

**Małgorzata Grzegorzewska**

University of Warsaw

“Eyes wide shut”: Paul Ricoeur’s  
Biblical Hermeneutics and the Course of  
Recognition in John Milton’s  
*Paradise Lost*

## ABSTRACT

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The author of the paper analyzes John Milton’s great epic narrative through the lenses of Paul Ricoeur’s biblical hermeneutics and his philosophical reflection, in particular the second chapter of the philosopher’s last book, *Parcours de la Reconnaissance (The Course of Recognition)*, devoted mainly to the prospects and pitfalls of recognizing oneself. Two excerpts from St. Paul’s Letter to Romans (14:23b) and the Letter to Corinthians (1, 13:12) highlight the main points of reference in this argument: (1) the concept of involuntary wrongdoing and (2) the contrast between the present opacity and the projected transparency of the knowing subject, connected with the promise of seeing face-to-face, whose fulfilment is rooted in God’s antecedent knowledge of a human being. It is argued that Ricoeur’s focus on the precarious fate of the “fallible man” and his simultaneous desire to outline the destiny of the “capable man” elucidate Milton’s masterpiece evocations of the Aristotelian *anagnorisis* in *Paradise Lost*.

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**ABSTRACT**

The witty title of Stanley Kubrick's film reminds us of the manifold paradoxes involved in the process of self-recognition which are presented in great works of world literature. The tragic hero is often forced to see in retrospect his own errors through the gaping wounds of the "eyes wide shut": from the eyeless Oedipus to blind Gloucester in *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Moreover, Kubrick's joke bears an oblique trace of yet another great narrative of Western culture which begins with the seductive prospect of infinite knowledge ("your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be like gods"), culminates with the eating of the forbidden fruit, and ends with the painfully exact, but at the same time most unwelcome fulfilment of the devil's equivocation: "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig trees together, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:5, 7). As we all know, the biblical myth of the Fall provided the canvas of John Milton's great epic poem about "man's first disobedience"; and, like the anonymous author of the biblical narrative, Milton shows that sin hinders the moment of self-recognition and leads the First Couple into the thicket of self-deceit. Does that mean, however, that Milton's sinners and sufferers must put up with this impaired vision of themselves until death definitively "shuts wide" their already sightless eyes? This question will inform our reading of the poem viewed from the perspective of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical reflection and his biblical hermeneutics.

Seeking to disentangle the lacunas of *anagnorisis* in *Paradise Lost*, we ought to invoke two famous Pauline assertions concerning the problem of human guilt and the concomitant issue of the accessibility of self-knowledge, which allows the human agent to assume responsibility for his/her deeds (not only wilful transgressions, but also fatal mistakes). As we shall soon find out, these assertions are crucial both for the readers of Milton's Christian epic and the addressees of Paul Ricoeur's last major book, entitled *Parcours de la Reconnaissance (The Course of Recognition)*. Since guilt comes first in the order of biblical narrative (Genesis 3), let us start with St. Paul's definition of sin—which, as we all know, in the Greek of the New Testament is called by the same name which Aristotle had used way before St. Paul to describe the predicament of tragic guilt: *hamartia*. In the Letter to Romans 14:23b we read that "whatever . . . is not of faith, sin is" (14:23b). In the Greek original this warning reads: *pan de ho ouk ek pisteos, hamartia estin (Bible Hub)*. If then, as Ricoeur reminds us, the Greek playwrights already recognized the fact that even unwilling actions have a bearing on the future, since in their course reality is re-shaped by the

protagonist in such a way that s/he cannot return to primordial innocence, it is only in the letter of St. Paul that we are confronted with further implications of the concept of involuntary wrongdoing. The Pauline definition, we could say, offers a pointed retort to all the self-acquitting protests of Greek tragic heroes who, as Ricoeur accurately observes, strive to distinguish between acts done willingly, in accordance with oneself—*hekon*—and deeds committed against oneself, unwillingly—*akon* (*Course* 91). This is precisely where St. Paul enters the stage with his definition of guilt. Our understanding of the notion of *hamartia*, he seems to imply, cannot be separated from what we mean by *pistis*, which denotes not only “faith,” but also “inner conviction,” “self-assurance,” in other words, the very core of our “self.” In other words, St. Paul seems to imply that all acts performed unwillingly, against one’s *true* self, must be deemed sinful. The argument that the ancient Greek heroes used in self-defence now turns against them, as self-ignorance and especially deliberate self-deceit are not just the main reason for, but the very essence of, sin.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, though, St. Paul knows only too well that that full self-awareness (apparently a necessary prerequisite for upright behaviour) is an unattainable ideal in this life. This allowance is expressed in the widely-known passage from 1 Corinthians: “We see indeed presently through a glass in obscurity, then moreover face to face; presently I know in part, then moreover *I will know as also I have been fully known*” (13:12; emphasis added). Let us also invoke the original version: *Blepomen gar arti di esoptrou en anigmati; tote de prosopon pros prosopon; arti ginoko ek merous; tote de epignosomai, kathos kai epegnosthen* (*Bible Hub*). Usually quoted as the promise of the saints’ participation in divine mysteries (“I will know God”), the Pauline confession certainly does preclude another possibility involved in that face-to-face encounter, that of an ultimate *self*-recognition (“I will know myself”; “I shall regain my own likeness, disfigured by sin”). Whichever interpretation we choose, we cannot miss the fact that the contrast between the present opacity and the projected transparency of the knowing subject entails a promise whose fulfilment is rooted in God’s *antecedent* knowledge of a human being (the English “I have been known” well renders the Greek *epegnosthen*), just as our imperfect love

<sup>1</sup> A reader familiar with Søren Kierkegaard’s concept of demonic despair will immediately recognize the influence of Pauline theology on Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin. In *The Sickness unto Death* the philosopher somewhat misleadingly asserts that Scriptures offer no spiritual definition of sin, other than equating it with disobedience; later on he provides his own definition which in fact can be very well reconciled with St. Paul’s stance: “Sin is: before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself” (66). Both states imply a separation from and disagreement with one’s present self, articulated either by a flight away from it, or a desire to achieve it.

derives from His love, which comes before our love, and our justification rests on His antecedent grace. St. Paul's vision resembles thus both the assurance given to the prophet of the Old Testament: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5), and the soothing awareness of the Psalmist who responds with gratitude to God's continual presence:

*You have searched me O Lord, and known me...  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; I cannot attain unto it.  
Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or wither will I fly from your  
presence? . . .  
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee, but the night shineth as the day:  
the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.  
(Psalm 139:1–12; emphasis added)*

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Moreover, the fulfilment of the promise is guaranteed by God's infallible memory, which makes up for constant human betrayals and inevitable forgetfulness.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, though, the accomplishment of the ideal is postponed until the end of time, so that "now," in this life, self-recognition signifies a partial, intermediate and unstable course of action. Yet again, the fact that all the moral, epistemological and ontological possibilities which characterize a human being (Kearney 50) ultimately refer to the eschatological possibility of Salvation only enhances their value.

We may now confront St. Paul's promise with Ricoeur's illuminating essay on the winding paths of the human journey of self-discovery. His analysis comprises three primary meanings of recognition: (1) simple and straightforward identification, (2) recognizing oneself, with recollection and remembering as instruments of obtaining self-knowledge, and (3) mutual recognition that involves not only the struggle between individuals demanding recognition from their fellow human beings, but also signifies bonds of gratitude, mutual acknowledgement and appreciation.<sup>3</sup> Although Ricoeur's major concern seems to be teasing out the consequences of the Hegelian understanding of the struggle for recognition, all three stages of his argument are equally relevant for the reader of *Paradise*

<sup>2</sup> Memory and promise, as we remember, are two pillars of recognition in Ricoeur's philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> All these three aspects play a crucial role in the New Testament account of the hour of darkness. First, while saying "I recognize this man," I mean "This is the man I have seen before"; like during Christ's trial in the high priest's house the maid recognized Peter as one of His disciples: "This man was also with him" (Luke 22:56). Then the bond of gratitude, acknowledgement and appreciation is broken by Peter's denial: "Woman, I know him not" (Luke 22:57). Also, Peter obtains self-knowledge only after he wants to conceal his true identity ("Man, I am not" [22:59]), precisely when the crow of a cock makes him recall Christ's words: "And Peter *remembered* the word of the Lord how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice" (22:61; emphasis added).

*Lost*. In our analysis attention will be most paid to the second chapter of his book, devoted mainly to the prospects and pitfalls of recognizing oneself. It is there that Ricoeur invokes the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorismos*, which denotes a sudden reversal of fortune, resulting in the protagonist's transition from ignorance to self-knowledge. He illustrates his argument with references to the *Odyssey* and two plays about Oedipus (*Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*), which anchor the meaning of the term in family relations. Accordingly, Ricoeur begins by reminding us that the story of Odysseus' return focuses mainly on the episodes showing how the protagonist step by step reveals his true identity: first to his son, then to his wife and his father. An analysis of this literary example is the starting point of Ricoeur's project of the "phenomenology of the capable human" (Greisch 94). Since the Homeric message concerning the epic hero's capacity for "recognizing himself as responsible" remains limited, as Ricoeur concedes, "to the role that tradition assigns to those that stand in the entourage of the master" (*Course* 77), this one-sided, one-way *anagnorisis* can only be the first step on the way to the concept of mutual recognition, and seems to have little bearing on the protagonist's self-recognition. What is more, the course of recognition in Ricoeur's account does develop in a linear succession. The philosopher's next example after Odysseus' stepping forward is Oedipus' withdrawal. The title of this section reads: "At Colonus, Oedipus retracts." Yet behind Oedipus' consistent preoccupation with undeserved suffering and "the irresistible character of the supernatural forces that govern human destiny," Ricoeur perceives a dramatic persona who is capable of recognizing himself as the "author of the innermost action consisting of his evaluating his acts, particularly retrospectively" (*Course* 77). Even if the gods manipulated Oedipus into fratricide and incest, they cannot take over his suffering "endured in a responsible manner" (77). Towards the end of this section, Ricoeur quotes Bernard Williams, who reminds us that "in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, *and not merely by what one has intentionally done*" (79; emphasis added) and in the light of Williams's observation he calls Oedipus a "suffering human being who recognizes himself as agent" (79). Then Ricoeur stresses the role of human effective capacities, when he claims that "happiness has its source in us, in our activities" and, following on from that, locates "the deepest-lying possibility" of self-recognition in its "anchorage in the goal of happiness in those activities that make up the human task as such, our task" (81). But we should not miss the fact that in the section devoted to the "guilty-innocent" Oedipus, the emphasis on human agency which involves a capability to achieve happiness seems overshadowed by the tragic hero's negative capacity for doing wrong, which in turn reminds us of

Søren Kierkegaard's definition of "the human task as such" as being continually "educated by the possibility" of choosing the *wrong* path at the crossroads of recognition (Hanson).<sup>4</sup>

We may indeed claim that Oedipus "retracts" because the tragic hero does not plead guilty of crime even when he confesses that he is the very man who has committed all the deeds of which he is now accused. At the same time, though, Oedipus' admission that he was "capable" of doing what has been done (92), marks an important step forward on the way towards self-recognition.<sup>5</sup> His discovery also involves the human negative propensity for evil, which later will become part-and-parcel of the Christian project of knowing oneself. But again, this gloomy reminder shows only one side of the coin, as indicated in the promise recorded by St. Paul: *arti ginosko ek merous; tote de epignosomai, kathos kai epegnosthen*. Also in Ricoeur's account, potency cannot be separated from limitation and the other way round. His "capable man" and fallen/"*fallible* man" are Siamese twins.<sup>6</sup> In effect, instead of seeking with Aristotle the *moments* of recognition (as fixed points on the axis of narrative time), the French philosopher invites his readers to trace the "*movements* of recognition" (Greisch 95), which better correspond with the ebbs and flows of the process of questioning and recognizing oneself.

Bearing all this in mind, let us see if Ricoeur's observation can throw light on the story of the Fall recounted in John Milton's poetic theodicy, in which the voice of a suffering human can be distinctly heard in the poet-narrator's self-reflexive incursions. The aim of Milton's epic, as we all remember, is not to dwell on "mortal woes," but "to justify the ways of God to man" (I: l. 26).<sup>7</sup> If we choose to read the verb "justify" in the legal sense (meaning: "to find not guilty") or even the theological one ("to absolve, free from guilt"), we are not far from the risk of blasphemy, but Milton's project consists primarily in understanding the

<sup>4</sup> In his presentation Hanson discussed the reader's possible responses to the story of an Indian ascetic who, after tasting wine, became addicted to drink, included in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*. He argued: "The point of such proverbial pieces of partial wisdom is that 'I could just as easily be that fellow.' But the person educated by possibility . . . thinks 'I *am* that fellow.' For the basis on which the student of possibility can be absolutely identified with the Indian ascetic is the basis of shared sin-consciousness."

<sup>5</sup> "In an ethical vision not only is it true that freedom is the ground of evil, but the avowal of evil is also the condition of the consciousness of evil. For in this avowal one can detect the delicate connection of the past and the future, of the self and its acts, of non-being and pure action in the very core of freedom," argued Ricoeur in his Preface to *Fallible Man* (xlix).

<sup>6</sup> I am alluding here to the title of Ricoeur's book: *Fallible Man*.

<sup>7</sup> Most future references to Milton's poem in this essay come from Book IX, therefore they will be followed by line number only.

human predicament which informs the biblical narratives of the Origin and the Fall. Viewed in this light, *Paradise Lost* can be called a “tale of recognition,” and should be interpreted as a paradigmatic example of recognition through narration. Moreover, we are invited to read Milton’s work not only as an epic story told in verse form, but also as a poem in its own right: a hymn of creation, a penitential psalm and a song of redemption. The structure of this poem discloses an intricate architectural plan: in Book VI, precisely half way through the text, Raphael gives a detailed description of the battle in Heaven and the Fall of Satan, which thus becomes the central episode of the story re-told by the poet and the axis of symmetry of the entire narration. In Book VII, as if to remind the reader of the seven days of creation, Raphael tells Adam how the world was created. Earlier, in Book III, one third of the poem’s length, the image of the Holy Trinity shines bright: after another Invocation to God’s Wisdom identified with the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself a ransom for man and the Father ordains the Incarnation of the Son. The Fall of Man is shown in Book IX, two thirds of the poem’s entire length, symmetrically corresponding with the preceding promise of Salvation. Moreover, unlike the former episodes of Holy History which were mediated by angelic messengers who reported to Adam the action that took place in Heaven, this time it is Adam and Eve’s turn to become the chief actors in the drama of Original Sin. The action of the tragic plot, as during a theatrical performance, enfolds on two planes simultaneously, while the reader is to recognize himself in the protagonists of the story “shown” by the poet, almost as if he was looking into the enchanted mirror of the stage.

In this dramatic re-enactment of the Fall, the Puritan poet follows most accurately the account provided in Genesis 3. Beguiled by the serpent’s deceitful eloquence, Milton’s Eve tastes the forbidden fruit, but the fatal effects of her deed do not become obvious to her at once. Intoxicated “as with wine,” she sings pagan hymns to the tree, rejoicing in her allegedly new, heightened clear-sightedness and expecting to learn even more from future experience:

O sovereign, virtuous, precious of all trees  
 In Paradise, of operation blest  
 To sapience, hitherto obscured, infamed . . .  
 Experience, next to thee I owe,  
 Best guide, not following thee I had remained  
 In ignorance; thou opens wisdom’s way,  
 And giv’st access, though secret she retire. (ll. 795–97, 807–10)

Exactly the same trope of eyes wide open and the broad prospects of knowledge and experience recur in Eve's temptation of Adam, when she convinces him that:

This tree is not, as we are told, a tree  
 Of danger tasted, nor to evil unknown  
 Opening the way, but of divine effect  
 To open eyes, and make them gods who taste . . . I  
 Have also tasted, and have also found  
 The effects to correspond—opener mine eyes,  
 Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart,  
 And growing up to godhead. (ll. 863–78)

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Adam, at first anxious about the possible misfortune that the breach of God's commandment must bring, unwittingly repeats Eve's mistake, praising the delicious "taste of . . . sapience." However, as the narrator hastens to explain, instead of opening the path of wisdom, the eating of the fruit displays "far other operation, carnal desire inflaming" (l. 1012). Adam is thus at once infected with covetousness, and his wife responds with equal intensity "he on Eve / Begun to cast lascivious eyes, she him / As wantonly repaid" (ll. 1013–15). They both fall prey to a lusty Cupid (*Amor*) who as if glides between Milton's lines, leaving but a trace of his invisible presence on the level of lexis: "he [Adam] forbore not glance or toy / Of *amorous* intent, well understood / Of Eve, whose eyes *darted* contagious fires" (ll. 1034–36; emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> Under the cover of the night, the First Parents give vent to their lust, sealing their mutual guilt with love sports, "till dewy sleep, / Oppressed them, wearied with their amorous play" (ll. 1044–45). If we look at this entire episode through the prism of Ricoeur's philosophy, what we discern in it will probably be less an echo of the unfortunate Augustinian identification of Original Sin with carnal lust, than the painful birth of the consciousness torn from itself. We may certainly say that at this stage of the story Adam and Eve not only desire each other, but also desire to be recognized by each other; moreover, they also prove to be as yet totally incapable either of self-questioning or of recognizing their mutual debts and of expressing gratitude. Most importantly, they are not ready as yet to take the leap of faith that would make them accept as their own the story of redemption, which Adam has heard from Raphael and which now promises to the First Couple another level of existence, despite the presently experienced desolation.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, in Book XII, the conventional attributes of Cupid are inscribed in Raphael's prophecy of the Son's victory "Satan's assaults" and his "*fiery darts*."



Tired of love (what a gloomy coda to the promising love scene in Eden!), Adam and Eve fall asleep before sunrise, still before sunbeams drink up the last drops of morning dew, but their second awakening already takes place in full light, and gives a completely new sense to their previous discoveries:

Soon as the force of that fallacious fruit,  
That with exhilarating vapour bland  
About their spirits had played, and inmost powers  
Made err, was now exhaled, . . . up they rose  
As from unrest, *and each the other viewing*  
*Soon found out their eyes how opened,*  
*And their minds how darkened.* (ll. 1046–54; emphasis added)

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The previous joy of knowing, suggested by Adam and Eve's frequent repetition of the Latinized form of wisdom—"sapience"—which emphasized the seemingly divine provenience and character of their new grasp of reality, now turns out to be mere illusion. Now they see their own guilt reflected in each other as in a fatal mirror. And only now can they admit the loss caused by the breach, whose immediate consequence is a distorted and opaque vision of reality and of themselves. This paradox has been accurately described in André LaCocque's and Paul Ricoeur's joint attempt to rethink biblical narratives of the Origin and the Fall. LaCocque's argument is worth quoting at length:

It is true that when the humans ate the fruit of knowledge something happened that resembles true science: their eyes opened (*pqb*), a verb that is used to describe the opening of the eyes of the blind (Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 35:5). But what they saw happens to be only a shameful reality, the very contrary of *tob* of divine proclamation in Genesis 1. . . . The humans' vision is a desire to reshape the world; they have an illusory feeling that they can do better than the creator. *What they obtain is the distortion of the given by an interpretation that itself is blurred.* . . . Far from mastering creation, as the humans thought they would, they are incapable of distinguishing what is good for them, their alleged clear-sightedness is myopia (or, on another level, nakedness). *Blindness is alienation from the self as well as from the other, so that they may even entertain an illusion of not being seen by anyone else . . . , of being hidden from the eyes of the One who surrounds them.* (19–20; emphasis added)

It is indeed astonishing how closely this explanation matches Milton's masterly portrayal of Eve's self-deception when she hopes her deed passed unnoticed in heaven. Not only is she deluded in believing that now she can

see more, but she also tries to persuade herself that God's omniscience is limited to that of a vigilant mortal tyrant relying on the reports of ubiquitous secret agents:

*And I perhaps am secret: heaven is high—  
High, and remote to see from thence distinct  
Each thing on earth; and other care perhaps  
May have diverted from continual watch  
Our great forbidder, safe with all his spies  
About him. (ll. 811–16; emphasis added)*

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Adam, far less ingenuously, retires to a wild thicket (which on the one hand reminds us of the romance heroes' diversion from the path of righteousness into the forest of ignorance and, on the other hand, foreshadows William Blake's "forests of the night") in order to hide there from the judicious, "insufferably bright" eye of the sun. His apprehensive question: "How shall I behold the face / Henceforth of God or angel, erst with joy / And rapture so oft beheld?" (ll. 1080–81) must wait for the soothing answer of the New Testament: "We see indeed presently through a glass in obscurity; then moreover face to face." Until this promise is incarnated in the Resurrected Christ, man can only put trust in seclusion. In despair, he repeats the mistake of the lyrical I from John Donne's "Holy Sonnet IX," who did not seek refuge in God's merciful remembrance, but out of shame prayed that the "black memory of his sins" be wiped out by his tears, and he himself be forgotten by God, rather than granted forgiveness ("That Thou remember them, some claim as debt; / I think it mercy if Thou wilt forget"). Milton's Adam expresses a similar desire:

O might I here  
In solitude live savage, in some glade  
Obscured, where highest woods, impenetrable  
To star or sunlight, spread their umbrage broad  
And brown as evening, cover me, you pines;  
Ye cedars, with innumerable boughs  
Hide me, where I may never see them more. (ll. 1084–90)

This statement is, of course, miles and miles away from the self-consciousness of a capable human being. The irony involved in Milton's presentation of the protagonists' self-recognition consists in the fact that upon eating the fatal fruit the humans indeed become "hidden," "concealed" creatures, as each sinner is a "secret" to him/herself, even though they still

remain perfectly transparent, fully “known” to the Maker. Paradoxically enough, Adam’s despair is the most obvious evidence of his error: overcome by sin, he does not wish any longer to be seen/ known or remembered by God, nor to see, know or remember Him looking at the sky. Man’s first clothes to cover his shameful nakedness are not made of fig leaves, but woven of the immaterial fabric of ominous shadows (“umbrage”), darkness, gloom. The moment of the sinners’ most acute self-awareness is in fact tantamount to the loss of the self. Moreover, no matter whether we attribute this loss to the characters’ self-ignorance or self-deceit, there can be little doubt that the damage cannot be mended immediately. As Claudia Welz reminds us:

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One can attribute self-deception to oneself only in retrospect. The grammar of self-deception entails *Nachträglichkeit*. It does not make sense to say, “I am deceiving myself,” but it makes perfect sense to discover after the fact, “I deceived myself at that time.” *Realizing self-deception requires a temporal caesura and a new, revised, self-evaluation.* (159; emphasis added)

On the other hand, Milton’s Adam is at least partially right when he intuits the importance of memory’s opposite, forgetting, in the complex process of self-recognition. In this way, the fall of Milton’s protagonist into time and history marks the beginning of Adam’s course of recognition. This is in perfect agreement concerning what contemporary theory tells us about the connection between recognition and time:

Forgetting is the other side of recognition, but also its prerequisite, whereas both concepts are necessary to the understanding of oneself and of the past, but also of the present and future alike, and thus acquire a dimension that is truly historical. (Le Huenen x)

This must be the reason why in trying to heighten the paradox of eyes “wide shut” by sin, Milton’s grand epic puts such an emphasis on the patterns of memory, forgetting, recollection and repetition. The consecutive episodes of Adam and Eve’s falling asleep and waking up, which set the pace of their story in the wonderful garden, can thus be read as metaphors of the moments of oblivion and remembering. We should not forget in this context that the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, akin to un-forgetting: *anamnesis*, is itself a turning point, a moment of reversal and sudden change of fortune. As Rachel Adelman reminds us: “Both the Greek term *anagnorisis* and the English re-cognition, suggest a *re*-turn in thought, a ‘going back’ . . . , perceiving the past anew through the prism of the present

truth" (53). On the surface level, Eve's speech immediately following the plucking of the fruit fulfils this requirement, by re-evaluating past ignorance and innocence from the standpoint of the newly acquired and, apparently still exhilarating experience and knowledge of things "hitherto obscured, infamed," echoed in Adam's complaint: "Much pleasure we have lost, while we abstained / From this delightful fruit, nor known till now/ True relish" (ll. 1022–24). Yet, in fact, in the course of time whose trajectory—as Ricoeur constantly repeats—determines the curving paths of human recognition, both the protagonists of the poem and Milton's readers are soon forced to revise their opinions in order to recognize their own error of judgment. Only then can we undertake the exercise set out by the poet, that of *anamnesis*, un-forgetting the forlorn happiness that should ultimately result in *anagnorisis*: the *recovered*, *regained* picture of ransomed Man, imprinted in the history of Redemption. (There is moreover a basic difference between the Platonic *anamnesis*, which only allows a hindsight of perfect knowledge, and the Christian project of un-forgetting the divine image, as outlined by St. Paul, which opens the prospect of the future, perfect mutual recognition: *I will know as also I have been fully known.*<sup>9</sup>) First, however, the humans must be reminded of the pre-history, proto-history of the Fall. For *Paradise Lost* not only opens an enticing perspective of un-forgetting Paradise, but, perhaps even more importantly, imposes on the reader an obligation to return to the "time of origins," and retrieve from thence the painful, but necessary memory of Original Sin.

Here again, Ricoeur offers help to Milton's readers, this time with postulating a model of biblical hermeneutics which, on the one hand, takes into account "the caesura between primordial and historical time," which denotes "more than discontinuity" and implies that "the time of primordial events in relation to the time of those in history cannot be fully coordinated in terms of some temporal succession" ("Thinking Creation" 32). On the other hand, however, the French philosopher lays emphasis on the umbilical cord that links the biblical myths of the Origin and the Fall with its actual development in the body of historical time. Ricoeur says: "the Creation arises out of prehistory whose reported events set into movement a broad dynamism operating at the very heart of history" (32). In other words, "the events that occurred in the time of origins have an inaugural value as regards the history that, on the literary plane of narration, follows

<sup>9</sup> This Christian understanding of *anamnesis* is in line with Professor Boitani's suggestion that the Greek prefix *ana-* involves not only a mere coming back to the point of departure, but also suggests a movement upwards: *anagnorisis* is then a "spot of time," to use Wordsworth's apt metaphor, when the human being, struck by surprise and wonder, advances and *rises* in the knowledge of himself. (qtd. in Russo xiv)

the primordial events” (33). They are “seeds of time,” to use a Shakespearean phrase, in which the history of Salvation germinates. Needless to say, the action of Milton’s poem embraces both times, beginning with the creative speech act of Eternal Logos, to the historical events of Christ’s birth and the death of the Word Incarnate on Golgotha.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of Book IX Milton puts stress on the insurmountable barrier separating the bucolic past (“rural repast . . . / venial discourse unblamed” [ll. 4–5]) from the tragic present (“foul distrust, and breach / disloyal” [ll. 5–6]), and emphasizes the distance that after the Fall separates Man from God (“on the part of Heaven/ Now alienated, distance and distaste” [ll. 8–9]) and heaven from earth. Critics argue as to whether Milton’s epic should be read in accordance with the rules of psychological realism framed by the narrative coherence of the story (which would stress linear progress from innocence, through temptation and self-temptation to the Fall), or whether the account of Original Sin should take the reader by surprise, suggesting the complete disjunction between the primordial innocence and the post-lapsarian despair.<sup>11</sup> Of course, narrative—“in the strong sense of this term,” as Ricoeur would add—always implies causal sequencing, but one cannot fail to notice that Milton’s extensive use of prolepsis and analepsis, alongside his masterpiece engrafting various literary genres onto the epic texture of his poem, from pastoral tale to tragedy (Kiefer Lewalski),<sup>12</sup> allows one to perceive in the poet’s account both the progression of events on the horizontal plane and a sudden leap on the vertical axis, which certainly involves more than mere reversal of fortune. Even the poet’s enjambments, which, in the Invocation to Book IX, break up nominal phrases, rather than “striding over” the lines in order to create the impression of a seamless flow of the narrative, enhance the sense of a sudden disconnectedness and dislocation.

Ricoeur’s biblical hermeneutics provides a modern reader with interpretative tools which help us better comprehend this double-fold design of Milton’s epic. In order to account for the complex structure of the Book

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur’s argument about the connection between the “time of origins” and the historical time (which is also the time of fulfilment), so prominent in the philosopher’s interpretation to Genesis 1, follows the medieval and Renaissance tradition of placing Paradise and the Tree of Knowledge exactly in the same place where the cross stood on Golgotha (“Thinking Creation” 30–67).

<sup>11</sup> The best known proponent of the theory of radical discontinuity in Milton’s poem was Stanley Fish (1988). The same line of argument informs John S. Tanner’s Kierkegaardian reading of *Paradise Lost*. For the “psychological” readings of the First Parent’s motivation cf. for instance John Steadman (1968).

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur’s reference to Pierre Gibert’s remark that “no privileged literary form captures Creation” (36) seems to accord with the diversity of genres employed in Milton’s rendering of Genesis 1–3.

of Genesis, the philosopher recalls Claus Westermann's concept of *Geschehenbogen* (a "narrative arch"), which allows him to avoid the mistake of speaking about two states of humanity separated by a fault, and instead facilitates our understanding of the unity (not just tropological foreshadowing) of "one complex, integral event" that includes both "the prohibition, the temptation, the transgression and the trial" of Genesis 3, as well as "the histories of disobedience attributed to Israel or other nations" ("Thinking Creation" 42).<sup>13</sup> Following on from that, Ricoeur postulates "progression in the separation, *within the single primordial history*, that culminates in the impoverished condition represented by the expulsion from the garden" (42; emphasis added). Paradoxically enough, this perspective allows him to reach the bright side of separation: not endowed with the negative meaning of "dereliction or alienation" (38), but interpreted as a benign withdrawal of God which gives the humans "access to responsibility *as regards oneself and others*" (39; emphasis added). This, in turn, renders the human agent morally accountable for his or her actions (both the ones s/he committed and those s/he only could have committed), but perhaps even more importantly it also opens a space of dialogue within oneself and with the other/Other.<sup>14</sup>

Although Ricoeur does not say it explicitly, I think we are entitled to add that the most accomplished form of that dialogue would be a prayer of praise, understood as human response to the call from the divine and distant, but not altogether absent Other, in recognition of the fact that "the human task as such" starts with the unconditional, divine gift of "having been known" by the Father. After all, even Milton's Adam, after his first fatal misrecognition (when he assumes that he is a god) and his second, incomplete *anagnorisis* (when driven by despair he does not want to be seen by God and deems himself as good as dead), learns step by step that "guilty and punished, humanity is not cursed," (Ricoeur, "Thinking Creation" 39) and that east of Eden man can also thank for the mercy of God. The best example of such a prayer of gratitude is the already quoted Psalm,

<sup>13</sup> The readers of *Paradise Lost* are immediately reminded in this context of the historical coda in Milton's great epic, where the Puritan poet recounts the blameless origins of the Catholic Church and its subsequent corruption, putting in the mouth of Michael the following prophecy: "Then they shall seek to avail themselves of names / Places and titles, and with these to join / Secular power, though feigning still to act / By spiritual" (XII: ll. 515–18).

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur says: "We must be very attentive to the composition of the narrative configuration [of Genesis 3] if we are correctly to designate what counts as the primordial history. *It would be an error and a grave mistake for the theological comprehension of this whole sequence to consider the transgression as separating two successive 'states,' a state of innocence that alone would be primordial and a fallen state, which would henceforth be part of history*" ("Thinking Creation" 42; emphasis added).

surely deserving to be called a song of recognition: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well” (Psalm 139:14). Moreover, as both Milton and Ricoeur show us, it is memory enhanced by narration which provides us with an indispensable tool for carrying on the task of recognizing our true selves. Although not free of the risk of self-delusion, in the ultimate perspective this most important human venture has been blessed with the promise of knowing truly and seeing face to face the “something secret,” “something divine,” which despite the Fall dwells within ourselves.

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