

READING MILTON'S *AREOPAGITICA* AFTER DERRIDA

CONSTRUCTING TRUTH, THE SELF, AND THE ORIGIN:  
READING MILTON'S *AREOPAGITICA* AFTER DERRIDA

By  
SUSAN L. MURLEY

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

McMaster University

(c) Copyright by Susan Murley, July 1992

MASTER OF ARTS (1992)  
(English)

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Constructing Truth, the Self, and the Origin: Reading  
Milton's *Areopagitica* After Derrida

AUTHOR: Susan Murley, Mus. Bac. (University of Toronto)

SUPERVISOR: Professor David Clark

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 87

## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to perform a deconstructive reading of Milton's *Areopagitica*, and at the same time, to use the similarities and dissimilarities that Milton's tract has with Derrida's work in order to explore some fundamental questions about Derrida's relationship with metaphysics, especially the metaphysical or theological idea of origin. These questions are often approached through the focus of the subject, or as Milton sees it, the individual, and his/her relationship to and knowledge of God functioning as the ground for truth. The elusiveness, instability, and fragmentation of truth as Milton describes it in *Areopagitica*, as well as the unusual excesses in his figures and his logic, provoke a reading of the pamphlet that views these instabilities and excesses as the signs of the radical and originary "play" Derrida terms *différance*. However, Milton's continual attempt to recuperate and make stable these dangerous marks of *différance* by grounding them in both the self-presence of the individual and in the infinite presence of God leads to the question of their origin. Perhaps the fundamental question which my thesis examines is how Milton and Derrida construct interpretations, metaphysical and deconstructive, for what Milton calls a fallen world and Derrida names writing, and the fascinating way in which these interpretations are linked.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, my most profound thanks must go to my supervisor, Dr. Clark, who agreed to take me on *only* on the condition that my thesis be finished by September 1991. Almost one year, a wedding, and frequent bouts of tendonitis later, the finished thesis was placed in his hands. It is a testament to his infinite patience that he not once betrayed any irritability with his prodigal student, and continued to read my work with a carefulness that prompted scores of suggestions for much-needed revisions. Thanks also to him for helping to work through my resistance to theory, which continues to surface with a regularity of which I am strangely glad. Next, I should thank my husband, Christopher Dawes, for somehow being able to live with me during the difficult writing of this thesis, and for providing me, in a wide variety of different ways, with the fun and relaxation I craved when I just couldn't stand it any more. Dr. James Dale introduced me to Milton in such a wonderfully open way that I felt I could approach him in any manner I wished, even deconstructively. My chiropractor, Dr. Elaine Yip, kept my hands functioning even through all of the abuse this thesis caused them. And finally, though perhaps not least, I would like to thank my three cats, who provided a constant source of relaxation and amusement throughout my degree.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

While I have followed standard MLA format (author and date if necessary, page number) for most of my parenthetical citations, the number of Derrida's works that I use makes this form occasionally awkward. Therefore, I list Derrida's texts by title and page, using the following abbreviations. Further information is located in the bibliography.

HTAS	"How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."
MP	<i>Margins of Philosophy</i>
OG	<i>Of Grammatology</i>
WD	<i>Writing and Difference</i>

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One.</i> Grounding an (Always Already?) Fallen Truth: Milton's Deferred Perfection and Derrida's Arbitrary Centre	11
1. The search for truth: from object to process	12
2. The principle of contrariety	15
3. Framing truth: dismemberment and dissemination	20
4. Truth and interiority	29
<i>Chapter Two.</i> Lurking Abnormalities: The Self and the Book in <i>Areopagitica</i>	37
1. The logic of the supplement	38
2. Speech and writing: the subject and its prodigal son	48
3. The transgression of the name	53
<i>Chapter Three.</i> Choosing an Interpretation of "Origin": The Symbiotic Alliance of Metaphysics and Deconstruction	57
1. Milton's "reasonable creature": the image of God or an artificial Adam	58
2. The divine impression and the dead letter	62
3. Speech, representation, and the subject	65
4. Supplementarity: the abyss as "ground"	68
5. Derrida and negative theology	71
6. The two interpretations of interpretation: metaphysics and deconstruction; Milton and Derrida	78
Bibliography	83

## Introduction

His was the last great voice of right reason, the last word of the old Puritanism before it split into libertinism or nonconformity. His ideas are always pressing tensely against the framework in which they are enclosed. If we took this approach seriously, we might find out a lot about Milton.

-- Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*.

When I first read Milton's *Areopagitica* in a graduate seminar, I was struck by the unusual and often grotesque figures that Milton used, figures whose excesses evoked, for me, aspects of the Derridian deconstruction I was also studying at the time. These excesses and the tension they often produce, rather than marring Milton's tract, instead contribute to its richness: the Gordian knot of Milton's prose, dense and twisted; the seemingly logical argument which, on closer examination, is often contradictory; and what I have learned to identify as the metaphysical aspects of Milton which conflict with a deconstructive subtext. A deconstructive reading seemed precisely the way to uncover this often eccentric richness in a manner that would not explain away or even condemn these excesses. I found, as well, that my examination of Milton brought into relief many questions I had about Derrida. Therefore, although this thesis is ostensibly "about" *Areopagitica*, Milton's text often serves as a lead in to a discussion of Derrida's texts, especially the crucial *Of Grammatology*. From my interest in this intersection of Derrida and Milton, the thesis has evolved.



Before outlining the general scope and argument of this thesis, it may be helpful to examine briefly the vocabulary and concerns of deconstruction. Derrida's philosophy is, among other things, an exploration of the infrastructures<sup>1</sup> of our system of knowledge, a knowledge based on difference. As linguists such as Saussure have pointed out, we begin to know an object or a concept by comparing it to what it is not: we know the colour "red" because it is not "black" or "green." We know as well that it is a colour and not, say, a texture, because it shares certain common properties with other colours that fit into our concept of colour -- which in turn differs from our concept of texture. If there were no other colours but red, if the whole world were red, colour would not exist for us because there would be nothing against which "red" could be defined. Derrida has taken this idea that knowledge is based on difference and gone to a further extreme. Since ultimately we can know something only by what it is not, then our knowledge of it, the meaning of it, is always dependent on another (an *other*) object or concept and so its meaning is endlessly deferred. Therefore, nothing is ever fully present in and of itself because its meaning or presence is entirely linked to all of the other things which differ from it: "[n]othing...is anywhere ever simply present or absent" (*Positions* 26). As a result, we are left only with "differences and traces of traces" (*Positions* 26).

---

1. I have borrowed this term from Rudolphe Gasché, who uses it extensively in his book, *The Tain of the Mirror*. He explains and defines "infrastructures" as follows:

Deconstruction...is engaged in the construction of the "quasi-synthetic concepts" which account for the economy of the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the basic philosophemes. *Infrastructures*, a word used by Derrida on several occasions in reference to these quasi-synthetic constructs, seemed to represent the most economical way to conceptualize all of Derrida's proposed quasi-synthetic concepts in a general manner. "Undecidables" would have been an alternative, yet "infrastructure" has the supplementary advantage of allowing for a problematization of Derrida's debate with structuralism... (7)

This differential and deferred infrastructure that underlies our knowledge -- this play of differences which enables us to know nothing in and of itself but which is also the condition that underlies the possibility of our knowing anything -- is what Derrida terms *différance*:

the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as, to take only a few examples, sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc. As a common root, *différance* is also the element of the *same* (to be distinguished from the identical) in which these oppositions are announced...*différance* is also the production...of these differences, of the diacritic that the linguistics generated by Saussure, and all the structural sciences modeled upon it, have recalled in the condition for any signification and any structure. (*Positions* 9)

Let us examine this quotation carefully. *Différance* "produces" differences and "is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language"; we cannot therefore say that it *is* these differences. Instead, it makes these differences, upon which is based our entire understanding, *appear* or come into whatever "being" they have. Therefore *différance*, or "the originary trace," as Derrida sometimes calls it, "designates the *minimal structure* required for the existence of any difference (or opposition) of terms (and what they stand for), that is, for any relation to alterity"(Gasché 187). Now, if *différance* produces or underlies the structure of our understanding or knowledge, then we cannot know or understand it because as soon as we do, it becomes part of our knowledge and therefore cannot be the "thing" which produces it. *Différance* is a non-concept, for to conceptualize it gives us the fantasy that we can know it -- something which is entirely impossible. Even to think about it or to try to postulate its "existence" is engaging in a "conceptual monstrosity"(Gasché 237), though it is a monstrosity that is entirely

necessary if we are to write about it at all. Furthermore, Derrida insists that this non-concept of *différance* does not really exist and that it is not a presence which underwrites the traces of meaning that we know: "Already we have had to delineate *that différence is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form...it has neither existence nor essence" (*Margins* 6). Instead, in a structural or spatial sense, it is comparable to the absence or distance between the differences or to the spacing between written words in a sentence, though it can also be seen as the play which takes place as the words refer to each other in the differential process of self-definition. It does not have even the limited presence of a trace, but is instead the space between traces which constitutes them by both separating and connecting them.<sup>2</sup> In the structure of language, *différance* is the referential quality which precedes even the terms which refer to each other.

Derrida also calls his enigmatic and complex "idea" of *différance* an "arche-trace" (that which underwrites all traces) and an "arche-writing," or often, just "writing" (*écriture*). Obviously, writing as it has been traditionally viewed provides a way into the concept of *différance* which speech does not. Before examining the relation between writing and (arche)writing, a look at the operation of the terms "speech" and "writing" in Derrida's work may be instructive. For Derrida, speech is inevitably linked with pure or unmediated thought (a signified not needing a signifier) in the consciousness or presence of a person to him/herself. Speech, then, both by its bonds with self-presence (a living and self-sufficient interiority which seemingly requires nothing external to define itself) and with an effacement of any exterior, mediating function of language, is usually thought of as escaping the

---

2. It is important to remember that this metaphor of "spacing" should not be viewed in a static and immovable sense. The "structurality" of *différance* is always changing and unstable.

differential network of signs which Derrida radicalizes in *différance*. Speech works by requiring that "it be heard and understood immediately by whoever emits it....Within so-called 'living' speech, the spatial exteriority of the signifier seems absolutely reduced...."(OG 166). On the other hand, "reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness," always already "preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos [i.e. speech, natural reason, and presence in general, but especially self-presence]"(OG 14). This external signifier or "sensible inscription" functions in our Western tradition as "the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos"(OG 35). Because it is external and representative, writing lacks the originary, simple presence and pure interiority of speech. Writing functions as the bodily *exterior* to speech's invisibly present *interior*.

The quasi-present or re-presentative quality of writing lends itself to discussing the constitutive play of absence and presence which is *différance* or (arche)writing. As a result, a certain confusion often occurs when reading Derrida's work because the term "writing" or "text" may signify either what Kevin Hart calls a phenomenal or a transcendental writing, or more likely, both at once:

Derrida often begins and ends with the "words on the page", but his object is to see how that text invites being framed by a context it cannot fully master. So there is an interplay between the phenomenal and the transcendental senses of "text" which precludes any simple formalism. (42-43)

The terms phenomenal and transcendental can be useful in an examination of Derrida's work, though we must be careful to qualify them. Transcendental writing or *différance* should not be taken as a totalizing or reductive entity which literally

"precedes" writing in the phenomenal sense. As Rudolphe Gasché makes quite plain, *différance* cannot be thought of as simply transcendental: "Differance...is clearly a transcendental concept, but it is just as clearly the reason why 'no pure transcendental reduction [or concept] is possible'" (194-95). Nonetheless, with these qualifications, "phenomenal" and "transcendental" succinctly describe how Derrida positions himself both within and without philosophy:

It is *within* philosophy in that the critique begins from what is devalued or suppressed by metaphysics -- the phenomena of script, play and difference, for example -- and it is *without* metaphysics in that the critique works from the enabling condition for metaphysics: the transcendentals *archi-écriture*, *jeu* and *différance*. Deconstruction as critique is doubled, then, in that it works at the same time from two realms: the phenomenal and the transcendental. (Hart 134)

In the word "writing," the movement within and the movement without philosophy intersect, suggesting at the same time the transcendental "origin" and the phenomenon it "produces."<sup>3</sup>

Since *différance* or arche-writing always underlies or is written through every object, idea, or concept, it follows that this radical difference and deferment must have "existed" from the beginning. This viewpoint leads to a fundamentally altered concept of origin not as a unified oneness or presence from which something develops, but as an originary difference, as a multiple origin which is always already dual, doubled, or split:

---

3. To avoid some unnecessary confusion, it is perhaps worth noting that (not surprisingly) Derrida's terms for the phenomenal and transcendental senses of writing do not remain stable. In the earlier works, he often uses "language" for the phenomenal and "writing" for the transcendental -- "let us ask how language is a possibility founded on the general possibility of writing" (*OG* 52) -- though "language" sometimes designates *différance* (transcendental language/writing), especially in "How to Avoid Speaking," one of his later essays. Often, of course, the two senses cannot be easily distinguished, so it is necessary to read the texts carefully.

In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. (OG 36)

Instead of our concept of a "simple origin," Derrida asks us to consider "an infinite reference" from one image or reflecting pool to another.<sup>4</sup> But this origin is not merely "an addition to itself of its image" (a presence plus its representation, or speech plus writing): the origin is always already represented, is already writing, and the simple presence of speech exists nowhere. These reflecting pools are representation *without* presence (presentation) since "the infinite reference from one to the other" makes nothing ever simply present, but split: each reflection thus contains some of the others within it as a constitutive factor of itself. The originary *différance* behind these reflecting pools "is neither absence nor presence, neither negative nor positive" (OG 167) but instead produces the play of reflection which destabilizes simple presence and simple absence. Our usual idea of the origin, the metaphysical concept of a simple and complete oneness, effaces the "irreducible complexity [of the originary trace] within which one can only shape or shift the play of presence or absence" (OG 167) in an attempt to provide a fixed point of origin. In Derrida's sense of the term, then, "metaphysics" chooses *one* thing, presence or absence, infinity or finitude, as a stable, immutable foundation and tries to suppress the play of the trace: "The concept of origin...is the myth of the effacement of the trace..." (OG 167). The natural, reasonable, and therefore entirely metaphysical

4. Although this idea of a split or doubled origin appears at first nonsensical, if we try to think through our everyday or commonsense concept of origin, it soon becomes apparent that the concept is itself problematic. The old question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?," exemplifies the fundamentally unresolvable paradox or aporia to which the origin eventually leads us. For us to be able to think of the beginnings either of the chicken or of the egg, *both* the chicken and the egg are necessary.

concept of the origin is produced by *différance* and therefore cannot comprehend its complex play. Derrida asserts that the "irreducible complexity" of this play is "that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think" (OG 167).

For Derrida, metaphysics always "thinks" in terms of a simple presence, renouncing both the absence with which it is constantly in play, and even the play itself. There are many determinations of a metaphysical, simple presence, but the main ones I will examine in this thesis are the concept of the self<sup>5</sup> as an individual, present to itself through its living consciousness, and the notion of a theological ground or origin: both ideas are fundamental to Milton's *Areopagitica*. Reading these ideas deconstructively involves looking at their relationship with their other, which is always in some way exterior to this presence, and ascertaining how the line which separates the inside from the outside cannot be strictly drawn. In short, it involves reading what we might call the "phenomenal" signs of *différance*.

Chapter one investigates a concept which always has ties to a metaphysical, stable meaning and its theological ground: truth. Milton's figuration of truth's nature, the epistemology through which the self attains true knowledge, and the frame which stabilizes truth are, in *Areopagitica*, crucial to an exploration of the Miltonic individual and the nature of the fallen world he/she inhabits. Since the fall of Adam, truth in "the field of this world" has many qualities which acknowledge a non-metaphysical instability, deferment of meaning, and fragmentation, qualities

---

5. Throwing aside all possible phenomenological connotations of the term, I will attempt to use "self" more or less interchangeably with the word "subject," though perhaps "subject" carries the connotations of its constitution by things beyond its control more than does my more neutral use of the term "self." When I utilize the term "individual," however, I mean to refer to the metaphysical concept of self we find in *Areopagitica*: a living presence, conscious of itself, its actions, and its constituting forces; pure interiority attempting to define itself as untouched by any taint of exteriority.

which evoke some superficial affinities with Derrida's philosophy. Yet by comparing *Areopagitica* with certain texts of Derrida's, we can see how Milton tries to recuperate some form of stable ground, even at the same time that he is emphasizing the impossibility of knowing good except through evil and the division that must always be inherent in unity. This reconstruction of truth's dismembered body takes place through grounding truth in some form of metaphysical presence, whether this presence is the God who will eventually make truth whole (though this completion is deferred until death or the Second Coming), or the living presence of Milton's individual, who provides the only "medium" in which a fallen truth can live.

In chapter two, I discuss the relation between the Miltonic subject and the exteriority which it tries to efface through an examination of Milton's defence of books. The "individualistic bias" (Hill 1991, 84) which the Protestant Milton exhibits leads to a contorted argument, for Milton is at the same time trying to justify books, which he views as being exterior to the self, and is trying to maintain the self-sufficiency of the individual. Milton also regards books from the standpoint of both reader and author, so the text functions not only as something read (an external taken into the self), but also as a reproduction or "progeny" of the individual (an external manifestation of the interior). In both of these cases, texts are somehow marked by abnormality or excess, revealing the inability of writing to function metaphysically as simple representation.

Chapter three attempts to probe the complicity between the metaphysical notion of the origin or ground, which seems to turn inevitably to theology, and the non-originary concept of *différance*, using both Milton's and Derrida's uses of representation in the constitution of subjectivity as a point of access. Milton's origin



and stabilizing foundation for the self is a metaphysical concept of God, but his description of the relationship between the individual and its foundation is underwritten by metaphors of representation. On the other hand, Derrida tries to see language and representation (in their transcendental senses) operating as the constitution of the subject, but is forced to borrow the concept of the origin to do so. In order to illustrate further how even deconstruction cannot be separated from the theological function of ground or origin, I will briefly turn to Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in which he discusses the intersection of his particular brand of deconstruction and negative theology. Finally, the chapter attempts to work through the inseparability of Milton's metaphysical interpretation of the Fall from Derrida's deconstruction of it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Grounding an (Always Already?) Fallen Truth: Milton's Deferred Perfection and Derrida's Arbitrary Centre

Truth lies open to all; it is no man's several.

--Ben Jonson, *Timber: or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*.

let no man upon a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill applied moderation think or maintain, that a man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works, divinity or philosophy; but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficiencie in both...

--Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton interweaves the plea for the liberty of unlicensed printing -- the tract's proclaimed subject -- with a complex discussion on the different nature of truth both in this world and without. For Milton, the individual cannot grasp or contain a perfect and completed truth, but can only provisionally know an elusive, fallen truth. As a result, the search for truth becomes as important as truth itself, since truth is not an object that can be grasped, but must be continually sought after. The elusiveness and instability of truth are due both to the differential structure of knowledge (the "principle of contrariety") by which the Miltonic subject understands the world and to the fragmented nature of truth. Both of these characteristics suggest certain similarities to Derridian deconstruction: the principle of contrariety provides a point of access to the Saussurian, structuralist epistemology which Derrida radicalizes in his concept of *différance*, and Milton's dismembered body of truth recalls Derrida's dissemination. From these similarities, many differences

may be discerned, most distinctly in the area of a theological ground or framework for the subject's knowledge of truth. While Milton posits a flawless frame (a whole and unfallen truth) which gives stability and direction to the fallen individual and his/her search for truth, Derrida undermines the stability and totality of this theological frame by viewing this foundation as merely a contextual function, not as a fixed and immutable origin. Milton complicates his relationship between fallen and unfallen truth and the subject, however. Unfallen truth may provide a stabilizing frame for the subject, but the reason and conscience of the individual ground and define fallen truth: truth must live internally within the individual, or it is not truth, but falsehood.

### **The search for Truth: from object to process**

Before examining these complex ideas in *Areopagitica*, let us turn to a passage in an earlier work, *Of Reformation* (May 1641), which presents truth in a simpler light:

The very essence of Truth is plainnesse, and brightnes; the darknes and crookednesse is our own. The *Wisdom* of *God* created *understanding*, fit and proportionable to Truth the object, and end of it, as the eye to the thing visible. If our *understanding* have a film of *ignorance* over it, or be blear with gazing on other false glisterings, what is that to Truth? If we will but purge with sovraign eyesalve that intellectual ray which *God* hath planted in us, then we would beleeve the Scriptures protesting their own plainnes, and perspicuity, calling to them to be instructed, not only the *wise*, and *learned*, but the *simple*, the *poor*, the *babes*, foretelling an extraordinary effusion of *Gods* Spirit upon every age, and sexe, attributing to all men, and requiring from them the ability of searching, trying, examining all things, and by the Spirit discerning that which is good...(I: 566)<sup>1</sup>

---

1. This passage was brought to my attention by Balachandra Rajan, who discusses it in "Areopagitica and the Images of Truth," a chapter in his book, *The Form of the Unfinished*, pp. 85-105. Volume and page numbers, here and elsewhere, refer to the Yale edition of *The Complete Prose of John Milton*.

Truth itself is plain, bright, and readily grasped; the "darknes" and "crookednesse" of human understanding is the sole source of the problems which inhibit our earthly knowledge of truth. Throughout this quotation, Milton traces a metaphor of vision: truth "the object" is the "thing visible" while understanding is the eye which sees it. God makes our understanding "fit and proportionable" to the truth so that it is possible to see it (like any external object) after purging our "film of ignorance" with "sovrain eyesalve," God's holy spirit. In a distinct move away from Calvinism's doctrine of the elect, "an extraordinary effusion of *Gods Spirit*" is available to "all men" -- the "wise," the "learned," the "simple," the "poor," the "babes" -- which allows them to see the "plainnes, and perspicuity" of the Scriptural truth.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this easy, plain transparency is not immediately apparent but only develops after a necessary period of "searching, trying, examining all things, and by the Spirit discerning that which is good."

This passage contains two interesting points of intersection with *Areopagitica* which may help to refine and locate the change in Milton's thought. First, the idea that truth is external (a thing visible) and may be located in Scripture is complicated greatly in the later work. Milton's 1644 tract states that the Bible "answers dubiously and darkly to the common reader"(517), yet books (including of course the Scriptures) are also seen as necessary vehicles of reason and truth.<sup>3</sup> Even so, the procedure required to attain truth appears in a similar form in both works. This

---

2. This passage sounds suspiciously like the Arminian assertion that sufficient grace is available to all. See Danielson's *Milton's Good God*, Chapter Three, "Assertion and justification: providence and theodicy," pp. 58-91 for a discussion of the distinction between Arminianism and Calvinism.

3. Chapter two will explore this interesting contradiction in full.

operation, it seems, is an ever-changing *process* of examination and discernment requiring rigorous mental exercise:

Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion. Truth is compar'd in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick'n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. (543)<sup>4</sup>

Faith and knowledge must be used or exercised to obtain the end of understanding truth, we assume. Yet truth is no longer the stable object that it was in the earlier passage but is here an ever-moving "progression." The means by which we come to know truth and truth itself have strong affinities; indeed, the juxtaposition of the two sentences contained in this quotation (one exploring the health of our faith and knowledge of truth and the other examining the fitness of the entity truth) implies a tacit equation, as if the second is somehow an elaboration of the first. Truth unexercised will "sick'n," just as our faith and knowledge or "limbs and complexion" will if they are not used. However, the searching and examining of all things no longer has a clear or stable goal, since the fountain of truth is in constant flux: it flows in a perpetual progression *away* from the person seeking it.

Far from being plain and bright, truth in *Areopagitica* is defined by its essential evasiveness. Even a well-exercised mind cannot fully contain true knowledge, for reaching that goal would stop the process of examination and discernment and thus cause truth to stagnate. Truth is always running away from the human capacity to know it: "See the ingenuity of Truth, who when she gets a free and willing hand, opens her self faster, then the pace of method and discours

---

4. All references to *Areopagitica* will be indicated parenthetically within the body of my text by page number only. The page references are to volume two of *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*.

can overtake her"(521). As a result, "true knowledge is kept at distance from us..."(566). *Areopagitica* also speaks of "the true knowledge of what we *seem* to know"(548, emphasis added). The combination of the stable ("true knowledge") and the conditional ("seem to know") makes an interesting paradigm of the play between true knowledge (unfallen, capital "T" Truth) and human knowledge, which may know fallen truth in a provisional form but can never know the "authentic" Truth which underlies it. For Milton, human knowledge is a shadow which always follows a parallel course to Truth but can never quite intersect with it. Though we may seem to know something, a truer knowledge exists outside of this fallen world where we may not know it. Still, the impossibility of understanding Truth does not mean that our knowledge does not progress or that we should not attempt to strive for truth: the task is endless but not pointless. Since the "object" is so elusive due to humanity's fallen nature, the search now becomes an end in itself. If we look at the above quotation in a fuller context, it shows the continual quest: "we are hinder'd and dis-inur'd by this cours of licencing *toward the true knowledge* of what we seem to know"(548). Because licencing restricts the free play of learning, it restricts even our progress *toward* the Truth underlying our provisional understanding; in effect, if licencing obstructs the subject's pursuit of truth, then it inhibits truth itself.

### **The principle of contrariety**

To see why our understanding is forever doomed to lag behind truth, we must look at what *Areopagitica* has to say about how we apprehend the world:

Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort

asunder, were not more intermixt. It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evil. (514)

The structure of knowledge proposed here is a differential one which bears some striking resemblances to Derrida's "epistemology," if it can be called that. One element can only be known by another; in this case, even *good* can only be known by its difference from *evil*, so good is unthinkable without evil. However, the passage does not reach this conclusion until it first tries to formulate a less drastic outcome. The two elements are "*almost*" inseparable and "so involv'd and interwoven" that they are "*hardly* to be discern'd." Good and evil leap out of "the rinde of one apple" like "two twins cleaving together." There is a double movement in this passage, a cleaving motion which brings the opposing elements together at the same time that it tries to separate them.<sup>5</sup>

---

5. "To cleave" means both to "stick fast or adhere" and to "separate or sever by dividing or splitting" (*SOED*). Strangely enough, about a year after I had noticed this double meaning of the word "cleave" in *Areopagitica*, Rick Asals showed me a passage from Paul Auster's *City of Glass* in *The New York Trilogy*. In it, the central character is reading a book by Stillman, a former academic and current madman, in which he discusses this very quotation from *Areopagitica*:

...if there was no evil in the Garden, neither was there any good. As Milton himself put it in the *Areopagitica*, 'It was out of [sic] the rind of one apple tasted that good and evil leapt forth into the world, like two twins cleaving together.' Stillman's gloss on this sentence was exceedingly thorough. Alert to the possibility of puns and wordplay throughout, he showed how the word 'taste' was actually a reference to the Latin word 'sapere,' which means both 'to taste' and 'to know' and therefore contains a subliminal reference to the tree of knowledge: the source of the apple whose taste brought forth knowledge into the world, which is to say, good and evil. Stillman also dwelled on the paradox of the word 'cleave,' which means both to 'join together' and 'to break apart,' thus embodying two equal and opposite significations, which in turn embodies a view of language that Stillman found to be present in all of Milton's work. (52)

It may be worth noting that Stillman goes mad trying to develop an innocent, unfallen language which he believes will reverse the Fall of man.

This motion is typical of what was known as "the principle of contrariety," seen here in this excerpt from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*: "They that endeavour to abolish vice destroy also vertue; for contraries, though they destroy one another, are yet the life of one another. Thus vertue (abolish vice) is an Idea"(Browne 140). Although the two passages exemplify the same principle, Browne's work takes the idea to a further extreme than Milton's does. Both agree that eradicating vice will also destroy virtue<sup>6</sup>, but only Browne does more than hint at the economy of simultaneous life and death in which good and evil circulate. Vice and virtue both "destroy" each other and yet are "the life of one another"; translating this idea into Derrida's vocabulary, we might say that they inhabit each other as a trace. Because, as *Areopagitica* states, we can only know good by evil, good must always be in life of evil, and evil, good. Vice constitutes virtue -- "the knowledge and surway of vice is in this world...necessary to the constituting of human vertue"(516) -- and as a constituting force, must make it up, must necessarily determine its identity. For Browne, virtue without vice is only an *idea*: it "exists" as a self-contained entity (that is, without its partner, vice) only in the mind, but is irretrievably coupled with it in the world. *Areopagitica* denies our ability to keep the two separate even in our minds, since we only obtain our idea of virtue through the idea of vice. We *know* good by evil.

Certain characteristics or movements of the principle of contrariety are reminiscent of Saussure's differential structure of signs, which Derrida has developed and radicalized. Saussure maintains "that signs are arbitrary and

---

6. c.f. *Areopagitica*: "They are not skilfull considerers of human things, who imagin to remove sin by removing the matter of sin....Suppose we could expell sin by this means; look how much we thus expell of sin, so much we expell of vertue: for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike." (527)



conventional and that each is defined not by essential properties but by the differences that distinguish it from other signs"(Culler 98). Applying this idea to *Areopagitica*, we might say that because our knowledge is fallen and imperfect, we know good not by its "essential properties" but by the differences that distinguish it from evil. Derrida takes this idea to its "logical" conclusion: if an element is *only* known by its difference with another element, not by its essential properties, then it cannot be said to be present and complete in itself:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element"...being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. (*Positions* 26)

If we think of "good" and "evil" as examples of the elements spoken of in the above quotation, then good is "constituted on the basis of the trace within it of" evil, among other things. Where Derrida passes the limit of both the principle of contrariety and Saussure's structuralism is in his insistence that their "play of differences" *constitutes* the element's very character or "essence." This play disrupts the simple presence of "good" or "evil" because neither element "can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present." Derrida's most radical formulation of play in a differential structure of knowledge is the concept of an originary play, or *différance*. In the principle of contrariety, it is easy to see the play between the elements of "good" and "evil" in a referential process of self-definition. Derrida not only sees this play of elements, but maintains that "play must be conceived of before the alternative"(WD 292) of

these elements. Because the play which links good and evil precedes even their existence, the elements are woven in a connection that is inseparable.

In a typically dialectical and reconstitutive move, both Milton and Browne avoid the dangers of contrariety by insisting not on evil's potential to weaken good but on the principle's ability to strengthen virtue through a contest with vice. In *Religio Medici*, this purification of virtue happens over a broader field than in *Areopagitica*. The folly of the multitudes is what allows the privileged few to be virtuous: "when vice gains upon the major part [of the population], vertue, in whom it remaines, becomes more excellent, and being lost in some, multiplies its goodnesse in others, which remaine untouched, and persists intire in the generall inundation"(140). Showing a concern with the individual, Milton scales down this macrocosm of the world to the microcosm of the self. The moment of purification which takes place throughout the general population in Browne's work happens within the confines of the warring self in Milton's:

He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary. (514-15)

The trial which brings about the cleansing process is entirely internal. One learns to "distinguish" and "prefer" virtue to vice by the intellectual method of apprehending and considering the matter; this is the warfare which the true Christian fights against his own impurity. However, for Milton, the outcome of the battle is certain. Truth must always win:

The Temple of *Janus* with his two *controversal* faces might now not unsignificantly be set open. And though all the windes of doctrin were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licencing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter. (561)

Seemingly, Milton's only concern is to provide truth with a suitably free field on which she can gain her certain victory, a field which on close examination is still located within the subject. Janus has "two *controversal* faces," here "Truth" and "Falshood," contained in a single figure: the battle between these two "controversal" elements takes place within the confines of the self. Because "licencing and prohibiting" constrain an individual's internal knowledge, they also injure truth's ability to fight this internal battle against falsehood.

### **Framing Truth: dismemberment and dissemination**

For all Milton's apparent confidence in the ability of truth to win against all foes, *Areopagitica* most often describes truth in this world as flawed. The fable by which Milton frames and grounds truth shows at once its present imperfection and eventual perfectibility:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *AEgyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangled body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and

member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. (549)

Let us examine the general movement of this passage before looking in detail at the metaphors which constitute it. Truth, for Milton, was once whole and will be whole again; its origin and end are perfect, complete. In this world, though, truth is mangled and dismembered -- scattered so thoroughly that we may never complete the task of assembling the parts. Therefore, if truth seems confused, unclear, or tainted by the trace of evil within it, this state is only a temporary one, as its true meaning was once pure and will be purified again. Though "the knowledge of good and evil" leap forth "*into the World*" like "two twins cleaving together" (514, emphasis added), the two are twins *only* here on earth: they are what Rajan calls "the offspring of human fallibility, knowledge joined indivisibly to the betrayal of knowledge" (86). In *Areopagitica*, the imperfection of the truth which the Miltonic individual experiences in this world is always excused by referring or deferring it to an ultimate and unapproachable ground, which Derrida names the "transcendental signified," and Milton, God. This theological ground provides a stable centre which limits the "play" of the system: "The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play" (WD 279). Therefore, although truth may be torn apart by the forces of evil in this world, the "play" of the system -- here the dangerous ability of evil to affect or alter truth -- has a reassuring limit put on it by the presence of God at beginning and end.

Returning to the quotation from *Areopagitica* (549) and looking at its figural language more carefully, we can see that Milton's attempt to describe transcendental and ahistoric truth is flavoured by an antiquated patriarchal ideology easily locatable

historically. The authority of this ground -- God/Christ, the "transcendental signified", absolute unmediated meaning, the stable centre around which human knowledge is organized -- is clearly masculine in the above passage: a male Christ, the "divine Master" of a female Truth, both brings her into the world and reassembles her mutilated body. When she enters the world, Truth is "virgin," but is subsequently hewed apart or raped after the departure of her male father/protector. Francis Barker comments on this passage in which Milton figures the "trope of truth" as "a dismembered female body":

Truth, in this version, is the absent object -- victimised cruelly in the torn and scattered corporeality of "joint and member," "limb by limb" -- of what is elsewhere described as "one brotherly search"...but whose gender and corporal disruption give a new inflection to such otherwise unremarkable idioms. The gender subordination of "her Divine Master," and even the way in which the (slightly racist?) evocation of an exotically threatening "wicked race of deceivers" which allows a certain protective cast to the discourse at this point, contribute to this...figuration of Truth as the object of a male pursuit. (Francis Barker 1987, 116-17)

Christ has the power to make Truth whole or intact again: the patriarchal authority of his ground is so stable that he can even renew virginity.<sup>7</sup> However, the transcendental authority of Christ is, in this passage, sustained by a masculine ideology which is most decidedly *not* a transcendental truth. Yet it is absolutely necessary that Truth have this ahistoric ground to be at all stable, even though her stability must be called into question by the patriarchal metaphors which figure this transcendental foundation. Without her male protector, "a wicked race of deceivers" (we could call these the forces of evil, falsehood) will undoubtedly

---

7. Interestingly, the myth of Osiris also contains the theme of sexual loss. Isis reassembled all of her husband's body except his penis, which had been eaten by a fish.

triumph, since Truth is so weak without the presence of Christ that her dismemberment happens immediately ("strait arose") upon his exit.

Derrida seizes upon this weakness and uses it as a starting point for many of his questions. What does it mean, or, more to the point, what does it not mean, to have a truth which is always fragmented in this world? If truth is capable of being dismembered, can it ever be capable or could it ever have been capable of pure and absolute unity?<sup>8</sup> What if "truth" (we could also call this the "true," "proper," or "correct" *meaning*) has no ultimate presence or truth to which it can refer<sup>9</sup>, but has been fragmented from the start? What if truth *never has been and never will be* pure and virginal? Rather than referring to a central point (God as an absolute and ahistoric truth) in order to stabilize the system of the world, Derrida tries to unsettle this stabilizing factor:

Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse -- provided we can agree on this word -- that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (WD 280)

---

8. In the context of *Areopagitica*, we could ask if virginity can, in actuality, be made completely new, not just re-newed. Is the purity of this virginity merely being reconstituted after its loss?

9. Certainly Derrida sees God-which-is-pure-truth-and-presence (the "transcendental signified") as a myth, indeed the unifying myth of our world. However, to jump to the immediate and obvious conclusion that he thinks that there is no God may be too hasty a judgement, although a deconstructive "idea" of God would be radically different than most people's idea of God. It would perhaps be safest to say that Derrida objects to the way God as "transcendental signified" *functions*.

The centre is no longer a "fixed locus," a "present-being" such as God, but a "function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-significations came into play." Therefore, something is true not because God has decreed it or because the voice of conscience and gift of reason tell you it is so, but is true only within a certain context. This does not mean that there is no centre, but that this point is arbitrary and may change according to context: the centre is a *function* of its context. Everything becomes "discourse" (or writing, Derrida's more frequent term) because "the central signified, the original or transcendental signified" has disappeared. To be more precise, the transcendental signified *has never been*, and so we cannot refer either back or forward to a time when this ground would have or will have absolutely stabilized truth: thinking of the centre as a function rather than as a fixed point effectively removes any theological stability to which humanity can refer.

While Milton says that the Fall of Adam plunged man into knowing by a system of differences ("that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil" 514), Derrida asserts that the fall has always already taken place: truth has always been dismembered and destabilized by discourse/writing. In *Areopagitica*, Milton follows a fairly standard version of the Fall: because we are fallen, truth is not readily apparent. It must be searched for and gathered up "limb by limb" (549) through a process of interpretation and differentiation, though Milton puts a slightly unusual twist on the stock account by his emphasis that truth can *never* be found completely in this fallen world. In *The Trespass of the Sign*, Kevin Hart summarizes this tradition of the Fall in terms of meaning, interpretation, and signs:

...God guarantees the possibility of determinate meaning. The Fall may establish the human need to interpret yet it simultaneously sets firm limits to interpretation. No longer in harmony with God, this world becomes a chiaroscuro of presence and absence; everywhere one looks, there are signs of a divine presence that has withdrawn and that reveals itself only in those signs. Whether in nature or scripture, these signs must be interpreted, yet only in ways which acknowledge that timeless truths wait behind them and can be separated from them. Seen in this way, the sign is always a representation of a presence which precedes it, a passage from one presence to another, from infinite to finite mind. (4)

For Derrida, the "fall into evil from the innocence of the word" is "the myth of myth...the myth of a speech [determinate and stable meaning] originally good, and of a violence which would come to pounce upon it as a fatal accident..."(OG 135).

By examining the questions of the Fall and the origin recuperatively posited from it, Derrida attempts to undermine the Alpha and Omega myth of purity which is the governing ground of meaning: "To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of *différance* which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the *theological presence* of a *center* the movement and textual spacing of differences"(Positions 14, emphasis added). The obvious concern in this passage is that this theological centre, another name for the transcendental signified as ground, will "govern" and "summarize" as dictator,<sup>10</sup> but what are we to make of the alternative -- to "risk meaning nothing" and thus to enter into "the play of *différance*" -- which prevents the threat of totalitarianism?<sup>11</sup> To risk meaning

10. Remember Milton calls this theological centre the "Master" of truth.

11. In his essay, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell" in *Responses*, Derrida makes perhaps his plainest statement about the relationship between his form of deconstruction and totalitarian thinking:

But rather that what I have practiced under that name [deconstruction] has always seemed to me favorable, indeed destined (it is no doubt my principal motivation) to the analysis of the conditions of totalitarianism in all its forms, which cannot always be reduced to names of regimes. And this in order to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible, because it is not



nothing appears nonsensical; how could we ever mean *nothing*? Perhaps this (deliberately) provocative phrase will "make sense" if we shift the emphasis: to risk *meaning* nothing. Again, the meaning of "meaning" must be qualified, shifted, contextualized (which is of course precisely Derrida's point).

In so many of his texts, Derrida asks us to think of meaning as something without an absolute and stable point of truth, as being radically relative and entirely dependent on its context. Meaning *means* nothing without the ever-fluctuating context which has always already dismembered its stability: in short, it means nothing without the play of *différance*. Rather than creating a myth of truth's dismemberment and a recuperative, metaphysical unification, as Milton does, Derrida tells a story of the dissemination of a meaning which is not grounded by an absolute truth:

In the last analysis *dissemination* means nothing, and cannot be reassembled into a definition...If dissemination, seminal *différance*, cannot be summarized into an exact conceptual tenor, it is because the force and form of its disruption *explode* the semantic horizon...Dissemination...although producing a nonfinite number of semantic effects, can be led back neither to a present of simple origin...nor to an eschatological presence. It marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity. (*Positions* 44-45)

Although the dismemberment and the dissemination of truth may have similar effects (in this world), the two have radically different frames or contexts. Milton's idea of

---

enough to untie a knot through analysis (there is more than one knot and the twisted structure of the knot remains very resistant) or to uproot what is finally, perhaps, only the terrifying desire for roots and common roots.  
(155)

Theology, because it allows people to refer to one ultimate, unifying, and correct force, is also seen as potentially totalitarian. It is the deepest form of that "terrifying desire for roots and common roots."

truth could be said to have "a present of simple origin" (the "perfect shape"[549] brought into the world by Christ) and "an eschatological presence" (the rebirth of truth's perfection at the second coming) in spite of its piecemeal and confused state on earth.<sup>12</sup> In the above passage, Derrida works to keep his concept of dissemination always dis-unified, at "origin," at "end," and at "present," though all of these concepts must now be re-thought. In a disseminative origin (if the phrase is not an irresolvable oxymoron), "there is nothing prior to the group, no simple originary unit prior to this division through which life comes to see itself and the seed is multiplied from the start"; dissemination is therefore "a singular plural, which no single origin will ever have preceded" (*Dissemination* 304). Thus, the nature of dissemination and dismemberment is different, as well. The disparate parts of dissemination do not belong together in a whole as do dismembered pieces, however grotesque this image may be. The seeds of Derrida's radically relative meaning multiply and scatter themselves; the mutilated body parts of Milton's truth are horrifying precisely because they long to be reassembled into a pleasant whole.

While both the figures of dismemberment and dissemination can be seen as non-totalizing, the nature of that non-totalization is somewhat different. For Milton, of course, no one person, nor even humanity working together can reassemble (bring together in totality or "totalize") truth: "We have not yet found...all [the mangled pieces of truth]...nor ever shall doe"(549). The infinite understanding of God which frames the fallen world is the only way in which truth can be completed. The multiple origin of dissemination, because it lacks this infinite, theological frame, may never be totalized:

---

12. In "Dissemination," Derrida notes that this "'primitive' mythical unity" which creates a simple origin and a simple end is "always reconstituted *retrospectively* in the aftermath of the break [the Fall]"(304, emphasis added).

Totalization can be judged impossible in the classical style: one then refers to the empirical endeavor of either a subject or a finite richness which it can never master....But nontotalization can also be determined in another way...from the standpoint of the concept of *play*. If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field -- that is, language and a finite language -- excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (WD 289)

In some sense, the totalization of Milton's truth may be judged impossible from both of these standpoints: the "classical" standpoint which asserts that the largeness of the field is inexhaustible and "cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse," as well as the standpoint of the concept of play in which the "center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions" is lacking. The scattering of the thousand pieces of Truth after her fragmentation, and humanity's inability to ever recover them suggests that "the largeness of the field is inexhaustible." However, there is also a sense that "the nature of the field...excludes totalization." Like Derrida's field of play, the centre of Milton's "field of the world," God or Christ, is also missing. However, His presence is only deferred, and will ultimately stabilize the system of play through the presence of infinite understanding: the dismembered nature of truth will eventually be made whole. Derrida's disseminative fragments can be organized only around a centre arbitrary by its very nature:

The loss of an authenticating centre leads to a succession of substituted centres, each relinquishing the wholeness which it claims or seeks since its own self-examination can only reveal the irreducible absence at its heart. The play between substitutions not only inhibits totalization but must eventually take the place of that totalization which it cumulatively excludes rather than defers. (Rajan 103)

The play which sees one arbitrary centre substitute itself in place of another makes a recuperative gesture of totalization, such as Milton outlines, impossible. Derrida's field does not lack a centre because the centre, for which God is the primary figure, has withdrawn its presence. Instead, the centre has never had and never will have a "natural site" or "fixed locus" (WD 280), even one from which it is absent, but has always excluded any fixed centre, even a deferred or absent one.

### **Truth and interiority**

Of course, Milton's idea of truth in the entire text of *Areopagitica* should not just be reduced to this image of dismemberment and reunification, though the metaphor does describe its essential characteristics. Throughout the pamphlet, Milton continues to negotiate between the two kinds of truth, "unfallen" and "fallen" or "perfect" and "divided," if we may call them that. While trying to align the two, he faces the problem of reconciling the individual beliefs which divide a fallen world (differences in religious conviction and language, for example) with the theological progress towards one unfallen and transcendental unity eradicating all differences, which Milton obviously believes is the goal toward which humankind must strive. To do so, Milton locates the fallen form of God's ahistoric truth and unity in the consciousness of the individual and even in the divisions amongst individuals, though he carefully avoids a radically subjective notion of truth. If truth in its unfallen state could exist on earth, then the goal of unity would be easily attainable: truth would be so self-evidently *true* that no one could think otherwise, and so everyone would be unified in their opinion. Since truth *has* fallen, however, *Areopagitica* recognizes that division and differences of opinion are an immutable fact of life:

Yet these are the men cry'd out against for schismaticks and sectaries; as if, while the Temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrationall men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world.... (555)

Even the divisions in the religious community -- those "schismaticks and sectaries" - are merely part of the process of building God's Temple<sup>13</sup>. However, because the Temple "in this world" must be made up of these differences, Truth cannot be united into a complete and indivisible whole, but is only "contiguous in this world." Those who attempt to compel a *continuity* of divided parts instead of letting them remain as a *contiguity* are in fact the people who create the most division:

There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims....all must be suppress'd which is not found in their *Syntagma*. They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those dissever'd peeces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth. To be still searching what we know not, by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it (for all her body is *homogeneal*, and proportionall) this is the golden rule in *Theology* as well as in *Arithmetick*, and makes up the best harmony in a Church; not the forc't and outward union of cold, and neutrall, and inwardly divided minds. (550-51)

There are two types of unity operative in this passage: a "forc't and outward union" achieved by suppression, which ultimately turns into its opposite, division; and the

---

13. It is interesting to note that *Areopagitica* defends the divisions in truth with an extended metaphor, something which is not "true" or "real," but is a fiction, a mere figure of speech. Milton might answer by saying that a fallen truth is forced to resort to such subterfuges, but Derrida would say that the metaphor is as "true" as even unfallen Truth -- both are fictions. When no absolute and transcendental ground exists, a figure of speech is as true as a fact.

"best harmony in a Church," that inward union secured by following the "golden rule in Theology." False union requires people to conform to a set and external standard -- a rigid Syntagma,<sup>14</sup> a pre-ordained maxim -- which may not be trespassed. Because division does exist in this world (there are cuts made even in the stone used to build the Lord's Temple), a doctrine which unifies by suppressing difference rather than accommodating it is doomed to fail.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Milton's internal, harmonious "unity" is searching, progressive, and most importantly, incomplete: since no one person may possess truth completely and wholly, truth does not require any absolutist and totalitarian unity. As each piece of truth is found, it is united with the other pieces in a "whole" which is never a perfected external object like a syntagma. Instead, the internal living search for truth unifies those who attempt it; the model of "true" unity here is closest to an organic process of change, rather than the dead stasis of the pre-perfected doctrine. Like the waters of truth which must flow in "a perpetuall progression" so they will not

---

14. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines "syntagma" as "A regular or orderly collection of statements, propositions, doctrines, etc.; a systematically arranged treatise." Even in this dictionary definition, we can see the emphasis on regularity, order, and the system which tends to make a doctrine too static for Milton's liking.

15. Sir Francis Bacon provides a conservative point of comparison with the more radical Milton on this topic. He says that there are

two false peaces or unities: the one, when the peace is grounded but upon an implicit ignorance; for all colours will agree in the dark: the other, when it is pieced up upon a direct admission of contraries in fundamental points. For truth and falsehood, in such things, are like the iron and clay in the toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image; they may cleave, but they will not incorporate.  
(Bacon 10)

While Milton might agree with him on the first point, he most certainly would not on the latter. Milton's true unity is founded on the admission of division. Again, we find the metaphor of cleaving, like Milton's two twins (the knowledge of good and evil), though Bacon is more anxious to try to separate the cleaving elements: "they will not incorporate."

"sick'n"(543),<sup>16</sup> "real" unity must contain this changing mental process so as not to be merely its false image which ultimately divides, not joins.

Like unity, truth may also be "real" or "false," depending on its circumstances -- although there is a complication: while *two* different types of unity exist (even "in this world"), one false and divisive, the other harmonious and true, a single truth, the very *same* piece of Truth's dismembered body, may be *both* true and false:

A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, *yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie*. There is not any burden that som would gladlier post off to another, then the charge and care of their Religion. There be, who knows not that there be of Protestants and professors who live and dye in as arrant an implicit faith, as any lay Papist of Loretto. (543-44, emphasis added)

How can one truth become falsehood or heresy for one man and yet remain truth for another? For "truth" really to be "true," it must be internalized in one's consciousness as understanding: it must *live* in the mind of an individual. A "heretick in the truth" blindly accepts a fact or belief external to him because someone else tells him it is true, but fails to make it his own. "[T]hough his belief be true," truth turns into its very opposite, falsehood, merely because it is external to the "believer": it is not in the spirit and understanding of the person, but is instead located in the rigid letter of the Law, passed down from an authority to be accepted mutely. The greatest problem which *Areopagitica* has with Roman Catholicism is this acceptance of "implicit faith."<sup>17</sup> To Milton, this policy means

16. See the discussion of this passage, page 14, above.

17. In his footnote to this passage (p. 543) in the Yale edition of the *Complete Prose*, Ernest Sirluck explains the doctrines of implicit and explicit faith as follows:

that religion does not inhabit the soul, as it should, but as a mere external object, can be handed over to another's charge. *Areopagitica* uses the example of a rich man hiring a priest as he would any other servant so that he may leave his spiritual cares in the clergy's capable hands. This priest becomes the external embodiment of "his religion [which] is now no more within himself, but is become a dividuall movable, and goes and comes neer him, according as that good man frequents the house"(544). The man hired to take care of another's soul is the personification of hypocrisy and false religion precisely because he is a "dividuall movable" -- an external good.

What can we extrapolate from this philosophy that makes it possible to be a "heretick in the truth"? In *Areopagitica*, it appears that the only real truth is internal knowledge, the conscious mind, and the life of the Spirit. Anything "external" -- which could mean anything not understood, not believed in by the soul, not progressing and changing in a living, mental process -- is false. If even a "true" belief may be considered false when it is not understood, then the logical conclusion is that anything external has no essential truth: "the matter of...both [sin and virtue] is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike"(527).

With this idea in mind, let us look at a passage near the end of *Areopagitica* which shows the elusiveness of truth's "essence" in this world:

---

For who knows not that Truth is strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licencings to make her

---

The medieval church distinguished between the 'explicit faith' required of the higher clergy (acceptance of the doctrines of the church with a clear understanding of their nature and grounds) and the 'implicit faith' which would suffice for the lower clergy and the laity (acceptance of the same doctrines on the authority of the church).

In short, a follower would not have to understand Catholicism's doctrines, as long as he practiced them.



victorious, those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power: give her but room, & do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the old *Proteus* did, who spake oracles only when he was caught & bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes, except her own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the time, as *Micaiah* did before *Ahab*, untill she be adjur'd into her own likenes. Yet is it not impossible that she may have more shapes then one. What else is all that rank of things indifferent, wherein Truth may be on this side, or on the other, without being unlike her self. (562-63)

Although it is asserted that she is "strong next to the Almighty," the figure of Truth is curiously deceptive, even "shifty" like error, her counterpart. Throughout this extraordinarily dense passage, Milton slowly re-legitimizes his figure by a qualifying movement. First, it is stated that if Truth is bound, then she "speaks not true": here, as above, truth turns into error. Next, Truth is said to turn "herself into all shapes, except her own," which may not be described as falsehood, exactly, but can not be called truth either. Then, rather than having just one (unchanging) form, Truth now *may* have "more shapes then one," culminating in her being on one or the other side of the "rank of things indifferent," "without being unlike herself." Truth is no longer falsehood but instead is found in different (but legitimate) forms. As the passage progresses, however, the language becomes more and more conditional, ending in the doubly negative phrase, "*without* being *unlike* herself" which works against the stability of the figure. Ultimately, truth is so unstable that she may be found in a multiplicity of forms: the "rank of things indifferent."

The idea of "things indifferent," though appearing infrequently in *Areopagitica*, is nonetheless a crucial concept in the perception of truth. "Things indifferent" were understood to be situations about which the Scriptures had made no specific revelation so that each individual Christian was free to make his/her own decision according to conscience:

in a given moral choice, necessary conditions exist that allow the agent to choose one way or the other. As Charleton defines it, 'The nature of this Liberty Elective seems radically to consist in that *Indifferency*, in respect whereof the Faculty called free, may or may not be carried on towards any particular object.' (Danielson 1982, 134-35)<sup>18</sup>

In *Areopagitica*, "that rank of things indifferent" contains the myriad forms of truth, however contradictory those different shapes may appear, precisely because of the freedom of conscience allowed. Truth "may be on this side, or on the other" in the argument about things indifferent because it is the freedom, the "room" given to Truth (rather than the "licencings" which "bind her when she sleeps") which is all-important. Eventually, everything external to the reasonable consciousness of an individual becomes a thing indifferent about which conscientious, thoughtful choices must be made so as not to be a "heretick in the truth." Although the "rank of things indifferent" is outside of the consciousness or external, truth can still be found "in" them since they require the subject to make an internal choice. Therefore, things indifferent are important not so much because they "contain" external truth (since for Milton there is really no such thing), but because they set an internal process of truth -- the process of choice -- into action.

In this fallen world, the living interiority of Milton's subject defines and grounds truth. Like the God of which humanity is an image, the individual is a centre where truth may be located, though he/she may only be a provisional centre. As Rajan suggests, the different forms of truth -- its constitution ahistorically or transcendently in God and its constitution historically or subjectively in Milton's individual -- engage each other and reveal a profound similarity: "the structures deciphered by human effort and the structures set forth in eternal dispensations are

---

18. Danielson quotes from Walter Charleton, *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled by the Light of Nature* (1652, 263).

placed in relationships which give each other meaning and which are in that deep sense, homogeneous"(95). But this concept of the centre is not as totalizing and absolute as it might first appear. Because Milton allows for division in truth, each subject can be said to have his/her own centre, so that a multiplicity of centres exist, none of which is absolutely true. Yet both structures locate truth in the logos: self-presence determined as a conscious and uncomplicated interiority, and the pure meaning and infinite presence of God. This placement of truth only in the living reason of the individual is, like the positioning of God as ultimate truth, a profoundly metaphysical gesture.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Lurking Abnormalities: The Self and the Book in *Areopagitica***

Some in their discourse desire rather commendation of wit in being able to hold all arguments, than of judgement in discerning what is true; as it were a praise to know what might be said, and not what should be thought.

--Sir Francis Bacon, *Of Discourse*

The subject's relationship to books in *Areopagitica* is complex past the point of convolution. Not only does Milton discuss this relation from the viewpoint of both the consumption and production of books (the "individual" as reader and author), but the economy in which the interior consciousness of the subject and the exterior supplement of writing circulate is governed by an abnormal and exorbitant "logic." In the argument against the licencing of books, Milton tries to prove that the exterior text is a helpful, non-threatening supplement which may aid the reader in the discovery of truth and in the perfection of virtue. Yet this argument exceeds this simple logic and becomes instead a paradigm of what Freud calls "kettle logic" (the logic of dreams) and what Derrida names "the logic of the supplement." Milton's discussion covers almost every permutation of the connection between the subject and the text (books cannot make a difference to individual readers; books are necessary in the development of a virtuous inner life; books can and do corrupt a person's soul; books are no different from anything else exterior to the self) but makes little attempt to resolve the contradictions these different positions create. In this strange and excessive logic, we can see the wavering of the line of demarcation

between the subject's fiercely protected interior and the supplement of the exterior text. These phenomenal "symptoms" show that Milton's "individual" is not a self-contained ground for truth, but is in some way invaded by exteriority and constituted by "writing" (in the transcendental sense). *Areopagitica* works hard to suppress these symptoms of the self's transgressed identity and individuality, but the attempt to obliterate exteriority results in a series of strange mutations which are partly speech and partly writing, partly living and partly dead. In this series, the chapter will first examine how Milton's tract, the defense for the liberty of printing, effaces its written form and presents itself as a speech, though the passage which most vividly enacts the fiction of the speech is unable to maintain a consistent present tense. Next, the book will be explored as that which preserves life after the death or absence of the author; as a result, the book exists in a strange limbo between life and death, a monster neither alive nor dead. Finally, I will discuss how Milton attempts to place controls on the book's ability to turn living interiority into monstrosity through a limited form of censorship; as the progeny of the soul, books must be permitted to be printed, to be born into the outside world, but if they are found to attack the identity of the name, then they must be suppressed.

### **The logic of the supplement**

Before examining Milton's unusual defense of books, it may be wise to examine briefly the "logic of the supplement," which Derrida develops in a discussion of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida explains the idea of the supplement as follows:

the concept of the supplement...harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The

supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence....

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence....

This second signification of the supplement cannot be separated from the first... Each of the two significations is by turns effaced or becomes discreetly vague in the presence of the other. But their common function is shown in this: whether it adds or substitutes itself, the supplement is *exterior*, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added... (144-45)

The term "supplement" has two meanings which react against each other. On the one hand, a supplement can be that added to something already complete in itself: it is a "surplus," basically unnecessary, which enriches an already full "plenitude." On the other hand, the supplement can be added because the plenitude is not rich enough: it is lacking and therefore needs the help of this addition. In this case, the supplement "insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*," invading a presence which, by extension, must already have had a void. Derrida's polysemantic examination of the word, "supplement," is not unusual, of course, but the way in which he treats the two significations is. Derrida's main point is that the "second signification of the supplement cannot be separated from the first": one or the other may efface itself or become "discreetly vague in the presence of the other," but will never disappear. The "logic of the supplement" escapes logic because it allows two contradictory identities to exist within the same idea. Whereas logic would say "if a equals b and b does not equal c, the a cannot equal c," the logic of the supplement would claim that a could indeed still equal c, although b still does not equal c. In short, a supplement may be *at the same time* that which adds to something which is complete in itself (an unnecessary supplement) *and* that which is entirely necessary to fill a void in that same thing.

This exorbitant logic describes the odd relationship between the subject and its other, or, in other words, between the interior and the exterior, between living consciousness and unconsciousness/death, between the presence of speech and the representation of writing. Although the "individual" sees him/herself as a consciousness which is not constituted or defined by anything exterior and unknown to this plenitude of self-presence, the plenitude of consciousness merely effaces the play of supplementarity. There is always what Gasché calls "a certain irreducibility of the Other with respect to the self"(187) since the self's "own identity is a function of its demarcation from the Other"(187). The subject can define itself as an interiority, conscious to itself, only by referring to and excluding exteriority: "Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity"(OG 244). Therefore, as this presence can only define itself through what is other, the play of absence and presence which is supplementarity or originary *différance* must have already invaded the subject: "...the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self"(OG 163).

Let us look at Milton's defense of books, keeping in mind this supplementarity and the ramifications it has for the definition of Milton's subject. Throughout *Areopagitica*, books function as a metaphor for that which is exterior to the self -- "what ever thing we hear or see, sitting, walking, travelling, or conversing *may be fitly call'd our book, and is of the same effect that writings are*"(528, emphasis added) -- though, according to the logic of the supplement, their ability to harm or penetrate the soul is described in contradictory ways. At first, books are neutral entities (things indifferent) which cannot change a person's essential characteristics, as this paraphrase of St. Paul reveals:

To the pure all things are pure, not only meats and drinks, but all kinde of knowledge whether of good or evill; the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequently the books, if the will and conscience be not defil'd. For books are as meats and viands are; some of good, some of evill substance; and yet God in that unapocryphall vision, said without exception, Rise, *Peter*, kill and eat, leaving the choice to each mans discretion. (512, emphasis added)

Like the external objects of meat and drink, outside knowledge cannot defile the inner self, if it is pure. Will and conscience are the guardians of the soul who protect it from the taint of exterior corruption found in writing. Here, the inner life is a plenitude complete in itself; the outside knowledge contained in books is merely a thing indifferent that cannot change the status quo. A person's spirit or soul, which has as its ground the reason given by the absolute interiority of God,<sup>1</sup> is the only essential: "For those actions which enter into a man, rather then issue out of him, and therefore defile not, God uses not to captivat under a perpetuall childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser..."(513-14). This quotation may be clarified somewhat by examining at the same time the passage from Scripture to which it refers:

16 And Jesus said, Are ye also yet without understanding?  
 17 Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out in the draught?  
 18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.  
 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:  
 20 These are *the things* which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man. (Matthew 15: 16-20)

In Milton's interpretation of the passage, reading cannot be harmful because it is an external thing taken in; it cannot affect the soul, but may be purged from the body

1. For a fuller discussion of how God as absolute presence and interiority is the ground for Milton's individual, see below, page 60 and following.



as is food. Milton slyly substitutes the abstract knowledge obtained through reading for the material nourishment of which this Biblical passage speaks. Presumably the food one takes into one's body is in no danger of contaminating "the heart" (the inner soul, the essential person), while knowledge, though also stemming from an outside source, may. In the Biblical quotation, the "things which proceed out of the mouth" can "defile" because they "come forth from the heart," or the interior. Because it affects the interior, the knowledge contained in books, though exterior, may not be purged from the body as easily as food. Obviously, reading may influence or even produce the "evil thoughts" which come from the heart, while food will not. Therefore, books are not as "meats and viands are." The strain in the analogy reveals the stress caused by Milton's attempt to neutralize writing.

Ignoring this small strain for the moment, and proceeding with our examination of *Areopagitica's* argument, we find a larger tension developing. Because of Milton's concept of a pure and virtuous inner life, it turns out that books are not extraneous entities, but are entirely necessary for the completion and perfection of the soul:

Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human vertue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we *more safely*, and with *lesse danger* scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tractats, and hearing all manner of reason? (516-17, emphasis added)

For "human vertue" to be truly virtuous, it must have knowledge of vice: according to the principle of contrariety, vice *constitutes* virtue. The safest way to apprehend evil (without which there can be no good) is by reading, since the vice contained in a book is not an "actual" experience but is merely a reflection or imitation of "reality." The "true warfaring Christian"(515) must be able to "apprehend and

consider vice [an internal, mental process]...and yet abstain [from external action]"(514). But if books enable the individual to experience the evil needed to make him/her pure, then books do affect the soul: the inner self cannot achieve purity without this knowledge entering in from the *outside*. The supplement of writing is therefore indispensable because the "individual" is not complete without it. Far from being merely indifferent, the exterior constitutes the interior, leading to a circular and undecidable origin: men produce books as their "progeny,"(492) but these external children in some sense also "produce" men, who may produce books, etc.

Having ended the section on "the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read,"(517) *Areopagitica* now turns to the potential evils: "But of the harm that may result hence three kinds are usually reckon'd. First, is fear'd the infection that may spread..."(517). Suddenly, "harm" and "infection" have been introduced, though they were rigorously suppressed when Milton was anxious to present books as neutral. At first, it appears that the infection is simply theoretical; the author is playing Devil's advocate and arguing the case as if books *were* harmful. Yet, the text he is using as his "test case" of infection is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures:

First, is fear'd the infection that may spread; but then all human learning and controversie in religious points must remove out of the world, yea the Bible it selfe; for that oftentimes relates blasphemy not nicely, it describes the carnall sense of wicked men not unelegantly, it brings in holiest men passionately murmuring against providence through all the arguments of *Epicurus*: in other great disputes it answers dubiously and darkly to the common reader. (517)

To show that even the Bible would have to be censored under the present Licencing Act, Milton paints a bleak picture of the Holy Book. But how can the Word of God

be contaminating? The best thing that can be said about the Bible, here, is that, like "all human learning and controversie in religious points," it is something external to the inner self and thus needs to be correctly interpreted (like any other thing indifferent) or it may corrupt, not purify. But if even the Bible is a thing indifferent about which choices must be made, if the truth contained in it is not immediately apparent, then the definition of things indifferent must be extended. Things indifferent, as discussed above, are matters about which the Scriptures have made no pronouncement, thus leaving the decision entirely up to the conscience of the individual. However, if even the Bible is to be treated as a thing indifferent, then we can see again how for Milton, the living internal conscience and the reason which guides it gains a primacy over even the external text of the living word of God. To "the common reader" (he/she who follows the Scripture blindly or who is a "heretick in the truth"<sup>543</sup>), the Bible may answer "dubiously and darkly," since he/she does not consult his/her inner voice of conscience.

Eventually Milton does admit that there are truly dangerous books which may corrupt and penetrate the soul: "But of our Priests and Doctors how many have bin corrupted by studying the comments of Jesuits and *Sorbonists*, and how fast they could transfuse that corruption into the people, our experience is both late and sad"(519). Strangely enough, these books do not corrupt the ignorant, according to Milton, but affect only the learned: "It will be hard to instance where any ignorant man hath bin ever seduc't by Papisticall book in English, unlesse it were commended and expounded to him by some of that Clergy..."(519). The whole *raison d'être* of book-learning is to exercise the individual's virtue against the potential vice of books so that he/she may become more pure. If this tenant held true, then the learned should be in little danger of corruption. Their souls should be

virtuous enough to withstand any kind of vice, since they have been purifying them through their study: the learned are not, after all "common reader[s]"(517). The *ignorant* should be at the most risk since what goodness they have, untested by books, is still a "fugitive and cloister'd vertue"(515) and thus, by Milton's previous reasoning, is most likely to be seduced.

Next follows a confused and confusing passage, which attempts to show that books are not the only means by which corruption may be spread:

Seeing therefore that those books, & those in great abundance which are likeliest to taint both life and doctrine, cannot be suppress without the fall of learning, and of all ability in disputation, and that these books of either sort are most and soonest catching to the learned, from whom to the common people what ever is herecticall or dissolute may quickly be convey'd, and that evill manners are as perfectly learnt without books a thousand other ways which cannot be stopt, and evill doctrine not with books can propagate, except a teacher guide, which he might also doe without writing, and so beyond prohibiting, I am not able to unfold, how this cautelous enterprise of licencing can be exempted from the number of vain and impossible attempts. (520)

Just as Milton is unable to "unfold" licencing from the impossible attempts to suppress vice, so is the reader unable to unfold this passage in any way that will make logical sense and support Milton's presumed purpose. Books, even those "likeliest to taint both life and doctrine," are necessary to keep learning and the art of disputation healthy. The contagion which may be spread from them is "most and soonest catching to the learned," so, we may assume, the general population will not be affected by the epidemic. However, "what ever is herecticall or dissolute" *from these books* can be "quickly...convey'd" to the "common people," though not through writing. The crux of the argument seems to be that the masses may be contaminated by "evill manners...perfectly learnt...a thousand other ways," including the guidance of a teacher, but not by books. Yet it seems in this passage

that the main source of infection, passed from the learned to the ignorant, does stem from writing. The mode of transmission to the masses may be indirect, not direct, but it is just as infectious.

The "line" of reasoning thus far, condensed and reduced to show its departure from the typical sequential logic used in argumentation<sup>2</sup>, is:

- 1) Books are neutral. They cannot corrupt a pure spirit. (The supplement of writing is merely a surplus, added to the already complete inner life of the individual.)
- 2) Books are necessary to exercise and to confirm truth and virtue. (The subject, lacking sufficient means of obtaining truth by him/herself, is required to supplement this lack through books, though this supplement is helpful.)
- 3) Books can corrupt and infect. The learned are especially vulnerable to this infection, and may transmit it to the ignorant. (The external text is a dangerous supplement, and may invade and corrupt the purity of the self.)

---

2. Critics have long noticed and tried to explain the irregularities of Milton's argument in *Areopagitica*. For example, Thomas Kranidas shows how the logical markers of Milton's speech are at odds with the flow of its argument:

The speaker is at pains to state his outline, to emphasize his transitions, and to establish clear guideposts for our convenience in following the argument. But even as stated above, the argument is loose, and the parallelisms irregular. Even an ardent admirer of Milton's 'architectonics' will recognize that much of the power of the piece comes from imagistic and thematic interplay and polarization. (Kranidas 1984, 178)

Rather than faulting Milton for these irregularities, as Kranidas implicitly does ("the argument is loose..."), Derrida's logic of the supplement brings out the necessary play between the interior and the exterior which produces this illogical argument.

4) People may be contaminated in many other ways than by reading, and so the licencing of books will not stop the spread of evil. (The supplement which may break in and corrupt the subject is not only the written text, but anything external.)

The layers of contradictions exceed an attempt to try to argue all sides of the case, since the argument's discrepancies are never dealt with and resolved. Instead the reader is left with passages in which two or more contradictory statements lie side by side:

if learned men be the first receivers out of books, & dispredders both of vice and error, how shall the licencers themselves be confided in, unlesse we can conferr upon them, or they assume to themselves above all others in the Land, the grace of infallibility, and uncorruptedness? And again if it be true, that a wise man like a good refiner can gather gold out of the drossiest volume, and that a fool will be a fool with the best book, yea or without book, there is no reason that we should deprive a wise man of any advantage to his wisdome... (520-21)

This quotation perfectly illustrates the simultaneous presentation of two ideas which, logically, cannot both be true. *Either* writing is so malignant that it will infect even the licensers against their will *or* it cannot change the status quo, as fools will be foolish and wise men wise "with the best book...or without book." This argumentative attempt to have your cake and eat it too is extraordinarily reminiscent of Plato's exegesis of writing in the *Phaedrus*, as summarized here by Derrida:

1. Writing is rigorously exterior and inferior to living memory and speech, which are therefore undamaged by it. 2. Writing is harmful to them because it puts them to sleep and infects their very life which would otherwise remain intact. 3. Anyway, if one has resorted to hypomnesia [empty repetition, not living memory] and writing at all, it is not for their intrinsic value, but because living memory is finite,

it already has holes in it before writing ever comes to leave its traces. Writing has no effect on memory. (*Dissemination* 111)<sup>3</sup>

Two writers whose intents are completely different -- Milton is endeavoring to defend writing, while Plato is attempting to show its dangers -- are seemingly compelled by writing to contradict themselves, to show "*both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside" (*Dissemination* 110).

### Speech and writing: the subject and its prodigal son

Throughout *Areopagitica*, Milton struggles to legitimize books and to resolve the conflict between speech and writing, legitimacy and illegitimacy, interiority and exteriority, and -- because it is the same thing -- self-determined personal identity and the alterity of writing which threatens it. To achieve this legitimacy, he attempts to back his pamphlet with the authority of his self-presence and make it live as his speech would. If we think carefully, it is more than a bit unusual that a defense of books or writing takes the form of a speech. The title page calls *Areopagitica* "A/ SPEECH/ OF/ MR. JOHN MILTON/ For The Liberty of UNLICENC'D PRINTING/ TO THE PARLAMENT OF ENGLAND." While reading the text, a vivid picture emerges of the noble speaker, the "voice of

3. Derrida sees in Plato's analysis of writing "an instance of that kind of 'kettle-logic' to which Freud turns in the *Traumdeutung* in order to illustrate the logic of dreams" (*Dissemination* 110-11). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes that the "mutually exclusive" explanations he found in one of his dreams

reminded one vividly of the defence put forward by the man who was charged by one of his neighbours with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbour at all. So much the better: if only a single one of these three lines of defence were to be accepted as valid, the man would have to be acquitted. (197)

reason"(490) personified, standing and addressing the Lords and Commons of England. Nothing could be more legitimate or more authoritative than this single individual, the representative of liberty, speaking to the government of the land:

when complaints are freely heard, deeply consider'd, and speedily reform'd, then is the utmost bound of civill liberty attain'd, that wise men looke for. To which if I now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter, that wee are already in good part arriv'd,...it will bee attributed first, as is most due, to the strong assistance of God our deliverer, next to your most faithfull guidance and undaunted Wisdome, Lords and Commons of *England*. (487)

However, the authority and legitimacy of this speech is only an illusion. We are not listening to a speech made before Parliament; we are not even reading a transcription of a speech once delivered there: "Nominally, *Areopagitica* was an oration addressed to Parliament, although Milton had no more intention of delivering it in person than Isocrates had of public delivery of the speech whose title Milton adopted"(Hughes 716). Instead, we are reading a written pamphlet, unlicensed and made illegal by the very Parliament it purportedly addresses. The "civill liberty" attributed to the wisdom and generosity of the government is never made "manifest" (or made present) by the "*sound*" of the speaker's voice because the words are *written*: the event does not take place. The sound and the manifest presence of liberty is a mirage, as is the authority with which the speaker "speaks."<sup>4</sup>

4. Michael Wilding, in his article, "Milton's *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects," proposes that Milton's choice of the term "SPEECH" to describe his pamphlet is an attempt to evade the licensing restrictions against which he was arguing:

If the pamphlet were designed as a provocative test case, Milton could have always claimed that no licence was required to prepare a speech...The paradox that what might freely be delivered as a speech could not be printed offered a telling point against the restrictions on printing....The absurdity of having to make 'A/SPEECH...For the Liberty of UNLICENC'D PRINTING' is a purely conceptual absurdity; the speech is not spoken but printed, and printed unlicensed, enacting that very liberty it demands. (28)



Indeed, the strangeness of the mixture of present, past and conditional in this passage divulges the strain of hiding its illegitimacy: "To which *if* [conditional] I *now* [present] manifest by the very sound of this which I *shall* [future] utter, that *wee are already* in good part *arriv'd* [present perfect, implying a mixture of present and past],...it will be attributed [future perfect, a mixture of past and future]..."

The "I" which is supposed to manifest liberty in the present, as he speaks to Parliament, is instead lost in a wilderness of tenses.

In the two forms contained within *Areopagitica*, we can see the relation of speech and writing to the subject. Speech, as the direct communication of a person's thought to an audience, is the voice of reason and authority: a voice which vigorously attempts to suppress the transgressive nature of writing. As a representation of this presence, writing can be seen as a reproduction of the self, the "progeny" who preserves the unique identity of its parent, yet this child in some way is always illegitimate or orphaned. The presence of the author produces books, but they are immediately left what Milton calls "orphan remainders"(534) to make their way among the readers of the world as best they can. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida surmises this orphaned state is characteristic of writing:

Not to know where one comes from or where one is going, for a discourse with no guarantor, is not to know how to speak at all, to be in a state of infancy. Uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country, this almost insignificant signifier is at everyone's disposal, can be picked up by both the competent and the incompetent, by those who understand and know what to do with it...and by those who are completely unconcerned with it, and who, knowing nothing about it, can inflict all manner of impertinence upon it. (*Dissemination* 144)

---

Whether or not Milton would have been allowed to deliver freely *Areopagitica* as a speech seems to me to depend on where he would deliver it. Almost certainly Milton would not have been able to deliver his "speech" in Parliament, and so the address to the Lords and Commons of England serves a different function.

Without the presence of its parent to explain, correct, or guide, writing may wander aimlessly, falling into any reader's hands who may interpret it as he/she wishes. Unlike a speech, which addresses a specific and stable audience -- the Parliament of England, for example -- Milton's written pamphlet travels out of his control and may be disseminated to any person capable of reading. What was once guaranteed by a living presence has now become an exterior object which lacks its founding interiority. This wildness and uncontrollability is precisely what makes writing so threatening to the author: once the book has been born, the ties to the parent are cut and his/her presence is no longer necessary. By endeavouring to turn his pamphlet into a speech that seemingly "is" its author, rather than a wayward and orphaned child, Milton attempts to exert some control over its wanderings:

By insisting on the helplessness of the text, Milton can create a correspondingly powerful, threatening enemy who in turn prompts the appearance of an even stronger author-defender able to rescue his predecessors. Yet the uncertain status of the text -- its effect, its ability to convey perpetual fame upon its author, even its ability to do harm -- is suggested by the essential circularity of this epic story. If texts are 'orphaned remainders'(534), then their producers must eventually cease their parental function and thus lose their singularity. (Blum 85)

Whether or not an author is dead or alive makes no difference to the status of his/her writing, since the living interiority of the parent is always absent or dead, never present and inherited by his/her progeny.

Part of the reason Milton defends books so vehemently, even if this defense takes place in a speech, is because books can preserve and disseminate the thoughts or the self-presence of an author more effectively than speech can. After all, people may, and usually do, read a book in the absence of its founding presence; the author reproduces him/herself in a form which will not die with him/her as speech will.

Like a child, the progeny of the book carries on the name and identity of the author and keeps it "alive."<sup>5</sup> Yet, if we examine *Areopagitica* carefully, writing reveals itself to be a peculiarly monstrous reproduction. Although writing is produced by a living consciousness, Milton's famous passage on books and men (492-93) shows that it is then preserved or embalmed in a limbo which is neither death nor life. At first, the passage personifies books: the public must "have a vigilant eye [as to] how Bookes *demeane* themselves, *as well as men*"(492). However, books do not live as men do, but are "not absolutely dead things" which "contain a potencie of life in them"(492). This passage defends books because they are in some ways a pure distillation of the intellect which may "live" past the death of its author: "they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them"(492); they are both the "season'd life of man preserv'd and stor'd up"(493) and "the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life"(493). Somehow, this essence of a living soul is not alive, but is irreducibly exterior: the books which preserve the author's thoughts are dead entities without a self-presence to answer for them. *Areopagitica* calls books not "a life" but "an immortality" which may yet be "*slain*." In a strange way, the

---

5. Of course, this supplementary writing shows a fundamental lack in speech's ability to maintain and communicate self-presence. In *Of Grammatology's* section on the "logic of the supplement," Derrida comments on the necessity of writing's addition to speech's "natural expression of thought":

When Nature, as self-proximity, comes to be forbidden or interrupted, when speech fails to protect presence, writing becomes necessary. It must *be added* to the word urgently. I have identified in advance one of the forms of this *addition*; speech being natural or at least the natural expression of thought,...writing is added to it, is adjoined, as an image or representation. In that sense, it is not natural. It diverts the immediate presence of thought to speech into representation and the imagination. This recourse is not only "bizarre," but dangerous. It is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent. (*OG* 144, emphasis added)

immortality of books is always already dead. Milton's attempt to view books as the child who carries on the author's line after his/her death is thwarted by the marginal status of the text. This progeny is only half-alive, a ghostly and monstrous figure existing somewhere between life and death. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida comments on the liminal quality of writing: "Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath" (*Dissemination* 143). Although books may preserve the author's life after death as a child inherits his/her parent's blood, this "imbalm'd" text is a zombie, a living corpse.

### **The transgression of the name**

The inherent abnormality of writing is a reason why Milton, even in this defense for "the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing" (title page 485), finds it necessary to place certain strict controls on the dissemination of books. Although he opposes the licencing of books before they are published, a restriction he identifies with Roman Catholicism and the Inquisition, he shows in his history of licencing that he favours censorship of "monstrosity" after the book has been published or born to the world:

Till then [the Inquisition] Books were ever as freely admitted into the World as any other birth; the issue of the brain was no more stifl'd then the issue of the womb: no envious *Juno* sate cros-leg'd over the nativity of any mans intellectual off spring; but if it prov'd a Monster, who denies, but that it was justly burnt, or sunk into the Sea. (505, emphasis added)

Books must be permitted to be born from the interior soul into the outside world, but once born and out of the power of their author, they may prove monstrous no matter how rigid the controls over them are or how closely the author tries to tie them to him/herself.

How Milton defines the monstrosity which makes a book dangerous enough to need suppression is extremely suggestive of the exterior text's infiltration of the inner self. He recommends the example of the judges of ancient Greece to his audience's attention:

In *Athens* where Books and Wits were ever busier then in any other part of *Greece*, I finde but only two sorts of writings which the Magistrate car'd to take notice of; those either blasphemous and Atheisticall, or Libellous. Thus the Books of *Protagoras* were by the Judges of *Areopagus* commanded to be burnt, and himselfe banisht the territory for a discourse begun with his confessing not to know *whether there were gods, or whether not*: And against defaming, it was decreed that none should be traduc'd by name... (494)

The two capital crimes which a book may commit, it seems, are blasphemy and libel, both characteristics which may attack and displace identity. Blasphemy, which can generally signify "defamation" (*SOED*) or libel, means more specifically taking the name of God in vain -- in effect, defaming God. Neither God nor the individual may be "traduc'd by name." The name of the individual is a sign of his/her unique identity, of that inner life or spirit which separates him/her from all other individuals. For Milton, this spirit is given to a person by God, the ultimate referent or signified, who exists as pure interiority, without external body or sign. Blasphemy and libel are, in effect, the same transgression: the transgression of the unique interior by the exterior, writing. The two punishable crimes which books can commit cause what Derrida calls an "eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*, breaching into the interiority of the soul, the living self-presence of the soul within the true logos, the help that speech lends to itself" (*OG* 34).

Derrida uses the notion of the proper name as a metaphor to demonstrate how the "unique" self is marked by the supplementary play of presence and absence. If we look at the "common-sense" (metaphysical) concept of the name, proper or

otherwise, we find that it refers simply to a person or thing; as David Clark notes, "of all the parts of language it is the name that most lends itself to the comforting notion that language is essentially a nomenclature, a system of signs pointing to things that are already given to comprehension in advance of signification"(18). The adjective "proper" carries connotations of unreflective individuality, uniqueness, and distinctiveness; *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "[b]elonging or relating to the person or thing in question distinctively or exclusively; special, particular, distinctive; peculiar, restricted; individual; of its own." Hence, when Milton displays his name so prominently on the title page of *Areopagitica*, he is trying to put his unique mark on what he has written in order to identify it as being his own self-contained production. His support of the author's copyright in the Licencing Order he otherwise attacks (569) also suggests a concern with fixing a stable, proper identity on the instability of writing. However, to Derrida, the proper name reveals not the unique identity of the self, but rather the necessity of its inscription within a chain of differences: "the name, especially the so-called proper name, is always caught in a chain or system of differences. It becomes an appellation only to the extent that it may inscribe itself within a figuration"(OG 89).

In *Areopagitica*, this inscription which infiltrates or transgresses the unique interiority of both the name and the subject is relentlessly figured as abnormality and monstrosity. Milton's figurations are especially provocative because they reveal, in their monstrosity, an excess of meaning which cannot be reduced to the simple "either...or" logic of metaphysical reason. For example, books are, in Milton's text, a progeny which is at once alive and dead, and for this reason, are neither simply alive nor simply dead. These excesses, which follow the "logic" of supplementarity, rather than a metaphysical logic, reveal the originary play which

underlies the construction of any simple presence, even that of the subject's own consciousness of itself: "*Différance* at once accounts for the excess of textual meaning at the level of discourse and names the condition of possibility for meaning as such"(Hart 197). This disclosure of originary excess is monstrous in that it contains a "mutated" form of absence and presence: a monster is "malformed" or "misshapen," "partly brute and partly human, or compounded of elements from two or more animal forms"(SOED). Because the normal conception of self is consciousness (a simple self-presence), anything which reveals the necessary supplementing of the subject with its other must be monstrous: partly human and partly non-human. Even for Derrida, a "painstaking investigation" of writing or *différance* leads us to a "future [which] can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity"(OG 5).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Choosing an Interpretation of "Origin":

#### The Symbiotic Alliance of Metaphysics and Deconstruction

The human understanding is unquiet; it cannot stop or rest, and still presses onward, but in vain. Therefore it is that we cannot conceive of any end or limit to the world, but always as of necessity it occurs to us that there is something beyond....this inability [of thought to stop] interferes...mischievously in the discovery of causes...

--Sir Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, XLVIII

The idea of "origin" has always evoked a certain relationship with theology, especially when the concept has referred to the genesis of humanity and the cause of the subject's coming into consciousness. Accordingly, looking at what constitutes the self involves an examination of theology, though not as the nature of God, but rather as his function as the ground or foundation of knowledge and the self. Viewing theology in the very specific sense of the origin and how it functions, we can investigate how the "non-ground" of Derrida's *différance* functions "theologically." Of course, to do this, the connection between the metaphysical foundation and the deconstruction which unsettles it must be determined. Milton's concept of origin is unquestionably metaphysical: God is the ground of the self, though, interestingly, Milton describes the association of the two in terms of representation. Derrida also describes the subject's relationship to the origin by way of representation, but in order to undermine the very concept of origin: *différance* is an "origin" which is "non-originary." Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysical



origin, however, is itself unsettled by the fact that it is forced to use metaphysical language which frames his idea of *différance* as a foundation. Since previously, this thesis has investigated language's (writing's) tendency to undermine a metaphysical, simple presence, I will now endeavor to show the other side of the coin, language's propensity toward a metaphysical grammar, by examining Derrida's discussion of deconstruction and negative theology, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." This work leads irresistibly to untangling the complicity between metaphysics and deconstruction.

### **Milton's "reasonable creature": the image of God or an artificial Adam?**

It is perhaps surprising to find that Milton delineates the relationship of the self to God through metaphors of representation, considering how vehemently he tries to protect the individual from the threat of representation in the defense of books. Yet, although he sees man as an image of God, Milton makes it clear that this image is not artificial or empty; seemingly, the representation of God is protected from the dangerous qualities of other representation. But before outlining this thematic of natural or theological and artificial representation, let us look at how Milton sets up a concept of self in his introductory remarks in *Areopagitica*. He begins with a meditation on the various states of mind felt by those who address Parliament:

I suppose them as at the beginning of no meane endeavour, not a little alter'd and mov'd inwardly in their mindes: Some with doubt of what will be the successe, others with feare of what will be the censure; some with hope, others with confidence of what they have to speake. And me perhaps each of these dispositions, as the subject was whereon I enter'd, may have at other times variously affected; and likely might in these formost expressions now also disclose which of them sway'd most but that the very attempt of this addresse thus

made, and the thought of whom it hath recourse to, hath got the power within me to a passion... (486-87)

Different authors are "alter'd and mov'd inwardly" in several different ways, which Milton details. He acknowledges that "at other times" he may have "affected" any of these "dispositions," depending on his subject matter of the moment. Now, this situation does not seem particularly unusual; Milton appears to be discussing how one's emotions are altered according to what one is attempting to write, though it is surprising to find so personal and introspective a comment at the beginning of an address to Parliament. What is interesting about this passage is the description of the self-changed-by-context as an affection, as something artificial, which here he has no need for. Because the matter is so important, the narrator is anxious to persuade the reader that "affection" or artificial dispositions are no longer necessary: the "power within" him has been worked to a "passion." The "real" self has emerged, one which disdains affecting a persona in order to make his point -- or so Milton would have you believe. A few lines later, the narrator affects speaking to the very Parliament which makes this written tract unlawful.<sup>1</sup>

The themes of artificiality and representation appear again in *Areopagitica*, also in discussing the self, though this time they are depicted theologically. In a defense of free will and choice, Milton lays the ground for what Danielson calls "the requirements of meaningful human existence" (Danielson 1982, 173):

many there be that complain of divin Providence for suffering *Adam* to transgresse, foolish tongues! when God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had bin else a meer artificiall *Adam*, such an *Adam* as he is in the motions [glossed as "puppet shows" in Sirluck's footnote]. (527)

---

1. See page 487 in *Areopagitica* and page 49 of this thesis, above.

Without reason and thus choice, Adam (who is being used as a prototype for all mankind<sup>2</sup>) would be a mere puppet, an "artificial" man: in brief, the exterior signifier of a person lacking the interiority which gives him meaning. Reason is, after all, what makes one into the image of God: "...who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye"(492). While it is difficult in this quotation to understand the distinction between the "reasonable creature, Gods Image" which is man, and "reason it selfe...the Image of God, as it were in the eye" (a good book), the connection between the Image of God and reason is unmistakably clear. To pull these two strands of *Areopagitica* together, we can conclude that man as a reasonable, and therefore free, creature is still somehow a representation -- an image -- though not an "artificial" one. If man is an image, a representation, a *sign*, then God as the transcendental signified is his referent: "meaning, the referent, truth...is what God's name always names, before or beyond other names..."(HTAS 29). The reason and choice which make man into an image of God are the very characteristics which make possible full and controlled self-presence: without free choice, and the reason necessary to be able to formulate the correct decision, man would be entirely constituted by the predestined will of God. Though man could *act* as a predestined being, his actions would have no meaning since the internal process of reasoning which enables him to choose those actions would not matter. Therefore, although man is a representation (of God), he is at the same time not a representation (not an "artificial" puppet) since, for Milton, the self is not mediated by signs but is fully present to itself at the moment of self-determination. To situate

---

2. As I am dissecting Milton's argument here, I have decided to stay with his gender-biased terms: man and mankind. Whether or not Milton would have meant to include Eve, and thus womankind, under the general category of "Adam," is an interesting question, but nonetheless a question which I do not have the space to discuss.

these ideas in the vocabulary of seventeenth-century theology, we can say that because man needs God as a referent, he is not completely self-reliant in the "Pelagian" sense (Danielson 1979, 59-65). However, since he can make reasoned choices, he is not so dependent on God's will that he ends up being a mere "artificial Adam," as would be the case in the doctrine of Calvinistic predestination: for Milton, "will is decisive but not efficacious; grace is efficacious but does not overrule the human will. For the orthodox Calvinist, the divine will alone is decisive; for the Pelagian, the unaided human can be efficacious" (Danielson 1979, 65).

Near the beginning of *Tetrachordon*, a work published shortly after *Areopagitica*, Milton performs a scriptural exegesis of the biblical phrase "In the Image of God created he him," Genesis 1: 27. In it, we can see a fuller explanation of the same thematic which operates in *Areopagitica*:

[*In the Image of God created he him.*] It is enough determin'd, that this Image of God wherein man was created, is meant Wisdom, Purity, Justice, and rule over all creatures. All which being lost in *Adam*, was recover'd with gain by the merits of Christ. For albeit our first parent had lordship over sea, and land, and aire, yet there was a law without him, as a guard set over him. But Christ having cancell'd the hand writing of ordinances which was against us, *Coloss.* 2.14. and interpreted the fulfilling of all through charity, hath in that respect set us over law, in the free custody of his love, and left us victorious under the guidance of his living Spirit, not under the dead letter; to follow that which most edifies, most aides and furdurs a religious life, makes us holiest and likest to his immortall Image, not that which makes us most conformable and captive to civill and subordinat precepts...(2: 587-588)

The play between the interiority of the spirit and the exteriority of the written law is startlingly obvious in the above quotation: fallen man has been saved from an artificial and meaningless exteriority through the inward merits of Christ. Because of Adam's transgression, Milton sees man as having been under the compulsion of

an external law -- the "guard set over him." But after his redemption by Christ, man is no longer under the constraint of this "dead letter" but is now directed by the internal life of the Spirit. Christ has "cancell'd the hand writing of ordinances which was against us" and left us under "the guidance of his living Spirit." Thus, following Christ's Spirit is what enables us to be "likest to his immortall Image." Man under a law which he must obey blindly, a law which is written in the "dead letter" and immutable, is the same as an artificial Adam: a purely external signifier which has no meaning, no internal life, no determinable self-presence. But just as man is still a representation or image, though not an artificial one, so too is his self imprinted by writing, though not the dangerous, external writing of the "dead letter": a few lines later, Milton writes that the "good of mankinde" is "not [always] writt'n in the characters of law" but is "*engrav'n in the heart of man by a divine impression....*"(2: 588, emphasis added). Again, the good representation -- the "divine impression" written in the heart of man -- comes directly from the absolute interiority of the transcendental signified, God.

### **The divine impression and the dead letter**

In both the passages from *Areopagitica* and *Tetrachordon*, there exists what Derrida names "a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body"(OG 17). Because the good "writing" or representation is imprinted with the spirit of God, it contains the interior presence which writing/representation in the common sense lacks. The "divine impression" in the "heart of man" redeems representation's dangerous exteriority. The economy in which good representation, bad representation, and God circulate is complex.

Writing as technique or artificiality represents the exteriority of death and unconsciousness: in short, non-self-presence. It is the "artificial Adam" who cannot make a meaningful choice; it is the rigidly external "hand writing of ordinances" which must be interpreted literally. On the opposite end of the spectrum, God, as the truth which constitutes and inhabits our world, is the pure meaning of the transcendental signified eternally present. "Good" writing, because it contains both of the others in it, is for Milton a sign -- signifier plus signified. It is not the pure interiority of God which needs no signifier to represent its meaning, but neither is it an arbitrary and meaningless symbol. But this natural inscription is not true representation at all, since it functions to reveal the *presence* of God and thus to guarantee man's presence to himself: "Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath....It is...very close to...the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense..."(OG 17).

Yet natural writing is, for Derrida, not as innocent as it seems. If divine writing is the imprint of absolute interiority on our hearts, then why must literal writing, the exterior representation of interiority, function as a metaphor for it? In other words, why can pure interiority only be signified by figuration? In what he describes in *Dissemination* as a "pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy," "good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one"(149). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida extends these remarks:

all that functions as *metaphor* in [the discourse of natural writing] confirms the privilege of the logos and founds the "literal" meaning then given to writing: a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos. The paradox to which attention must be paid is this:

natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by metaphor. (15)

Natural writing "confirms the privilege of the logos" (God as presence, especially the presence of conscience in the self) and "founds" the literal meaning of writing. In other words, natural writing is the meaning or truth which precedes its representation in literal writing. But as the density of this passage attests, the use of the term "writing" to figure that which comes before writing quickly becomes problematic. Derrida describes the situation as "a sign [literal writing] signifying a signifier [natural writing] itself signifying an eternal verity [God as pure spirit or intelligence]." But since natural writing cannot name itself except by borrowing from what it is supposed to be serving as ground, then Derrida asks which writing really came first, the natural interiority or the artificial representation of the natural?

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida traces a brief history of natural and literal writing, a history in which we may situate Milton. In the Middle Ages, natural or good writing is seen as "the book of Nature"(15) in which God writes. Therefore, God's presence is all around us, written in Nature. By the seventeenth century, Derrida sees a movement away from the presence of God inhabiting Nature toward a "determination of absolute presence" as self-presence:

In the history of this treatment [of divine versus fallen writing], the most decisive separation appears at the moment when...the determination of absolute presence is constituted as self-presence, as subjectivity. It is the moment of the great rationalisms of the seventeenth century. From then on, the condemnation of fallen and finite writing will take another form, within which we still live: it is non-self-presence that will be denounced...Writing in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death....On the other hand, on the other face of the same proposition, writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated; it is equal in dignity...to the voice of conscience as divine law...(OG 16-17)

Certainly, Milton's concept of representation and the self in *Areopagitica* and *Tetrachordon* is part of this seventeenth-century movement.<sup>3</sup> The vocabulary which Milton uses to denounce the external image is even the same as that which Derrida describes: the "law without" Adam (2: 587) both Milton and Derrida call "the dead letter." In addition, Milton values both the "divine impression" which Christ's Spirit engraves in the "heart of man"(2: 588) and the "free consciences and Christian liberties" which cannot be crowded into "canons and precepts of men"(554) over any external law, even the Scriptures. Because truth may only be found by exercising the conscience on which God has written, for Milton the most important right that the subject must have is "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties"(560).

### **Speech, representation, and the subject**

For Derrida, the valorization of conscience follows the tradition of viewing speech as the "*natural* bond of sense" to the mind while writing is merely derivative -- the sign of speech. The voice inside our head, whether its self-presence is guaranteed by the theological foundation of God or by the secular ground of the self, effaces its language so that our thoughts seem transparently unmediated:

The voice *is heard* (understood) -- that undoubtedly is what is called conscience -- closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto-affection that necessarily has the form of time and which does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in "reality," any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self, and nevertheless,

---

3. Perhaps one of the things I find most interesting about Milton is his location on the margin between the "determination of absolute presence" as God and its determination as self-presence. As chapter one explained, Milton situates truth both in the presence of God and in the self-presence of the subject.



as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality. (*OG* 20)

Normally, we do not think of the voice inside our head as speaking in a language (that is, a system of signs which we merely borrow); when we hear ourselves speak, either audibly or inaudibly, the signifier is so absolutely effaced that it seems to exist as pure meaning or thought: "The feelings of the mind...constitute a sort of universal language which can then efface itself....All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative" (*OG* 11). As a result, the subject appears not to need "any accessory signifier, any substance of expression" borrowed from the outside world which may interfere with the spontaneous and unmediated expression of its thought. By way of illustration, because the "power *within*" the narrator of *Areopagitica* has been worked to a passion, he does not need to affect consciously an artificial disposition through which he can write. The reader appears to receive the spontaneous expression of his thought, "spoken" as directly to his audience as it is heard in his mind.

In the above quotation, Derrida is, of course, only describing the so-called "natural" perception of subjectivity, not his own. Certain keywords, more obvious in the original context than this one, leap out at the reader familiar with Derrida's work, reminding him/her that the situation is perhaps more complex than it first seems. The fact that a gap exists between the hearing and the understanding of the subject's voice, for example, implies the process of thought may not be as unmediated and unified as we casually think. This division or gap reveals the process of language-as-articulation happening even within the confines of the subject. Therefore, the perception that the self does not need to "borrow from outside itself" is, as it were, both true and false. The subject does not need to "borrow" any exteriority (lack of presence, death, unconsciousness) from the world

outside itself simply because the exteriority of "language" (in both the phenomenal and transcendental senses) already constitutes the self.

Accordingly, rather than the self being able to produce a "unique expression of the signified" spontaneously as pure thought or meaning unmediated by language, here language and representation come *first*, before even self-presence: "Language has started without us, in us and before us"(HTAS 29); "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.*"(OG 50). If we begin to think of even the *thoughts* in our minds as mediated language, then this situation raises some alarming questions. If representation (language) takes place before presence (thought/meaning), then what is being represented? Where is the signified? Derrida proposes that the desire to find the signified, the pure presence of thought "behind" language, is born out of representation, not the other way around: "Representation *in the abyss* of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc."(OG 163). Presence stems from the desire to stop the "indefinite multiplication" of representation. If writing represents speech, speech represents our thoughts, and even our thoughts are preceded by language, then where does representation end? For Milton, the answer is God. Man may be an image, but he is an image of God, the pure presence which stops the abyss of representation in the most absolute way possible. God cannot be a representation: he is the creator of all signs, not a sign himself. Derrida considers this type of case -- God as the subject's ground of presence -- the supreme example of the desire to efface representation, to stop the abyss from multiplying indefinitely. The sign, language, and representation do not split apart "a self-presence which is already possible"(OG 166). Instead, the "loss of the proper, of absolute proximity,

of self-presence" is instead "the loss of that which has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated..."(*OG* 112). Thus the self must live a curious contradiction: "Privation of presence is the condition of experience, that is to say of presence"(*OG* 166). So this is not to say that the self can have *no* experience of presence, but that what we think of as presence is produced by representation: "presence"/experience is not absence, exactly, for even a sign is present, though only as a stand-in for the "real" presence which it represents, but it is also not full presence either, since the presence which the sign represents is not really present.

#### **Supplementarity: the abyss as "ground"**

While Milton uses God as the ground to guarantee self-presence, Derrida attempts to undermine the very idea that the subject can be grounded -- in the usual meaning of the word ground as a stable foundation. Nonetheless, Derrida does view supplementarity (representation, writing) as a kind of non-ground for the self, for knowledge, and for conceptualization is general. As Stanley Fish explains,

The supplement of writing is not secondary, does not come after a plenitude it then threatens; rather it is "primordial" and names, and *thereby marks* the absence of, a plenitude that is not now and never was available in and of itself.... presence -- whether it be of God or the world or the self -- rather than occupying a realm independent of and prior to the articulations that strain to characterize it, is the product of these articulations, of systems of signification, of writing, of the dangerous supplement. (1990, 43)

It is difficult to characterize so slippery a notion as that of the supplement. Because the supplement is at its very nature representation, the idea of origin cannot fit easily with it: by definition, representation must have something which goes before it,

something for it to re-present. Yet Derrida insists that it "is" the constituting (non) origin of the self:

supplementarity makes possible all that constitutes the property of man: speech, society, passion, etc....Man allows himself to be announced to himself after the fact of supplementarity, which is thus not an attribute -- accidental or essential -- of man...supplementarity, which *is nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend. Therefore this property [*propre*] of man is not a property of man: it is the very dislocation of the proper in general....That supplementarity is not a characteristic or property of man does not mean only, and in an equally radical manner, that it is not a characteristic or property; but also that its play precedes what one calls man and extends outside of him. (OG 244)

The language used in this passage evokes, as it cannot fail to do, the metaphysical concept of the origin as that which comes before and constitutes. Man can recognize himself as man only because of supplementarity: "its play *precedes* what one calls man and *extends outside* of him." Man is "announced to himself" only "*after the fact* of supplementarity." Therefore, supplementarity or *différance*, as Derrida names this non-concept elsewhere, cannot be encompassed by humanity; it is not an attribute, property, or characteristic of man though it "makes possible" these properties. Not only is it not a "characteristic or property of man," it is not even a property at all, since it is what enables us to conceive of "property" in general. Supplementarity, as that which effaces itself in order to produce our metaphysical concepts of man and the world, differs from the typical origin because it "*is nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence." As the "opening" of "the play of presence and absence," it can be comprehended under "no metaphysical or ontological concept," although it is what "constitutes" the subject.

In the "concept" of *différance* or supplementarity, Derrida is trying to speak about that which escapes or precedes "the instituting question of philosophy: 'what is...?'" (OG 19). Because supplementarity founds the very opposition of absence and presence, we cannot answer the question either with "it is" or with "it isn't," precisely because *différance* is what causes us to formulate the question in these terms in the first place. Therefore, supplementarity is not really an origin as the idea is usually understood, as a thing or present being which creates or produces something: God would be the foremost example. Although the origin is supposed to precede representation, this ground can easily turn into the abyss. After all, we can always ask, "Who created God?" and "Who created whoever created God?" ad infinitum. God is defined, in part, as the One who stops this *mise en abyme* by being the *ens originarium*, the first being, creator, not created. However, Derrida suggests that supplementarity both creates the abyss and effaces it by producing the idea of ground or origin. It is difficult to think that something came before God, since humanity must think in terms of some type of ultimate origin, yet it is also difficult to think that *nothing* came before God -- we can always ask what the origin of that origin is. Asking the origin of *différance* is somewhat trickier, since this non-origin produces our notion of ground in the first place: "...the distinction between a finite and an infinite cause of the trace...is itself an effect of trace or difference, which does not mean that the trace or difference (of which I have tried to show elsewhere that it is finite, insofar as it is infinite) have a cause or an origin" (HTAS 29). Therefore, whether or not the cause of the trace/*différance* is infinite (God) or finite (something else) begs the question, according to Derrida, since all these concepts (finitude, infinity, cause) are "caused" by *différance*. As Kevin Hart explains, even our concept of God is produced by this non-concept:

"Although we write the word '*différance*' and use it as a concept, as I am doing here and now, what the word signifies in fact is the enabling condition of conceptuality. All concepts, and hence all meaning, are a function of *différance*; and this obviously holds true for the concept of God"(37).

The difficulty here, one which shows itself in the awkwardness of the language used (the origin which is not an origin, the cause which is not a cause), is how to escape from metaphysical concepts like the origin in order to discuss something quite different. As Derrida readily admits, the problem is inescapable:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language -- no syntax and no lexicon -- which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (*WD* 280-81)

The best he or anyone can do is to try to shake the foundations of metaphysics in order to make them "give" a little. Consequently, even when he is trying to explain the play of presence and absence which produces the idea of origin or ground, Derrida is forced to frame his argument in such a way that *différance* or supplementarity *operate* as a foundation, as an origin for the self and for human knowledge even though the very "essence" of *différance* dislocates the stability of any ground. As *différance* acts as an origin, as some "thing" which "precedes what one calls man and extends outside of him"(*OG* 244), then the connection can always be drawn between it and Milton's metaphysical ground, God.

### **Derrida and negative theology**

The inability to escape this metaphysical notion of origin unfolds itself beautifully in the convergence of negative theology and deconstruction. The

relationship between *différance* and the God of negative theology is striking, as many critics have noted. Yet even from early on in his career<sup>4</sup>, Derrida has maintained that his work is not a negative theology:

the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology....those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated [it has neither existence nor essence, it derives from no category of being...] are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence... (MP 6)

Structurally and syntactically, the way in which Derrida discusses *différance* is at times "indistinguishable" from negative theology, though as the above passage makes clear, Derrida intends it to be quite different from the "superessentiality" which he affirms is the goal of an apophatic discourse. In a more recent article, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Derrida examines in some detail the relationship between his work and the general category of negative theology.<sup>5</sup>

In this work, he probes the question of the similarity between *différance* and negative theology, and the problem he faces trying to talk about supplementarity without inadvertently discussing deconstruction's metaphysical other: how to avoid speaking/*comment ne pas dire* -- about negative theology, for example. Of course, he recognizes that the "onto-theological reappropriation [of *différance*] always remains possible -- and doubtless *inevitable* insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the

---

4. "Différance" was originally given as an address before the Société française de philosophie, 27 January 1968. It is reprinted in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 1-27.

5. Unfortunately, due to the length and richness of Derrida's article and the brevity of my thesis, I cannot do "How to Avoid Speaking" the justice it deserves. Instead, I am forced to pick from the work only those (perhaps eccentric) points which are relevant to my argument. Readers interested in the intersection of Derrida and negative theology should look at Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* and Mark C. Taylor's "Non-Negative Negative Atheology," as well as Derrida's essay itself.

element of logic and of onto-theological grammar"(HTAS 9). But the title of the essay turns into a meditation about the impossibility of not speaking about something, and at the same time, the impossibility of speaking:

"Comment ne pas dire?" can mean, in a manner that is both transitive and intransitive, how to be silent, how not to speak in general, how to avoid speaking? But it can also mean: how, in speaking, not to say this or that, in this or that manner? In other words: how, in saying and speaking, to avoid this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode? How to avoid an inexact, erroneous, aberrant, improper form? How to avoid such a predicate, and even predication itself? For example: how to avoid a negative form, or how not to be negative? Finally, how to say something? (HTAS 15)

The term "speaking" cannot help but carry over some resonance from so much of Derrida's work. Speech is always seen as a manifestation of self-presence, as an effacement of language, as pure thought: in short, all of the metaphysical concepts that Derrida deconstructs. So the problem which lies in the title is both how to avoid speaking (how to avoid metaphysics in general) and, because one *must* speak, how, in speaking, to avoid metaphysical ideas like the origin when one can only speak "in the element...of onto-theological grammar." Of course, because we speak in this predicative and metaphysical grammar, it is tempting to think *différance* or arche-language, that "play [which] precedes what one calls man and extends outside of him"(OG 244) is God: "...at the moment when the question "How to avoid speaking?" arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak"(HTAS 29). Because it is always "too late," because there is always an "always already" or constituting factor, however that "thing" is defined, language may be called God. What we might call the metaphysical tendencies of language tries to determine



anything that precedes or constitutes in terms of the simple origin figured theologically as God, even if it is the decidedly not-simple *différance*.

To qualify the essentially "predicative" nature of speech, it is necessary to use "the rhetoric of negative determination," a rhetoric which gives *différance* a (perhaps unfortunate) "family resemblance" (HTAS 4) to negative theology. Derrida outlines this rhetoric in such a way as to make its relationship to his work perfectly clear:

this, which is called X (for example, text, writing, the trace, différance, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc.) "is" neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent... Despite appearances, then, this X is neither a concept nor a name; it does *lend itself* to a series of names, but calls for another syntax, and exceeds even the order and the structure of predicative discourse. (HTAS 4)

As Derrida makes clear, "X" could just as easily apply to the mysterious and unknowable God of negative theology as it could to any of the "non-concepts" (*différance*, supplementarity, writing, etc.) which here he names. He proposes, as a provisional and general definition, that "negative theology consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to...the hyperessentiality (the being beyond the Being) of God" (HTAS 4). As a result, "only a negative ("apophatic") attribution can claim to approach God, and to prepare us for a silent intuition of God" (HTAS 4). So, in the most general terms, a negative theology would say that God is "neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside..." Therefore, though God may "lend" itself to the name "God," it cannot really be conceptualized. Because the affinities between these two discourses are so pronounced, the quandary Derrida faces is how to *assert* that his discourse of

"negative determination" which "endlessly [multiplies] the defenses and the apophatic warnings"(HTAS 4) in precisely the same manner as does negative theology is nonetheless not the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

Why does Derrida end up stating, quite baldly, that the discourse of deconstruction is not a negative theology, though rhetorically, they are so alike?

What is it about these two discourses which makes them so similar when they have such different ends?<sup>7</sup> Derrida speculates that, in a strangely circular movement, any

6. Some idea of the complexity of even the title, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" can be gleaned from this brief explanation, though of course it may be extended further. "Denials" or "Dénégations," as it stands in the original French, suggests the problem of asserting (in a predicative form) that your discourse of negative determination, in which you try to avoid predication by using the form "neither...nor," for example, is not the same as an apophatic discourse. In his article, "Non-Negative Negative Atheology," Mark C. Taylor construes "dénégation" this way:

*denegation is an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation. The affirmation of negation by way of denegation subverts the dialectical affirmation of negation by way of the negation of negation. To think or rethink negative theology with Derrida, it is necessary to think the negative undialectically by thinking a negative that is neither both negation and affirmation nor either negation or affirmation. This strange thought or unthought is the neither/nor implied in dénégation. (Taylor 1990, 3 n.4)*

7. Just how far apart are the ends of deconstruction and negative theology is a debatable point, it seems. Derrida suggests that negative theology reserves "beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being. This is the word that Dionysius so often uses in the *Divine Names*: *hyperousios, -ôs, hyperousiotes*. God as being beyond Being"(HTAS 7-8). In other words, its goal is still, in some manner, presence: a union with the "hyperessentiality" or "being beyond Being" of God. In an article on Derrida and Meister Eckhart, John Caputo agrees with Derrida's assessment:

Negative theologies are always just detours on the way to even higher, more sublime affirmations. They are ways of saying in even stronger terms that an entity, namely God, exists: He exists so deeply, so thoroughly, so purely, so perfectly, that we even have to take the word 'is' back if and when we say it. Negative theologies are modified onto-theo-logies, variations on the philosophy of presence which always turn out to be philosophies of super-presence. (Caputo 25)

Kevin Hart, however, takes issue with this interpretation, claiming that negative theology is a *form* of deconstruction, and, as such, is directed against presence, rather than harbouring it:

discourse attempting to avoid predication (a "rhetoric of negative determination," an apophatic discourse, *différance*) leads to back to predication, theology, and God:

once the apophatic discourse is analyzed in its logical-grammatical form,...it perhaps leads us to consider the becoming-theological of all discourse. From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity that manifests itself need only be pushed to the limit, and it at least resembles an apophatic theology....God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. (HTAS 6)

Once any "negative form" is "pushed to the limit," it leads to negative theology and "the becoming-theological of all discourse."<sup>8</sup> Any concept (or non-concept, in the case of *différance*) that is approached in this "indirect and negative manner" may be called God. So why is this so? "God" here names the ineffable, that which we cannot know because it is the constituting factor of our knowledge. As the "thing" which produces our concepts in general, whether it is *différance* or the God of negative theology, it cannot be conceptualized, and must be approached indirectly. In both the deconstructive and apophatic discourses the ineffable acts as a ground of

---

It may be objected that even at the end of *The mystical theology* Pseudo-Dionysius makes positive statements about God; in chapter 5, God is still the transcendental 'superessentiality' addressed in chapter 2. And if this is so, we cannot rightly say that negative theology is a mode of deconstruction, since deconstruction is always directed against presence....The word Rolt translates by 'superessential' is *hyperousious*. The English word, when used to describe God, suggests that God is the highest being, that He exists yet in a way which transcends finite beings. The Greek word, however, makes no such claim; indeed, the prefix '*hyper*' has a negative rather than a positive force. To say that God is *hyperousious* is to deny that God is a being of any kind, even the highest or original being. (Hart 202)

Whether or not God's "being" or "non-being" has been sufficiently qualified is remains unresolved, but God's function as ground or origin remains quite metaphysical here.

8. Typically, Derrida does not say that discourse "is" theological after its negativity has been pushed to the limit, nor does he say that it is not. Instead, he leaves it on that strange margin halfway between the two options: it is stuck in the process of "becoming" without actually getting there.

sorts: a foundation which is stable, though unknowable, in the case of negative theology, and, in deconstruction, a "ground" which operates as a foundation though it is not really a ground as such. "God" is the other beyond that limit of human knowledge/language which an apophatic discourse approaches.

Because both discourses push the limits to use the unknowable as a "ground," the concept of *différance* can always be appropriated for the purposes of theology, if one could still call it that. Derrida tries to resist this appropriation because the "unnameable" which is *différance* is not "an ineffable Being which no name could approach" (MP 26); while the God of negative theology "exceeds the order of truth," as does *différance*, negative theology's "occult of a nonknowledge" ultimately dissimulates "itself as something, as a mysterious being" (MP 6). Nonetheless, the substitution of "God" for *différance* remains possible, although this "God" would have to be a God without being.<sup>9</sup> Like *différance*, we could say that "God" produces the metaphysical oppositions which define our language, and thus our selves, even the opposition of self/other and humanity/God. We think in terms of "God" as origin or creator, yet "God" is [crossed out] outside our concept, is a non-concept like *différance*. The terms "presence" and "absence," or "being" and "nothingness" would not apply to "God," simply because "he" initiates the "play of presence and absence": this movement might have the effect of asserting that "God" had a truer "being" than humans, but this effect would only be due to the fact that we are unable to escape the metaphysical grammar of language. Therefore Derrida's statement, "We think only in signs" (OG 50) would have its emphasis shifted slightly; rather than suggesting that language constitutes the self, it could also say "We think only in signs," implying that humanity thinks in signs, but that

---

9. See J.-L. Marion's *God Without Being*.

some"thing" else "exists" (because we have no way to escape this founding concept) beyond our knowledge.

**The two interpretations of interpretation: metaphysics and deconstruction;  
Milton and Derrida**

Again we have come full circle. The substitution of "God" for *différance* leads us back to the idea that our human knowledge is imperfect (Milton would say fallen) and so we cannot fully know God, however he/it is constructed. (The extent of our knowledge would depend on how positive or negative our theology is. Milton's "positive" conception of God links him to the self through his gift of reason, whereas the God of negative theology is mystically unknowable.) There are two explanations, which I will for the moment inexactly name as Milton's and Derrida's, trying to explain what is traditionally called the imperfection of our human knowledge of truth. For Milton, the world is fallen, and as a result, truth, which was complete and accessible before Adam's fall and will be whole again with the second coming of Christ, is temporarily fallen, incomplete. Consequently, mankind must build a knowledge of God's will by finding pieces of fallen truth and interpreting them through the reason which God has given to us. Though man may be imperfect, outside of him, beyond the limits of what he is or can know, is truth, perfection, pure meaning: in short, God. Derrida undermines this metaphysical frame, noting that this unified, perfect origin is "always reconstituted *retrospectively* in the aftermath of the break" (*Dissemination* 304): this stable origin is a delusion which works to efface our "always already" fallenness, non-self-presence, inscription. Accordingly, in at least a certain movement of his texts, Derrida works to reveal the origin's effacement of writing and play through the mirage of speech

and presence: "The ethic of the living word would be perfectly respectable...it would be as respectable as respect itself if it did not live on a delusion and a nonrespect for its own condition of origin..."(OG 139). Nothing is wrong with speech as such, except that it presents itself as what it is not, covering its tracks to maintain the fiction of a present and stable origin.

Although this interpretation of Derrida's is an important, even the primary, movement in his texts, it is nonetheless not the only one. The rationale for favouring this interpretation can be seen in this passage from *Positions*, where Derrida outlines the first move in his "general strategy of deconstruction"(41): "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other...To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment"(41). However, Derrida's work would be merely a hegemonic overturning which favours representation over presence if he did not acknowledge the reciprocal relationship of a metaphysical explanation (for which I have used Milton as a figure) and a non-metaphysical explanation. To borrow Saussure's phrasing, metaphysics and deconstruction are two correlative movements,<sup>10</sup> and Derrida acknowledges the impossibility of *absolutely* choosing between them:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology -- in other words, throughout his entire history -- has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play....

---

10. In *Différance*, Saussure is quoted as saying that "Arbitrary and differential...are two correlative characteristics"(10).

For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing* -- in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference." (WD 292-93)

Kevin Hart analyzes this excerpt which deals with what he calls the "Rousseauistic and Nietzschean theories of interpretation" (122). He notes that many commentators on this much-discussed passage have interpreted it to mean "Derrida is enjoining us to favour the Nietzschean mode over the Rousseauistic" (118)<sup>11</sup> but he quite correctly points out that "Derrida cannot be urging the interpretations of interpretations as *alternatives* between which we must choose" (122) since Derrida's concern is to elaborate "why we *cannot* choose between them" (122). As a result, Hart maintains that "there are not two but *three* interpretations of interpretation: two first-order interpretations (Rousseau's and Nietzsche's) and one second-order interpretation, Derrida's" (122). Derrida's interpretation is of a "second-order" because it "establishes the relationship between apparently 'grounded' and 'groundless' theories of interpretation" (122).

Although here Derrida is attempting to "conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference" (WD 293), he clearly has more of an affinity with the Nietzschean theory than with the Rousseauistic. In consequence, it is very tempting to misread Derrida in the way many others have: it is an interpretation to which he seems to deliberately *lend* himself. This temptation can

---

11. Both supporters and detractors view Derrida as only "[affirming] play and [trying] to pass beyond man and humanism." For example, the contributors to *Religion, Ontotheology and Deconstruction*, most of whom dislike Derrida's work, uniformly see Derrida as continuing the Nietzschean tradition of the "death of God." Mark C. Taylor, an ardent supporter of deconstruction who has written extensively on deconstruction and theology, similarly views Derrida as part of this tradition.

be explained by the fact that Derrida does foreground Nietzschean play as the opening and primary strategy in his deconstruction, though it not his final one. In order to displace metaphysical presence from its place as the ruling concept of Western philosophy, he pushes to the front that which best undermines it and that which it has suppressed: in his words, "writing." As a result, the way that he construes *différance* is based on difference, rather than unity, exteriority, instead of interiority, and play, rather than stability, so that at times, this non-originary origin seems like the transcendental *signifier* to Milton's transcendental signified. Yet this construction, though it definitely *chooses* the Nietzschean interpretation, is nonetheless just a point of access to the "irreducible difference" of the "two interpretations of interpretation." Because of the very irreducibility of Milton's and Derrida's interpretations (though what I call "Derrida's interpretation" is only the primary and obvious movement in his texts), it is always possible to undermine Derrida's explanation through Milton's. If *différance* causes signs to circulate in an unstoppable play of presence and absence, if representation comes "before" the "origin," if, in effect, this condition is the way things "are" and always have been, then why must the abyss be effaced by a delusion of presence? Why do we desire presence? Why do we long to expel the exteriority of writing which has infiltrated our consciousness and long to make stable the play of representation and *différance*? If full presence and a stable origin have never been possible, then why is this delusion produced? How do we know about and long for something which is not possible to attain? According to Derrida, "Privation of presence is the condition of experience, that is to say of presence" (OG 166). Since this "is" our experience, why do we feel the need to construct a presence (or why does *différance* efface itself) when we have never experienced it? The most obvious answer to these



questions lies in Milton's interpretation of the fall. We desire presence because the world was not always fragmented into a play of presence and absence, but was once whole and will be whole again...

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achinstein, Sharon. "The Politics of Babel in the English Revolution." *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution*. Special ed. of *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 14.3 (1991): 14-44
- Auster, Paul. *City of Glass in The New York Trilogy*. New York: Penguin, 1990. 1-158.
- Bacon, Sir Francis. *Essays*. Rutland, Vermont: Everyman, 1992.
- Barker, Arthur E. *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma 1641-1660*. 1942. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1976.
- Barker, Francis. "In the Wars of Truth." *Southern Review: Literary and Interdisciplinary Essays* 20 (1987) 111-25.
- . *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*. New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Blum, Abbe. "The Author's Authority: *Areopagitica* and the Labour of Licencing." *Re-Membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*. Ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson. London: Methuen, 1987. 74-96.
- Brinkley, Roberta Florence, ed. *English Prose of the XVII Century*. New York: Norton, 1951.
- Browne, Sir Thomas. *Religio Medici in The Major Works*. Ed. C.A. Patrides. London: Penguin, 1977. 57-161.
- Bryant, M. Darrol. "From 'De' to 'Re' or...Does the 'Future of Ontotheology' Require the Recovery of the Experience/Sense of Transcendence?" *Religion, Ontotheology and Deconstruction*. Ed. Henry Ruf. New York: Paragon House, 1989. 69-87.
- Caputo, John D. "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart." *Derrida and Deconstruction*. Ed. Hugh J. Silverman. London: Routledge, 1989. 24-39.
- Clark, David L. "Monstrous Reading: *The Martyrology* after de Man." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 15.2 (1990): 1-32.
- Corns, Thomas N. "'Some rousing motions': the Plurality of Miltonic Ideology." *Literature and the English Civil War*. Ed. Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 110-26.

- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. 1982. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Danielson, Dennis Richard. *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- . "Milton's Arminianism and *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 12 (1979): 47-73.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1981. 61-171.
- . "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." Trans. Ken Frieden. *Languages of the Unsayable*. Ed. Snaford Budick and Wolfgang Iser. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 3-70.
- . "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War." Trans. Peggy Kamuf. *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, Thomas Keenan. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989. 127-64.
- . *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.
- . "My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereotypes." Trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell. *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*. 1984. Ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988. 1-32.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Dowling, Paul M. "Areopagitica and Areopagiticus: The Significance of the Isocratic Precedent." *Milton Studies* 21 (1985): 49-69.
- . "Milton's Use (or Abuse) of History in *Areopagitica*." *Cithara* 23.1 (1983): 28-37.
- Fish, Stanley. "Driving From the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in Milton's *Areopagitica*." *Re-Membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*. Ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson. London: Meuthuen, 1987. 234-54.
- . "Wanting a Supplement: the Question of Interpretation in Milton's Early Prose." *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*. Ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 41-68.

- Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged ed. London: Macmillan P, 1987.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. London: Pelican-Penguin, 1988. Vol. 4 of *The Pelican Freud Library*.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1986.
- Geisst, Charles R. *The Political Thought of John Milton*. London: Macmillan P, 1984.
- Hart, Kevin. *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*. 1989. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Hill, Christopher. *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*. Revised ed. London: Yale UP, 1991.
- . *Milton and the English Revolution*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.
- Holstun, James. Introduction. *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution*. Special ed. of *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 14.3 (1991): 1-13.
- The Holy Bible. King James Version. 1611.
- Hughes, Merritt Y., ed. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. By John Milton. 1957. New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Huntley, John F. "The Images of Poet & Poetry in Milton's *The Reason of Church-Government*." *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton*. Ed. Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1974. 83-120.
- Illo, John. "Areopagitic Mythic and Real." *Prose Studies* 11.1 (1988): 3-23.
- Kendrick, Christopher. "Ethics and the Orator in *Areopagitica*." *ELH* 50 (1983): 655-91.
- Kirby, R. Kenneth. "Milton's Biblical Hermeneutics in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*." *Milton Quarterly* 18 (1984): 116-25.
- Kranidas, Thomas. "Polarity and Structure in Milton's *Areopagitica*." *English Literary Renaissance* 14 (1984): 175-90.
- . "Words, Words, Words, and the Word: Milton's *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*." *Milton Studies* 16 (1982): 153-66.
- Le Comte, Edward. "*Areopagitica* as a Scenario for *Paradise Lost*." *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton*. Ed. Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1974. 121-41.

- Lieb, Michael. "Milton and the Organicist Polemic." *Milton Studies* 4 (1972): 79-99.
- . "Milton's *Of Reformation* and the Dynamics of Controversy." *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton*. Ed. Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1974. 55-81.
- . "Reading God: Milton and the Anthropopathic Tradition." *Milton Studies* 25 (1990): 213-43.
- Low, Anthony. "Milton's God: Authority in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 4 (1972): 19-38.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being*. Trans. Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*. Ed. Don M. Wolfe. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-82.
- Myers, William. *Milton and Free Will: An Essay in Criticism and Philosophy*. London: Croon-Helm, 1987.
- Norris, Christopher. *Derrida*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Parker, William Riley. *Milton: A Biography*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968.
- Rajan, Balachandra. *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.
- Ruf, Henry. "The Origin of the Debate over Ontotheology and Deconstruction in the Texts of Wittgenstein and Derrida." *Religion, Ontotheology and Deconstruction*. Ed. Henry Ruf. New York: Paragon House, 1989. 3-42.
- Sanchez, Reuben Marquez Jr. "'The Worst of Superstitions': Milton's *Of True Religion* and the Issue of Religious Tolerance." *Prose Studies* 9.3 (1986): 21-38.
- Sewall, Arthur. *A Study in Milton's Christian Doctrine*. 1939. USA: Archon, 1967.
- The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 1973.
- Smallenburg, Harry R. "Contiguities and Moving Limbs: Style as Argument in *Areopagitica*." *Milton Studies* 9 (1976): 169-84.
- Smith, Huston. "The View From Everywhere: Ontotheology and the Post-Nietzschean Deconstruction of Metaphysics." *Religion, Ontotheology and Deconstruction*. Ed. Henry Ruf. New York: Paragon House, 1989. 43-66.

- Smith, Nigel. "Areopagitica: Voicing Contexts, 1634-5." *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*. Ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 103-22.
- Smith, Paul. *Discerning the Subject*. Theory and History of Literature 55. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Staveland, Keith W. *The Politics of Milton's Prose Style*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.
- Steadman, John M. *The Hill and the Labyrinth: Discourse and Certitude in Milton and His Near-Contemporaries*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Stevens, Paul. "Discontinuities in Milton's Early Public Self-Representation." *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 51 (1988): 261-80.
- Taylor, Mark C., ed. *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- . *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. 1984. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- . "Non-Negative Negative Atheology." *Diacritics* 20.4 (1990): 2-16.
- Whitaker, Juanita. "'The Wars of Truth': Wisdom and Strength in *Areopagitica*." *Milton Studies* 9 (1976): 185-201.
- Wittreich, Joseph Anthony, Jr. "Milton's *Areopagitica*: Its Isocratic and Ironic Contexts." *Milton Studies* 4 (1972): 101-15.
- Wilding, Michael. "Milton's *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects." *Prose Studies* 9.2 (1986): 7-38.
- Woolrych, Austin. "Milton and the Good Old Cause." *Ringling the Bell Backward: Proceedings of the First International Milton Symposium*. Ed. Ronald G. Shafer. Indiana: Indiana University of Pennsylvania Imprint Series, 1982. 135-50.