitable and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled" (182). The problem with his conception of liberty is made evident. There is no absolute liberty as may be presumed if readers are to have access to all opinions except one, or two, or perhaps three. As much as it is understandable why Milton would make his exemptions, once we consider his ambience, we cannot accept his proposal as liberty. As beautiful, inspiring, invigorating and idealistic as Milton's imagery and aphorisms are in his defense of liberty, I do not read them as expressive of any sort of absolute liberty. And the more we approach his ideal critically, as I have attempted to do here, the more we realize that that ideal belongs entirely to him – as much as to his location in time and in space.

The notion of progression is expressed in Milton's pamphlet when he urges his readers to close "up truth to truth" (176). He believed that with the liberty he proposes in *Areopagitica* Englishmen could come closer to the union of the scattered body of truth. Furthermore, Milton's confidence in an ultimate arrival in truth, in "her Master's second coming" when "he shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection" exposes *Areopagitica's* religious underpinnings which not all readers may comply with (178).

Another setback in Milton's notion of liberty as progression lies in his view of England and Englishmen. We can see how Milton not only believes his "liberty" will progressively bring humanity closer to truth, but he also believes that Englishmen are the ones "chosen before any other [. . .] as out of Sion" to gather the pieces (176). Heaven favors Englishmen, being propitious and propending towards them.

There are a series of passages where this English supremacy notion is voiced. The presence of this prejudiced seventeenth century conception helps us see how the notion of progression suggested by Milton's text is problematic and biased. Consequently, so is his conception of liberty. These predispositions presented in Milton's pamphlet compromise its idealizations. Few would easily accept his pleas by the argument that Heaven has been propitious towards Englishmen. In this reasoning, Brazil, for example, is devoid of this divine privilege because Reformation did not arise in the New World. The question is, What advancement, what progression is there in making this dislocation if I have to submit to the view that Englishmen have some sort of divine privilege? There is none. These are *Areopagitica's* dated predispositions.

The first consideration that must be made about *The Marriage* is Blake's notion of contraries. According to Blake, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction / and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and / Hate, are necessary to Human existence. / From these contraries spring what the religious call / Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason / Evil is the active springing from Energy / Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell" (*Illuminated Books* 144). Progression is never to be applied to the contraries

themselves. They do not change; their polarities are never altered in any way. Progression is only to be applied to the human capacity of sense perception. This enhancement in sense perception is necessary so that humans are able to see things as they really are. The revolution *The Marriage* is calling for concerns the enhancement of spiritual perception to an ultimate point where liberty would be attained.

Under liberty, "the whole creation will / be consumed, and appear infinite and holy / whereas it now appears finite & corrupt" (*Illuminated Books* 66). This moment when everything will appear "infinite and holy" is Blake's apocalypse. It is the ultimate step in progression of sense perception. Here man accomplishes the ideal of marrying contraries – hence the title. In marrying contraries, man is able to realize how the moral designations regarding concepts of good and evil in life are a human construct and not real. The impositions of good and evil such as articulated by the Ten Commandments for instance are a product of tyrants. They are not real and as such should have no influence on man.

A person who is not in a state of liberty is commonly described by Blake as being in chains, or as he says in his poem "London" being in "mind-forged manacles" (*Potrey and Prose* 75). But Blake himself manifests his chains by the fact that he was not an artist free from the ideology current in his time – as no artist ever is. *The Marriage* cannot escape the fact that it was written by an artist living in London, for instance – an English dissenting Christian, Goddard, turn-of-the-18th-century man. Understanding that Blake is not an isolated figure helps expose how the notion of liberty he is calling for is problematic. A study of his influences problematizes the possibility of liberty, progression and of liberty as progression.

The point of my work is to show *how* his notion of liberty and progression is historicized and problematic. The most obvious of Blake's influences in writing *The Marriage* may be mentioned as an illustration. The very title of Blake's text is indicative of how influential Emanuel Swedenborg presents himself to Blake. Blake's "Memorable Fancies" parody Swedenborg's "Memorable Relations." Both present "matter of fact accounts of adventures in the spiritual worlds" (Nurmi 27). In *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg articulates the notion that God keeps spiritual equilibrium between good and evil in the world, whereas Blake urges for a superabundance of what the religious and Swedenborg call evil.

Blake presents himself greatly indebted to Swedenborg in writing *The Marriage*. So although *The Marriage* urges for a liberty and criticizes Milton, for instance, for writing in fetters, it also displays its fetters. *The Marriage* is not so free itself if great part of what it does is reply to another text; exalt precisely what has been debased; marry what has been separated; reverse doctrines and satirize texts. My main point here is: critical and imaginative appropriation should not be equated with liberty – especially not to the kind of liberty articulated in *The Marriage* and certainly not liberty as a progression.

I read *The Matrix* as the story of Mr. Anderson's transformation in becoming Neo. This transformation calls for a disbelief in the Matrix, the machine constructed simulation of life. An enhancement of this disbelief is the ideal. While Neo's mind develops its disbelief and lets go more and more he gradually manifests less regard towards rules of physics. He then becomes faster, hits harder and jumps higher. Neo can ultimately do things no one else can do because he pursues the cleansing of his

senses. Here I propose *The Matrix* is a narrative that allegorically accomplishes the idealization of liberty as progression that I have read in *The Marriage*. In becoming Neo, the protagonist allegorically fulfills Blake's ideal for humankind – the ideal of liberty as progression.

Blake urges his reader to marry contraries and develop a disbelief in the rules of morality imposed on man. Because God does not establish them, they are not real. In the film, this is precisely what Morpheus urges Neo to realize. Because the Matrix is a simulation, its rules of physics are to be perceived in the same way Blake sees rules of morality – not real. Consequently, Neo's breaking the rules of physics in the Matrix because they are not real would signify the concept of breaking the rules of morality of *The Marriage* – hence the allegory.

Nevertheless, what will be addressed here is my view that while *Areopagitica* and *The Marriage* present themselves as assertive, confident, uncritical, unhesitating, believing and overall entirely devoted to their revolutionary and pro-gressive ideals, *The Matrix* does not. *The Matrix* does not present itself entirely devoted to the pursuit of truth and liberty.

Cypher is a character in the film that is desperate to return to the simulation. He would be glad to have his body go back to being plugged and once again be an energy source for the machines. He could not care less about liberty, progression or truth – the apparent ideals of *The Matrix*. By having a character in the film that prefers the simulation in spite of "knowing the real," the film problematizes its own apparent ideal. So the film being allegorical certainly does not necessarily imply being univocal in relation to its influences. Consequently, I propose *The Matrix* be read as a postmodern parody adaptation.

According to Hutcheon, postmodernism always implies a paradox of "complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (*Politics* 11). *The Matrix* is postmodern because it inscribes ideology through the allegorical reading of Neo as the one who accomplishes the Blakean ideal, and subverts it through the character of Cypher, which questions it or exposes the ideological inconsistencies behind this Blakean ideal. The doubleness within postmodernism as proposed by Hutcheon is what I have found to be most consistent with my reading of *The Matrix* not only as postmodern, but as a postmodern parody/adaptation of *The Marriage*.

The consonance Linda Hutcheon sees between postmodern and parody is significant here. According to Hutcheon, "Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (*Poetics* 11). Therefore, a doubleness of complicity and critique or repetition with difference is fundamental to the proposition that *The Matrix* is a postmodern parody/adaptation for *The Marriage*.

Irony has a very specific role in the relationship between a text and its parody. I should cite Hutcheon again. In discussing the fundamental role played by irony in a parodic relationship, she asserts, "The pleasure in parody's irony comes not from humor in particular, but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' [. . .] between complicity and distance" (*Parody* 32). So, the irony in a parodic text must suggest a movement between the more complicit and the

more critical facets of the established relationship. In *The Matrix* irony is suggested in Neo's accomplishment of the ideal implicated in the movie. Once this ideal is accomplished he would see the truth; he would see things as they really are in the Matrix – computer codes. But critical distance is produced when one considers Cypher's comments on Neo's progression or accomplishment. Hence, Neo's progression in terms of disbelief is always also a "progression." Neo's accomplishment would only be viewed as the ideal within the allegorical reading of *The Matrix*. Within Cypher's problematization, the event of Neo's accomplishment is actually a counter-ideal.

Concluding, impressions of truth and liberty are time and space specific. Historically, works of art stand as material manifestations of the physical conversions required by ideologies in their hailings of individuals and reminders of those individuals' statuses as always-already subjects. Hence, delving into distant texts as sites of expression for these ideologies allows the reader to contrastively study the different formulations that may be made for truth and liberty. Both *Areopagitica* and *The Marriage* call for a pursuit of truth. They urge their readers to progressively undertake a movement towards a supposedly superior condition where there is liberty and, in doing this, they manifest their affinity towards their locations in time and space. Under the allegorical reading I here propose, *The Matrix* may be read to do the same. But it distinguishes itself by problematizing its own apparent ideals of liberty and truth through Cypher. In the film, he is given voice and once his articulations are taken into consideration, the reader cannot refrain from being reluctant towards the film's apparent ideals. The ironic bouncing between this doubleness of complicity and critique has led me to consider *The Matrix* postmodern as Hutcheon defines it.

Resumo:

Abordarei os pressupostos de *Aeropagitica*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* e *The Matrix*, assim como provocar seus ideais, a fim de expor o *status* de sua liberdade e progressão em direção a uma verdade que não é absoluta, mas específica do seu tempo e espaço.

Palavras-chave: Milton, Blake, The Matrix, Hutcheon, liberdade.

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