

POLYSEMY IN JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Thomas Martin, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

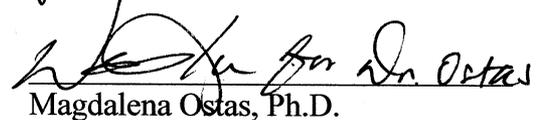
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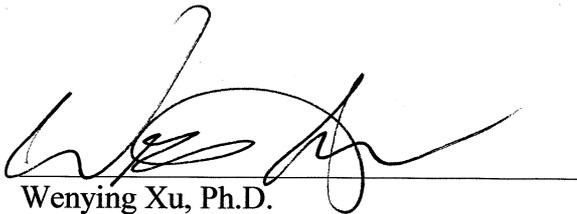
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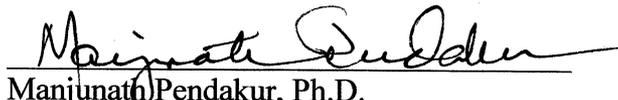
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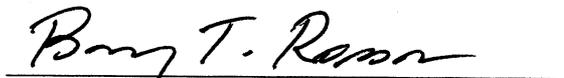
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ABSTRACT

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This is a study of the polysemous language in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Unlike some of his seventeenth-century contemporaries, Milton did not harbor a mistrust of highly symbolic and interpretable language, and the fact that he did not has deep repercussions in Milton's great epic. I examine the porous and mutable nature of Edenic language, and how it challenges the idea of prelapsarian language as devoid of polysemous gloss. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve's perfect acquisition of knowledge is not undermined by the symbolism of language. Nevertheless, Satan cleverly exploits the polysemy of Edenic language in order to effectuate Adam and Eve's transgression. Ultimately, Milton's *Paradise Lost* departs from common seventeenth-century theories about language and knowledge. Milton's view is unique in that it retains a positive view of symbolic language and suggests that postlapsarian humanity is bereft of divine guidance and left to struggle for knowledge through experience.

DEDICATION

To my beloved husband, Michael, who taught me *Paradise Lost* for the first time.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout this thesis, I use the word “polysemy” to refer to the porous and mutable quality of language, that is, to its ability to signify more than one thing, and to signify beyond the intentions of its users. Thus, I use the phrase “polysemous language” to refer to highly symbolic and deeply interpretable language. I envision polysemous language as directly antithetical to a linguistic system based on a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. I argue that prelapsarian and postlapsarian language share the same polysemous nature; that what changes after the Fall is not the nature of language itself, but the relationship between language and its users. In doing so, I maintain that prelapsarian language is both prolific in its signifying, and that its meaning can escape the intention of its users. However, prior to the Fall, the “sudden apprehension” that God bestows upon his creatures significantly amortizes their risk for equivocation because it endows them with intuitive knowledge. In fact, Satan exploits the polysemy of language in order to make divine meaning elude its users.

II. POLYSEMY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Milton was not a semiotician. He did not offer his own theory of signs or even write explicitly about the signification in his poetry. Nevertheless, he doubtlessly gave thought to semiotic matters, and his work could not but be informed by some theory of signs. In this chapter, I will focus on how thinkers before and up until Milton's time approached the concept of polysemy, and what Milton espoused and rejected from each of these approaches. A study of the history of the polysemy is relevant to the study of Milton because the concept of polysemy is an idea that from its earliest inception conflates theories of language with theories of being and truth, the very concepts that lie at the heart of *Paradise Lost*. The ancients initiated the study of epistemology. The problem of universals that originated in ancient Greece greatly influenced theories about language and about the nature of God. The Greek's theories of language, truth, and divinity were immediately relevant to Milton. In fact, ancient and medieval thinkers found a religious, and epistemological, problem in polysemy. Because polysemy is the possibility for multiple and mutable meaning, it complicates the search for pure, absolute knowledge. As a result, by Milton's time, the general attitude towards language was a deep mistrust of its polysemy, which many considered its greatest menace. Although the anti-polysemous perspectives of some of Milton's contemporaries owe their origin to ancient debates over the nature of truth as well as medieval debates over the nature of God, Milton himself did not envision the polysemy of language as a predicate of

fallenness or imperfection. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Milton found, in polysemy, a means for grappling with the complexities of human knowledge, and his work ultimately departs from the rejection of polysemy that was so prevalent in his time.

The word “polysemy” appears as early as the fourteenth century in a letter by Milton’s foremost predecessor, Dante Alighieri. In his missive to Can Grande della Scala, Dante remarks upon the complexity of his “Divine Comedy,” positing multiple signification as downright necessary for an understanding of the work:

For the clarification of what I am going to say, then, it should be understood that there is not just a single sense in this work: it might rather be called *polysemous*, that is, having several senses. For the first is that which is contained in the letter, while there is another which is contained in what is signified by the letter. (251, emphasis added)

Dante’s explication of the word “polysemy” points to the ability of language to mean signify beyond its form, and to signify a multitude of things. This mutable and superfluous quality of language is what some of Milton’s contemporaries would come to hold harmful to knowledge. Given the stature of Dante and the scope of Milton’s knowledge, it hardly needs mentioning that Milton would be familiar with both Dante’s passage and its topic. Yet the concept of polysemy can be traced to even earlier times. Many ancient philosophers argued over the proper uses of rhetoric; Plato famously banishing poetry from society. Ancient thinkers argued over yet another problem of signification: the problem of universals. The debate between realism and nominalism that originated in ancient times is a debate over whether universals can exist independently from the individuals that constitute them, or whether universals are merely convenient

ways of finding similarities among individuals. Plato believed that only universals could be known, for only universals were immutable (as opposed to perceivable objects, of which, precisely on account of their mutability, Plato believed one could not have knowledge but merely opinions). Aristotle took a more moderate realist position than his teacher. Whereas Plato understood universals as the only realities (perceivable objects were, according to Plato, only shadows of the universals, or ideal forms), Aristotle was far more confident than Plato about the possibility of deriving knowledge from the sensible world. He considered universals to be blueprints, or essences, of individual things. In Aristotle's view, a universal cannot exist merely by itself:

It seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance. For [...] the substance of each thing is that which is peculiar to it, which does not belong to anything else; but the universal is common, since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one thing. (qtd. in Russell 163)

In contrast to realist thinkers, nominalists posited that universals are *not* real, that is, that they do not exist as entities or beings, and that only individuals can be known. William Ockham, a fourteenth century philosopher and the most influential proponent of nominalism, argued that universals exist only as mental categories of things that share some similarity. He argued, then, that only individuals exist, and that universals are convenient ways of thinking about the similarities among individuals: "I maintain," he wrote, "that a universal is not something real that exists in a subject [...] but that it has a being only as thought-object in the mind" (qtd. in Solomon, 41). In part, Ockham espoused this view towards universals because he could not accept the limitations that

realism entailed for divine omnipotence (namely, that if there are such things as universals, God must create everything to fit the universals).

Just as the problem of universals sparked discussions about the nature of God, it also shaped theories regarding how we come to know things in the world. Thus, the debate over universals brings together knowledge, divinity, and language. The problem of universals is one that confronts what we can and can not know, and language is inextricably bound up with that knowledge. In spite of its prelapsarian nature, Adam's immediate acquisition of knowledge through language points to a fact that is true even about postlapsarian humanity: it is largely through language that we come to know things. At the same time, Adam's acquisition of perfect knowledge puts to shame the ability of fallen humanity to derive knowledge from language. We come to know things, but how well do we come to know them? In Milton's time, just as in ancient times, philosophers who speculated on the nature of language were preoccupied with the ability of language to lead to pure knowledge. As early as the fourteenth century, Ockham had argued that language was simply the expression of similarities among distinct objects. Words such as "essence" he thought had no referent at all. He argued that these words did not reflect anything that actually existed; that they simply represented the flawed ways human beings envisioned a world of brute particulars. For a nominalist such as Ockham, language is fundamentally flawed. For the realists, language truly signifies some real aspects of the world.

Three centuries later, Francis Bacon would intervene in his own way in these debates over language and meaning. While Ockham had been mostly interested in disputing the existence of universals, Bacon had an actual hope for the perfectibility of

language, especially as a scientific nomenclature. The project of a clean and tidy scientific language would see polysemy as a barrier to knowledge. He wanted to weed language of linguistic abuses and found it troubling that “men believe that their reason controls words” (48). In *Novum Organum*, Bacon writes the following:

It is also true that words retort and turn their force back upon the understanding; and this has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophistic and unproductive. And words are mostly bestowed to suit the capacity of the common man, and they dissect things along the lines most obvious to the common understanding. And when a sharper understanding, or more careful observation, attempts to draw those lines more in accordance with nature, words resist. Hence it appears that the great and solemn controversies of learned men often end in disputes about words and names. But it would be wiser (in the prudent manner of the mathematicians) to begin with them, and to *reduce them to order* by means of definitions. However, in the things of nature and matter, definitions cannot cure this fault. For the definitions themselves consist of words, and *words beget words*. (48, emphasis added)

Thus, Bacon’s mistrust of words derives from his belief that words pollute the understanding and hinder the acquisition of perfect scientific, or philosophical knowledge. Yet, at the same time that he issues a warning against the naïve belief that words can be controlled, Bacon insists that they *be* controlled, reduced, so to speak, to circumscribed definitions. Bacon’s mistrust of words is largely a mistrust of their polysemous nature, which he obviously hopes can be curbed and domesticated. Words

beget words, Bacon admits, but their plurality can be curtailed through a downright mathematical procedure. Only if words are reduced can they be said to have any order; to leave them in their polysemous universe is to leave them in chaos.

Bacon goes on to argue that words are responsible for two very specific detriments to knowledge, namely, the existence of words that refer to things that are not real, and the existence of words that refer to things that *are* real but are not well defined. Of these two types of words, Bacon finds the latter especially problematic. A word like “wet,” Bacon argues, can be used to describe too many natural phenomena: anything that can be poured, anything that does not have boundaries or is unstable, anything that divides and disperses, anything that flows, anything that can be reduced to a liquid, or anything that easily combines and comes together. It is easy to see from this example that Bacon’s search is truly for a language that will render the sciences more precise. In addition, it is evident that Bacon’s concern with what he considers to be badly defined words is that, as Daniel Fried puts it, they are “deprived of stable meaning” (120). Hence, the words Bacon thinks of as badly defined and as the greatest threats to knowledge are in fact polysemous words.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes shares Bacon’s mistrust for polysemous words. Hobbes’s critique of polysemy extends into a discussion of the very origin of language. In *Leviathan*, Book 1, Chapter 4, Hobbes writes:

The first author of Speech was God himself, that first instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight [...] this was sufficient to direct him to adde more names, as the experience and use of the creatures should give him occasion; and to joyn them in such a manner

by degrees, as to make himself understood; and so by succession of time, so much language might be gotten as he had found use for; though not so copious, as an Orator or Philosopher has need of. For I do not find any thing in the Scripture, out of which [...] that Adam was taught the names of all Figures, Numbers, Measures, Colours, Sounds, Fancies, Relations, much less the names of Words and Speech, as Generall, Speciall, Affirmative, Negative, Interrogative, Optative, Infinitive, all which are useful; and least of all, of Entity, Intentionality, Quiddity, and other insignificant words of the School. (qtd. in Fried 121)

Hobbes's theology, thus, presents divine language, and the perfect language of Adam, as devoid of any kind of superfluity. In fact, Hobbes is very much an anti-universalist; he argues later in his essay that universal names only refer to similarities between singular things (and in Hobbes's view, such words are unnecessary). According to Hobbes, Adam would have acquired from God only as many words as he found use for, and he wouldn't have found a need for the words of Philosophy. Fried has argued that Milton subscribes to Hobbes's idea of Edenic language, for, according to Fried, "other language, lacking the experience of their referents, would have been meaningless in Paradise" (121). I want to suggest that Milton did not subscribe to Hobbes's theory of divine language, because the language of *Paradise Lost* has its superfluity, its otherness, and even its misdirection. Indeed, empty signifiers, as I will show in the next chapter, play a crucial role in *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, the speeches of God and of Adam are often the speeches of philosophers, poets, and rhetoricians, and they further complicate the possibility that Milton agrees with Hobbes as to the semiotic austerity of Edenic language, a language

that, in Hobbes's opinion, has no need for the linguistic copiousness of philosophy, poetry, or rhetoric. It is also unlikely, in a poem in which Milton sets out to "justify the ways of God to men," that Milton would write a God of polysemy against his own belief in a semiotically austere deity. In the next chapter, I will show how God's polysemy is crucial to Milton's project of divine justification.

There is yet another reason why Milton's theodicy does not fit the kind of theology propounded by Hobbes. As Fried points out, Hobbes's attack on polysemy is unlike Bacon's in that Hobbes uses the language of morality to prove the inefficacy of words with multiple meanings, and by doing so, Fried suggests, Hobbes takes into account the perspective of the speaker:

And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words; which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such as are the names of Vertues, and Vices; For one man calleth Wisdome, what another calleth feare; and one cruelty, what another justice; one prodigality, what another magnanimity; and one gravity, what another stupidity, &c. And therefore such names can never be the true grounds of any ratiocination.

(qtd. in Fried, 122)

Hobbes believed that even thinking was the product of complicated internal motions that resulted from the impression of external stimuli upon the senses. On account of this belief, Hobbes was able to argue that certain words have no referents and are therefore empty, insignificant words (an example of one of these would be the word "spirit"). These words, Hobbes would argue, can be considered metaphors for things that are

conceptual and not physically real. Thus, Hobbes extends Bacon's argument against insignificant words. I want to add that Hobbes's inclusion of the perspective of the speaker in the quote above is also an inclusion of the intention of the speaker. In the next chapter, I will attempt to show that the subtle difference between perspective and intention is one that informs the polysemy that marks the break between divine and Satanic language in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's treatment of polysemy was far more complex than that of most of his contemporaries, but that does not discount the fact that he shared some of his contemporaries' beliefs.

Yet Bacon had a stronger influence than Hobbes, or any other thinker of his time, on the semiotic theories of the age. The seventeenth century experienced an overall Baconian desire to establish a one-to-one correspondence between words and things in order to enable flawless, international scientific dialogue. In this regard, both Chinese and mathematics were considered perfect models of notational systems in the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century mistrust of polysemy as exemplified by Bacon's *Novum Organum* culminated in two works by members of the Royal Society: Thomas Sprat's 1667 *History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, and John Wilkins's 1668 *Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*. Of the two, Wilkins's treatise is the Royal Society's greatest attempt at forging an infallible language. The project is a colossal classification of the world into genera and species. Its purpose was to begin with the objects in the world and assign them a value without redundancy or gaps. The Royal Society members believed this system would avoid confusion as well as ease memorization. The project is by far the Society's most advanced endeavor at creating a universal, Baconian language, but due to

its unrealistic goal, it was a complete failure. Two committees were formed to discuss its progress and its attainability, and several amendments were proposed, but in the end, the Baconian hope for a language with which to end contention simply led to more contention.

If Wilkins's work is the foremost example of the linguistic idealism of seventeenth century thinkers, the culminating example of the anti-polysemous attitudes of seventeenth century philosophers is arguably found in Sprat's *History*. Sprat wrote the document largely under the direction of Wilkins. The *History* was meant to record, publicize, and celebrate the accomplishments of the Royal Society. Sprat prefaces it with a poem by Abraham Cowley that praises Francis Bacon, the endeavors of the Royal Society, and Sprat's own literary style. Sprat begins the work with a history of learning, and spends a considerable amount of time denouncing the defects of the scholastic method, the medieval theological and philosophical system that attempted to reconcile orthodox Christian teaching with Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy. While Sprat expresses admiration for the ancient thinkers, he ultimately rejects their authority. Sprat goes on to denounce the harmful effects of religious debate and argues that if knowledge is to flourish, all religious debates must be settled, or at least set aside.

Next, Sprat moves on to a full description of the Royal Society's origins and regulations. While the Society is open to men of all nations, religions, and occupations, Sprat emphasizes the role of gentlemen. He also emphasizes the Society's avoidance of political, moral, and religious matters, and describes its new way of inquiry, which amounts to the Royal Society's preference for experimentation (preferably cooperative rather individual experimentation). The Society also rejects the Cartesian method. Sprat

goes on to praise the Society's experimental approach to knowledge and its rejection of religious fanaticism and dogmatism. Sprat argues that the Society's new approach alters only natural philosophy, as it supports religion, Christianity, and the Church of England. The experimental model, Sprat argues, will benefit the arts, the nobility and gentry, and writers. It will also spread civility and encourage obedience to civil government.

Many questioned the accuracy of Sprat's account of the Society's origins, goals, and achievements. However, the third Book of Sprat's *History* became central to discussions of scientific writing. In Book III, Sprat argues that eloquence ought to be downright banned from civil society. Sprat begins Part II of the third book of his *History* with an appraisal of the English language as "not so airy and discursive as [that of] some of our neighbors," and commends the British for preferring "to have Reason set out in plain, undeceiving expressions" (112). Sprat's enthusiasm for the creation of an English Academy derives from his sense that the English language is deficient; he argues that "the English language [...] seems at this time more than others to require some such aid to bring it to its last perfection" (113). Yet he does not advocate an expansion of the English language, but rather a reduction or narrowing of its boundaries. In Sprat's view, the English language acquired some needed vocabulary from contact with other languages, but the process of assimilation was corrupting as well as enriching, mostly because the process went unregulated (114):

The Truth is, [the English language] has been hitherto a little too carelessly handled, and I think, has had less labor spent about its polishing than it deserves [...]

In the Wars themselves [...] it received many fantastical terms, which were introduced by our *Religious Sects*, and many outlandish phrases, which several *Writers* and *Translators* in that great hurry brought in and made free as they pleas'd, and with all it was enlarg'd by many sound and necessary Forms and Idioms which before it wanted. And now, when mens minds are somewhat settled, their Passions allai'd, and the peace of our Country gives us the opportunity of such diversions, if some sober and judicious Men would take the whole Mass of our Language into their hands as they find it, and would set a mark on the ill Words, correct those which are to be retain'd, admit and establish the good, and make some emendations in the Accent and Grammar, I dare pronounce that our Speech would quickly arrive at as much plenty as it is capable to receive [...]

Thus, Sprat has high hopes for the perfection of the English language once it has been rid of its polysemy. He envisions the perfection of English as deriving from a downright quantitative reduction of its copiousness; he would have linguists take the whole mass of language and reduce it to its bare essentials. Sprat would have linguists weed out any superfluous words and allow language only as much abundance as would be useful. Sprat's desire for a curtailment of the excesses of the English language does not stop at words, however. He goes on to argue for the necessity of an "Impartial Court of Eloquence, according to whose Censure all Books or Authors should either stand or fall" (114). Sprat believes that virtue must be protected, that it must be made impermeable to corruption by actual censorship. In the second part of his *History*, Sprat denounces the

discourse of society, which he thinks has been greatly injured by “the luxury and redundancy of speech” (116). Sprat goes on to outline the dangers of any kind of linguistic excess, which he presents as a threat to knowledge, and as a peril from which the innocent must be guarded:

The ill effects of this superfluity of talking have already overwhelmed most other *Arts* and *Professions*, insomuch that when I consider the means of *happy living* and the causes of their corruption, I can hardly forbear [...] concluding that *eloquence* ought to be banished out of all *civil Societies*, as thing fatal to Peace and good Manners. To this opinion I should wholly incline, if I did not find that it is a Weapon which may be as easily procur'd by *bad* men as *good*, and that, if these should onely cast it away, and those retain it, the *naked Innocence* of vertue would be upon all occasions expos'd to the *armed Malice* of the wicked. This is the chief reason that should now keep up the Ornaments of speaking in any request, since they are so much degenerated from their original usefulness. They were at first, no doubt, an admirable Instrument in the hands of *Wise Men*, when they were onely employ'd to describe *Goodness, Honesty, Obedience*, in larger, fairer and more moving Images; to represent *Truth*, cloth'd with Bodies; and to bring *Knowledge* back again to our very senses [...] But now they are generally changed to worse uses [...] (116)

If the ornaments of speech were to be used only by the virtuous, Sprat seems to suggest here, then they would pose no threat to knowledge. Sprat even admits that such linguistic ornaments were once useful, when used by wise men, in helping to convey knowledge

through imagery. Yet Sprat seems convinced that the same cannot be said of the thinkers of his time. He goes on to argue, “I dare say that, of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain’d than this vicious abundance of *Phrase*, this trick of *Metaphors*, this voluptibility of *Tongue*, which makes so great a noise in the world” (117). According to Sprat, there is no hope of ridding society from the menacing superfluities of language, the latter of which, Sprat seems to believe, are solely responsible for causing the corruption of knowledge. The only way linguistic purity will be achieved, Sprat goes on to argue, is if language is forcibly reduced to its essentials. Indeed, the only remedy, Sprat argues, is “to reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style, to return back to the primitive purity and shortness, when men delivered so many *things* almost in an equal number of *words*” (118). Thus, for Sprat, there is danger embedded in the very polysemy of language. There is no hope, according to Sprat, of purifying language through faith in the intention of its users. Humanity can’t be trusted with the meandering excesses of language, or at least it shouldn’t be. Language should be reduced to a science so that human beings can have their unspoiled knowledge and virtue.

At first glance, Sprat's *History* seems to draw at least partially upon Milton's *Areopagitica*, published a full twenty-three years earlier. Like Sprat's *History*, *Areopagitica* is also a treatise that concerns itself with purity of expression, and, like Sprat, Milton does express a belief that books ought to be judged based on their contribution to virtuous instruction. However, Milton did not support censorship, and he wrote *Areopagitica* mainly with the purpose of denouncing censorship and advocating freedom of expression. Unlike Sprat, Milton does not support the idea of an institution

that will decide to ban certain books. Rather, he decries Parliament's Licensing Order of June 16th, 1643, and argues for the necessity of freedom of the press:

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Bookes demeane themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors: For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. [...] And yet on the other hand unlesse wariness be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's Image; but he who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. (999)

Milton does not believe in censorship precisely because he believes all individuals have the right to exercise judgment. As conveyors of knowledge, books elicit, from human beings, this very exercise of judgment. For Milton, these ideas still have the strong theological ties that thinkers such as Sprat have begun to repudiate; it is in their ability to exercise such judgment that human beings resemble God, and the very act of judging is Reason itself. Thus, censorship has deep theological repercussions for Milton.

He goes on to point out that censorship is often insincere in that it is more concerned with condemnation than with the presumed concern for purity to which it lays claim:

Till then Books were ever as freely admitted into the World as any other birth; the issue of the brain was no more stifled then the issue of the womb [...] But that a Book in wors condition then a peccant soul, should be to stand before a Jury ere it were borne to the World [...] was never heard before, till that mysterious iniquity provokt and troubl'd at the first entrance of Reformation, sought out new limbo's and new hells wherein they might include our books also within the number of their damned.

(1003)

Thus, for Milton, freedom of expression necessarily accompanies the flourishing of pure knowledge. For this reason, Milton does not endorse any kind of censorship, either of books or of language. As it turns out, Milton believes that even what ought to be censored is vital to the acquisition of knowledge, for the process of human learning is dialectic. Milton believes that human beings learn virtue by first learning to recognize corruption, and he also considers this mode of learning to be the basis of Christianity. Milton does not believe, like Sprat, that the human acquisition of knowledge can be perfected or even facilitated. In order to learn, human beings must struggle; this is true even for Adam and Eve. The curse of the fallen condition is that we struggle more in our fallenness, and this is never more evident than in the case of language:

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 evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evill? 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 virtue, unexercised & 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. (1006-1007)

One of the many struggles human beings face in this world is the struggle with imperfect language. Milton never suggests that this struggle may be remedied by working to sanitize language. Unlike Sprat, who wants to purify language in order to keep corruption *from* the seeker of knowledge, Milton locates pure knowledge *within* the seeker of virtue. The idea that language may be perfected for the sake of pure knowledge never enters Milton's work because, in his view, it is the struggle itself that leads to virtue. As he puts it in *Areopagitica*, "to the pure, all things are pure, not only meats and drinks, but all kind of knowledge whether of good or evill; the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequently

the books, if the will and conscience be not defil'd" (1005). Thus, the answer does not depend on changing external things such as language or books. In fact, Milton goes as far as to point out that "a wise man like a good refiner can gather gold out of the drossiest volume and [...] a fool will be a fool with the best book" (1008). In Milton's view, the change towards virtue must happen within the human being, caught up as he or she is in a world of uncertainties and ambiguities.

Precisely because polysemy is the cause of much uncertainty and ambiguity, it is intimately connected with the human search for knowledge. Milton differs from other seventeenth century thinkers in that he recognizes the necessity of polysemy for knowledge. The struggle with polysemy is the framework upon which Milton's "trial by what is contrary" operates, both in the fallen world and the unfallen world of "Paradise Lost." Adam and Eve, in their prelapsarian state, also learn by trial. When they fall, they fall away, not from perfect access to knowledge, but from the divine polysemy that contrasts so sharply with Satan's semiotic dissemblings. Thus, I will attempt to show that Milton did not envision polysemy itself as a predicate of fallenness or imperfection. It is in on account of his realization of the necessity of polysemy that Milton is most unlike his seventeenth-century contemporaries.

Ultimately, Milton's own theories of signification could be said to be more closely aligned with those of the ancient philosopher Quintilian, who, in *Institution Oratoria* (ca. 96 C.E.) discusses rhetorical techniques and the proper use of rhetoric. Quintilian thinks the job of the rhetorician to be distinct from that of the philosopher. Yet he is aware of the dangerous abuses of rhetoric. The skills he teaches might be used by "harlots, flatterers, and seducers" (155). However, Quintilian is unique (as say,

compared to his contemporary, Gorgias, who noted rhetoric could spread evil as well as virtue), in that he is not content with accepting rhetoric's moral neutrality:

The authors who have discoursed on the nature of virtue must be read through and through, that the life of the orator may be wedded to the knowledge of things human and divine. But how much greater and fairer would such subjects be if those who taught them were also those who could give them most eloquent expression! O that the day may dawn when the perfect orator of our heart's desire shall claim for his own possession that science that has lost the affection of mankind through the arrogance of its claims and the vices of some that have brought disgrace upon its virtues, and shall restore it to its place in the domain of eloquence, as though he had been victorious in a trial for the restoration of stolen goods.

(168)

Thus, Quintillian not only believes that philosophy is a necessary part of a rhetorician's training, he believes eloquence is an important part of a thinker's training. Milton does not write explicitly about the importance of eloquence in *Areopagitica*. However, Milton's anti-censorial stance, and his faith in the ability of human beings to learn by trial echoes Quintillian's hope that eloquence, which has been subjected to censorship and scrutiny, will one day be allowed as a supplement to knowledge. Milton's defense of books, both good and bad, as conveyors of Reason itself forms a nice parallel with Quintillian's defense of eloquence. Furthermore, the very backbone of eloquence is polysemy, which Quintillian openly admires in his discussion of figurative language:

Let us begin, then, with the commonest and by far the most beautiful of tropes, namely, *metaphor*, the Greek term for our *translatio*. It is not merely so natural a turn of speech that it is often employed unconsciously or by uneducated persons, but it is in itself so attractive and elegant that however distinguished the language in which it is embedded it shines forth with a light that is all its own. For it to be correctly and appropriately applied, it is quite impossible for its effect to be commonplace, mean or unpleasing. It adds to the *copiousness* of language by the interchange of words and by borrowing, and finally succeeds in accomplishing the supremely difficult task of *providing a name for everything*. [...] We do this either because it is necessary or to make our meaning clearer or, as I have already said, to produce a decorative effect. (158, emphasis added)

What Quintillian likes so much about the polysemous nature of metaphors is precisely what Milton's contemporaries fear about polysemy, or think polysemy fails to do. In Quintillian's view, a metaphor adds to the beauty, plenitude, and clarity of language. As I've shown, Baconians think that the very copiousness of language subtracts clarity from language. They would not attempt to clarify meaning through metaphors, and would be horrified by Quintillian's celebration of the capability of metaphor to *supply a name for everything*, as Quintillian puts it. Milton, on the other hand, would not take issue with Quintillian's point, because, again, he takes an open-ended (as opposed to a closed) understanding of world, language, and knowledge.

I have attempted to show that the problem of language, of fallen and imperfect language, was a different kind of problem for Milton than it was for most of his

contemporaries. Some seventeenth century thinkers thought of language as perfectible. At the same time, most seventeenth century thinkers thought of this very perfectibility as depending upon a quantitative reduction and regulation of language. Meanings were to be made static and immutable. The goal was to establish a one-to-one correspondence between words and things; to trap the polysemous fluttering of language in a univocal and fixed order along scientific and philosophical lines.

I will show, in the following chapter, that Milton did not subscribe to many of these beliefs. While he did think of language as fallen and imperfect, he did not believe that it could be perfected. Yet he also did not believe that perfect language was necessary for the acquisition of knowledge, or that knowledge could arise only in sanitized circumstances. He did not believe, even, that the very acquisition of knowledge itself should be perfected, but he did believe in knowledge. He had great faith that human beings could derive knowledge – about themselves and about God – in fallen language, and from the best and worst books. As I will show, it is in the very polysemy of language that Milton found the means to present the complexities of human knowledge, and ultimately, to “justify the ways of God to men.”

III. POLYSEMY IN PARADISE

In this chapter, I will write on the polysemy in Milton's Paradise. In the previous chapter, I attempted to show that Milton was unlike other thinkers of his time in that he did not envision imperfect language as a predicate of fallenness. Indeed, he did not think of polysemy itself as a predicate of imperfection. Milton's crowning work, *Paradise Lost*, portrays a universe in which both perfect and imperfect beings are agents of polysemy. In Heaven and Eden, language is not impermeable to abuse. Polysemy is necessary, even for divine meaning. Satan's worst weapon is his selfish interpretation and reduction of God's meanings, and he succeeds in derailing the angels and Adam and Eve through an exploitation of the openness of language. Satan's semiotic reductions amount to a new, perverse kind of polysemy, a misrepresentation of God's original meanings and an exploitation of the forbidden sign. What I intend to show is that polysemy, highly symbolic, productive, and interpretable language, is inextricable from any transmission of knowledge, good or bad, in Milton's work.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton goes to great lengths to treat the prolific nature of God. In his depiction of God, Milton pays constant attention to the complexity of divine polysemy, for it presents a paradox that must be addressed in a work that seeks so completely to explain the nature of God. The paradox of God's signifying lies with the fact that whereas God is omnipotent and omnipresent, He is one single God. He signifies infinitely at the same time that he signifies absolutely. Not only that, what God signifies

is what comes into Being. The Bible presents creation as inseparable from the language of God (or, rather, his language *is* creation): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Not surprisingly, Milton’s text, in keeping with the Biblical narrative, presents the words of God as speech acts; God has only to speak for the act to be performed:

And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light...

(Genesis, 1:3)

Let there be light, said God, and forthwith light

Ethereal, first of things, quintessence pure

Sprung from the deep [...] (*Paradise Lost*, VII. 243-245)

While Milton’s depiction of God’s speech acts is taken straight from the Bible, his inclusion of them highlights the link between divine power and language, and Milton’s treatment of such a link is unique. God’s language in *Paradise Lost* is not highly symbolic. In part, this is because, as I’ve argued, Milton was aware of the danger in seeking the perfection of language in immutable signification, or in a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. In *Paradise Lost*, though divine creation entails a one-to-one correspondence between words and things (represented, for example, through divine speech acts), it also entails overabundance and proliferation. That is, the fact that there can be a one-to-one correspondence between words and things in divine language does not render the whole of divine language monosemous. Divine language creates, but creation entails proliferation. Renaissance thinkers envisioned God’s creation as one of absolute plenitude, replete with every possible kind of life, and took this

limitless proliferation as representative of God's excellence (Abrams, 119). God's only begotten Son is the perfect example of both divine proliferation and the creative power of divine language: he is one day simply announced in Heaven:

Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,

Hear my Decree, which unrevoked shall stand!

This day I have begot whom I declare

My only Son and on this holy hill

Him have anointed whom ye now behold

At My right hand. (V. 603-608)

God's announcement of the Son in Heaven is itself a creative act; it contains both the actions of begetting and declaring. Once the Son has been created, however, he has a will independent of, but harmonious with, God's. In fact, the Son comes to mediate God's will. When God speaks, the Son echoes God's intention and bids it come to pass, thus performing speech acts himself. Thus, the Son both mirrors and echoes God, and it is only through Him that God's creatures are able to behold Him. In Book VI, God refers to the Son as "Son in whose face invisible is beheld / Visibly what by deity I am," (681-682) and as "Second Omnipotence" (684). These paradoxical and polysemous phrases do not suggest that God's power is limited. Rather, they suggest something about the relationship of language and its users.

God's creatures must grapple with many paradoxes concerning God even in their perfect state because, although they have perfect knowledge, they do not have absolute knowledge. Adam and Eve, prior to their fall, have a type of language that resembles, but does not equal, a system of one-to-one correspondences between words and things.

Edenic language leads to immediate knowledge. Adam has only to name the animals in Paradise to obtain knowledge of their nature:

I named them, as they passed, and understood
Their nature, with such knowledge God endued
My sudden apprehension [...] (VIII. 352-354)

Yet even the “sudden apprehension” by which Adam and Eve know things in the world does not depend on a system of perfect correspondences between words and things. As Adam’s own words reveal, the sudden apprehension is bestowed by God; it is not simply a result of a perfect linguistic system. Perfect understanding is itself an occurrence that comes only from God, which further confirms the role of God as the single origin of things, and of man as seeker, sign user, and accurate interpreter. However, though God may use language to create, it does not follow that either divine or Edenic language is perfect, or that it is perfect because it is untainted by its open interpretability.

Edenic language is already polysemous, open to multiple interpretations, to multiple meanings, and to gaps in meaning. Satan’s deception of Eve depends on just this pliability of language. Thus, the difference between fallen and unfallen language is not the difference between perfect and imperfect language, or between unequivocal language and ambiguous language. The difference between Edenic prelapsarian and postlapsarian language lies simply in Adam and Eve’s loss of immediate understanding, caused by the film that the falls upon their eyes when they taste the forbidden fruit. The weakening effect of this film on Adam and Eve’s relationship to knowledge is illustrated by the fact that the angel Michael must remove this film from Adam’s eyes in Book XI, prior to showing him what will befall mankind. After the Fall, Adam and Eve lose their intuitive

access to knowledge, which also changes their relationship to signs (and to the process of interpretation). Because Adam and Eve no longer learn by intuition, they must work to interpret signs with the added risk of equivocation. As R.A. Shoaf puts it, after the Fall, Adam and Eve must suffer the arbitrary nature of signs. Not only that, Shoaf argues that signs themselves have a will of their own after the Fall, which he claims is evident in the following passage:

Nature first gave *signs*, imprest
On bird, beast, air, air suddenly eclipsed
After short blush of morn; nigh in her sight
The bird of Jove, stoopt from his very tower,
Two birds of grayest plume before him drove:
Down from a hill the beast that reigns in woods,
First hunter then, pursued a gentle brace,
Goodliest of all the forest, hart and hind;
Direct to the Eastern gate was bent thir flight.
Adam observed, and with his eye the chase
Pursuing, not unmoved to Eve thus spake:
O Eve, some furdur change awaits us nigh,
Which Heaven by these mute *signs* in nature shows,
Forerunners of his purpose, or to warn
Us haply too secure of our discharge
From penalty. (XI.182-197, emphasis Shoaf's)

Shoaf's point regarding the "will" that signs acquire after the Fall has more to do with the

user of language than with the nature of signs in themselves. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve's perfect understanding was based solely on their closeness to God. In their perfect state, although they were spared the risk of equivocation, and granted intuitive knowledge of the truth, their prelapsarian language was polysemous, as I will soon show. Shoaf argues that, "in [the] fallen world [...] the arbitrariness of signs is not subject to man's control" (32). Indeed, Adam and Eve's relationship to language changes after the Fall; they lose their immediate understanding. Their thoughts and language are more ambiguous, having lost their divine guidance. Thus, it is not so much that Adam and Eve have less control over language, but that they themselves are more likely to err. In Book XII, Raphael tells Adam that, after the Fall, human reason is significantly diminished:

Since thy original lapse true liberty
Is lost which always with right reason dwells
Twinned and hath from her no dividual being.
Reason in man obscured or not obeyed
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From reason and to servitude reduce
Man till then free. (83-90)

Just as man is a slave to his inner passions after the Fall, he is slave to newly fallen language. Just as reason is perfectly conducive to the right impulse, prelapsarian language, as mentioned, is perfectly conducive to knowledge. This is not the case with fallen language. That fallen language won't always work according to man's will or lead him to knowledge is symbolized both by the story of the tower of Babel, the "tow'r

whose top may reach to Heav'n" (44) mentioned by Michael in Book XII, and the fact that Michael describes Pharaoh as a "lawless tyrant" (173) who must be "compelled by signs and judgments dire" (175). Nevertheless, the mark of Edenic language is not infallibility, much less a perfect correspondence between words and things. Polysemy and ambiguity exist already in Edenic language, as well as in the language of Heaven.

From the very beginning, starting with his rebellion, Satan exploits the polysemy of language, first to derail the angels and later to deceive Adam and Eve. As Daniel Fried has pointed out, in Book V, Satan wins over the third part of the angels through the use of ambiguous words. We are told that he:

Tells the suggested cause and casts between
Ambiguous words and jealousies to sound
Or taint integrity. But all obeyed
The wonted signal and superior voice
Of their great potentate. For great indeed
His name and high was his degree in Heav'n! (702-707)

This passage not only reveals Satan's use of ambiguity to corrupt the angels, but it also shows the effect that these ambiguous words have on the angels. Perfect as they are, the angels can be misguided, just as Adam and Eve will be, by Satan's signal. Yet the angels *obey* this signal; they are not overpowered by it. Thus, falling from grace is not simply a matter of having been led to corruption through the imperfection of language; it is a matter of failing to obey God. Since God's creatures have no reason to want to disobey God, Satan must invent one, and he does this by exploiting the neutrality of language. He invents the lie, and he is able to because, perfect as they are, God's creatures are not

immune to deception. Milton establishes the credulity of the angels in Book III, when the angel Uriel is fooled by Satan's cherubic disguise; God being the only entity who can see through hypocrisy.

Clearly, then, it is not language itself that is deceptive. Even in Heaven, there is no language that is impermeable to abuse, immutable, and eternally conducive to the truth. Thus, knowledge of the truth does not depend on linguistic purity, and even linguistic purity does not depend on fixed signification. God bestows his creatures with a clear understanding of the truth, which, Raphael warns Adam, they lose when they fall. Indeed, Satan experiences post-lapsarian confusion in Book I, when he wakes next to Beelzebub and begins to speak with the conditional word "If." He is uncertain of Beelzebub's identity, and this confusion emanates from Satan's general uncertainty towards the relation of things in the world.

Prior to his fall, Satan is warned by Abdiel, the single seraph to stand firm against Satan's revolt, of the creative power of divine language, of God's established order, of the hierarchy among the angels, and of the fact that God is responsible for all of creation:

As by his word the mighty Father made
All things, eve'n thee, and all the spirits of Heav'n
By Him created in their bright degrees,
Crowned them with glory and to their glory named
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,
Essential Powers, not by His reign obscured
But more illustrious made since He, the Head,
One of our number thus reduced becomes,

His laws our laws: all Honor to him done

Returns our own. (V. 836-845)

Abdiel's caveat to Satan is an acknowledgement of divine polysemy, and of the paradoxical nature of that polysemy. Although God, in His infinity, is not a countable entity in His universe, nothing exists outside of His realm, so that, in adoring Him, God's creatures also receive glory. In contrast to Abdiel's speech, Satan's reply to Abdiel questions the divine origin of things and the idea that God's creatures cannot exist without Him:

That we were formed say'st thou? And the work

Of secondary hands by task transferred

From Father to His Son? Strange point and new!

Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who saw

When this Creation was? Remember'st thou

Thy making while the Maker gave thee Being?

We know no time when we were not as now,

Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised

By our own quickening power [...] (V. 853-861)

Most alarmingly, Satan's retort to Abdiel questions the divine origin of knowledge and posits experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. Since, as I've mentioned, knowledge in Heaven is divinely bestowed upon God's creatures, the Satanic emphasis on personal experience amounts to a willed disconnection from knowledge itself. Hence, the Satanic claim to knowledge through experience falls apart merely in the light of Satan's rebellious renouncement of perfect knowledge.

In addition, Satan's reply to Abdiel betrays a willed misunderstanding of divine proliferation. In referring to the Son's creations as the work of "secondary hands," Satan is deriding God's creations and His creative power. Satan's misinterpretation of God's creative process, in turn, will enable his misrepresentation to Eve of knowledge, good, and evil. Through a polysemous play with language, Satan will convince Eve of the empirical – not divine – source of knowledge, and he will confuse the origins of good and evil. In order to do this, though, Satan will blur the boundaries of God's authorship. Milton's portrayal of divine proliferation is that of a God who gives origin to existence, but whose creations continue to create, or, in the case of Satan, de-create themselves. As Barbara Lewalski has pointed out, Milton's God gives origin to his creatures, but as free-willed agents, they continue to shape themselves. God's detachment from his creatures' actions clearly settles the issue of whether the origin of evil ought to be attributed to God. The origin of evil is merely disobedience, a fact that Satan willingly obscures in his tempting speech to Eve. Yet Satan fails to realize that every action he takes, though self-willed, is an action that comes to pass because God has not forbidden it. God does not threaten, as Satan claims, but He does expect obedience. The subtleties in God's meanings are not hidden from His creatures, but they explain the empty signifiers in Paradise, as I will soon show.

Satan's nature is, as would be expected, completely antithetical to the divine. Whereas the Son of God is the perfect resemblance of God, Satan cannot even recognize his son, Death, upon meeting him in Hell for the first time. Also, while the Son of God is in eternal harmony with the Word of God, Satan's son counters the very first words Satan ever addresses to him, in Book II. Functionally, Death is like the Son of God in that he

reflects his father. After being called an “execrable shape” by his father, and being ordered by him to refrain from engaging with spirits from Heaven, Death answers Satan with the truth about his nature:

Art thou that traitor angel, art thou he
[...]
And reckon'st thou thyself with spirits of Heav'n
Hell-doomed, and breath'st defiance here and scorn
Where I reign king, and to enrage thee more,
Thy king and lord? [...] (II. 689-699)

Undaunted as Satan is by Death's defiance, Satan is actually lesser than his own progeny: more mistaken, less understanding of truth, or at least more self-deceiving, than either his son or wife-and-daughter, Sin. Sin intervenes in the fight that threatens to break out between Satan and Death by explaining their familial relation, and recounting how that relation came to be:

Out of thy head I sprung! Amazement seized
All th'host of Heav'n. Back they recoiled afraid
At first and called me “Sin” and for a sign
Portentous held me. But familiar grown
I pleased and with attractive graces won
The most averse (thee chiefly) who full oft
Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam'st enamoured and such joy thou took'st
With me in secret that my womb conceived

A growing burden [...] (II. 758-767)

Satanic proliferation, then, is decreative rather than creative. The incestuous begetting of Sin is linked to the nature of Satanic polysemy. Of all characters, Sin most graphically represents Satanic proliferation: an inward, gnawing state of infinite consumption, and abortive, hideous self-replication. Like Death, Satan does not at first recognize Sin; he demands that she explain to him “What thing thou art thus double-formed and why, / In this infernal vale first met thou call'st / Me "father" and that phantasm call'st my son” (II. 741-742). Satan’s amnesiac inability to recall his union with Sin, and his inability to interpret her, highlights not only Satan’s confusion but also Sin’s interpretability as a sign. She is an empty signifier to the unfallen angels, who recognize only her status as a sign. For Satan, on the other hand, she is impregnated with meaning the moment he has the experience of sin. As a sign, Sin is perfectly neutral, for she is surprisingly innocent from the moment of her creation. She springs from Satan's head, is raped by him, gives birth to hell’s hounds, and begins a tormented existence that she did not choose. Yet Sin has a clear understanding of God, in spite of her resentment of Him (signaled by her sarcastic comparison of divine wrath to justice). She acts successfully as a sign when she is able to remind Satan of God’s eventual victory:

O Father, what intends thy hand, she cried,
Against thy only Son? What fury, oh Son,
Posseses thee to bend that mortal dart
Against thy father's head? And knows't for whom?
For Him who sits above and laughs the while
At thee ordained His drudge to execute

Whate'er His wrath (which he calls "justice") bids,

His wrath which one day will destroy ye both! (II. 727-734)

Satan refers to Sin as “double-formed,” then, refers both to her deformity and to her nature as a sign. The fact that Sin springs from Satan demonstrates the ability of God’s creatures to produce signs – even perversely. The confused amazement that Sin inspires in the unfallen angels suggests that only experience can account for the meaning of signs that cannot be traced back to a divine origin. Yet fallen experience is flawed in that it can be forgotten, just as Satan initially forgets his experience with Sin. Thus, the empty signifiers in Paradise and Heaven do not represent flaws in God’s ways. They result from the ability of God’s creatures to proliferate, produce signs, and fall away from God.

Hence, Milton does not envision divine language as unambiguous because ambiguity is merely part of its productivity. In other words, the fact that God’s creatures can feel uncertainty and doubt should not be surprising; they are users of language. Even unfallen Adam’s grateful reply to Raphael’s recounting of how God created the world is accompanied with uncertainty. In Book VIII, Adam thanks Raphael for relating what was done before his memory (in contrast to Satan’s blasphemous claim that he does not remember having been created and therefore must be self-made). Nevertheless, Adam hesitates when he says to Raphael that, “Something yet of doubt remains” (177). He feels this way in spite of the fact that Raphael, in Book VII, has already advised Adam to have temperance even with respect to knowledge:

Knowledge is as food and needs no less

Her temperance over appetite to know

In measure what the mind may well contain,

Oppresses else with surfeit and soon turns

Wisdom to folly and nourishment to wind. (VII. 126-130)

The lesson to Adam is one of moderation, the only other lesson Raphael tries to teach Adam besides obedience. Wisdom requires a willful adherence to God's laws, not infinite knowledge. Yet, in his desire for wisdom, Adam is confronted with God's infinite, polysemous nature. Adam recognizes singleness to be the only imperfection of man, and he understands that God is self-sufficient and has no need for conversation (a pleasure which Milton argues in the "Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce" is the true purpose of marriage). Still, Adam ponders over God's loneliness as a single Being, and in doing this, he is comparing God's existence with his own experience. For Adam, conversation is for him a means of acquiring knowledge; in Book VIII, he tells Raphael that he is barely satisfied by their conversations, and he remains rapt in Raphael's words long after Raphael has ceased to speak. Yet God responds to Adam's inquiry regarding his potential loneliness with a statement about the natural abundance amidst which Adam lives, and raises the question as to how Adam may know the meaning of the word "solitude." God's question is rhetorical given that He knows solitude to be Adam's very experience without Eve:

What call'st thou solitude? Is not the earth

With various living creatures and the air

Replenished?" (VIII. 369-371)

Adam replies that he the beasts are no equals with whom to converse. God replies that he has no equals, but that discourse with his inferiors affords him much pleasure. Upon which Adam raises the issue of the infinite fullness of God's being and his eternal

existence:

Thou in Thyself art perfect and in Thee
Is no deficiency found. Not so is Man
But in degree, the cause of his desire
By conversation with his like to help
Or solace his defects. No need that Thou
Shouldst propagate, already infinite
And through all numbers absolute, though One.
But Man by number is to manifest
His single imperfection and beget
Like of his like, his image multiplied
In unity defective which requires
Collateral love and dearest amity. (VIII.415-425)

God is highly pleased by Adam's understanding of his deficiency because it shows that Adam senses the purpose of his design. God's desire for man to know himself is evident from the fact that Raphael urges Adam to "Think only what concerns thee and thy being" to have "lowly wisdom," and according to Stephen Fallon, this not only means that he should not touch the fruit, it also means that "Adam is to look to the 'ground' or substance of his being." (1). In learning about himself, Adam discovers both his similarity and inferiority to God. Man's deficiency may be, in part, the inability to self-proliferate, but the deficiency is more importantly a *desire*, a desire for conversation, and thus for knowledge derived from shared language. Man's uncertainty towards knowledge is not so much the result of a linguistic deficiency pre-programmed by God in man; it is

the very longing that God implants in the heart of man. Man's initial longing is for companionship, for shared language, for conversation and the knowledge that results from it. Adam's desire for conversation precedes even his sexual desire for Eve – this comes later, after he's laid eyes on her, and when he reveals to Raphael that whatever Eve does or says seems wisest and that "All higher knowledge in her presence falls / Degraded" (VIII.551-552), Raphael warns Adam of the danger of letting Eve's beauty cloud his clarity. Man's utmost desire must be to obey God. By doing so, he shall keep every happiness.

Adam's uncertainties about God and knowledge derive in part from his capacity to keep learning. God's prohibition is a source of linguistic uncertainty for Adam and Eve because it introduces concepts for which Adam and Eve have no referent. For example, Adam and Eve do not possess a clear understanding of the word "evil," and any knowledge they gain about Heaven, from the angels, they must learn through accommodation. For example, in Book VI, Raphael tells Adam that "what surmounts the reach / Of human sense I shall delineate so / By lik'ning spiritual to corporeal forms / As may express them best" (572-574).

One of the major empty signifiers in Paradise is the word "death." Many critics have considered it a flaw in Milton's poem that Adam and Eve do not know what it means to die. Their understanding of death is as rudimentary as their understanding of evil; death and evil are abstractions that Adam and Eve nevertheless recognize have dire meanings. However, as I've attempted to show, the fact that Adam and Eve can experience linguistic uncertainty should not be considered a flaw in their intellectual makeup, just as the very polysemy of language should not be considered a flaw of their

language. Just as polysemy is a result of the productivity of language, the doubt and wonder that Adam and Eve can feel is a result of their capacity for growth, and of the longing for knowledge that God instills in them. In their perfect state, Adam and Eve have polysemous language, partial but precise knowledge, and a desire for intellectual growth. To a large degree, they learn through analogy (Raphael, for example, teaches Adam through accommodation). Adam and Eve do not possess unambiguous language and absolute knowledge. Rather, they have divine guidance, which guarantees them safety from error.

Adam and Eve are spared the risk of error or linguistic equivocation as long as they remain obedient to God; such is the significance of the symbol, the Tree of Knowledge (this may be part of what Stanley Fish refers to when he argues that there is only one value in *Paradise Lost*, that of obedience). Obedience is the only condition laid upon Adam and Eve's right to the Garden of Eden. Thus, Satan's exploitations of language perplex Eve not because of some imperfection in her, or because of some imperfection of language. Through polysemous play with language, Satan convinces Eve of the truly empirical – not divine – source of knowledge, and he confuses the origins of good and evil. His work is above all a semiotic reduction and perversion of God's forbidden sign:

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,
Mother of science, now I feel thy pow'r
Within me clear not only to discern
Things in their causes but to trace the ways
Of highest agents deemed however wise!

Queen of this universe, do not believe
Those rigid threats of death! Ye shall not die.
How should ye? By the fruit? It gives you life
To knowledge. By the Threat'ner? Look on me!
Me who have touched and tasted yet both live
And life more perfect have attained than fate
Meant me by vent'ring higher than my lot.
Shall that be shut to Man which to the beast
Is open? Or will God incense His ire
For such a petty trespass and not praise
Rather your dauntless virtue whom the pain
Of death denounced (whatever thing death be)
Deterred not from achieving what might lead
To happier life, knowledge of good and evil?
Of good, how just? Of evil (if what is evil
Be real) why not known since easier shunned? (IX. 679-699)

Twice, Satan suggests to Eve that the existence of the empty signifiers – death and evil – imply an imperfection in God's logic. In fact, he goes as far as to empty those signifiers and fill them with his own meaning. To a degree, the fact that he does betrays his own willed misunderstanding: as narcissistically as he refuses to imagine having been created by God, Satan refuses to imagine his own destruction, his own death. Yet Satan has seen Death in the flesh; Death is his very progeny. Thus, Satan's deception of Eve is *above all* a lie: he has *not* eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, although he has committed the very

act it symbolizes. Satan's triumph rests on the fact that he is able to make Eve momentarily forget the divine source of knowledge, and to imagine knowledge as derived from experience. Indeed, the first words of Satan's speech are, "Wonder not," (IX. 532), and as Fish has pointed out, Satan's speech carries the message, "do not believe / [...] Look on me" (IX. 684; 687). He suggests to Eve that she can acquire a godlike nature through her own actions if she is capable of "dauntless virtue" and courageous enough to try "venturing higher than her lot." Satan goes as far as to suggest that *lack* of experience will lead to error, that Eve cannot avoid something she hasn't yet experienced. The trap is that Eve does not need to avoid what doesn't exist, yet, either for her or for Adam. In short, Satan owes his triumph to his successful exploitation of the sign.

The Fall makes death and evil real for Adam and Eve. Thus, as Donald Bouchard has pointed out, Satan's work reduces meanings to their postlapsarian grounding in things. After the trespass of the sign, death and evil begin to exist for Adam and Eve. The Satanic emphasis on personal experience as the source of knowledge takes the place of the divinely guided, intuitive access to knowledge that Adam and Eve had before the Fall. Adam and Eve do not gain knowledge, they gain uncertainty and sorrow. After their fall, they ponder what death may be, and it is not until Adam sees death, when the angel Michael shows it to him in a vision in Book XI, that he comes to understand with horror what death is (at the very least, he, along with Eve, has gained a deeper understanding of death, one that overwrites the rudimentary conception they initially had). Adam and Eve have lost intuitive knowledge; their pathway to knowledge has indeed become experience, it is no longer the easier route of divinely bestowed knowledge lovingly spared from error.

As a result of this shift from intuitive knowledge to knowledge derived from experience, the postlapsarian polysemy of language has negative consequences for Adam and Eve. Prior to the Fall, polysemy posed no threat for Adam and Eve; it represented the productivity of language and fed into the desire that God placed in Adam and Eve for each other, for community, for shared language, and for knowledge and intellectual growth. Because their knowledge was so perfectly intuitive, Adam and Eve's uncertainty took the shape only of wonder, especially with regard to divine matters. With respect to their life in the garden, Adam and Eve were able to understand intuitively the nature of things, as Adam explains to Raphael by recounting his naming of things. After the Fall, Adam and Eve lose intuitive knowledge and thus any link to divine knowledge, which explains the Son's offer to "interpret" (32) for Adam and Eve in Book XI. Humankind's newly acquired battle with polysemy is also symbolized in the vision through which Michael allows Adam to foresee the future. There is the story of Nimrod's creation of the tower of Babel and how multiple languages doomed that project to failure, as well as the description of Pharaoh as a "lawless tyrant" (173) who must be "compelled by signs and judgments dire" (175). The story of Pharaoh is a striking contrast to Adam's initial relationship to signs, wherein he could immediately map signs onto their referents. As I suggested earlier, this perfect understanding of signs was not the result of a perfect correspondence between words and things in Edenic language. Rather, it was the result of the "sudden apprehension" (VIII. 354) God bestowed upon Adam's vision.

I have tried to show that polysemy informs the whole of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Milton did not imagine the perfection of language to depend on a perfect correspondence between words and things, nor did he imagine

perfect language as a tool necessary for knowledge. The fact that he did not manifests itself in *Paradise Lost*. The language of both Heaven and Paradise is highly symbolic and interpretable. In Paradise, language is polysemous both prior to and after the Fall. Language does not change from a prelapsarian state of perfection to a postlapsarian state of imperfection; what changes after the trespass of the sign is the relationship of the user of language to knowledge and to language itself. The Satanic act of disobedience cuts God's creatures away from their God-given intuitive knowledge and leaves them to acquire knowledge through experience. In this new mode of learning, the vast interpretability of language overwhelms God's creatures with its greater chances for equivocation and error, the very aspects of language that made Milton's contemporaries wish for language stripped of its polysemous gloss. Milton's view is unique in that it retains a positive view of symbolic language and does not envision the perfection of knowledge as dependent on the creation of a perfect, scientific, internationally exchangeable language. For Milton, fallen humanity, bereft of divine guidance, is left to struggle for knowledge through experience. Yet, as he puts it in *Areopagitica*, "that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary" (1006). Thus, for Milton, the struggle is still the trial, and it is humanity's present chance to choose before the Tree of Knowledge.

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