

“Desire of Wandering”: Decoding the Word “Wandering” in Milton’s Paradise Lost

Jie TANG

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

wlz20120@163.com

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Abstract: Paradise Lost invites a flexibility or fluidity of some particular words, such as taste, wanton, error, fruit, ruin, change, wandering. These word sprawls from innocence and purity to sin and infection with the progress of narration, thus, there is always an underlying ambiguity or paradox in Milton’s flexible usage of some particular words. This paper, focusing on the given word “wander” that at least involves three meanings: movement that is not patterned or directed; straying from moral probity; and irregular but innocent, tries exploring the tension behind it with close reading of contexts. This paper concludes that from the flexibility stems Milton’s free usage of language when creating prelapsarian and postlapsarian world, and behind the paradox breeds Milton’s theory of knowledge of good and evil in language itself.

1. Introduction

This paper, focusing on the given word “wander”, tries offering an answer to how we understand the paradox in the flexibility of some particular words in *Paradise Lost*.

“Wander” initially means merely “to move hither and thither without fixed course or certain aim,” but this physically ungoverned movement accrues such dubious associations as literal-”to deviate from a given path, or determined course; to turn aside from a mark” and figurative-”to turn aside from a purpose, from a determined course of conduct, or train of thought; to digress; to pass out of the control of reason or conscience; to fall into error (moral or intellectual)” (*OED*, s. v. “wander”). There are 35 occurrences of wander and its cognates in *Paradise Lost*. The wander in *Paradise Lost* is frequently linked with the Fall due to Satan’s “wandring quest” (2.830) and Eve’s “Desire of wandring” (9.1136), just as noted by Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey, the word “wander” is a “key word, summarizing the theme of the erring, bewildered human pilgrimage, and its extension into the prelapsarian world with the fallen angels” and “the word wander has almost always pejorative, or melancholy, connotation in *Paradise Lost*” (MacCaffrey, 188).

Is, yet, wander always pejorative or melancholy in *Paradise Lost*? “The over-moralization of a word can have consequences far beyond the resulting misreading” (Fish, 137). Indeed, the word wrestles with its innocence and infection around its initial neutrality, neither always pejorative nor melancholy. As Stanley Fish argues “After Book vii, the reader is ready at any time to deliver two definitions of ‘wand’ring’-(1) movement that is not patterned or directed (2) straying from moral probity-and the self-consciousness of his attitude toward the word has created a third-irregular,

but innocent. Moreover he feels obliged to define the word precisely each time it occurs” (Fish, 138).

2. Satan and the Fallen Angels

The wander firstly appears significantly in retrospect. The fallen angels are deprived of their heavenly names for rebellion and try regaining their new ones by “wandring ore the Earth,/Through Gods high sufferance for the tryal of man,/By falsities and lyes the greatest part/Of Mankind they corrupted to forsake” (1.365, ff). There is a paradox, which is also exploited in following contexts. The “wandring” signifies undirected and aimless movement, meanwhile the fallen angels without names lose their essence and have to wander over the Earth through God’s sufferance for “in the Bible one’s name is not just a convenient tool for preserving one’s memory but is taken as intimately related to one’s essence. If the name survives, the essence somehow survives as well” (Margalit, 22-23). And in the following introduction to Satan’s twelve generals: “Osiris, Isis, Orus and thir Train/With monstrous shapes and sorceries abus/Fanatic Egypt and her Priests, to seek/Thir wandring Gods disguis’d in brutish forms/Rather then human./.../And when Night/Darkens the Streets, then wander forth the Sons/Of Belial, flown with insolence and wine” (1.478, ff). The wander also endows with the force of stroll or promenade, which signifies aimlessly physical movement, and enhances its own ironically ominous suggestion when modifying “Gods”.

During the stygian council about how to plot against God in Pandemonium, Beelzebub asks “who shall tempt with wandring feet/The dark unbottom’d infinite Abyss” (2.404, ff). The “wandring” is surely neither pejorative nor melancholy, meaning without guide or aim, but the association with the verb “tempt” is ominous since we know someone will wander from God into the dark and infinite of sin. After Satan and his train dissolve the “great” council, “Thence more at ease thir minds and somewhat rais’d/By false presumptuous hope, the ranged powers/Disband, and wandring, each his several way/Pursues, as inclination or sad choice/Leads him perplex, where he may likeliest find/Truce to his restless thoughts, and entertain while away/The irksom hours, till his great Chief return” (2.521, ff). Here the “wandring” is given in its innocent or neutral meaning as a descriptive of physical movement, but when the neutral “inclination” becomes “sad choice” and the devils become “perplex” for their manifestation of “restless thoughts”, the potential moral connotation of the word surfaces. “Wandring” recurs within thirty-five lines, which takes on an inescapably moral sense: “Others apart sat on a Hill retir’d/In thoughts more elevate, and reason’d high/Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate,/Fixt Fate, free will, foreknowledg absolute./And found no end, in wandring mazes lost” (2.557, ff). The juxtaposition of “Providence”, “Foreknowledge”, “Will”, “Fate”, “Fixt Fate”, and “free will” elevate the devils’ thoughts, yet without faith and redemption, not only these “foreknowledg absolute” constructing mazes are infected and wander from God themselves, but also the followers of them find no way out of the mazes .

To show his leadership, Satan recommends himself to carry out the plot against God. Before beginning his journey, Satan expresses: “with lonely steps to tread/Th’ unfounded deep, and through the void immense/To search with wandring quest a place foretold/Should be,/.../Chaos and ancient Night, I come no Spy,/With purpose to explore or to disturb/The secrets of your Realm, but by constraint/Wandring this darksome Desart, as my way/Lies through your spacious Empire up to light,/Alone, and without guide, half lost” (2.828, ff). Here the “wandring” is the activity of ungoverned physical movement. Satan perplexed and hopelessly entangled by struggling with the “unfounded deep”, “Chaos” and “ancient Night”, is condemned to meaningless movement without guide and without rest. As a result, he confesses that he is “half lost”. Moreover, Satan bears with the errand to “disturb/The secrets of your Realm”, whose

wandering quest or journey is inevitably loaded with moral disobedience to God. The “wandering” sways in its fallen nature.

There are neutral occurrences, although it is increasingly difficult to accept “wandering” as a merely physical concept because of Satan and his group’s fallen nature. Despite the fact that Satan seems to intend very little when regarding his journey as a “wandering quest”, he strongly hopes “To find who might direct his wandering flight/To Paradise” (3.631, ff), and his “wandering flight” causes and begins our woe. Satan’s feigned “wandering” is true for him and his successors, while as a tourist against God and the moral law, his “wandering” digressing from God is a defect.

3. Adam and Eve

At the beginning of Book 8, Adam expresses his gratitude after Raphael’s narration: “How fully hast thou satisfi’d me, pure/Intelligence of Heav’n, Angel serene,/And freed from intricacies, taught to live/The easiest way, nor with perplexing thoughts/To interrupt the sweet of Life, from which/God hath bid dwell farr off all anxious cares,/And not molest us, unless we our selves/Seek them with wandering thoughts, and notions vain” (8.180, ff). The “wandering” is surely a physical concept of random roam. Without heavenly guidance and providence, man aimlessly seeks the knowledge of the world and his own identity, and struggles with the irregularity of the world. The “wandering thoughts” lack of inflexibility interrupts “the sweet of life”. Within the next lines, Adam recalls his creation: “Here had new begun/realistically, vividly/My wandering, had not hee who was my Guide/Up hither, from among the Trees appeer’d/Presence Divine” (8.311, ff). Again, the “wandering” is irregular but innocent. Again, Adam underscores the role of holy guide. He has to wander with no “Guide/Up hither” or divine lead. He is entangled by his own wandering and unknown identity.

However, the “wandering” is infected before us because of Eve’s “Desire of wandering”. Eve’s failure of Satan’s irresistible temptation leads to the Fall. Along with it, the “wandering” is stained. In Adam and Eve’s fruitfulness of mutual accusation after the Fall, Adam rebukes Eve, “Would thou hadst heark’nd to my words, and stai’d/With me, as I besought thee, when that strange/Desire of wandering this unhappie Morn,/I know not whence possessd thee; we had then/Remaind still happie, not as now, despoild/Of all our good, sham’d, naked, miserable” (9.1134, ff). Just as Eve’s earlier dangerous desire for independence “from her husband’s hand her hand/Soft she withdrew” (9.385, ff), Adam believes Eve’s “wandering” away from him is a sin and disobedience. The “wandering” is loaded with fierce immoral implication. It is not only about the aimlessly random movement, but about the mechanism of moral law and holy Providence. Eve, yet, retorts, “What words have past thy Lips, Adam severe,/Imput’st thou that to my default, or will/Of wandering, as thou call’st it, which who knows/But might as ill have happ’nd thou being by,/Or to thy self perhaps: hadst thou been there,/Or here th’ attempt, thou couldst not have discern’d/Fraud in the Serpent, speaking as he spake” (9.1144, ff). Eve knows the “ill” part of the “wandering”. Her “will/Of wandering” leads to her default, but she tries persuading Adam to believe her “wandering” is positive, not totally negative. Her “wandering” brings about knowledge.

When Adam and Eve calms down, Adam comforts Eve, “But for thee/I had persisted happie, had not thy pride/And wandering vanitie, when lest was safe,/Rejected my forewarning, and disdain’d/Not to be trusted, longing to be seen/Though by the Devil himself, him overweening/To over-reach” (10.873, ff). Adam emphasizes on the sin and fallen nature of “wandering” since Eve’s “wandering vanitie” that is independence and disobedience not only breaks God’s sole command and disobeys God, but also violates Adam’s superiority, which challenges the system of morality. Meanwhile, knowing the catastrophe attributing to her “wandering vanitie”, Eve repents, “from thee/How shall I part, and whither wander down/Into a lower World, to this obscure/And wilde, how shall we breath in other Aire/Less pure, accustomd to immortal Fruits?” (11.281, ff).

Different from Eve's former statement that her "wandring" at least discerns the fraud in the serpent when responding Adam's accusation, the "wander" is totally pejorative or melancholy, pushing her "Into a lower World". What's worse, the "wander" is doubly infected since Eve has no God's and Adam's guide.

Gratefully, Adam and Eve gain redemption as they consciously know and correct their default after Michael foretells the wandering history of their posterity, such as Noah's "Famin and anguish will at last consume/Wandring that watrie Desert" (11. 779), Abraham's "Not wandring poor, but trusting all his wealth/With God, who call'd him, in a land unknown(12.130)", and Abraham's seeds' "The clouded Ark of God till then in Tents/Wandring" (12.333,ff). Meanwhile, Adam and Eve learns the true knowledge and wisdom of Providence, Patience and obedience with free will, they finally gain a paradise within and "The World was all before them, where to choose/Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:/They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,/Through Eden took thir solitarie way" (12.646, ff). As Fish argues, "in Book XII, 'wand'ring' undergoes a final transformation and is absorbed into the Christian vision.... Wandering is now the movement of faith, the sign of one's willingness to go out at the command of God" (Fish, 141).

4. Eden

The first appearance of Eden found by Satan is presented with "an intensity of detail and sustained frustration" (Stein, 52), which is steep, savage, entwined, tangling and perplexing: "Southward through Eden went a River large,/.../And now divided into four main Streams,/Runs divers, wandring many a famous Realme/And Country" (4.233, ff). Noted by Christopher Ricks, Milton "takes us back to a time when there were no infected words because there were no infected actions" (Ricks, 110). The "wandring" suggests the irregularity of four rivers in Eden, and is also innocent and pure as the four rivers are in their natural state. The "wandring" is associated with water, which intensifies the word's ungoverned physical movement in natural state. One more example is that Satan hopes to meet "Some wandring Spirit of Heav'n, by Fountain side" (4.531) when he journeys alone.

Milton, speaking through the Angel Raphael, says of the newly created waters in his magnificent expansion on the Creation narrative in Book 7, "But they, or underground, or circuit wide/With Serpent error wandring, found thir way,/And on the washie Oose deep Channels wore" (7.301, ff). A phrase with three words in sequence as heavily laden as serpent, error and wander must be intentional on some level. In Book 4, Milton also says of the rivers running through Eden "With mazie error under pendant shades" (4.239). Nature can only find its way, including direction, path, aim, through a circuitous process that, paradoxically, is characterized by its apparent aimlessness and directionlessness. The root meaning of "wander" is to wind or curve around, the root meaning of "error" is in motion. The "wandring" highlights the natural state of nature in Eden. For the modifier "Serpent", it signifies the animal's crawling movement, which is similar to the rivers', but it is inevitably linked with moral sense due to the impressively evil part in *Paradise Lost*. The intentional juxtaposition of "Serpent", "error" and "wandring" is a reminder of potentially fallen nature in Eden, thus the "wandring" is partly covered with a potentially moral sense. However, within twenty-five lines, the description of Eden goes on, "That Earth now/Seemd like to Heav'n, a seat where Gods might dwell,/Or wander with delight, and love to haunt/Her sacred shades" (7.328, ff). The partially moral connotation of "wandring" wears away.

The irregular but innocent sense of "wandring" in Eden corresponds to the sense in Milton's description of planets, "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 stedfast though she seem,/Insensibly three different Motions move?" (8.126, ff). Literally, the

meaning of “planet” is “wander”. And in Adam and Eve’s hymn: “Moon, that now meetst the orient Sun, now fli’st/With the fixt Starrs, fixt in thir Orb that flies/And yee five other wandring Fires that move/In mystic Dance not without Song, resound/His praise, who out of Darkness call’d up Light” (5.175, ff). The innocence of Eden’s “wandering” rivers is echoed in the “mystic dance” of the planets’ punningly “wandring fires” (5.177), creating a landscape in which gods might “wander with delight” (7.330). As all things stay in their natural and pure state before the Fall, the word “wander” is back to its earlier purity and innocence.

5. Conclusion

The word “wander” is richly textured, which sprawls around its corruptible (evil) and incorruptible (good) implication in different contexts, or strays between innocence and infection, in *Paradise Lost*. The word, through the agent of faith and Providence, has the potential tension to include all its meanings, even those which are literally contradictory, and is thus reaching back to its original purity and innocence after many permutations. In *Areopagitica*, Milton states that “the high providence of God...gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety” (Milton, 83), likewise “Those thoughts that wander through Eternity” in *Paradise Lost*. Guided by the Providence, the word “wander” offers Milton’s liberal usage of language creating the world before and after the Fall. Meanwhile, the word “wander” is mostly twined with its evil and good part, which is echoed to Milton’s philosophy of good and evil: they “grow up together almost inseparably; the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil,” and are “as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World” (Milton, 55).

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