

The Root-Tree of Knowledge: A Deleuzian Reading of *Paradise Lost*

Postmodern philosophy is useful in that it can excavate unintended significations in texts. Derrida notably did this with his critique of *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*¹, in which he argues that Rousseau proves points about writing's relationship with spoken language contrary to those he originally set out to. Reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost* through the lens of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "Introduction: Rhizome"² can reveal a similar situation in Milton; namely, that Milton accomplishes a goal in *Paradise Lost* incompatible with the one he initially he lays out for himself. Milton begins the text with a brief explanation of what it will entail, famously claiming that he will "justify the ways of God to men" with his poem (Book 1, Line 26). As Deleuze and Guattari's work can show us, this statement is dependent upon a logic of binary difference: Milton's conception of justification here theorizes that something can either be justified or not justified. This is a dichotomous distinction; it does not leave room for variance or dimensionality within justification. But I would pose that one of Milton's primary accomplishments in *Paradise Lost* is, in fact, a kind of deconstruction of binary logic -- a pointing out that this logical system is constructed and not inherent. This deconstruction occurs via the consistent connection throughout the text between the fall of man and the creation of binary-derived thought structures. So, ironically enough, Milton's effective -- if unintentional -- deconstruction of binary logic renders his stated intention for the text somewhat irrelevant and paradoxical.

¹ This can be found in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*.

² The full text of this essay can be found in this PDF of *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is the successor to *Anti-Oedipus* and the second volume of Deleuze and Guattari's larger work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: <http://projectlamar.com/media/A-Thousand-Plateaus.pdf>.

Deleuze and Guattari can aid us in understanding how binary logic and the fall of man function in tandem in *Paradise Lost*. As they do in most of their work, Deleuze and Guattari spend much of “Introduction: Rhizome” describing metaphors that can be applied to a wide range of subjects. One metaphorical image they map out in the essay is the root-tree. For Deleuze and Guattari, the image of the root-tree represents a traditionally Western vision of knowledge -- a hierarchical knowledge developed through a linear branching off from a single, static point of origin. They use the root-tree to explore “classical” knowledge structures, which they interpret as being driven by dichotomies and binaries: “Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree” (Deleuze 5). To them, this image of the root-tree that grows through binary branching is an inaccurate and limiting one; they prefer the image of the rhizome, a “subterranean stem” from which all points on and below the tree are inextricably connected to one another (Deleuze 6). The metaphor of the rhizome, unlike that of the root-tree, leaves space for a logic of multiplicity and indeterminacy in terms of the tree’s growth and structure; it allows for an understanding of the tree system -- or of a system of knowledge -- that questions temporal and historical absoluteness within that system. The rhizome functions through “principles of connection and heterogeneity,” not traceable to any individual point from which growth originates. The root-tree “plots a point,” while “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze 7).

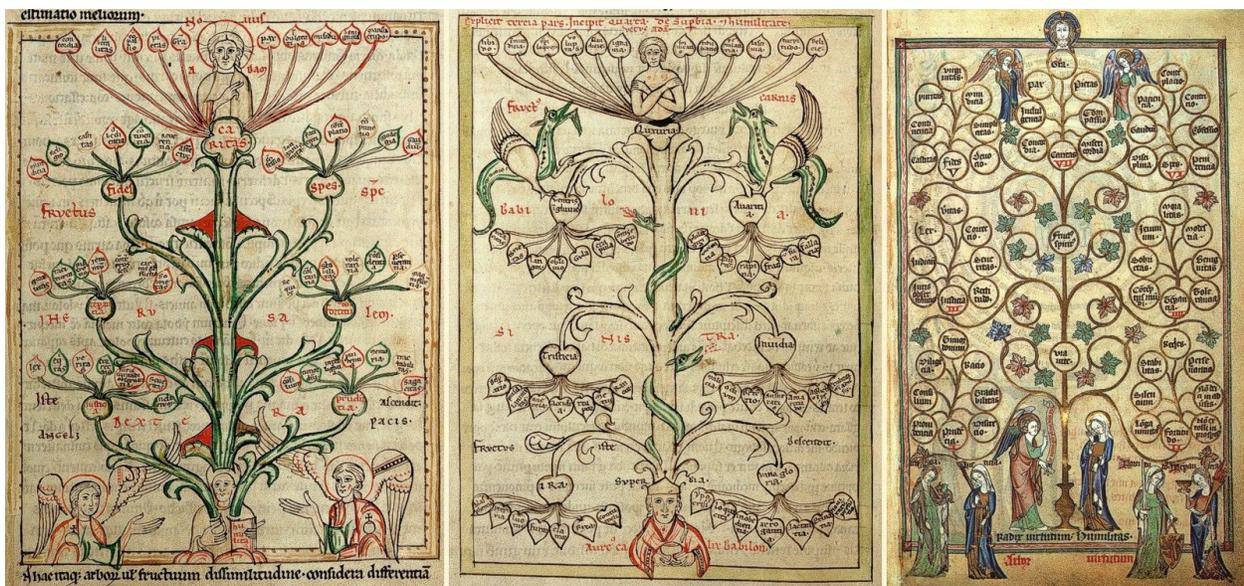
But why the root-tree? What drew Deleuze and Guattari to this specific image, and what about it is so representative of Western thought structures to them? One place the metaphor might be drawn from is the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve’s encounter with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; after all, the traditions of hermeneutics and teleology in which

Deleuze and Guattari find so much problematic, binary logic originate in Biblical studies³.

Paradise Lost serves as an expansion of the Adam and Eve narrative, and as an example of the exact sort of book Deleuze and Guattari see as directly analogous to root-tree knowledge

structures: “The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree.

This is the classical book, ... noble [and] signifying” (Deleuze 5). So, we can read Milton’s Tree of Knowledge as an instance of Deleuze and Guattari’s root-tree. A comparative reading of



“Introduction: Rhizome” and Milton, then, demonstrates that the fall(s) of man in *Paradise Lost* -- including Eve’s dream of Satan, Eve’s consumption of fruit from the Tree, and Adam’s decision to fall from grace alongside Eve -- is about the establishment of hierarchical, Western knowledge structures based on root-tree logic.

Milton’s descriptions of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a name that belies binary-centric thought patterns in and of itself, confirm that the fall of man is predicated on the

³ One Christian theologian worth looking at here is Joachim de Fiore, who attempted to explicate hierarchies of knowledge and virtue visually through drawings of trees. Three particularly pertinent pieces of art by de Fiore have been inserted into the text.

creation of dichotomies. Milton writes that what the Tree contains is “Knowledge of Good bought dear by knowing ill” (Book 4, Line 222); in other words, the Tree offers the ability to understand the good through understanding the evil. So, what Adam and Eve ingest when they eat from it is an understanding of existence that relies on the logic of dichotomy -- a thought system based on the idea that to experience a certain thing (goodness), one must also experience its opposite (evilness). The notion that opposites exist is, on a basic level, reliant on binary logic. Deleuze and Guattari remind us that this “dichotomous” system of knowledge is “the most classical and well reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought” (Deleuze 5). If we think of Adam and Eve’s consumption of fruit from the Tree as a founding event in one conception of human history, and of its result as the development of binary logic, it seems obvious that the “oldest” system of understanding would be a “dichotomous” one.

The way Milton details the boundaries surrounding the Tree displays the binary logic upon which the Tree is constructed:

Of *Eden*, where delicious Paradise,
Now nearer, Crowns with her enclosure green,
As with a rural mound the champain head
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairie sides
With thicket overgrown, grottesque and wilde,
Access deni’d; and over head up grew
Insuperable highth of loftiest shade,
Cedar, and Pine, and Firr, and branching Palm,
A Silvan Scene, and as the ranks ascend
Shade above shade, a woodie Theatre
Of stateliest view. Yet higher then thir tops
The verdurous wall of paradise up sprung[.] *Book 4, Lines 132-143*

The concept of a boundary, like that of opposites, depends on binary logic; one portion of something can exist inside the lines that are drawn, while the other portion must be excluded.

The “thicket overgrown” outside Eden is “denied” any “access” to paradise, and the only object

“higher” than the “tops” of the trees of Eden -- including, apparently, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil -- is the “wall of paradise.” It seems the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil does not just contain binary distinctions in its fruit: it is also surrounded by them. The natural objects inside the walls are representative of “delicious Paradise,” but those outside are “grotesque and wild.” These objects are all God’s creations, but the root-tree logic of the wall dictates that some of them are superior to others. Deleuze and Guattari would agree that boundaries are built on dichotomies. They are critical of “rigidified territorialities” (Deleuze 15), preferring deterritorialized, nomadic subjects that lack nationalistic self-definition; their greatest fear is a politics of absolute truths and divisive boundaries, like those surrounding the Tree. They claim that “one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad.” Deleuze and Guattari are so adamant about this point because they believe that “groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize” through “organization” (Deleuze 9-10); to put it simply, they see the violent potential of regularizations and categorizations based on binary logic.

William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which can be conceptualized as a theoretical critique of *Paradise Lost*⁴, is helpful in understanding this point. One of Blake’s most thought-provoking Proverbs of Hell from that text is “What is now proved was once only imagined” (Blake 8); he is reminding us that truth is a fluidic substance that changes depending on who is “organiz[ing]” structures within a “multiplicity” (Deleuze 7). This creation of truth through binary logic makes space for the aforementioned political situations Deleuze and

⁴ Blake does, after all, claim that the “reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it” in the text (Blake 6).

Guattari see as dangerous. And here we see the fall of man: the establishment of binaries, and the resulting possibility of a “power takeover by a dominan[ce] within a political multiplicity”

(Deleuze 7)

Rereading certain scenes of *Paradise Lost* from before the fall of man with “Introduction: Rhizome” in mind is useful; moments of logic structured around multiplicities rather than around binaries before the fall highlight just how binary-centric life becomes for Adam and Eve after it. One noteworthy moment of rhizomatic, non-binary logic making an appearance before the fall is when Eve views her reflection in an Edenic pool of water:

As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A Shape within the watry gleam appeared
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleas'd I soon returnd
Pleas'd it returnd as soon with answering looks
Of sympathie and love... *Book 4, Lines 460-465*

From a Deleuzian perspective, the way Eve describes her reflection is not hindered by the binaries that limit our normal understanding of how mirroring works. “Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature,” Deleuze and Guattari write (Deleuze 11), essentially stating that the one-to-one relationship with which we understand reflection lacks nuance. They offer a different interpretation of how the process of mimicry works: “[The reflection] forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the [reflection] and the world” (Deleuze 11). The way Eve characterizes her experience with her reflection feels distinctly non-binary. She describes the reflection as if it has sentience, instead of as a straightforward mimicry of her actions: the phrase “Pleas'd it returnd as soon with answering looks / Of sympathie and love...” imparts the reflection with emotional

intention, which implies that a “circular system of ramification” (Deleuze 5), rather than root-tree logic, is at play.

Here, again, Blake’s Proverbs of Hell can help us interpret “Introduction: Rhizome,” and its relationship to Milton. “A fool sees not the same tree a wise man sees,” Blake writes (Blake 7). This points to the fact a person’s perception of something can be thought of as a reflection of sorts -- a reflection in the brain -- and that, like the Deleuzian reflection Eve describes, perception is rhizomatic and not built on an A to B relationship. After Adam and Eve’s fall, Milton does not write of any thinking that could be categorized as non-binary in the way Eve and Blake’s⁵ understandings of perception are; once more, we see that the fall is related to the invention of a new, divisive sort of logic.

It is clear that the event that dooms man to suffering outside Paradise is not the discovery of evil -- it is the invention of the idea that evil can be cleanly divided from good. This discovery makes room for one of the most tangible instances of the fall’s consequences in the poem: the bloody history of man explained to Adam by Michael in Books 11 and 12. Michael’s description of a battle that he shows Adam confirms that man’s fall comes from the establishment of binary logic. He characterizes two unnamed, warring coalitions of humans as partaking in a “factious opposition,” choosing not to identify either side as just (Book 11, Line 664). Instead of doing so, he plainly remarks that “on each hand” of the battle there has been “slaughter and gigantic deeds” (Book 11, Line 659). It is of utmost importance that Michael positions to Adam the two warring sides as standing on equal ground morally; this supports the Deleuzian idea that the

⁵ Blake is relatively explicit about the fact that he sees problems with binary logic in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. He writes, in the voice of the Devil, that “man has no body distinct from his soul for that calld Body is a portion of soul” (Blake 4).

creation of binary logic leads to violence, as both sides would have believed they were in the right and that the other side was in the wrong. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, violence is a “power takeover” by a “dominan[ce]” that self-righteously believes in its justness (Deleuze 7); as Adam’s vision of war through Michael shows us, violence defined in this way is foundationally composed of binary logic. Another of Blake’s Proverbs of Hell attests to the fact that “Every thing possible to be believd is an image of truth” (Blake 8). Truth as a concept is based on its antithetical distinction from falseness; we can imagine the warring parties of Adam’s vision as being confident in their “believd” reasons for fighting, which are “an image of truth” within their reality of binary logic. The fall of man results in violence in Milton, as binaries do in Deleuze: once more, we see that the fall of man is a metaphor for the discovery of thought structures premised on dichotomy.

Uncovering the binary deconstruction that surprisingly exists below the surface of *Paradise Lost* has been powerful for me in terms of my personal relationship with the poem. Through this process, I have realized that much of the frustration I experienced while reading *Paradise Lost* before I applied Deleuze to it actually came from the same sort of root-tree logic that Milton’s Tree apparently imparts upon man. For example, I spent a lot of time during my initial reading of the book worrying about the paradoxical nature of certain aspects of it. Even petty paradoxes bothered me, like Milton’s renditions of light and darkness in Hell and Heaven. When explicating Hell’s appearance, he writes, “As one great Furnace flam’d, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible” (Book 1, Lines 62-63), and when expounding on God’s physical state he writes, “Eternal King; thee Author of all being, / Fountain of Light, thy self invisible” (Book 3, Lines 374-376). The visual paradoxes inherent in these descriptions were

at first difficult for me; how could I read *Paradise Lost* as a justification of the world if its representations of the world were so paradoxical? But encountering Deleuze's application of the concept of root-tree logic to the process of reading alleviated many of these fears for me. "What a vapid idea, the book as the image of the world," he writes of the Western understanding of "the Total Work or Magnum Opus" (Deleuze 6). Deleuze advocates for a sort of reading that is not based on looking for accurate representation of the world in the book but instead on "decentering" the book and its relationship to the world through "a method of the rhizome type" (Deleuze 8). Basically, Deleuze wants us to think about reading just like how he wants us to think about reflection -- through an indeterminate logic of multiplicity that denies any possibility of a one-to-one relationship. When reading *Paradise Lost* in this manner, I cannot find anything bothersome about Milton's paradoxical descriptions of Heaven and Hell because, to Deleuze, the poem creates a rhizome with the world, not an image of it. Given this, why should I even want for anything like "accuracy" from it?

Deeper philosophical paradoxes in *Paradise Lost* frustrated me even more than descriptive ones upon my initial reading. The strange tension between God's assertion of man's free will and his traits of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience left me feeling disconnected from the text emotionally. God attempts to explain the coexistence of his Heavenly traits with man's free will through an intellectual process that I found paradoxical:

... They therefore as to right belongd,
So were created, nor can justly accuse
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate,
As if predestination over-ruld
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree
Of high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I; if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown. *Book 3, Lines 111-119*

Essentially, God here is defending the fact that he created man with foreknowledge that they would commit the original sin by stating that his foreknowledge does not preclude the existence of free will; he claims that “[Adam and Eve] themselves decreed / Their own revolt” and that his “foreknowledge” of the event “had no influence on their fault.” This portion irked me immensely when I first read it. Foreknowledge seems to require predetermination, which, as far as I can tell, cannot coexist with free will. I couldn’t help but wonder, what was Milton even doing here? Why personify God if his verbal output has to end up so impenetrable? By including God’s ultimately paradoxical defense, did Milton not just make the poem -- and God himself -- less believable?

Again, this portion of *Paradise Lost* becomes a great deal less frustrating when read through a Deleuzian lens. According to Deleuze, “writing has nothing to do with signifying” reality (Deleuze 4-5). But what a good book actually *can* “assure,” in his worldview, is the “deterritorialization of the world” (Deleuze 11). When we think of writing as an asignifying force that interacts with the world through a non-representative, non-rational logic of multiplicity, Milton’s God is actually quite digestible. *Paradise Lost*, then, does not form an image of the world. Rather, the poem and the world just complicate each other, residing forever in an atemporal, rhizomatic feedback loop. A mind-expanding -- if overquoted -- Blakeism is pertinent here: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: Infinite” (Blake 14). I visualize “the doors of perception” as the physical actualization of binary logic. I feel this way because binary logic governs many systems that directly affect the

way we perceive the world, such as language⁶. What would happen if we were to be “cleansed” of binary logic? Perhaps we would then be able to see the world how I have learned to see *Paradise Lost* -- as “rhizomatic,” or maybe even “infinite.”

⁶ The classic philosophical thought experiment of categorizing chairs can prove the notion that, 1) language is constructed through binary logic, and 2) language literally alters our experience of reality. Consider a person looking at a barstool and a luxurious, leather chair covered in pillows. The bar stool has perhaps more in common with a traditional dining room chair than the luxurious chair in terms of the materials it's built with. However, it's linguistically demarcated as a *stool* while the leather chair is called a *chair*. So, binary logic is at play (through the division of chairs and non-chairs), and our perception of reality is being altered (we come to perceive the leather chair as a chair and the barstool as a stool).

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