"With Serpent Error Wand'ring Found Thir Way": Milton's Counterplot Revisited

Henry Weinfield

In his magnificent expansion on the Creation narrative in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton, speaking through the Angel Raphael, says of the newly created waters that "With Serpent error wand'ring [they] found thir way" (302). Whatever we make of this line—for clearly we have to make something of it—we know that a phrase with three words in sequence as heavily laden as *serpent*, *error*, and *wandering* have by now become in the poem must mean something important, must be intentional on some level. It may be that our entire feeling for the poem, our sense of how it develops and unfolds, depends on how we interpret this strange and extraordinary line.

Not that it can be taken out of context, of course. For the moment, I shall point to only two of what seem to me the most salient contextual markers, one of them frequently cited as a parallel to "With Serpent error wand'ring, found thir way" and the other more tenuously connected. In Book 4, Milton says of the river running through Eden that it "[r]uns diverse, wand'ring many a famous Realm […] With mazy error under pendant shades" (234, 239). "Mazy" substitutes for "serpent" here, but the serpent emerges a moment later in the allusion to how Proserpina was bitten by a snake ("*Proserpin* gathering flow'rs / Herself a fairer Flow'r by gloomy *Dis* / Was gather'd" [269–71]), and then a moment after that in the serpentine description of Eve's hair ("Shee as a veil down to the slender waist / Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd / As the Vine curls her tendrils" [304–307]). The link between these passages and "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way" is obvious, but when we connect the line to the poem's conclusion, "They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow, / Through *Eden* took thir solitary way" (12.648–49), the uncanniness of Milton's conception becomes clear and takes on additional complexity. The waters find their way at the very beginning of Creation, whereas Adam and Eve are forced to take theirs when they are expelled from paradise after the Fall. So, why the convergence of diction and syntax in the two passages, a convergence which, when one considers that the second occurs at the very end of the poem, makes the connection between them all the more important and impossible to ignore?

Evidently, error is already inscribed both in Creation and in Eden, and is associated with the element of water. Moreover, in "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way," the manner in which the second half of the line balances the first suggests that in Milton's conception the only way in which Nature can find its way—i.e., direction, path, aim—is through a circuitous process that, paradoxically, is characterized by its apparent directionlessness and aimlessness: the root meaning of "wander" (from the Anglo-Saxon) is to wind or to curve around, and the root meaning of "errare" (the Latin verb from which "error" derives) is to be in motion. But that the waters *do* find their way is emphasized by the chiasmus

(one of Milton's favorite tropes) that "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way" completes:

> so the wat'ry throng,
> Wave rolling after Wave, *where way they found*,
> If steep, with torrent rapture, if through Plain,
> Soft-ebbing: nor withstood them Rock or Hill,
> But they, or under ground or circuit wide
> With Serpent error wand'ring *found thir way*.
> (7.297–302; my emphasis)

Milton's phrasing in "Wave rolling after Wave," the tonal connection between "Wave" and "way," and the chiastic repetition suggest that nothing can withstand these waters in their blind inexorability; formless themselves, they break through the strongest and hardest of forms ("Rock or Hill") in the process of finding their way. Indeed, at the beginning of the verse-paragraph in which these lines appear, the waters are referred to as the *womb* and the *great Mother* of all earthly forms, which suggests that they not only find their way through these forms but give birth to them as well:

> The Earth was form'd, but in the Womb as yet
> Of Waters, Embryon immature involv'd,
> Appear'd not: over all the face of Earth
> Main Ocean flow'd, not idle, but with warm
> Prolific humor soft'ning all her Globe,
> Fermented the great Mother to conceive,
> Satiate with genial moisture, when God said,
> Be gather'd now ye Waters under Heav'n
> Into one place, and let dry Land appear.
> Immediately the Mountains huge appear
> Emergent, and thir broad bare backs upheave
> Into the Clouds, thir tops ascend the Sky [. . .].
> (7.276–87)

The reference to the "great Mother" is ambiguous: in part the phrase refers to the "Waters" and to "Main Ocean," but it also implicitly refers to Nature, a Nature that is present but not literally stated. (Earlier in Book 7, Adam had referred to "the rising Birth / Of Nature from the unapparent Deep" [102–103], which suggests that in the conception Milton is developing, Nature itself emerges out of Chaos.)[1] In the chain of mediations by which Creation unfolds and the spirit is materialized, God the Father ordains Creation and that it be carried out by the Son ("So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake / His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect" [7.174–75]), but, as Milton's imagery makes plain, it is in the womb of the great Mother that all things have their birth. And the imagery conveys not only a sense of origin but also of *telos*: all things are born out of the womb of the Waters, but also nothing can withstand them as they rush to find their way.

Note that in "With Serpent error wand'ring," we move in descending order of severity with regard to the way in which the items in the sequence are associated with sin and the Fall. "Serpent" literally means "serpentine" here, but obvi-

ously we are meant to focus on the Serpent as the agent of the Fall (even if, as Milton indicates in Book 9, it is merely the "Fit Vessel" for Satan [89]). "Error," in its ordinary, as opposed to etymological, meaning, is negatively valenced by definition—and as a matter of fact, in the invocation to Book 7 itself, Milton worries about the possibility that he is presuming too much and that the error of presumption will lead him to fall: comparing himself to the mythological hero Bellerophon, he asks Urania to preserve him, "Lest [...] (as once/*Bellerophon*, though from a lower Clime)/Dismounted on th' *Aleian* Field I fall/Erroneous there to wander and forlorn" (17–20).[2] "Aleian" derives from a Greek word for "wandering," and clearly the ideas of wandering, error, and *falling* (a physical fall that is metaphorically related to the doctrine of the Fall, itself a more abstract version of the same metaphor) are symmetrically aligned here. It should be noted, however, that although "wandering" is a root meaning of "errare," and thus can be used by Milton, here and elsewhere, as a synonym for "error," "wandering" is not negatively valenced in itself; indeed, there are many occasions in the poem in which the word is either neutral or even positively valenced. In the invocation to the Light of Book 3, for example, Milton, lamenting his blindness, asserts, "Yet not the more/Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt/Clear Spring, or shady Grove, or sunny Hill,/Smit with the love of sacred Song" (3.26–29)—and here the positive association of wandering to poetry contradicts the negative association we find in the invocation of Book 7, where, following the allusion to Bellerophon, Milton expresses the fear that he will share the same fate as Orpheus (7.32–39). Immediately after the invocation to Book 7, moreover, although "wandering" in the Bellerophon passage is negatively valenced and synonymous with error, Milton refers to Raphael's warning to Adam and Eve against eating of the "interdicted Tree" as the "sole command,/So easily obey'd amid the choice/Of all tastes else to please thir appetite,/Though wand'ring" (46, 47–50). The "though" is slightly ambivalent here, but the passage indicates that there is nothing inherently sinful about wandering in itself. And in the Creation narrative, after the Earth is made to put forth its plenitude, and only a few lines after "With Serpent error wand'ring, found thir way," we have an astonishing passage—astonishing, among other things, for its quasi-paganism—in which Milton says of the Earth that it "now/Seem'd like to Heav'n, a seat where Gods might dwell,/Or wander with delight" (7.328–30). Milton recognizes that the delights of wandering are such as even the gods would want to cultivate, and yet he knows that there is a sense in which to wander is to be in error, and thus not only prone to falling but (to make use of his own pun) vulnerable to whatever might "befall" (7.43–44).[3]

In any event, since the Serpent explicitly and error and wandering implicitly are associated with the Fall, in both "With mazy error under pendant shades" and "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way" we have parallel examples of the figure of prolepsis or anticipation. But the question is how prolepsis is functioning in these passages. Is it functioning so as to uphold the before-and-after theological structure of the narrative, or is it functioning to undermine that structure?

Note that if what led to the Fall is evil (though what "evil" is, is not necessarily clear), then it would seem that Nature is already "fallen" even before the Fall. Such an interpretation is very dubious, however, not only because it is contradicted by everything we know about Milton and his theology (no one could be farther from Manichaean dualism or Gnosticism than he), but because it is con-

tradicted by the Creation narrative in Book 7 itself. Milton's account of the Creation is punctuated by the continual refrain (borrowed from Genesis, of course) of "God saw that it was good"; this clause occurs at lines 249, 309, 337, 352–53, 395, and 549, in different variations and in different positions in the verse. So, unless we take the untenable position that what God sees as good is in fact evil, we cannot interpret "With Serpent error wand'ring" as meaning that Nature is evil or even that it has a propensity to evil.

Criticism seeks coherence, sometimes at the expense of complexity, and the tendency to do this is especially great in the case of works in which a theological paradigm is in tension with poetic feeling or poetic intensity. What is true of the academic response to Dante's *Commedia* is also true of the response to *Paradise Lost*, and for roughly the same reasons. The same "interpretive community" that is threatened by the pathos engendered by the Paolo and Francesca or Ulysses episode, and will strive, at all costs, to reassert the dominance of Dante's theological code, will also be threatened not only by the figure of Satan in Books 1 and 2 but by the uncanniness of a line such as "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way." The predictable response to a line such as this will be less to explain it than to *explain it away*, to eliminate complexities so as to arrive at a univocal interpretation in which theology and poetry (to make use of a somewhat inexact shorthand) fall out on the same plane.

The tendency, therefore, has been to argue not only that Milton is insisting on the innocence of the things themselves in "With Serpent error wand'ring, found thir way," but that he is insisting on the innocence of the words representing them, while at the same time pointing to the fact that the negative connotations these words may possess for us are a result of the Fall. Thus, in his analysis of "With mazy error under pendant shades," Arnold Stein asserts that "before the Fall, the word *error* argues, from its original meaning, for the order in irregularity, for the rightness in wandering—before the concept of error is introduced into man's world and comes to signify wrong wandering" (66–67). In other words, the Latin derivation of "error," the fact that it once meant "wandering," emphasizes the original innocence of the thing itself. Or, as Christopher Ricks, extending Stein's argument, asserts,

> Error [. . .] is not exactly a pun, since it means only "wandering"—but the "only" is a different thing from an absolutely simple use of the word, since the evil meaning is consciously and ominously excluded. Rather than the meaning being simply "wandering," it is "wandering (not error)." Certainly the word is a reminder of the Fall, in that it takes us back to a time when there were no infected words because there were no infected actions. (110)

Not surprisingly, Stein and Ricks are cited approvingly by Stanley Fish, whose interpretive paradigm is clearly in accord with their observations. To Fish, if we insist on ascribing negative connotations to error in "With mazy error under pendant shades" or "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way"—or if we are struck by the sexual suggestiveness of Eve's "wanton ringlets," for that matter (4.306), these are "carnal responses" that merely point us to our own fallenness (92–107).

The advantage of this line of reasoning, of course, erroneous as it may be, is that it is consistent with the before-and-after theological structure of the narrative. But there are actually two aspects to the argument, which, though they ought to be kept separate, have been conflated. First, the argument indicates that the things being represented in "With Serpent error wand'ring" are entirely innocent before the Fall, and that Milton is indicating this to the reader at the same time as he is anticipating a time when it will no longer be the case; but secondly, the argument also suggests that Milton is making a point about language, about the words themselves by which the things or actions are being represented. "With the Fall of Man," Ricks asserts, "language falls too" (109). This aspect of the argument seems far-fetched both on internal grounds and when one considers Milton's attitude to language. When he describes the negative consequences of Original Sin, for example, in the final books of the poem, it does not occur to Milton to include the "fall of language" in the chain of disasters he outlines—even though an excellent opportunity for doing precisely this presents itself in the Tower of Babel story that the Angel Michael relates (12.24–63). Moreover, if language falls too, then Milton is himself the inheritor of a "fallen" language, as he would have had to recognize—unless, of course, he had adopted the Symbolist idea that poetry has the capacity, as Mallarmé said, to "purify the language of the tribe"; but this, of course, is an anachronism in regard to Milton.

Moreover, as the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* makes clear, it simply does not happen to be the case that the Latin "errare" excludes the negative connotations of the English "error." The *OLD* defines "errare" in terms of three general categories: (a) the idea of motion and uncertain motion—the latter leading to the ideas of being in doubt, wavering, and vacillation; (b) the idea of going astray; and finally (c) the idea of being in error, as in our modern English sense. Thus, if Milton is playing on the Latinate sense of "error" in order to suggest that before the Fall error means "only wandering," then, strictly speaking, he is doing so erroneously; it is possible that this is what he *is* doing, of course, but, in any event, the suggestion can hardly serve as an objective basis for interpretation, especially since it is not demonstrable in and of itself.

But what about the aspect of the Stein-Ricks-Fish interpretation that assumes that the things and actions represented in "With Serpent error wand'ring" are innocent themselves at the same time that they point proleptically to a time in which they will no longer be innocent? The argument implies that it is possible to delineate and circumscribe the senses of "error" that lead in an "unfallen" direction from those that connote culpability, guilt, and sin and thus lead in a "fallen" direction; but I think we have to ask whether, if this is what Milton wanted to achieve, he would not have recognized the instability of his construction and the danger he faced of being misunderstood. We are in the shadowy realm of intentionality here, but all meaning is ultimately intentional, and Milton is a poet who is highly conscious of his artistic effects. If, as the Stein-Ricks-Fish interpretation would have it, Milton wanted to suggest that "error" before the Fall means "only wandering," he would surely have known that he had nevertheless laid the ground for a less benign interpretation (at least for readers as benighted as myself), in which prolepsis functions not to uphold the before-and-after theological structure but to subvert it. If, linguistically as well as poetically, "error" falls within a continuum of meanings, some of them benign, others less so, then it seems more likely that in lines such as "With mazy error under pen-

dant shades" and "With Serpent error wand'ring, found thir way," Milton was attempting to exploit the ambiguities than to circumscribe the unfallen from the fallen senses of the term. If not, then he would have known that he was leaving himself open to misinterpretation—and the only possible explanation for why he would have been willing to do this is the theory—to me unpersuasive—that he wanted his readers to be surprised by their own sinful imaginings. But this is too easily said, and the cost of a hermeneutic model that requires us to view Milton's language—his poetry—as a self-consuming artifact is too great.

Error, in "With Serpent error wand'ring," is literally mid-way between the benign wandering, which gods might do with delight, and Spenser's "foul Errour," the allegorical dragon found in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*. Here, too, Spenser was Milton's original, as Dryden said, and though my conjecture would be that Milton's half-echo of Spenser is not intended, the point is that what "error" conjures up for Milton is partly what it conjures for Spenser. "Error" stands between the "Serpent" and "wandering" in the line, and by the same token, in the history of English poetry, one might say that Milton stands between Spenser and Wordsworth—Spenser, for whom error is allegorically linked to sin (although at the same time his knights-errant wander in search of the truth), and Wordsworth, for whom wandering not only has positive connotations but sometimes is viewed as the truth of the human condition.[4]

If error is inscribed in Eden and in Creation itself—hence in Nature and the scheme of things—this does not, of course, mean that Nature or the realm of matter is evil or sinful in itself, which would indeed amount to a Manichaean perspective. Spenser's dragon Errour is tantamount to sin, but for Milton there is no simple equation between error and sin; and yet there clearly is a sense for Milton in which, along the continuum of meanings, error stands in relation to sin. Sin is something that only rational creatures (angels or human beings) are capable of: it involves a deliberate choice of some kind and an action following from that choice. Sin is not itself substantive for Milton (who follows Augustine in this respect), but—as in the allegory of Satan, Sin, and Death in Book 2—is born out of Satan's head, and one might say is continually reborn out of the heads of human beings when they sin. But error, insofar as it stands in relation to sin, seems to be something on the order of a *mistake* or *deviation* that can lead to sin or allow it to take hold. In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton remarks that Adam and Eve "did not expect for a moment that they would lose anything good by eating the fruit, or that they would be worse off in any way at all" (*Complete Prose Works* 6 : 390; cited by Rumrich, 18). This was an error contributing to their sin, perhaps, but, as Milton's wording suggests, it was not the sin in itself; it was an "evil" thought, but only metaphorically, because, for the Protestant Milton, thoughts are not evil in themselves and the distinction between thought and action must be maintained: "Evil into the mind of God or Man/May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave/No spot or blame behind" (5.117–19).

The question must nevertheless be asked: If error spans a continuum of meanings, and if the kind of error that predisposes human beings to sin is one of those meanings, then why does Milton *go out of his way* to suggest that error is already present in Eden and in Creation itself? The answer, I believe, has to do with Milton's complex recognition, in the context of his monistic conception of the universe, that in order for the principle of freedom to be maintained, Nature cannot merely obey an orderly script; it must be free to follow its own course,

even if by doing so it falls into error—even the kind of error that predisposes us to sin. The realm of matter, in Milton's metaphysics, must be capable of the sort of "creative swerve" (or *clinamen*) that Lucretius invokes in *De Rerum Natura*; otherwise it merely follows the scripted path of determinism. The potential for error, in its most benign as well as its least benign senses, is the inevitable concomitant to freedom; freedom allows for the kind of delightful wandering that is given to the gods—and to Adam and Eve—but it also allows for deviations that may lead to sin. God endowed human beings (and perhaps Nature as a whole) with freedom, and error is the inevitable outgrowth or by-product of freedom. To some extent, moreover (to take this argument even further), it is only by losing their way, by deviating from their path, that human beings can find their way. In the words of *Areopagitica*:

> I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexcercis'd and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal 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. (*Complete Prose Works* 2 : 515)

The rhythm of those famous sentences suggests that our very dignity as human beings depends on the process of learning through trial and error. The verb "slinks," reminding us of the culminating crisis in *Paradise Lost* ("Back to the Thicket slunk/The guilty Serpent" [9.784–85]), indicates how radical is the reversal that is enacted in the passage.

What all of this says for Milton's theodicy is extremely interesting. When we think of that aspect of his project, we normally think in terms of the punishment that God inflicts on human beings for Original Sin; for if God's punitive nature is what characterizes the "ways of God to men," then presumably some sort of justification is required. The project, from that point of view, is a defensive one—and some would argue that the defensive posture of Milton, and of Milton's God, especially in Book 3, indicates that it is fundamentally indefensible, whether or not Milton thought so himself. But we lose sight of the fact that from the beginning Milton locates his theodicy more immediately and ultimately in terms of God's *care* for human beings than his punishment of them. Milton does not merely want to "justify the ways of God to men"; he wants "to assert Eternal Providence,/And justify the ways of God to men" (1.24–26); the two aspects of his theodicy must be seen in tandem with each other.[5] Milton's conception, though partly pessimistic with respect to the realm of contingencies, is plainly optimistic with respect to that of finalities. His hidden God (in contrast to the School Divine of Book 3, as Pope termed him) endows all beings with a measure of freedom, and freedom, as God knows, inevitably entails error; but at the same time He ordains the world providentially so that eventually it will be able to *find its way*.

To what extent, we may ask in conclusion, does the poetic vision enshrined in "With Serpent error wand'ring found thir way" coincide with the received theological narrative around which the poem is structured? I am not now concerned with Milton's "heresies" (his Arianism, his materialism, and so forth), but simply with the question of whether or to what extent his vision in the poem either coin-

cides with or undermines the received doctrine of the Fall. More than forty years ago, Geoffrey Hartman suggested that the emphasis on Creation in *Paradise Lost*, including the idea that "the creation will outlive death and sin," constitutes what may be characterized as the poem's "counterplot" (115). Hartman's wording suggests that plot and counterplot can coincide without being mutually negating, but to my mind the question is not so much whether Creation will outlast death and sin as whether the presence of error (and metaphorically of the Serpent) in Milton's Creation does not undermine the before-and-after structure of the narrative. The answer will depend on how pessimistically we view the presence of error in Creation and, concomitantly, how optimistically we view the emphasis on an Eternal Providence that enables its creatures to find their way. It may seem that we have been led, via a proto-Hegelian route, to the old doctrine of the Fortunate Fall; but in reality, if the presence of error is taken as undermining the narrative, then what we have is not a Fortunate Fall but, essentially, *no fall at all*. By virtue of an insistence on freedom that inevitably entails error, the mythical innocence of the traditional narrative comes itself to seem erroneous—if we insist on the reality principle, as I think Milton himself partly did. In that case, it is not a question of one huge Fall and its aftermath, but rather of an infinite series of errors, many if not most of them invisible and indistinguishable, and at the same time of the faith that everything in the world has been ordained and is moving toward its proper end.

University of Notre Dame

Notes

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[1] As John Rumrich reminds us, Milton refers to Chaos as "[t]he Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave" (2.911). Rumrich argues that Chaos in Milton's materialist metaphysics is procreative—in spite of the fact that in the allegory of Book 2 Chaos is a figure of deficiency. "Once a portion of chaos undergoes creation, the same quality of unshaped potency that makes Chaos an allegory of deficiency appears as unpredictable plenitude of being—as excess" (130).

[2] For a discussion of how Milton's treatment of the Bellerophon myth, first in the Sixth Prolusion and then in *Paradise Lost*, is bound up with his attempts at self-representation, see Fallon, "Milton and Bellerophon."

[3] The play on the positive and negative senses of "wandering" is also very striking at the beginning of Book 8, in which the Creation narrative of Book 7 is extended. Adam asks Raphael to explain the cosmos—essentially, whether the Ptolemaic or the Copernican system obtains—and Raphael answers equivocally:

> What if the Sun
> Be Centre to the World, and other Stars
> By his attractive virtue and their own
> Incited, dance about him various rounds?
> Thir wandring course now high, now low, then hid,
> Progressive, retrograde, or standing still,
> In six thou seest, and what if sev'nth to these
> The Planet Earth, so steadfast though she seem,
> Insensibly three different Motions move?
> (8.122–29)

The "wandring course" of the planets (indeed, the word "planet," from the Greek, means "wanderer") is a part of the beautiful *dance* of the spheres, as Milton's diction and especially his baroque syntax makes clear (the whole passage from line 122 to line 169 turns on the anaphoric repetition of "what"). And yet, at the conclusion of the passage, Adam, "clear'd of doubt," replies that he now understands the inappropriateness of seeking "with wand'ring thoughts, and notions vain" beyond what he can grasp (8.179, 187). The latter passage recalls the philosophizing devils in Book 2, who find "no end, in wand'ring mazes lost" (2.561); and "wand'ring mazes," of course, resonates against the "mazy error" of the river running through Paradise.

[4] Two examples: (1) In the opening lines of *The Prelude*, lines that begin where Paradise Lost leaves off, Wordsworth writes, "The earth is all before me. With a heart/Joyous, nor scared of its own liberty,/I look about; and should the chosen guide/Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,/I cannot miss my way" (1850; 1.14–18); and (2) the moralizing central consciousness of "The Excursion" is named the Wanderer.

[5] As has often been noted, of course, "justify the ways of God to men" can mean both (a) provide a justification for God's treatment of men (which presumably points to his punishment of them for Original Sin), and (b) provide a justification to men of God's ways in general. The second of these meanings could be construed as more fully parallel to the assertion of Eternal Providence than the first; but, in any event, the two aspects of Milton's theodicy, the justification of God's treatment of men and the assertion of Eternal Providence, seem to oscillate, dialectically, between a theology in which the Fall is central and one in which it is not.

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