

# COPERNICAN REVOLUTIONS: MARY JO SALTER'S INTERTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF *PARADISE LOST* IN *FALLING BODIES*

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## I. Milton's Copernican Revolution

In the lines from *Ars Poetica* “Nec gemino bellum Troianum orditur ab ovo;/ semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res/ non secus ac notas auditorem rapit” (147–149) Horace singled out the narrative technique in which preliminaries are dropped, and recognized it as a distinguishing feature of epic poetry. Insofar as *Paradise Lost* complies with this traditional pattern, its very structure has often been considered a declaration of poetics. Yet, such a view downplays Milton's masterpiece, which —far from being a mere imitation of Homer and Virgil— was meant to be a Christian epic challenging in grandeur the pagan canon. The goal Milton had set himself demanded a substantial revision of the legacy he had been handed down by the classics, and this need turns out to be in line with the basic principle of intertextuality<sup>1</sup> as illustrated by T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919):

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. [...] Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its

success, “tradition” should positively be discouraged. [...] This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (1971: 14)

Eliot maintains that tradition is not the same as slavish imitation; rather, it is a confrontation with one’s own ancestors which shapes the very meaning of a text through balancing emulation and opposition. Accordingly, intertextuality should not be seen as a set of immutable references, but as a form of imitation bringing forth the recreation of meanings through the manipulation of given commonplaces and structures. Leo Spitzer, the father of stylistics, focused on these idiosyncratic deviations from traditional usage as elements of great moment for identifying the peculiarities of a writer’s style. He also devised a method for examining style; this is based on the linguistic analysis of a text for its distinctive traits, whose actual distinctiveness has to be verified in the light of data taken from literary history so as to make a contrast whose final aim is the authentication of the author’s deviations from tradition. The detection of these deviations results in the construction of a “psychogram” (1948: 15) enabling the critic to sift relevant features (“the inward life-center” [19]) from irrelevant ones and, thus, to detect the writer’s *intentio dicendi* in modifying while imitating with a view to enriching traditional structures with new meanings.

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Analogously, Arthur Barker claims that *Paradise Lost* needs to be examined for the modifications Milton intended to make to his main structural model, the *Aeneid*. According to Barker, the augmented edition Milton produced in 1674 by adding two books to the 1667 edition (thus matching the number of books of Virgil’s *magnum opus*) was not exclusively meant to stick to the Virgilian model, but was also designed to shift the stress from the war between good and evil to Christ’s ultimate triumph and God’s mercy. “It is here” —Barker claims (1965: 143)— “that *Paradise Lost* reproduces while modifying the large structural pattern of the *Aeneid*”. Although the structure of *Paradise Lost* is overtly heir to the tradition of ancient epic poetry, it also serves as a means for conveying a set of different values than those the Greek and Roman *Weltanschauung* rested on. This is no trifling consideration when analyzing such a complex poem as *Paradise Lost*, whose structure and contents have been determined by theological as well as literary paradoxes. The very label of “Christian epic” —traditionally assigned to *Paradise Lost*— is itself paradoxical on the grounds of the different ethical values pagan and Christian cultures are based on. However, Milton was urged to look back on heathen models to write the masterpiece of Christian literature in English because they were the only means he could avail himself of for lending his work the greatness it demanded. In consequence, he displaced the conventions of pagan epic

poetry into the framework of a Christian narration for the sole purpose of having them work as *auctoritates* connoting the Fall with the same tragic grandeur that characterizes the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*.

Still, Milton intended to reassess the classical concept of heroism those works epitomize. In order to reach this goal not only did he tap into Homer's and Virgil's poems; he also drew inspiration from Torquato Tasso, whose *Gerusalemme Liberata* had been meant to serve an analogous purpose. Following the model provided by Tasso, Milton used classical allusions as markers of negative implication connoting the devils as heroes of yore, whose bravery is debased because ruled by the pagan principle of unrestrained self-realization (embodied in the *Iliad* by the character of Achilles):

From the outset, then, the traditional language, characters, and events of epic tradition are associated with the works of Satan. Satan expresses the values of ancient heroic literature, and the narrative of his rebellion against God and his subsequent "ruin" are the embodiment of the traditional epic subject matter within *Paradise Lost*. [...] Thus, in the creation of the figure of Satan and the fallen angels and in the entire recounting of the war in heaven, Milton simultaneously imitates and radically criticizes the classical heroic tradition. (Kates 1974: 306)

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Conversely, positive characters are often described by explicitly reversing the epithets used in epic poetry for connoting heroism. Among them is the so-called "attendance motif": this is easily recognizable in Homer's poems thanks to a linguistic clue, i.e. the formulaic *incipit* "not alone", used for describing the apparition of a main character surrounded by his/her train of attendants. As Neil Forsyth points out, this motif has a highly gender-bound meaning which —when applied to men— works as an indicator of the characters' social status. Yet, in *Paradise Lost* Milton uses this Homeric *topos* with a view to reversing its original meaning, as in the case of the description of Adam given in V. 350–357:

The allusion is one of the many ways in which he [Milton] asserts his independence of the epic tradition, even while he uses his techniques. A Homeric hero was not complete without his attendants; they mark his dignity, status, his dependence on his subordinates. [...] But when Raphael comes to visit Adam, in a scene which otherwise imitates closely the type-scene of a Homeric guest's arrival and the hospitality he normally receives, Milton expressly renounces the tradition of regal pomp (by now, of course, the mark of a social system he had come to despise in King Charles). [...] The dramatic situation calls for these new creatures to be alone, but it does not demand such proud insistence on the point. (Forsyth 1981: 141–142)

Milton's ambivalent attitude towards the sources of inspiration of ancient poetry heals the breach between the conventional means of expression of heroism and the new meaning Christendom attached to this virtue. This is what John M. Steadman

(1967: 174) has defined as the “Copernican Revolution” of heroic poetry, “a literary *renversement* that overthrows and displaces its predecessors”, thus building up a literary paradox swerving from tradition while sticking to it. As we are going to see in greater detail, this oxymoronic genre of “Christian epic” is in turn the paradoxical receptacle of a series of dichotomies related to Christian faith which constitute the very gist the poem.

## II. Paradoxical Forms for Paradoxical Contents

Not only is *Paradise Lost* paradoxical in the way it hands down traditional commonplaces and structures while altering them; its formal paradoxicality also doubles as a mirror of its contents, i.e. the contradictory mysteries of Christian doctrine. Rosalie L. Colie claims that although *Paradise Lost* bristles with the numerous paradoxes of Christian Creed, only two of them can be viewed as cornerstones of the poem: the existence at once of foreknowledge on God’s part and of free will on man’s part, as well as the presence of time within eternity. In particular, the latter paradox is so relevant to the overall meaning of the poem as to have left an indelible mark on its structure in the form of its beginning *in medias res*. This formal device turns out to be not simply a learned reference to the classics, but an instrument to outline the parentheses of time within eternity:

Although *Paradise Lost* begins according to the orthodox literary doctrine of Horace, *in medias res*, it could not by its nature begin otherwise: the Christian material it presents outdoes the material of Troy or Latium by its appropriateness. For however precise its focus on man, the whole narrative of *Paradise Lost*, from the elevation of Christ in heaven to the vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth is *in medias res*, since in the chronology of eternity there is neither beginning nor end, and time is, in Browne’s phrase, but a parenthesis in eternity. Nonetheless, though the metaphysical sense in which Milton’s material was by its nature *in mediis rebus* may help to explain its extraordinary suitability to the epic pattern he inherited from the ancients, the material itself was not by definition thus made tractable to poetic laws. For the purposes of his narrative, Milton had to establish a chronology of motivation in the events prior to the creation of measured time: after the elevation of Christ, Satan knew jealousy, incited the third part of heaven to rebel, fought the great war in heaven, and fell into hell. (130)

The dichotomies of Christian doctrine which form the bedrock of *Paradise Lost*’s theology, however, do not pertain to the order of time only, but to that of space, too, as the ambivalent setting of Eden demonstrates. In effect, this location is evidently characterized by a mingling of wondrous and ordinary elements. In some passages this causes the reader to feel wrong-footed by the bewildering atmosphere of such an environment, which is earthly and godly at once.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in books VIII and IX the atmosphere slowly (but inexorably) grows disturbing: discomfort increasingly replaces bewilderment as the reader is seized by a grim sense of foreboding. Evil is going to stain the immaculate world of Eden, and the reader feels its crawling approach as unavoidably impending through Milton's sharp use of Sophoclean irony.<sup>3</sup> By means of this technique, Eden comes out as the place of innocence where sensuality sneakily pierces through virtue until it finally manages to corrupt it by resorting to the serpent's temptation. This sensation suffuses the scene in which Eve departs from Adam and Raphael shortly before the Fall: this passage displays Milton's craftsmanship in using the devices inherited by classical tradition to his own purposes. In particular, we can consider VIII.59–65 an example of Sophoclean irony, since the use of the Homeric attendance motif applied to Eve suggests to the reader the threatening approach of sin, which Eve—who's going to be brought to ruin by it—is completely unaware of:

With goddess-like demeanor forth she went;  
Not unattended, for on her as queen  
A pomp of winning Graces waited still,  
And from about her shot darts of desire  
Into all eyes to wish her still in sight.  
And Raphael now to Adam's doubt proposed  
Benevolent and facile thus replied.

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While the description of Adam as divested of any train whatsoever aims at reversing the original meaning of the attendance motif, here Milton echoes the formulaic *incipit* of ancient tradition with a view to restoring its original meaning. As mentioned above, the attendance motif is highly gender-bound in Homer's poems, and—whenever applied to women—is burdened with erotic connotations. Milton does attach this very same meaning of seductiveness to the description of Eve attended by the Graces. In addition, he further strengthens this connotation by styling these graces “winning”, an anaphoric reference designed to remind the reader of the goddess Sin, who was born out of Satan's left side to seduce him with her “attractive graces” (II.762–65) and ensnare him in temptation exactly as Eve herself is about to do with her mate. But the passage also enmeshes the reader into the disturbing atmosphere of an Eden on the verge of corruption, so that he is forced to give up the privileged position of detached observer to become (against his own will) an admirer gazing longingly at Eve:

Appropriately enough, given the connection with Aphrodite/Venus and with Sin, the “winning Graces” of Eve shoot those “Darts of Desire”, and this is how we first read the passage. [...] By this point in the poem, the reader should be alert to the shock of finding sexual language used in innocent ways before the Fall. [...] The reader must immediately cancel all these lascivious ideas, however, for the sentence does not end with the line, nor even with the desire-pierced eyes. Instead the word “desire”

turns out to be modified by the infinitive clause, “to wish her still in sight”. So this is not, after all, the “Carnal desire” which erupts after the apple is eaten (IX.1013), still less the fierce desire to which Satan confesses on first seeing Adam and Eve make love (IV.509), but merely that Latinate and rather stilted word that means “to wish for”. [...] The reader’s error prepares him to be sympathetic when Adam confesses the same error to Raphael (Forsyth 1981: 149–150).

The atmosphere grows ominous as the narration proceeds. After Eve’s departure, Adam reveals to Raphael his weakness for her beauty so openly as to be rebuked by the Archangel, who admonishes him to beware of nurturing this penchant, lest it should be changed into lust. Such a reproach engenders abashment in Adam (VIII.595), who is seized by a fit of decency; this feeling surfaces again in the same scene in which Raphael warns man not to transgress God’s command by yielding to temptation (VIII.635–644). Obviously, here Milton resorts again to Sophoclean irony in order to foreshadow the human couple’s impending fall, but the passage will bear another reading.

Although it is anachronistic to quote Kierkegaard’s philosophy in order to explain Milton’s theology, such an anachronism may be useful to shed new light on Milton’s notion of sin. In *The Concept of Dread* (1844) the Danish philosopher defines decency as one of the outer manifestations of dread, that is, the feeling of dizziness caused by the insight into infinity disclosed by complete and utter freedom, which represents possibility for possibility itself. The cause of this dizziness is the void ignorance that hangs in; since ignorance means innocence, then ignorance (though guiltless) entails an unavoidable predisposition to sinfulness. Adam’s bashful decency reveals that the germ of dread has already taken hold within him, and Raphael’s prohibition simply makes him fully aware of the boundless possibility of freedom which is the apogee of dread. Hence the false note struck by the passage thanks to the device of Sophoclean irony, used for focusing on the fact that the prohibition is soon to be disobeyed.

Dread ceaselessly increases until it finally reaches its height in the scene of Eve’s temptation. The serpent’s bombast proves to be effective on the mother of mankind because it discloses to her the possibility of finding relief from the anguish of ignorance by choosing knowledge. So, she pays no heed to the serpent’s promise of power and beauty, and interrupts his speech with a question betraying her ignorance and, at once, her craving to be rid of it:

What may this mean? Language of man pronounced  
By tongue of brute, and human sense expressed?  
[...] How cam’st thou speakable of Mute; and how  
To me so friendly grown upon the rest  
Of brutal kind, that daily are in sight?  
Say, for such wonder claims attention due. (IX.553–566)

It is this question that enables Satan to choose the right path towards his wicked goal: the woman is to fall through her painful ignorance that demands knowledge. He promises knowledge as the source of freedom —i.e. of indeterminate (and therefore unlimited) possibility for possibility itself—, thus making her dread reach its apogee and causing her to beget sin as he did.

Unlike dread, sin is not a state, but an instant as short as the blinking of an eye: “Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she eat [*sic*]” (IX.781). Every single word Eve speaks after tasting the fruit reveals that she is prey to a more specific dread produced by knowledge. This effect is created by means of numerous echoes of Satan’s own speeches, which show to what extent Eve has changed immediately after the Fall and, apparently, without any explicit prompting on Satan’s part. After referring to God as “our Creator” throughout the whole poem, now she suddenly drops this term and calls him “our great Forbidder” (IX.815), thus unknowingly branding her disobedience as a revolt akin to Satan’s. Eve also wonders in what form she should appear to Adam (IX.83–96), a doubt that necessarily echoes the Tempter’s when he first approached the Earthly Paradise with the aim of bringing his foes Adam and Eve to woe and despair. While considering what to do about her mate, she even entertains the possibility of not sharing with him her powerful gift (IX.816–17), thus involuntarily disclosing to the reader the fact that gaining knowledge entails losing innocence. In addition, Eve turns out to be so swollen with pride that she could be mistaken for an emanation of the Father of Lies, as the rhetorical question “for inferior who is free?” shows (IX.825, echoing I.248–63 and V.790–97). This language fraught with allusions to Satan’s own rhetoric may be slightly misleading, for it seems to depict human sin as an unavoidable contamination. Yet, Milton doesn’t allow the reader to revel in self-indulgence through such a facile explanation, for the speech Eve delivers before eating the fruit (IX.745–779) proves that—at the crossroads between good and evil— her option for evil was the result of free choice as well as fraud.

Therefore, Milton’s narration suggests an underlying ambivalence that is to be found in Genesis, too, as John Tanner points out. Tanner claims that *Paradise Lost* should be viewed as an etiological poem investigating the murky origins of evil, for “to the question ‘Whence cometh evil?’ the muse supplies [...] the entire complex poem as answer” (1988: 45). Following closely in the footsteps of Genesis, *Paradise Lost* suggests that human iniquity contaminated the world through three different outbreaks: Satanic evil, Adamic evil and Historical evil. Each of them grows more predetermined (and therefore less voluntary) than the previous one, but in each one outward predetermination and inward willpower collaborate—though to different extents— to bring forth evil. The first case shows evil coming to Satan in the form of the goddess Sin, who—as soon as she leaps out of his head—is raped by her father-lover. Yet, Satan does not appear so much to choose

an idea from within as to yield to a power from without, as though Sin had bewitched him. In the second manifestation, evil emerges under the active pressure of seduction: Satan tempts Eve who, in turn, entices her mate. Although evil assaults both sinners from without, they are prone to yield to temptation, and therefore they choose evil as well as they are chosen by it. The same can be said of historical evil, which appears to be biologically determined, but which can be chosen or shunned by each man, who is granted full freedom by the Creator (See Tanner 1988: 45–46). This paradoxical etiology of evil as both inherited and voluntary is faithful to the description provided by Genesis: accordingly, the poet succeeds in respecting the ultimate inexplicability of evil characteristic of the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

This ultimate inexplicability calls for a further elucidation that can also explain the paradoxical contents and structure of *Paradise Lost*. Such an elucidation is provided by the psychoanalyst Ignacio Matte Blanco in *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets* (1975), an essay that analyzes the mechanisms ruling the unconscious. According to Matte Blanco, the unconscious is a system governed by a logic other than the “bivalent logic” of rational reasoning, based on asymmetric relations in which the terms of an opposition are mutually exclusive (what is godly cannot be earthly, what is guilty cannot be innocent, and so forth). In effect, the unconscious follows a symmetrical logic of its own in which the converse of any relation is identical with the relation itself. In a clarifying example, Matte Blanco illustrates symmetrical logic thus: “‘the arm is part of the body’ is identical with ‘the body is part of the arm.’ In other words, the part is identical with the whole, from which it follows logically that it is also identical with any other part. [...] All these assertions may appear absurd, but according to what we may call *the logic of symmetrical thinking* they are perfectly legitimate” (1975: 43; author’s emphasis).

This principle of symmetry can be equally applied to the idea conveyed by the narration of Genesis and of *Paradise Lost* that sinfulness is compulsive and freely chosen alike. Since such a symmetrical relation does not pertain to rationality, but to faith—a condition in which the believer comes to terms with the dogma without comprehending it logically—it follows that it cannot be expressed except through symbols, which represent the reconciliation of dichotomies into a wholeness that reason cannot explain, but which the unconscious instinctively grasps. The structural device of the beginning *in medias res* is likewise subservient to this purpose, for it enables the poet to represent the paradox of time unfolding within eternity, as well as to shift the cause of evil and sin ceaselessly backwards without clearing up the ambiguity of the coexistence of inheritance and free will.

In the following sections, I intend to analyze the way Milton uses the backward-oriented structure inherited from the classical epic tradition for conducting an etiological study into the bilogic of sinfulness (morals-centrism).



Then, I will examine the development of this structure in Mary Jo Salter's play *Falling Bodies*, which will be interpreted as a representation of the very mechanisms of intertextuality (literature-centrism).

### III. The Fall in the Light of Milton's *Tragische Analysis* and Galileo's Reasoning *Ex Suppositione*

It is now necessary to examine more closely the way the *in medias res* structure works. A narration beginning *in medias res* and following a backward-oriented structure is known in German as *tragische Analysis*, and its peculiarity lies in giving action a *post factum* collocation.<sup>5</sup> This structure is commonly viewed as a typical feature of epics, but it also characterizes Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. In this tragedy the king of Thebes Oedipus tries to save his city from the plague through taking heed of the soothsayer Tiresias's prophecy designed to discover the killer of his predecessor, king Laius. Thus, Oedipus ferrets out the fact that he himself is guilty of this murder, for —unaware of Laius's identity— he killed his father and married his own mother, queen Jocasta. This backward-structured play is considered the first example of a whodunit in literary history, and —after being viewed as a *Schicksalstragödie* for a long time— Guido Paduano has highlighted the role played by *tragische Analysis* in shifting the focus from the unavoidability of destiny (given voice by the oracle) to Oedipus's voluntary search for knowledge (See 1994: 71–124). Accordingly, the interplay between compulsion and freedom comes to the fore as the veritable core of Sophocles's tragedy exactly as in *Paradise Lost*.

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This whodunit *ante litteram* was the starting point from which Freud developed the very kernel of the Oedipus complex, for he saw in Oedipus' ignorance the representation of that unconsciousness which, for every person, the Oedipus complex is cloaked in.<sup>6</sup> Not only did *Oedipus the King* prompt Freud to postulate the relationship between the Ego and the Id; it also provided him with a crucial clue for the theorization of the method of psychoanalytical investigation, following which —like the detective in a whodunit— the therapist analyzes tangible symptoms so as to go backwards to their invisible causes.<sup>7</sup> Such a method is evidently etiological in principle, and it was precisely this etiological perspective that was considered the guarantee of its scientific nature. We can now sum up the above-mentioned concepts in a syllogism: an etiological perspective entails investigating the consequences and then going backwards to their causes (following the same structure as *tragische Analysis*), and since the method of modern science takes on this very same backward-oriented structure, then modern science is essentially etiological in principle, and so is *Paradise Lost*.

But what does the etiological research of modern science —whose forefather is claimed to be the 17<sup>th</sup>-century physicist Galileo Galilei— rest on? William A. Wallace argues that Galileo’s method was based on the necessity to investigate the immutable causes of natural phenomena in spite of their mutable manifestations:

The reason [behind some defective processes] is that the processes whereby perfect organisms are produced are radically contingent, or, stated otherwise, that natural causes are sometimes impeded from attaining their effects. But if one starts with an effect that is normally attained, he can formulate this as an ideal *suppositio*, and from this reason back to the causes that are able to (virtually) produce it. Stated otherwise, one can use his experience with nature to reason on the supposition of an effect’s attainment (*ex suppositione*) to the various antecedent causes that will be required for its production. This way, scientists are enabled to investigate the causes behind natural phenomena and can reason apodictically to the requirements for the production of similar effects in the future even despite the fact that nature and its processes sometimes fail in their *de facto* attainment. (83)

This reasoning *ex suppositione* can be summarized in the formula “If P, then Q”, in which P stands for a result that is physically verifiable, while Q is the antecedent cause or condition producing the appearances observed. Even though the antecedent cause cannot be experienced empirically, it can be inferred by means of mathematical reasoning, which is the only guarantee a scientist can rely on.

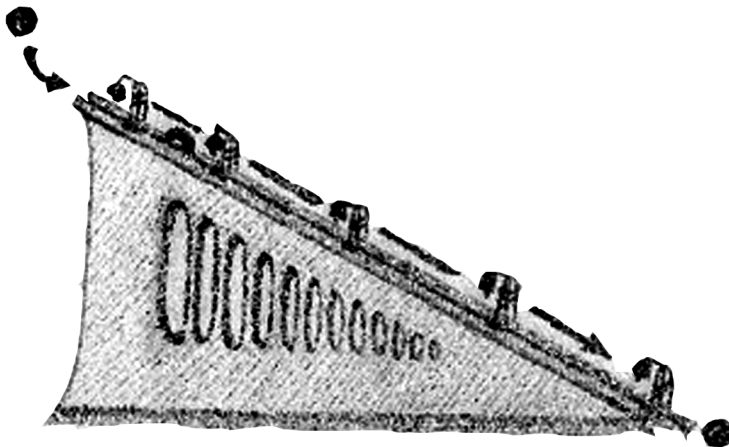
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Therefore, the etiological method of science is meant to trace a tangible effect back to its intangible cause, which is exactly what psychoanalytic hermeneutics does when tracing a symptom back to the Id’s unsaid. Still, this is also the method followed by Milton in *Paradise Lost*: in all these cases, the first cause stays unfathomable, and this ultimate unfathomableness cannot be expressed except by means of symbols. Just as the physical fall of bodies can be studied mathematically in its phenomenal manifestations, but not in its noumenon, likewise everyman’s fall in the face of sin can be empirically observed, but its origin continues to be shrouded in mystery. Such an analogy between the physical fall of bodies and the Fall of man is implied in the very title of Mary Jo Salter’s *Falling Bodies*,<sup>8</sup> a play whose plot rests precisely on the relationships between Galilei’s science and Milton’s poetry.

#### IV. A New Copernican Revolution: from Morals-Centrism to Literature-Centrism

“A large, triangular scientific instrument, about the size and —though angular, the shape— of a harp, which we will call the accelerator. This is a model of an actual device Galileo used to measure the speed of falling bodies”:<sup>9</sup> it is on this object that the curtain opens at the very beginning of *Falling Bodies*. This scientific measurer

in the shape of a musical instrument turns out to be as crucial to *Falling Bodies* as the handkerchief is to *Othello*, since it is the ultimate representation of the close relationship between Galileo and Milton the play stages. Just as Galileo gauged the speed of falling bodies by means of this instrument, so did Milton with the Fall of man through the measurement of iambic pentameter. This analogy is fully developed in I.v, where Edward Phillips —Milton's actual nephew and biographer— is shown the accelerator. In this instrument balls are caused to roll down a slide, thus hitting five bells positioned at an increasing distance from each other: it was thanks to this ingenious instrument that Galileo was able to demonstrate the natural acceleration of falling bodies.



*Galileo's inclined plane —referred to in the play as the "accelerator"— drawn after a 19<sup>th</sup>-century model held in the Museo di Storia della Scienza (Florence).*

As soon as Edward Phillips hears the music produced by this tool, he immediately recognizes the rhythm of iambic pentameter, thus drawing an explicit parallel between Galileo's scientific researches and Milton's theological poem. It is interesting to note that the character who elucidates this parallel is Edward Phillips, whose role is that of an omniscient narrator allowed to cross the boundaries of time and space. However, before discussing the role of time and space in connection with this character, it might be useful to give a brief overview of the play.

*Falling Bodies* is based on the combination of historical scenes (such as Milton's arrest, or the lecture on the physical measurement of Dante's *Inferno* Galileo gave in Florence in 1588) and whimsical situations in which the present fades into the past and is at the same time projected into the future. It lacks a traditional plot; instead, it is built on the juxtaposition of anecdotes taken from Milton and Galileo's lives, with a view of highlighting an uncanny series of parallels between their biographies and works. Appropriately, these parallels are not arranged in a chronological order, but shift backwards and forwards in time. This peculiar disarray is further complicated by the presence of an incongruous cluster of characters, showing that not only are different times and places mixed up in the play, but that the boundaries between reality and literary fiction, too, have been blurred. Accordingly, some characters of *Paradise Lost* such as Satan, Adam and Eve are presented side by side with the historical characters of Virginia and Mary (respectively, Galileo's and Milton's daughters) and with stock characters from contemporary times such as the News Announcer and the Museum Guide.

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Phillips plays a central role as both a historical character and a narrator ceaselessly crossing time-space boundaries (it is precisely on a time-space voyage to a modern museum that he is shown the accelerator), and this power transfigures him into the very embodiment of the Writer. There are two main reasons for this: as a historical figure Phillips wrote his uncle's biography in 1694, while as a character in the play he can be considered Mary Jo Salter's alter ego. In effect, the scene featuring Phillips at the museum is reminiscent of Salter's own experience in the Museo di Storia della Scienza in Florence, where she herself thought that the "music" of the accelerator had the same rhythm as iambic pentameter.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Phillips can be seen as the figure of the Writer also accounts for the declaration he makes at I.ii, in which he explains the structure of the play in a metatheatrical soliloquy: "We begin, as epics do, *in medias res*. A phrase my uncle taught me in our Latin lessons long ago. *In medias res*—in the middle of things. Why is it, do you suppose, that in this world and even in Heaven, the middle of things always means the middle of a war?" In this way, Phillips underlines the fact that the play begins *in medias res* from Milton's old age, thus making a self-referential remark about the play he is a character in. But this self-referential remark is also enclosed within the broader frame of the intertextual relationship the play has with *Paradise Lost* (which begins *in medias res* with the war between Heaven and Hell) and—broader still—the metaliterary frame of epic tradition, with particular reference to the *Iliad* (beginning in the midst of the Trojan war).

This passage foregrounds the fact that *Falling Bodies* reconstructs the inception of *Paradise Lost* while staging some of its episodes, and that it does so by consciously using the device of the beginning *in medias res* for attaching to the Miltonic legacy a set of new meanings. So, Mary Jo Salter's use of the *in medias res* device inherited

by Milton may be conceived of as an instrument for representing the paradoxical mechanism of intertextuality (which entails sticking to tradition while swerving from it) in a play which is itself intertextual. This is evident from the very prologue, in which Milton's poem is quoted with a view to creating a beginning *in medias res* reproducing the outset of *Paradise Lost*. The war between Heaven and Hell is here staged in the form of a dance that turns out to be the whirlwind of Milton's dreams furnishing the poet with the images for his masterpiece:

SATAN: Is this the region, this is the Soil, the Clime –  
VIRGINIA: Said then the lost Arch-Angel, this the seat –  
MARY: That we must change for Heaven, this mournful gloom –  
GUARD 1: For that celestial light? Be it so, since he –  
NEWS ANNOUNCER: Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid –  
EVE: What shall be right: farthest from him is best –  
ADAM: Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme –  
GUARD 2: Above his equals. Farewell happy Fields –  
MUSEUM GUIDE: Where joy forever dwells –  
ALL: Hail horrors, hail –  
MICHAEL: Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell –  
(*The circuit of speakers begins again, at right*)  
SATAN: Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings –  
VIRGINIA: A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.  
MARY: The mind is its own place, and in itself –  
GUARD 1: Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.  
NEWS ANNOUNCER: What matter where, if I be still the same –  
EVE: And what I should be, all but less than he –  
ADAM: Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least –  
GUARD 2: We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built –  
MUSEUM GUIDE: Here for his envy, will not drive us hence.  
MICHAEL: Here we may reign secure, and in my choice –  
ALL: To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!

*The music rises in volume again, and the nine speakers divide (five on one side, four on the other) to stand lined up on right and left sides of the stage, facing the other side. As they do this, The News Announcer, who has been at the center, lifts and displays the face-down large "book" we had seen on the glass table: we now see that these are angel-wings, scribbled with words. Meanwhile, Galileo rises and walks diagonally upstage to sit at his little telescope-table, and begins looking up through his telescope, sometimes taking notes. Milton stays seated, his eyes closed: he is sleeping. The lighting and music suggest that Heaven is in danger. While the speaker looks on, a dance of angels, using all of the stage, begins – and we realize quickly that this dance is a war. Video projections may add to the tumult. The angels' costumes may employ wings that remind*

*us of open books; they might also indicate somehow a difference between God's obedient angels and the rebel angels. These angels are figments of a literary imagination.*

This prologue introduces Milton's waking up and dictating *Paradise Lost* to his nephew while waiting for his own arrest. When this takes place, Phillips soothes his uncle by saying that this is not the end, but Milton replies: "No, it is the middle. This is the hard part". These words occur again in I.xiii, the scene in which Phillips enters the narration of the Fall and is subject to that envy Satan himself felt while gazing at the human lovers in the Earthly Paradise. It is in this scene that —after experiencing the physical fall of bodies on the accelerator— he also goes through the moral and religious experience of the Fall.

EVE: (*as she raises the apple that has somehow materialized from her garlands*)

"She plucked, she et". (*And she bites into the apple, lasciviously*)

EDWARD: Completion. The deed is done for Eve. "She plucked, she et". Nothing pithier in English, apart from "Jesus wept".

(*Eve's movements convey that she is tempting Adam with the apple*)

Completion. A twentieth-century medical term, I understand, for a common illusion experienced by those who are going blind. A hand reaches for something in its accustomed place —a pen on the desk, a key on its hook, two eyes in the mirror— and they appear for an instant to be there. Completion. My uncle had put off —completion— for decades, with every possible work of prose. Vituperations against his political enemies, brilliant tracts of political and religious insight, not to mention every clever and —by the way, immortal— sonnet he could think up. He put it off until he was blind. Give him credit: he put off the Fall of Man as long as he could.

(*Adam accepts the apple from Eve and bites into it*)

Until it burnt as bright as the sun.

(*Bright light on Satan*)

But for us, the Fall of Man is only the middle.

This is the hard part.

Finally, the last occurrence of this expression is at the end of the play (II.v), a scene set in Florence on the occasion of the meeting between Galileo and Milton in 1638.<sup>11</sup> At that time Milton was a budding poet who intended to write the English national epic about King Arthur, while Galileo —who was as old and blind as Milton was in the first scene— was waiting for *The Two New Sciences* to be printed in Leyden. After meeting Milton, Galileo is asked by his servant about the young poet, and answers: "He is not so young. He thinks he's at the beginning. But it is the middle. That is the hard part". This net of repetitions creates a circular structure in which the end of the narration turns out to be the beginning of the narrated events, so that the play comes out as a whodunit in which the mystery to be

unveiled is the way in which a poet manages to conceive his masterpiece. In this perspective, the circularity of *Falling Bodies* is a means for narrating the poet's search for inspiration, and thus it turns out to be a mirror text.

The self-reflecting power of the play is further strengthened by the fact that the "middle" of the artist's quest for inspiration (the core of the poem itself) refers to Milton, whose masterpiece—as Phillips suggests at the end of I.xiii—recounts precisely the "middle" of human history, the Fall, which is the watershed between life in the Earthly Paradise and History. This "middle" called for a backward-oriented structure allowing the poet to put off the inevitable as long as he could, and this is what Salter does, too, in narrating the way Milton's faltering inspiration swerved from an epic about King Arthur to one about the Fall. In order to reach this goal, Salter makes use of that *in medias res* structure of epic tradition and of science as well, thus creating an interesting contrast: while a scientific discovery such as Galileo's entailed the rejection of the Aristotelic theories about motion until then accredited, Milton's creation didn't turn upside down the system it belonged to. Milton did not upset the conventions of epic tradition he had been handed down, but manipulated them so as to make them convey new meanings and values. Salter does the same in her attempt to reconstruct the inception of *Paradise Lost* while employing the very same devices (and often words) used in the model she looks back on. In effect, Salter does not rewrite *Paradise Lost* into a play, but shifts its original bilogic of the coexistence between inheritance and free will from the level of morals to that of literature. Hence, in the play she uses the *in medias res* structure for representing the way intertextuality entails sticking to a traditional legacy (inheritance) while at the very same time modifying its given significances (free will).

It follows that *Falling Bodies* may be read not only as an intertextual play, but also as a mirror text which—while describing the composition of a work of art it draws inspiration from— ceaselessly reflects its own structure. This peculiar self-referentiality is easily detectable in *Falling Bodies* thanks to the presence of Edward Phillips, who is often entrusted with making metaliterary remarks; in consequence, he can be considered a figure of the Writer and, more specifically, Salter's alter-ego. Therefore, through the enchanted mirror of intertextuality, the reader can see the very author of the play, Mary Jo Salter, peeping out from the paper-and-ink screen of Edward Phillips, and with her Milton, Tasso, Virgil, Homer, and each of those authors who have interwoven thread by thread the huge tissue/text of literature.

## Notes

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1. Labelling this passage as an illustration of intertextuality is anachronistic, as when T.S. Eliot wrote this essay the word didn't exist. Yet, the literary practice of referring to earlier works dates from ancestral times, and had been used—as well as debated—since long before Julia Kristeva coined for it the label “intertextuality” in *Séméiôtiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969).

2. “In Book V, Raphael is entertained by Adam and Eve to a vegetarian meal that might remind gourmets of the nouvelle cuisine (Eve does not believe in adulterating flavors, 334–35). The episode has embarrassed some of the poet's friends, and one infamous detail aroused snorts of derision from Bentley. [...] It can, however, be defended. Paradise is at once ordinary and wondrous, and if that is not our imagining, then the poet might complain of our moral attitudes as much as of our literary tastes” (Martindale 1985: 325–327).

3. “‘Sophoclean irony’ [is a device] by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and, usually, from the other persons on the stage. The very first words uttered by Macbeth, ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen,’ are an example to which attention has often been drawn; for they startle the reader by recalling the words of the Witches in the first scene, ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’” (Bradley 1966: 283). The definition “Sophoclean” comes from the use Sophocles made of this device in *Oedipus the King*, a play that will be discussed later in this article. It is interesting to note that Bradley explains Sophoclean irony by referring to *Macbeth*, a play that has been interpreted as the staging of the psychological mechanisms triggering off dread in King-Kok (1984: 430–439).

4. See Kierkegaard: “Just as the relation of dread to its object, to something which is nothing [...] is altogether ambiguous, so will the transition here from innocence to

guilt be correspondingly so dialectical that the explanation is and must be psychological. The qualitative leap is outside of ambiguity, but he who through dread becomes guilty is innocent, for it was not he himself but dread, an alien power, which laid hold of him, a power he did not love but dreaded — and yet he is guilty, for he sank in the dread which he loved even while he feared it” (Kierkegaard 1944: 39).

5. The definition *tragische Analysis* was coined by Schiller in a letter written to Goethe on October 2nd, 1797: “Der Oedipus ist gleichsam nur eine tragische Analysis. Alles ist schon da, und es wird nur herausgewickelt. Das kann in der einfachsten Handlung und in einem sehr kleinen Zeitmoment geschehen, wenn die Begebenheiten auch noch so kompliziert und von Umständen abhängig waren” (“Oedipus is a *tragische Analysis* as well. Everything is there, and is ready to be unraveled. It can happen in the simplest of actions and for the briefest of instants, even though it is complicated and dependent on the circumstances”; Goethe 1949: 435; my translation).

6. The Oedipus complex was first mentioned in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dating October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1897 (Freud, 1985). The relationship between Oedipus’ *Unwissenheit* (unknowingness) and everyman’s *Unbewußtheit* (unconsciousness) is illustrated in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940).

7. The analogy between the activity of the psychoanalyst/psychoanalytic critic and the detective’s researches is elucidated in: Lavagetto (2003). See also: Bertoli (2008: 7–30).

8. For further details about Mary Jo Salter, see: Bacigalupo (2004-2005: 145–149); Benthall, (2003: 265–271); Post (2008); Taylor, (2002 II: 297–310).

9. The play was premiered at Mount Holyoke College (Holyoke, MA) in November 2004 under the direction of Holger Teschke. The text is unpublished; the excerpts here quoted



are taken from the original manuscript, kindly provided by the author.

<sup>10</sup>. The author highlighted this resemblance during an interview given in Bellagio (Italy) on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007. This interview is reported in: Bertoli, Mariacristina

Natalia. *An Insight into Mary Jo Salter's Poetry*. Dissertation (Tesi di Laurea). Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Brescia, 2007.

<sup>11</sup>. Mary Jo Salter's source for this episode is: Sobel (1999).

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