MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST* AND A POSTCOLONIAL FALL

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ABSTRACT

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* epic and empire are dissociated. Contrary to many misreadings, this all-important work of the English Renaissance intersects postcolonial thinking in a number of ways. By using Gayatri Spivak's circuit of postcolonial theory and practice, this paper enacts a counterpointal (mis)reading of Milton's text: *Paradise Lost* may at last free its (post-)colonial (dis)content. Since every reading is a misreading, my (mis)reading of Milton's paradise is a mo(ve)ment of resistance against and intervention in a so-called grand narrative of power (Milton's epic) with a view to proposing a postcolonial conversation with this text.

KEY WORDS: John Milton, postcolonialism, poetry.

Milton's imperial epic, in the words of Martin Evans (1996), seems to transform itself into an imperious epic in relation to post-colonial matters in the post-modern moment. Evans begins to discuss his overall thesis in the following ways: the texts linked to the literature of colonialism treat recurrent themes – of the colony itself, of the status of the colonized, of colonizers and their reasons – and share a common object whose lineaments are figured and delineated from linguistic practices, descriptive tropes, narrative organization, and conceptual categories. Departing from a supposedly shared discursive practice found in colonialist texts, Evans proceeds to connect these same practices to the grand argument of *Paradise Lost*: in justifying the ways of God to men Milton would appeal to an imperial discourse. This imperial discourse, however, is reworked

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as an ambivalent practice in the epic and is redressed in empyreal overtones. David Quint's *Epic and Empire* (1993) is another seminal volume whose beginnings are a rejection in *Paradise Lost* of imperialism and of the imperial epic tradition traced down to Virgil. Quint introduces a different critical moment when he proposes that the epic is transformed into adventurous romance, and that, finally, *Paradise Lost* is an epic that put an end to all other epics; Milton is a poet against empire. On the way that traverses empire and post-colony, Samuel Johnson is cited in an epigraph to *Milton's Imperial Epic* and sheds light on the notes to come: "[t]he subject of an epick poem is naturally an event of great importance. That of Milton is not the destruction of a city, the conduct of a colony, or the foundation of an empire" (EVANS, 1996, p. 1). This privileged reader of Milton's text understood that *Paradise Lost* would not found an empire, would not promote the empire, but maybe would initially de-stabilize the epic genre in its negotiations with (u)empire (agency and practice).

As long as negotiations are at stake, Homi Bhabha in his Afterword to the volume *Milton and the Imperial Vision* sets out on "an ironic act of courage" when he comments on Balachandra Rajan's propositions on Milton's epic as suffering from an imperial temptation. *Pace* Bhabha (1999, p. 317), "Milton earns the authority to speak in our time, to become part of the postcolonial conversation, because of the deep ambivalence that exists in his 'imperial voice'". This earned authority associated with deep ambivalence is the Miltonic terrain *par excellence* and one on which I will not fear to thread. Milton's imperious epic will be read in its ambivalence and in its various negotiations.[1]

The choice of images in *Paradise Lost* for a crucial moment in one of the Western grand narratives of human history – the Fall – challenges the informed reader or critic to consider the relation between the acquired condition of Adam and Eve and the discourses of power and colonization in face of the New World. The surprising passage in the epic, with the images related to Adam's and Eve's loss of their "first

naked glory" (9. 115),[2] reveals the extent to which this narrative of the Fall is associated with the loss of liberty of the colonized peoples of the New World. *Paradise Lost* exposes both histories as one possible history of human life. In addition, at the moment of re-dressing themselves, Adam and Eve symbolize the Fall also in terms of civility and civilization. In what follows, I will discuss this passage in particular with a view to understanding how the narrative eye/I (the authorial epic narrator) over these images and characters is less imperialist and much more likely to be linked to a political thinker exploring an instance of temporal and cultural difference. This bi-focal narrative outlook into politics and cultural difference will be thought out in relation to postcolonial assumptions.

Paradise Lost represents the acquired state of things through which Adam and Eve had to transit after the Fall: a fall into language (a postlapsarian one), and a fallen language that evokes a vast complex of contingencies and conflicts, complexities and paradoxes, that which also emerges in any postcolonial reading. The temporary center of discussion gravitates round the idea that the New World was habitually described in terms of a new Eden and that Milton's paradise is filled with images of this baiting New World. The implication is not a simple one, of course, since the Fall in *Paradise Lost* is first introduced through a satanic admiration of this New World that is God's "latest" creation; superimposed upon this first narrative, the reader is presented with the epic narrator's admiration upon the creation and the subsequent loss by humankind of God's new world in relation to the New World. One of the forms Satan finds in order to tempt Eve, for instance, is a corruption of Adam's and Eve's sovereignty over the created "things" in the garden of Eden: "Me thus, though importune perhaps, to come / And gaze, and worship thee of right declared / Sovran of creatures, universal dame" (9. 610-12). This corrupting stare, this gaze previously negotiated in Pandemonium, will subvert natural sovereignty into imperial domination. The next step of the serpent, as in a *stare decisis* inside out, will be to induce Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit after having openly declared that the "mother

of mankind" "Sovran of creatures" and "universal dame" is to become "Empress of this fair World, resplendent Eve, / Easy to me it is to tell thee all" and still, "Empress, the way is ready, and not long" (9. 568-9, 626). This eye-straining imperial topos and eye-stained satanic trope will become more and more evident in the representation of fallen human subjectivity in *Paradise Lost*.

The allusive structure of the scene of the Fall impels the reader to understand this very Fall through the t(r)opological optics of imperialism, that is, the convocation, or even recruitment, of Adam and Eve to the contemporary "problematics" of opposition, conflict, and difference initiates with the loss of "innocence" of the autochthonous subject or the aborigine.[3] Such state of affairs is complicated still more if the reader take into consideration that the Fall is narrated in the register of shame and naturalized through a surprising and adventurous ethnographic comparative admiration:

> And girded on our loins, may cover round
> Those middle parts, that this newcomer, Shame,
> There sit not, and reproach us as unclean
> [...] there soon they chose
> The fig-tree, not that kind for fruit renowned,
> But such as this day to Indians known
> In Malabar or Decan spreads her arms
> Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
> The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow
> About the mother tree, a pillared shade
> High overarched, and echoing walks between;
> There oft the Indian herdsman shunning heat
> Shelters in cool, and tends his pasturing herds
> At loop-holes cut through thickest shade. Those leaves
> They gathered, broad as Amazonian targe,
> And with what skill they had, together sewed,
> To gird their waist, vain covering if to hide
> Their guilt and dreaded shame, O how unlike
> To that first glory! Such of late

> Columbus found the American so girt
> With feathered cincture, naked else and wild
> Among the trees on isles and woody shores.
> Thus fenced, and as they thought, their shame in part
> Covered (9. 1096-98, 1100-20)

There seems to be nothing new in the analogy between Milton's Eden and the New World, or between Adam and Eve and the ab-original inhabitants of this New World. What is "new" in the aforementioned passage focusing on the Fall is that the epic narrator makes representation equivalent to loss, an autochthonous loss.

The colonization of Adam and Eve by Satan, or the imperialism of Satan in regard to the "original" couple, asserts, with direct references, the interdependence between universal Fall and historical fall (for example, the fallen subjects of seventeenth-century England that submitted themselves to a "corrupt tyranny" of a Charles I or even to an-other "corrupt tyranny" of an Oliver Cromwell). In *Paradise Lost*, the postlapsarian "universal" subject of Scripture equalizes, in an ambivalent fashion, the dispossessed native subjects of the New World; the beginning of history is, in such transactional manner, the chosen first moment of colonialism and imperialism. Again, the aforementioned passage seems to sway both under a colonialist vision of history and up the mast that gives away postcolonial vistas into histories. Which vision of history is played out? What textual tradition of this history is a yoke critiqued out in the open or "yoked out" deconstructively? Before being described as the natural inhabitants of America, of the New World, Adam and Eve chose the "banyan:" an East Indian family tree that sends out shoots which grow down to the soil, roots that form secondary trunks, and whose leaves look like the leaves of the fig tree. As the epic narrator makes clear, the ab-original couple did not choose the well-known fruit derived from that tree, nor did they choose the blossoms of that same tree, they chose instead the leaves of a similar, but not equal, tree that grows in India. From India, the epic narrator next takes the readers,

from lines number 1102 to 1108 of Book 9 of *Paradise Lost,* to the noun "Indians" and "Indian." At this exact moment, the informed reader and critic are faced with the superimposition of East (India, Indian, Indic) and West (Indian-American, indigenous), and also confronted with a linguistic slip whose posterior ab-use has rectified, recrudesced, at fault and to a fault, the forms and the structures of imperialism. Nonetheless, if Adam and Eve cover themselves up with the leaves of this Indian/ indigenous tree, they do it out of shame and as the consequence of an error. Again, this linguistic slip, an isomorphism at best, indicates a re-vision of the registers of discovery of the New World. The fault/the fall and shame of Adam and Eve are represented and can be read thus: as a deviation of Columbus (a detour from the sea-routes that would lead to the East-Indies), as a defalcation of the discoveries (they failed to meet the European promises and expectations), as the defacement of colonization (erasure of any previous subjectivity), as the defaults of imperialisms, and even as a possible defeasance of postcolonialisms (thinking them in terms of a general theory of resentment or simply as trivial acritical generalizations). All those mis-takes, as if posed in relation to an interdependent universal Fall and a historical fall, are still to be confirmed in the next corrective evidence in the same passage of the epic.

Fault, falls, superimposition and interdependence of ideas are also to be found in the reference in the epic to the "Amazonian targe" or light Amazonian shield. At this point, what is ambivalent, and not ambiguous, is to what "Amazonian" in the poem refers. Would there be a reference to the "recently" discovered warriors that inhabited the riverbank, or their textual prototypes, fierce female combatants that inhabited the classical antiquity? In case the reader opts for the first possibility, the Amazonian peoples, the poem asserts soon after that that Columbus found(ed) these peoples "recently" discovered in America girt in the "first naked glory" before their fall. Another point of inferential interest: would this lineament be a pronouncement, forfeiture, prefiguration that

the Amazonian peoples, until then as much innocent as pre-fallen Adam and Eve, should be corrupted by discovery and then from this point on be dis-covered in a linguistic slippage, a shaking soil of signification, or be re-discovered from a blurred eye? If the answer to this (un)rhetorical question is a "positive" one, would not the text be linking, definitely, the European (or English, to be more specific) imperial project to the satanic imperial prospect in *Paradise Lost*? And yet: in making such connection, could the epic still be read in its proto- or pro-colonial/imperial affiliations? In a localized sense, by reading these textual aporias, by mis-reading them, I intend to open up the epic toward a postcolonial conversation, that is, I recover the poem from a critical arena full of insidious interpretations, and redeem the text, redirect its foreclosed contents, toward a critical battlefield fulfilled with readings and mis-readings. The colonial/imperial avatars in Milton's paradise may then submerge, for there to emerge postcolonial questionings.

On this very route, following the theological line of thought that takes the Fall and the participation of Satan in this fall as a better good, that is, as *felix culpa*, I would add that a reader, any reader, may understand the discovery and colonization of the American peoples by the Europeans also in terms of a devious "fortunate fall". Bearing the biblical text in mind, one cannot recuperate a lost innocence, one cannot recuperate the Garden of Eden, one cannot know good by good, but one has to opt and recoup salvation, or losses, with great labor on the (in)fertile soils of signification. In relation to the colonized peoples, and according to the negotiable prospects I read in the text, one would be confronted with the following: there is no way to recuperate, let alone regain, one's lost and found origins, there is no way to recuperate one's "nation"/ notion of "purity," there is no way one can know the civilizational "good" as being simply a "good." Notwithstanding, one may reach back/toward "salvation" in the ways of subjectivity, laboring on the side of re-cognition and on the strife of negotiation. We, readers of the epic, cannot deny the founding violence – there is complicity between violence and discourse in the same way we cannot retaliate, the text in question, with violence:

> [t]he point is not to recover a lost consciousness, but to see, to quote Macherey, the itinerary of the silencing. [...] So from that point of view, our view of history is a very different view. It is also cumulative, but it's a view where we see the way in which narratives compete with each other, which one rises, which one falls, who is silent, and the itinerary of the silencing rather than the retrieval. (SPIVAK, 1990, p. 36 e 31)

Curious as it might appear, the mis-reading of epistemic violence – to mention just one, and one associated with European imperialism – as a fortunate fall or *felix culpa* for the peoples who suffer(ed) the evils of colonization should be plentifully linked to the itinerary of the silencing as Macherey and Spivak see it. Excuses masked as *ex-culpas*,[4] happy or misshapen ones, in the strategic time and place of postcolonial discourse would not, some way or another, retrieve much, or retrial, rescue or salvage anything worth the while. These *ex-culpas*, obliterative or oblivious of responsibility, cannot, once again, correct any state of affairs, once the matter is not related to correction or the like. Put in a different manner, "the aftermath of colonialism is not only the retrieval of the colonial history of the past but the putting together of a history of the present" (Spivak 1991, p. 139), this very same reading/re-reading that I am now putting forth in my misreading of the epic. And yet, "[t]he most frightening thing about imperialism, its long-term toxic effect, what secures it, what cements it, is the benevolent self-representation of the imperialist as savior" (SPIVAK, 1992b, p. 781). Nothing better than strategic and (in)*felix* (ex)*culpas* of negotiation, the misreading that I am now briefly proposing, to deconstruct "benevolence" in any salvage.

Imperial benevolence and postcolonial ambivalence are to be found on the Amazonian targe of Milton's epic. The second possibility of reading the passage, the allusion to the classical female combatants, would bring about one more layer of complication and complexity, since the complicity of this text with the imperial project is getting ever and ever more remote. If the informed reader reflects on the reference to the combatants, s/he would be surprised by the correspondent attractions and repulsions: the

Amazons, as members of a female warrior race that would repeatedly fight against the Greeks, would be combating, now in a mythological intertext, the (proto)imperialist and patriarchal projects of the classical antiquity. A referential system of such magnitude and (dis)order, placed at a crucial moment of the text, serves, at least, to corroborate the suggestion that the political-colonialist alliances of the epic are ambivalent to a discredit:

> A nice bit of controlled indeterminacy there, resting upon one of the most firmly established European conventions: transition from Christian psychobiography to Romantic Imagination. [...] The problem of irrational faith is interiorized into allegory in the narrowest possible sense. (SPIVAK, 1991b, p. 146)

Even though Spivak does not refer to Milton's epic, this same romantic imagination is to be found in the passage in question in terms of mythology/ideology. In addition, if faith is irrational or not extrapolates the scope of these short notes on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but in *lato sensu*, this very same faith is allegorized in the epic to the extent it becomes aporetic. The fall of Adam and Eve and the immediate consequences of this fall are textual movements where the ab-original couple dress themselves up in combat and repeat a battle at times mythological, at times theological, at times cultural and ideological. Religion, seen as a cultural allegory, permitted the epic narrator and author to produce an-other (text) immediately assessable by grinding and superimposing the attendant problems related to race, exploration, conquest, and colonization.

Once more,

> [i]ndeed, literature might be the best complement to ideological transformation. The successful reader learns to identify implicitly with the value system figured forth by literature. Through learning to manipulate the figures, rather than through (or in addition to) working out the argument explicitly and literally, with a view to

> reasonable consent. Literature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind. (SPIVAK, 1992a, p. 278)

In the present case, this transformation takes place less as a consenting to the figures of speech or as a forgetting to read them, and more as a critical maneuver within the textual allegories that I presume to have refined to the point of being capable of reading them as aporias. There are yet many questions looking for their answers: how then is my assent given to this epical narrative? How am I, or indeed how was I, historically constituted as its implied reader so that I am now able to read it with pleasure within my cultural self-representation? Returning to the first point, I would say that my assent was given to the narrative of *Paradise Lost* in terms of acknowledgement. To the second, I would presume to be a well-informed reader of the epic, and that my misreading of the text is a *jouissance* because I sight the textual ambivalences and see the valences (fall, loss, lack) within Milton's paradise.

O *PARAÍSO PERDIDO*, DE MILTON, E UMA QUEDA PÓS-COLONIAL

RESUMO

Em *Paraíso perdido,* de John Milton, épico e império se encontram dissociados. Contrário a muitas leituras tradicionais, essa escrita da renascença inglesa intersecta o pensamento pós-colonial de várias maneiras. Ao usar o circuito pós-colonial de teoria e de prática associado a Gayatri Spivak, este trabalho desenvolve uma des-leitura em contraponto ao texto de Milton. *Paraíso perdido* poderá finalmente libertar-se de seu conteúdo colonial e liberar seu conteúdo pós-colonial. Uma vez que toda leitura é uma des-leitura, minha des-leitura do paraíso de Milton é não só um mo(vi)mento de resistência, mas também uma intervenção sobre essa dita grande narrativa de poder – o épico de Milton –, no intuito de propor uma conversação pós-colonial com esse texto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: John Milton, pós-colonialismo, poesia.

Notas

1. On Milton and Imperialism see also Stevens (1996) and Banerjee (1999).
2. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes New York, 1957. Parenthetic book and line references to Milton's *Paradise Lost* are to this edition.
3. In relation to vision, optics, and the eyes/I's that see and are seen I side myself with Jean Starobinski through Martin Jay (1994, p. 19-20) in their prefatory remarks on the judiciousness of reading: "[t]he complete critique is perhaps not one that aims at totality … nor that which aims at intimacy (as does identifying intuition); it is the look that knows how to demand, in their turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indefatigably from one to the other. One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its powers". It is such ambivalent desire, a willingness to risk this loss, that guides and empowers my critical entrance in the labyrinths of *Paradise Lost*.
4. I use the term *ex-culpa* in the following accumulations: first, as an improper derivation from the verb to exculpate: "to clear from alleged fault or guilt." Second, as an ironic derivation from the usage of the verb to exculpate, implying "a clearing from blame or fault often in a matter of small importance". Third, as a means to call attention to the fact that *ex-culpa* is a term associated with the itinerary of silencing in the sense that what is of great importance in this process is the (un)blameworthy violence perpetrated both in practice and in discourse. Fourth, *ex-culpa* is a term related to the itinerary of silencing less as an attempt at retrieval and more in its attempts at negotiation. Fifth, the term *ex-culpa* also denotes a discursive/rhetorical maneuver that attempts to release one either from an obligation that binds the conscience (straightens the eye/I) or from the consequences of committing an act of grave (ir)responsibility.

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