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Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Study of Religion in Literature: Freedom, Faith, and Authority in Milton's Paradise Lost

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a *Miltonic hermeneutic model* for reading *Paradise Lost* through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Rather than treating Milton's epic as a closed system of religious doctrine, the study interprets it as a dynamic dialogue in which freedom, faith, and authority are continually interacted. Gadamer's notion of the *hermeneutic circle* illuminates how meaning arises through movement between parts and whole, past and present. Close readings reveal how Satan's boast *"The mind is its own place" (I.254)* juxtaposed with Adam's lament after the Fall "*O miserable of happy! is this the end" (X.720*) captures the tragic weight of freedom and responsibility. Similarly, Eve's reasoning with Satan dramatizes belief as negotiation rather than passive obedience, recalling the ancient question, *"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'? (Gen. 3:1).* These textual encounters confirm Gadamer's insight that understanding emerges not in certainty but in the *fusion of horizons*. By situating Milton within his 17th century theological and political milieu while engaging contemporary philosophical debates on autonomy, pluralism, and authority. The study demonstrates that *Paradise Lost* is neither static nor archaic. Instead, it remains a living dialogue whose resonance lies in its openness to reinterpretation. The *Miltonic hermeneutic model* proposed here integrates critique and tradition, plurality and responsibility. It is affirming that Milton's poem continues to enforce philosophical reflection on freedom, faith, and the conditions of human understanding.

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Keywords: Paradise Lost; philosophical hermeneutics; freedom; faith; authority.

ملخَّص البحث :

يقدم هذا البحث نموذج هرمنيوطيقي خاص بجون ميلتون يعتمد على قراءة (الفردوس المفقود) من خلال رؤية الهرمنيوطيقا الفلسفية لهانس جورج جادامر. فبدلًا من التعامل مع نص ملحمة ميلتون كنظام مغلق من العقائد الدينية، هذا البحث يقدمها كحوار متداخل تتفاعل فيه الحرية والإيمان والسلطة باستمرار داخل أبيات القصيدة. إن مفهوم جادامر عن الدائرة الهرمنيوطيقية يوضح كيف ينشأ المعنى عبر الحركة بين الجزء والكل، وبين الماضي والحاضر. وتكشف القراءة الدقيقة كيف أن مفاخرة الشيطان (I.254) إذا ما وضعت بجانب رثاء آدم (X.720)، نجد أنها تجسد المعنى المأساوي السلبي للحرية والمسؤولية. وبالمثل، فإن محاججة حواء مع الشيطان تجسد الإيمان بوصفه تفاوضًا لا طاعة سلبية، مستحضرة السؤال القديم: "أحقًا قال الله لا تأكلا من كل شجر الجنة؟" (تكوين 3:1). هذه التفاعلات النصية تؤكد رؤية جادامر بأن الفهم لا يولد من اليقين، بل من اندماج الأفق. ومن خلال وضع (الفردوس المفقود) في السياق الديني والسياسي للقرن السابع عشر، ودمج النقاشات الفلسفية المعاصرة حول الاستقلالية والتعددية والسلطة، يظهر البحث أن (الفردوس المفقود) ليس نصًا جامدًا ولا ملحمة كلاسيكية، بل حوار حي للنصوص والثقافات تكمن قوته في انفتاحه على إعادة التفسير. النموذج الهرمنيوطيقي المقترح يدمج بين النقد والتقليد، وبين التعددية والمسؤولية، ويؤكد على أن ملحمة (الفردوس المفقود) ما زالت تحفز التأمل الفلسفي حول الحرية والإيمان والفهم الإنساني.

كلمات مفتاحية: الفردوس المفقود؛ الهرمنيوطيقا الفلسفية؛ الحرية؛ الإيمان؛ السلطة.

Introduction

John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667) remains one of the most profound and contested works in Western religious literature. While Milton declared that his aim was to "justify the ways of God to men" (I.26), the poem resists simple doctrinal closure. Instead, it unfolds as a polyphonic meditation on freedom, faith, and authority, challenging readers to navigate tensions rather than passively accept truths. This dynamic mirrors the Old Testament's own mode of teaching. For example, Ecclesiastes 12:13 states, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind," yet the surrounding reflections wrestle with vanity, futility, and ambiguity. Like Scripture itself, Milton's poem thrives on tension rather than resolution.

This study approaches *Paradise Lost* through Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, especially the concepts of the hermeneutic circle, historically effected consciousness, and the fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, understanding is never a recovery of fixed meaning but a dialogical process shaped by the interplay between text, tradition, and reader. Milton's Satan, Eve, and Adam function as interlocutors who dramatize hermeneutic encounter itself. Their choices and arguments compel readers to revisit their assumptions about freedom and authority, echoing Gadamer's claim that interpretation is always provisional and transformative.

At the same time, the reception of Milton in non-native contexts introduces additional pedagogical and interpretive challenges. As Yahya et al. (2025), Masoud et al. (2025) and Almajri et al. (2025) observe in their studies the educational challenges of teaching cultural and religious texts in foreign settings. Teaching canonical texts often requires negotiating not only linguistic barriers but also cultural distance. Most non-Christian settings understand religious literature according to their own perception of sacred texts (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Primarni et al., 2025). This dynamic resonates with Gadamer's notion of historically effected consciousness, for both teachers and students bring horizons shaped by differing traditions, languages, and assumptions. Thus, engaging *Paradise Lost* in a foreign classroom highlights the dialogical and provisional nature of understanding, underscoring the need for what this study terms a Miltonic hermeneutic model."

The aim of this research is to develop what may be called a Miltonic hermeneutic model by reading *Paradise Lost* not as a closed doctrinal epic but as a philosophical drama of interpretation. The study explores how Milton presents freedom, faith, and authority not as settled truths but as dialogical struggles that resonate with modern hermeneutic concerns. At its heart, the project asks how *Paradise Lost* embodies Gadamer's hermeneutic principles of openness, historical situatedness, and the fusion of horizons. It further considers the ways in which Milton dramatizes freedom, faith, and authority as dynamic, contested categories that demand interpretive engagement. Finally, the research investigates whether Milton's epic can serve as a philosophical model of interpretation, one that speaks both to the theological debates of 17th century England and to contemporary discussions about pluralism, belief, and human autonomy.

This study hypothesizes that *Paradise Lost* enacts what can be called a *Miltonic hermeneutic model*, in which meaning does not arise from doctrinal closure but from sustained interpretive struggle. Like Deuteronomy 30:19, *"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live",* the poem portrays freedom as a burden of choice, faith as an act of engagement, and authority as contested yet binding.

While much scholarship has addressed Milton's theology, politics, and poetics, relatively few studies have explicitly framed *Paradise Lost* within Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. Existing works often note hermeneutic elements in passing but do not theorize them systematically as a model of interpretation. This study addresses that gap by uniting Milton's 17th century context with Gadamer's modern hermeneutics to articulate a framework where contradictions are not flaws but productive spaces for interpretive growth.

Thus, the present research contributes by showing that *Paradise Lost* not only reflects the theological and political debates of Milton's age but also offers a paradigm for philosophical hermeneutics. Like the Old Testament narratives that bind law, prophecy, and wisdom in dialogical tension, Milton's epic resists reduction, inviting readers into a living dialogue that transforms both text and interpreter.

Literature Review

Debates over freedom stand at the center of Milton scholarship. C. S. Lewis (1961) treated the poem as an orthodox Christian defense of divine justice, while later critics highlighted its ambiguity. Fish (1998) argued that the poem destabilizes readers' expectations, forcing them to reflect on their own interpretive presuppositions. Myers (2004) showed how Milton reshaped strands of Reformation theology to articulate a complex vision of liberty. Fallon (2012) expanded this, arguing that narrative itself becomes Milton's theological medium. More recently, Wang (2023) read Adam and Eve's choices against the backdrop of seventeenth-century struggles over individual liberty, while Urban (2017) explored the moral ambiguities of sincerity and deception in Satan's and humanity's falls. These readings echo Gadamer's claim that freedom is always conditioned by tradition.

Other scholars focus on the relation between freedom and reason. Walker (2007) challenged Fish's emphasis on obedience, insisting that Milton grounds faith in rational choice. This interpretation resonates with Gadamer's insistence that understanding is dialogical and rational, not blind. Scholars using Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, such as Muto (1970), Grzegorzewska (2014), and Rajan (2011 show how Milton dramatizes recognition, suspicion, and commitment. Mascetti (2006) described the poem as polyphonic, where multiple voices resist closure. These insights reflect the hermeneutic circle, in which meaning emerges only by revisiting earlier judgments in light of new understanding.

Milton's theology cannot be separated from politics. Worden (2007) and Cox (2007) connected his vision of divine hierarchy to debates about monarchy after the English Civil War. Trubowitz (2006) explored broader philosophical issues of embodiment and authority. Loewenstein (2013) emphasized how Milton justified republican ideals through theology, while Teskey (2013) situated the poem in the epic tradition. These studies align with Gadamer's idea that authority must be interpreted, not simply obeyed, a theme already present in the Old Testament, where Israel questioned Samuel about kingship (1 Samuel 8:10–18).

Despite this rich scholarship, few studies explicitly read *Paradise Lost* as itself a work of hermeneutics. Gadamer (2004) described understanding as a dialogue in which both text and reader are transformed. Milton's epic follows this process, showing that interpretation always balances tradition and critique. Recent comparative work by Masuwd (2024, 2025) extends this point into Islamic hermeneutics, demonstrating how historical contexts shape interpretation while still allowing openness and renewal. In this way, Milton's poem models what can be called a Miltonic hermeneutic: a way of reading that sustains contradictions, demands responsibility, and bridges past and present.

Research Methodology

This study uses Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as the main approach for analyzing John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Gadamer's theory treats understanding not as recovering a fixed meaning but as an open and historically situated dialogue between text and reader. In *Truth and Method* (2004), he explains that the "hermeneutic circle" is not a trap of subjectivity but the very process by which meaning emerges. Readers move back and forth between the parts of a text and its whole, between past traditions and present concerns. In this sense, reading Milton's epic becomes a hermeneutic event, where the 17th century horizon of the author meets the horizon of 21st century readers in a continuing dialogue.

The method in this article centers on close textual analysis. Key passages, such as Satan's claim that *"The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n."* (I.254–255), Eve's reasoning before eating the fruit, and Adam's lament after the Fall (X.743–745), are studied not in isolation but within the larger flow of the narrative. Earlier scenes gain new significance when re-read in light of later events, just as Eve's innocent self-reflection in Book IV foreshadows her temptation in Book IX. This recursive way of reading reflects Gadamer's view that pre-understanding (*Vorurteil*) is not a block but a productive step in interpretation. In line with Ricoeur (2008), this study balances a "*hermeneutics of suspicion*" (critical distance, e.g., toward Satan's rhetoric) with a "*hermeneutics of faith*" (receptive openness, e.g., toward Adam's desire for solidarity).

Historical context forms a second methodological axis. Gadamer's concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (historically effected consciousness) reminds us that Milton wrote in a world shaped by Reformation debates, republican politics, and humanist education. At the same time, readers today bring their own horizons, concerns about autonomy, pluralism, and belief. Interpretation, then, is a "*fusion of horizons*," where past and present meet without collapsing into a single meaning. This method mirrors the biblical example of Deuteronomy 30:19, where Moses presents Israel with a choice between life and death. The choice is framed within an ancient horizon but still speaks to later generations who must also decide.

A third methodological concern is critique. Habermas (1984) cautions that hermeneutics can unintentionally support authority if it is not critically aware. For *Paradise Lost*, this means not automatically accepting God's voice, the narrator, or tradition at face value, but examining how authority operates in dialogue with freedom and faith. Yet, following Gadamer, the aim is not to dismantle authority completely but to hold it in tension with human agency. This balance between critique and openness is central to what this study calls the "*Miltonic hermeneutic model*."

Finally, interpretation is approached as an ethical responsibility. Reading *Paradise Lost* is not just about appreciating poetry but about confronting the risks of freedom, the weight of responsibility, and the struggle of belief. Like Adam and Eve, who must "*choose life*" (cf. Deut. 30:19), readers must also recognize their own role in shaping meaning. The Miltonic hermeneutic model thus sees the poem not as a closed artifact but as a living dialogue that continues to challenge and transform its readers.

Results and Discussions

The hermeneutic reading of *Paradise Lost* reveals the poem as a site of dialogical struggle rather than doctrinal certainty. Milton frames human freedom, divine authority, and interpretive agency in ways that demand active engagement from readers. Satan's defiant proclamation, *"The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n"* (I.254–255), encapsulates a radically self-sufficient vision of freedom. Yet, when juxtaposed with Adam's anguished question after the Fall, *"O miserable of happy! is this the*

end / Of this new glorious world?" (X.720–721), it becomes clear that freedom in Milton's epic is fraught with responsibility and tragic consequence. This tension is mirrored in the biblical wisdom tradition, where Moses exhorts Israel in Deuteronomy 30:19 *"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live."* The juxtaposition of Milton and Scripture underscores Gadamer's (2004) point that meaning emerges dialogically, in the encounter of horizons where aspiration, responsibility, and consequence are continually reinterpreted.

Dialogical Interpretation and the Hermeneutic Circle

The *hermeneutic circle* becomes evident in the interpretive alternating between the part and the whole. For instance, Eve's self-reflection, *"What thou seest, / What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself"* (IV.470–471), is framed as innocent wonder, yet it is haunted by latent self-regard. When revisited in light of her temptation in Book IX, this earlier moment acquires new meaning. Her susceptibility to Satan's flattery, "Fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair" (IX.538), is foreshadowed by her earlier fascination with her reflection. This mirrors Genesis 3:6 "*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."* Both Milton and Genesis present Eve's sight and desire as interpretive acts, dramatizing the hermeneutic circle where earlier perceptions gain fuller meaning in hindsight.

Readers, too, undergo this circular process, revising their judgments as the narrative unfolds. Eve's desire to eat the fruit or Adam's decision to join her in solidarity, *"How can I live without thee, how forgo / Thy sweet converse and love so dearly join'd"* (IX.908–909), demand reconsideration in light of both earlier innocence and later consequence. Gadamer's insistence that pre-understanding is a condition of understanding is enacted within this narrative. Grzegorzewska (2014), drawing on Ricoeur, calls this anagnorisis: recognition that only arises through reinterpreting the past with new insight. The biblical account in Genesis 3:7, *"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves",* captures precisely this hermeneutic recognition, where knowledge is inseparable from loss.

Freedom, Responsibility, and the Burden of Choice

Freedom in Milton's epic is simultaneously a divine gift and a human burden. In Raphael's instruction, God insists: *"Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant faith or love"* (III.103–104). This resonates directly with Deuteronomy 30:19 and with Joshua's exhortation in Joshua 24:15 *"choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."* Both biblical and Miltonic texts underline that authentic devotion requires the possibility of refusal; obedience without freedom is no obedience at all.

Yet the same freedom becomes destructive in Satan's boastful reasoning *"Here at least / We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built / Here for his envy, will not drive us hence"* (I.258–260). His twisted claim echoes the rebellion of Israel in Numbers 14:4, when the people cried *"We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."* In both instances, freedom is misread as liberation from divine order rather than its fulfillment.

Adam's lament after the Fall *"Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"* (X.743–745) underscores the tragic weight of responsibility. His protest parallels Job 10:8–9 "*Your hands shaped me and made me?… Remember that you molded me like clay."* Both Adam and Job wrestle with the paradox of divine sovereignty and human fragility. Gadamer's (2004) concept of historically effected consciousness clarifies this dynamic: Adam cannot undo his situatedness within

creation but must reinterpret it through the horizon of guilt and loss. Kerrigan (1983) rightly observes that Milton's psychology of freedom dramatizes not liberation alone but its existential cost.

Faith, Tradition, and the Dynamics of Belief

Faith in *Paradise Lost* is not passive submission but an active negotiation with tradition. Eve's reasoning with Satan, *"What fear I then, rather what know to fear / Under this ignorance of good and evil, / Of God or death, of law or penalty?"* (IX.773–774), illustrates this hermeneutic struggle. Her deliberation reflects Genesis 3:1, where the serpent asks, *"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"* Tradition here is tested, questioned, and reinterpreted in light of desire and curiosity.

Raphael's warning to Adam, *"Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid: / Leave them to God above"* (VIII.167–168), embodies tradition as a guardrail, echoing Deuteronomy 29:29 *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."* Yet Milton refuses to depict this as absolute closure. His Eve still probes the boundaries of prohibition. Rajan (2011) describes this tension as a *double hermeneutic*. suspicion of Satan's rhetoric balanced by commitment to divine command. Gadamer's *fusion of horizons* clarifies the same: tradition never dictates meaning unilaterally but requires reinterpretation within each new context.

Authority, Politics, and Dialogues Across Time

The relationship between divine authority and political order in *Paradise Lost* reflects Milton's republican commitments. God's declaration, "*Freely we serve, / Because we freely love"* (V.538–539), frames authority as grounded in consent rather than coercion. This resonates with Exodus 19:8, where Israel responds to the covenant *"We will do everything the LORD has said."* Authority here is not tyrannical but ratified by willing devotion.

Yet Milton stages also the dangers of hierarchy. Satan's critique of divine monarchy, *"Who can in reason then or right assume / Monarchy over such as live by right / His equals"* (V.794–796), echoes 1 Samuel 8:11–18, where Samuel warns Israel about the burdens of kingship. Milton thereby draws on biblical suspicion of monarchy to complicate his political theology. Loewenstein (2016) reads this as Milton's attempt to justify republican ideals through theology, while Worden (2007) situates it within Civil War debates over governance. Gadamer's hermeneutics allows us to see these not as contradictions but as a dialogue across horizons: Milton dramatizes both the legitimacy and contestability of authority.

Multiplicity of Meanings and Narrative Openness

The narrative voice of *Paradise Lost* embodies Gadamer's principle of semantic openness. Satan is granted eloquence that often borders on persuasive truth *"What though the field be lost? / All is not lost; the unconquerable will"* (I.105–106). Yet the narrator reframes this immediately as vain boast. Readers are left in a hermeneutic oscillation reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 1:2 *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* The text forces readers to discern meaning amid contradiction rather than receive it ready-made.

Even the narrator himself confesses interpretive limitation *"What in me is dark / Illumine"* (I.22–23). This echoes Psalm 119:18 *"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."* Milton situates the poet, like the reader, in the posture of a seeker dependent on divine illumination. Gadamer (2004) insists that understanding is always unfinished. Milton enacts this principle in his self-reflexive narrative, where inspiration never dissolves interpretive struggle.

Bridging Horizons: Contemporary Resonance

Milton's themes of freedom, faith, and authority resonate far beyond their 17th century context. Adam's anguished reflection, *"O Heaven! in evil strait this day I stand"* (X.125), is not unlike the Psalmist's cry in Psalm 38:22 *"Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Savior."* Both voice the existential predicament of choice and despair, demonstrating the continuing relevance of Milton's hermeneutic vision.

Gadamer's notion of the *fusion of horizons* explains this ongoing vitality: Milton's 17th century struggles with divine justice meet 21st century debates about autonomy and pluralism, generating new insights in each era. As Teskey (2013) argues, *Paradise Lost* is not merely a relic but a modern poem whose openness sustains its relevance. The influence of the epic on education, culture and literature is beyond the boarders of its original boundaries. Learners in the muslim countries read this poem in relation to their understandin of the Quranic narrative (Pallawagau et al., 2025; Manshur et al., 2025; Abrahem & Baroud, 2025).

From Critical Reflection to Hermeneutic Synthesis: Toward a Miltonic Model

Critical reflection guards against uncritical acceptance of authority. Habermas (1981) warns that hermeneutics can legitimize ideology; Milton's God risks being misread as authoritarian, especially in lines such as *"What pleasure I from such obedience paid, / When will and reason (reason also is choice) / Useless and vain"* (III.97–99). Readers must therefore test authority against the dialogical dynamics of the text. Isaiah 1:18 provides a biblical parallel *"Come now, let us settle the matter, says the LORD."* Authority invites dialogue, not blind submission. At the same time, Gadamerian openness allows Milton's epic to be read as a dialogical synthesis. Satan's seductive claim, *"Ye shall be as Gods"* (IX.708), recalls Genesis 3:5, where the serpent promises the same. The hermeneutic task is to discern within plurality, balancing suspicion and faith.

Thus, the Miltonic hermeneutic model integrates critique and tradition, plurality and responsibility. It recognizes interpretation as provisional yet ethically binding, echoing both Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and the biblical texts. In *Paradise Lost*, understanding arises not from eliminating contradictions but from inhabiting them, making the epic itself a paradigm of hermeneutic philosophy.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine John Milton's *Paradise Lost* through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Its central goal was to explore how Milton's epic dramatizes interpretation itself as a dialogical process, where freedom, faith, and authority are not delivered as a doctrines but are negotiated through tension and choice. In doing so, the research addressed the questions of how Milton's text embodies hermeneutic principles, how it frames central theological categories in dialogical terms, and whether it can be read as providing a model of interpretation relevant beyond its 17th century context.

The findings confirm the research hypothesis: *Paradise Lost* enacts what may be called a *Miltonic hermeneutic model*, in which meaning does not emerge from resolving contradictions but from inhabiting them. Just as Deuteronomy 30:19 places before Israel the choice of life and death, Milton's epic portrays freedom as both a gift and a burden, faith as both a tradition and an inquiry, and authority as both a divine and a contested. This hermeneutic process is not a defect in the poem but its very strength, drawing readers into interpretive responsibility.

By identifying this model, the study addresses the gap in scholarship where Milton's text has been acknowledged as hermeneutic but rarely theorized systematically in Gadamerian terms. It demonstrates that Milton's epic is not merely a historical artifact or a theological

allegory but a philosophical drama of interpretation whose openness sustains its contemporary relevance.

The contribution of this research lies in positioning Paradise Lost as a paradigmatic case for philosophical hermeneutics: a text that, like the Old Testament itself, binds law, freedom, and wisdom into a living dialogue. It suggests that readers are not passive recipients of truth but participants in an ongoing interpretive event, compelled to wrestle with contradictions and to exercise discernment. In this way, Milton's poem becomes not only a 17th century epic but also a lasting guide for how philosophy, faith, and literature can meet in the task of understanding.

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