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Singing and Flying: The Epic Actions of *Paradise Lost*'s Narrator

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In “Milton as Narrator in Paradise Lost”, Stephen M. Fallon states that the early modern poet “revises the definition of heroism to mean telling rather than acting” (3). Although his analysis focuses on the demarcation between narrator and author, his thesis problematises the epic status of Paradise Lost’s characters in favour of the narrator. Nevertheless, apart from his ambition to sing “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (l. 16), the narrator’s displacement or flying between Hell and Heaven constitutes a process where he changes his human status into a semi-divine one. In other words, even though he does not participate in the primary story, both singing and flying are epic actions that allow the emergence of heroism in the figure of the narrator. I will show how this works by using the cognitive poetics approach to briefly study the prologues of books I, III, VII and IX.

In contrast with the archaeological approach, where literary works are investigated as pieces of data which reflect cultural history (“Cognitive Poetics and Literary Theory” 1), the rhetorical tradition focuses on the text itself, pointing out its verbal material and its underlying semantic relations. Cognitive poetics configures the latest paradigm regarding rhetoric and stylistics. This theory studies the mental constructs and processes involved in reading literary texts (“Introduction: Body, Mind and Literature” 1), and is characterised by its interdisciplinary, scientific and empirical base.

According to cognitive poetics, every narrative structure is formed by narrative spaces, which are textually prompted constructs in the emergence of the story. They are distinguished by their temporal dimensions, their consistent subplots, and/or their construction of a specific epistemic perspective (Dancygier 58). Therefore, the particular use of this topology constitutes the viewpoint of the narrative space, a category that determines the structure of three different types of spaces. The first one is the *story-viewpoint* (SV) *space*, where the narrator is located; the second one, the *main narrative* (MN) *space*, where the primary story takes place; and the third one, the *Ego-viewpoint* (EV) *space*, where each character is the focus of attention (Dancygier 63).

The SV-space corresponds to an “outer” narrative space, whose degree of profiling “correlates with the degree of distance between the SV-space and the MN-space” (Dancygier 75).

Thus, both constructs have different interactions depending on the narrator. Based on the degree of distance between both spaces, there are two types of tellers. On the one hand, the *narrator on-stage* is located in the SV-space and in the MN-space, participating or not in the primary story as an independent voice, and profiling its Ego-viewpoint. He is identified by the first grammatical person. On the other hand, the *narrator off-stage* is only placed in the SV-space, ordering the narrative, and profiling a local or narrow epistemic viewpoint, or a global or general one. He is characterised by the third grammatical person. As this essay is focused on the narrator, the following paragraphs will describe his figure, his viewpoint, and the topology of the SV-space. Nevertheless, we should not forget that all these cognitive poetics categories can change, shift or blend throughout the construction of the narrative structure.

In *Paradise Lost*, the narrator is configured as the narrative voice of the primary story located in different physical spaces: Aonian mount, Hell and Heaven. He is a subject who talks about “all our woe with the loss of Eden” (I.3), using the first-person plural to express the consequences of Adam’s disloyalty towards God, and describing himself indirectly as a fallen man. Both characteristics are closely related to the epic actions of the narrator: he sings an “adventurous song” (I.13), and flies through various physical spaces. In order to achieve these actions, the fictional subjectivity needs the help of the “Heav’nly Muse” (I.6). Urania is an instance of inspiration and “not simply a classical model or holy spirit” (Lifson 46), but a mediator between Hell and Paradise, metonymically expressed as “Eternal Night” (III.18) and “holy Light, offspring of Heav’n, first born” (III.1), respectively.

In relation to the epic action of singing, the narrator is chosen by God, as he is inspired by Urania, in order to translate the Muse’s voice into his own human language, and the divine story into his own song. Hence, the narrator is textually constructed as a poet who pursues “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (I. 16), which constitutes a contradictory aim. He composes his song by re-building a Biblical story, and by establishing an inter-textual dialogue with classical mythology and literature. Nevertheless, the song is “advent’rous”, because, according to Bloom, those authors and references are re-created by combining different modalities (the epic, the lyrical,

the tragic and the comic), and by the originality in style and character's characterization (35-36). At the same time, the narrator mediates, as believed by Lifson, between his audience and God's word (47), transcending literary tradition and his human status by being given a "heroic name" (*Paradise Lost* IX.40) among the mortals.

In relation to the epic action of flying, it is necessary to contrast the MN-space with the SV-space, and to describe the topology of the latter. On the one hand, in connection with the MN-space, the primary story can be summarised as the origin of Man's disobedience and the loss of Paradise. On the other hand, in connection with the SV-space, in the prologue of Book I, the narrator is located in Aonian mount, the starting point between Darkness and Light, fall and ascension. In the prologue of Book III, as he has been descending, the narrator has just reached "the dark descent", a metonymical reference to Hell, where he told the story of Satan's fall, singing "of Chaos and Eternal Night" (III.18), even if he could not see through Darkness. At the same time, he wants to express what the Light of God has created in the realm of Heaven, which corresponds to "the rising world of waters dark and deep" (III.11), the antithesis of Darkness and Chaos, a goal which is going to be achieved from book III to VII.

By the act of flying, the narrator rebels against his own condition of a fallen man, penetrating Hell and Paradise, divine places forbidden to living men, and becoming a semi-divine figure as he ascends to Heaven. In view of this, he is not a divine subject, because he is still a mortal man. By seeing and telling "things invisible to mortal sight" (III.55), the narrator transcends his narrow and human viewpoint, which characterised him before invoking Urania, and reaches a global and divine epistemic viewpoint. In other words, although he is constructed as a narrator on-stage, who does not participate in the primary story, he has complete knowledge about the main narrative space and the Ego-viewpoint spaces of each character, because of God's gift of divine wisdom. Consequently, this phenomenon is opposite to Adam's and Eve's method of acquiring knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit, disobeying God's rule.

In the prologue of Book VII, the narrator wants to descend from Paradise, which is the beginning of his own fall asking Urania to return to "his native element" (VII.16), a metonymical

reference to the mortal world. This aim is related to the creation of the world and men, and the disobedience of Adam, which corresponds to the beginning of human history. The narrator tells, in one way or another, his own story, combining his Ego-viewpoint with the global epistemic viewpoint or “eternal Wisdom” (VII.8). At the same time, he blends both the MN-space with the SV-space. In contrast with the previous chapters, from Book IX onwards, there are no direct textual references to the narrator, because he does not fly anymore through infinite spaces. He is a narrative voice that, inspired by Urania’s voice, conserves his semi-divine status until the end of the song, being the epic action of singing present in the whole of *Paradise Lost*.

In conclusion, we can see how the narrator’s configuration is related to the epic actions of singing and flying. On the one hand, singing is understood as the creation of an original song, the narrator being a poet that, chosen by God and guided by Urania, transcends literary tradition. On the other hand, flying constitutes the displacement between Hell and Heaven and a process of acquiring a global epistemic viewpoint. It is an interesting phenomenon because the narrator is constructed as an on-stage one with complete knowledge about the primary story. At the same time, by the act of flying, the narrator transcends his human nature as a fallen man, becoming a semi-divine figure, a new status symbolised by the act of ascending.

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