

## **Chaotic Effectuation of the Great Chain Of Being in John Milton's *Paradise Lost***

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### ABSTRACT

John Milton's (1608-74) *Paradise Lost* (probably written between 1660-65) holds its place as a great epic in English literature. In over ten thousand lines of blank verse, it renders the story of the fall of Satan and his compatriots, the creation of Man, and, most significantly, of Man's act of disobedience and its consequences which made Paradise lost for us.

As the title of the paper suggests, it aims at a thematic presentation of the Great Chain of Being depicted by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*, as well as the effectuating chaos that is permeated in the hierarchical structure of this chain in terms of superiority and inferiority.

Satan, in fact, plays an important role in the crucial moments of the poem via his rebellion resulted in his disobedience and, hence, the breakdown of the hierarchy. Thus, losing his proximate domain from God, Satan attempts to take Man, God's favorite creature, down to his domain at the bottom of the chain as an act of vengeance against his Superior.

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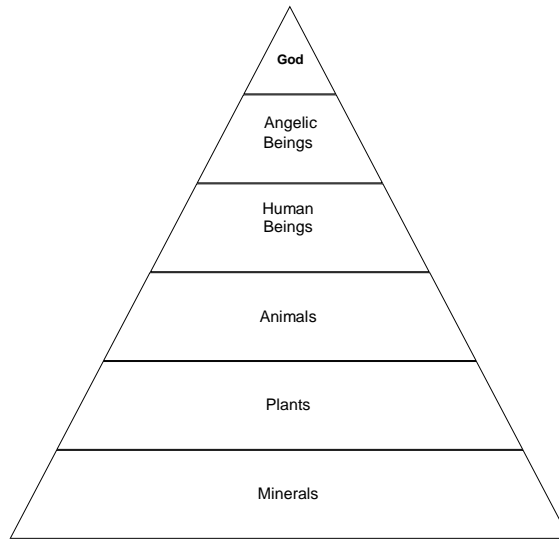
The conception of the "Great Chain of Being" (or *scala naturæ*, in Latin) is grounded in ideas about the nature of God in the Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, and is conceptualized by later thinkers into a comprehensive philosophy to account for the origin, types and relationships of all living things in the cosmos (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 139-40). Among such thinkers is Arthur O. Lovejoy (1965) who

identifies three basic intellectual components of the Great Chain of Being, which he calls the principles of plenitude, continuity, and gradation:

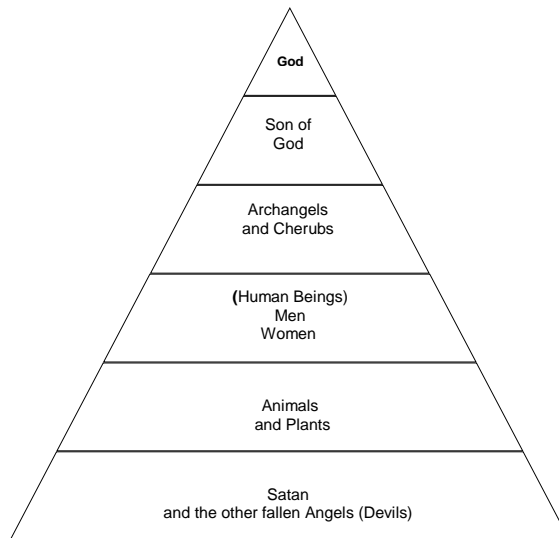
In the principle of Plenitude, God demonstrates his wisdom and goodness through the diversity of his species. Since omnipotence and humility seem to be incomplete, God is considered to be showing his creative power by bringing into existence not a finite sample of life forms, but all possible species. Consequently, there is no line recognized between real species and imaginary ones; everything must exist somewhere. The principle of Continuity holds that there are no gaps separating different kinds of living things. The transcendent line on which various species fall is itself unbroken, and it is an additional manifestation of God's wisdom and power that He creates species which blend into one another.

The principle of Gradation incorporates the assumption about the geometry of the natural order as essentially a line leading from the lowest up to the highest form of life. In other words, the existing species exhibit a hierarchy of status, and so compose a great chain, or ladder, of being, extending from the lowliest condition of the merest existence up to God Himself

Taking the last principle into consideration to represent the chain of being, Harmon and Holman (2006: 243) correspondently elaborate the Great Chain of Being as the belief which partakes the hierarchical system, extending upward from inanimate matter to things that exist but do not reason, to rational human beings, to angels, finally to God as in the following pyramid which provides clear-cut basic ranks of the hierarchical structure of the chain:



Accordingly, throughout the discourse of his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton corresponds to such a hierarchical structure as follows:



In the above pyramid, Milton presents such a system as a hierarchy based on proximity to God and His grace, leading to a hierarchy of angels, humans, animals, plants and devils. The Son is closest to God, with archangels and cherubs behind him. Adam precedes Eve and then animals and plants come next with Satan and the other fallen angels following last.

In Milton's view, among others, it is this Great Chain of Being that keeps stability in the universe, and any action that tries to disturb this balance will have annihilating consequences since "the proper running of the hierarchical structure of the chain requires the obedience of inferiors to their superiors. Hence, God, for being God, is by definition – the Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Just – superior to every other things in the universe and should always be obeyed" (Duran, 2007: 101).

However, disturbing such a balance in the chain, as Milton permeates, is paralleled with acts of disobedience: the rebellion of the fallen angels led by Satan and their disobedience and transgression side by side with Man's disobedience and dominion which becomes a subject of temptation by Satan. Thus, Satan first act of disobedience creates a huge disorder in the chain and leads the whole hierarchy into an effectuating chaos in terms of superiority and inferiority.

Milton starts his epic by asking the Heavenly Muse to dispel his ignorance and weakness and raise him to sublime heights, so that he may be able to deal adequately with a great subject and thereby establish the justice of the ways of God to Man. Thus, he announces that "he will attempt a defense of God's just" (Danielson, 1999: 144):

Sing heavenly muse ... what in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert eternal providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.

[I: 6-26]

But Milton's opening statement here is quite ironical regarding the chaos that he is going to depict in the chain since one of the ingenious structural strategies of the hierarchical structure in *Paradise Lost* is to present Satan, in the first two books, as far superior to his God: the rebel against God, in terms of tyrannical monarch (Corns, 1987: 19; and Bradford, 2001: 140). It is this rebellion that leads to the sort of disorder that Milton presents in this epic. The action begins in medias res – in the middle of events – with Satan and his fellow rebel angels

who are found chained to a lake of fire in Hell. Milton, here, introduces Satan and his horrid crew cast down into a recently constructed Hell after their failed rebellion against God (Bradford, 2001: 96). Satan seems to be coming to his conscious after the fall. Then, Satan, who was once called Lucifer in Heaven, illustrates the reason of his fall with the other fallen angels. He presumes that, in Heaven, he was equal to God and when God asked him to bow for the Son, Satan did not bow finding himself superior to the Son: "To bow and sue for grace / With suppliant knee, and deify his power [I: 111-112]." Hence, he declared war against the Creator and many angels joined him, shaking God's throne in a cosmic battle. Here, Milton shows how the destructive battle over the Chain of Being begins. Being banished from his proximity to God, Satan decides to wage a war against God and His son in order to create anarchy in the chain:

He trusted to have equaled the most High,  
If he opposed; and with ambitious aim  
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God  
Raised impious War in Heaven and battle proud  
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power  
Hurled headlong flaming from the Ethereal Sky  
With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,  
Who durst defy the Omnipotent to Arms.

[I: 40-49]

Satan, moreover, tells Beelzebub, another fallen angel, that all is not lost. He will never bow to God and His son, and now knowing more of the extent of God's might, the rebellion angels might better know how to continue the fight against God in an eternal war. This, indeed, implicates that Satan, who chooses to commit an act that goes against the basic laws of God and His Son, challenging the very nature of the universe, is constant at his attempts to destroy the hierarchy of the chain through his ongoing rebellion:

Since through experience of this great event  
In Arms not worse, in foresight much advanced,  
We may with more successful hope resolve  
To wage by force or guile eternal War

Irreconcilable, to our grand Foe,  
Who now triumphs, and in the excess of joy  
Sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heaven.

[I: 118-124]

Again Satan repels God and claims that here in Hell they do not ever have to obey God again. He remains proud and claims that, in Hell, he will at least be free: he is no more subservient to God. In his opinion, it is better to be supreme in Hell than to live as subordinate in Heaven. Satan, thus, incarnates the image of chaos that turns the chain upside down:

Here at least  
We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.

[I: 258-263]

Moreover, Satan and the fallen angels will work to instill evil in all good things so as to always anger and vex God, his superior. Satan hears of a new kind of creation that God intends on making called Man. They will continue the war against Heaven but the battlefield will be moved to the world of mankind. This war represents the act of revenge Satan wants to perform against God and Man. Moreover, it is the full manifestation of the anarchy that Satan creates:

Through God's high sufferance for the trial of man,  
By falsities and lies the greatest part  
Of Mankind they corrupted to forsake  
God their Creator, and the invisible  
Glory of him that made them, to transform  
Oft to the Image of a Brute, adorned  
With gay Religions full of Pomp and Gold,  
And Devils to adore for Deities:

[I: 366-373]

Satan keeps on his pride and confidence of defeating God, his superior. He draws the fallen angels into a large council in Pandemonium: Satan's throne in Hell. He addresses them to give them courage. After all, he says, they need not fear ever falling again. He asks for suggestions on how to best continue battling Heaven:

Satan exalted sat, by merit raised  
To that bad eminence; and from despair  
Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires  
Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue  
Vain War with Heaven, and by success untaught  
His proud imaginations thus displayed.

[II: 5-10]

The fallen angels involve in a debate to find alternatives to defeat God, principally Satan, Moloch, Belial, Mammon, and Beelzebub. The latter tells them of a new race that God has created, called Man. Man is not as powerful as the angels, but he is God's chosen favorite among creations. Beelzebub suggests that they seek revenge against God by seducing man to their side, and all fallen angels agree unanimously to this decision:

Thus Beelzebub  
Pleaded his devilish Counsel, first devised  
By Satan, and in part proposed: for whence,  
But from the Author of all ill could Spring  
So deep a malice, to confound the race  
Of mankind in one root, and Earth with Hell  
To mingle and involve, done all to spite  
The great Creator? But their spite still serves  
His glory to augment. The bold design  
Pleaded highly those infernal States, and joy  
Sparkled in all their eyes; with full assent  
They vote: whereat his speech he thus renews.

[II: 378-389]

In addition of creating such a heroic image of Satan of being a military leader who is challenging the authority of God and leading his army to battle against God, Milton depicts a more equal image of Satan of being a creator himself before his fall. Sin, Satan's daughter, is created from his head while he presumes to be greater than God and decides to battle against Him in Heaven. He rapes his daughter and thus Death, his son, is born. So, Satan creates evil: the direction away from God. By doing so, Satan wants to create a chasm in the Chain of Being by giving Man access to other domains in the chain through evil. Thus, evil will bring Man down to the domain of evil at the bottom of the chain:

In bold conspiracy against Heaven's King,  
 All on a sudden miserable pain  
 Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum  
 In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast  
 Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,  
 Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,  
 Then shining heavenly fair, a Goddess armed  
 Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized  
 All the Host of Heaven; back they recoiled afraid  
 At first, and called me Sin,

[II: 751-760]

And also:

Pensive here I sat  
 Alone, but long I sat not, till my womb  
 Pregnant by thee ...  
 I fled, and cried out Death;  
 Hell trembled at the hideous Name, and sighed  
 From all her Caves, and back resounded Death.

[II: 777-789]

Moreover, Milton's view of the Great Chain of Being works at a more sophisticated level: as gender issues between Adam and Eve. The monoliths of the hierarchical state, God as being the ultimate determinant of human action and fate, are challenged by ideas which allocated more esteem to Man – his free will (Bradford, 2001: 138). Milton, in fact,



views the hierarchy of Adam being submissive to God and Eve being submissive to Adam as a natural God given order (Danielson, 2006: 175-9). The implication, here, is that it is men who are in contact with God, and women are to learn about God only through men: Eve addresses Adam saying, "God is thy law, thou is mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" [IV: 636-637]. However, Eve soon transgresses Adam's dominion over her for working alone in the Garden of Eden. She manages to convince him to split up and divide the work to get more of it done. Actually, Milton implicates that Eve challenges Adam, her superior, to be able to work alone, and Adam yields to her: "to short absence I could yield" [IX: 248], his inferior, Eve. The problem here lies with both humans. Eve should not argue with her superior Adam, but likewise, Adam should not yield his authority to his inferior, Eve:

Eve to Adam:

Thou therefore now advise  
Or hear what to my mind first thoughts present,  
Let us divide our labours, thou where choice  
Leads thee, or where most needs, whether wind  
The woodbine round this arbour, or direct  
The clasping ivy where to climb, while I  
In yonder spring of roses intermixed  
With myrtle, find what to redress till noon:  
[IX: 212-20]

In order to succeed in creating chaos in the chain, Satan turns to Eve who becomes a subject of temptation by Satan himself who hides in a serpent; both are inferior to her and belong to a lower rank than hers: "So spake the enemy of mankind, enclosed / In serpent, inmate bad, and toward Eve" [IX: 494-5]. She is tempted to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil: "naming thee the tree / of knowledge,

knowledge of good and evil" [IX: 751-2]. Satan, in fact, persuades her that eating from that tree will make her a goddess and, hence, she will be equal to God, her superior: "who shouldst be seen / A goddess among gods" [IX: 546-7]. She eats from the Tree and also seduces Adam to eat too. This deed is a total transgression and disobedience to God authority and superiority over them:

Eve when eating the forbidden fruit:

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour  
Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:  
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her sear  
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,  
That all was lost.

[IX: 780-4]

Satan, consequently, succeeds in achieving his goal, making Eve tempt Adam; the matter that leads to farther the proximity of Man away from God, is by creating the necessary disorder in the chain and also showing his rage against his Creator. The following extract is the way how Eve tempts Adam to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge:

Hast thou not wondered, Adam, at my stay?  
Thee I have missed, and thought it long, deprived  
Thy presence, agony of love till now  
Not felt, nor shall be twice, for never more  
Mean I to try, what rash untried I sought,  
The pain of absence from thy sight. But strange  
Hath been the cause, and wonderful to hear:  
This tree is not as we are told, a tree  
Of danger tasted, nor to evil unknown  
Opening the way, but of divine effect  
To open eyes, and make gods who taste;  
And hath been tasted such: the serpent wise,  
Or not restrained as we, or not obeying,  
Hath eaten of the fruit, and is become,  
Not dead, as we are threatened, but thenceforth

Endued with human voice and human sense,  
Reasoning to admiration, and with me  
Persuasively hath so prevailed, that I  
Have also tasted, and have also found  
The effects to correspond, opener mine eyes,  
Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart,  
And growing up to godhead; which for thee  
Chiefly I sought, without thee can despise.  
For bliss, as thou hast part, to me is bliss,  
Tedious, unshared with thee, and odious soon.  
Thou therefore also taste, that equal lot  
May join us, equal joy, as equal love;  
Lest thou not tasting, different degree  
Disjoin us, and I then too late renounce  
Deity for thee, when fate will not permit.

[IX: 856-85]

In conclusion, Milton's *Paradise Lost* fully delineates the clutter Satan creates when he first disobeys God for not bowing to His son. This disorder is created as an act of vengeance on God's son, and His new creature, Man. Satan, who was once part of Angels, is now at the bottom of the chain. He wants to bring Man to the devil's domain too in order to heal his pricked pride and dignity. Thus, he creates all this mess in the chain just to show superiority and power over God's new creature.

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تحقيق الفوضى في سلسلة الوجود العظيمة  
في ملحمة "الفردوس المفقود" لجون ملتون

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### المستخلص

الفردوس المفقود لجون ملتون (١٦٠٨-١٦٧٤) والتي كتبت على الأرجح بين عامي ١٦٦٠-١٦٦٥ تمتلك مكانة مميزة كواحدة من اعظم الملاحم الشعرية التي كتبت في الادب الانكليزي. من خلال اكثر من عشرة الاف بيت من الشعر الحر، تعرض الملحمة سقوط الشيطان و رفاقه و خلق الانسان، كما تتطرق الملحمة بشكل ملفت للنظر لعصيان الانسان و عواقب ذلك العصيان.

وكما يبين عنوان البحث، فان البحث يهدف الى عرض دراسة فكرية حول موضوع سلسلة الوجود العظيمة كما يعرضها جون ملتون في ملحمة "الفردوس المفقود"، بالاضافة الى ذلك يتناول البحث موضوع تحقيق الفوضى التي تغلغلت في النظام الهرمي لتلك السلسلة من خلال الصراع بين السلطة العليا و السلطة الدنيا. و يلعب الشيطان دورا مهما في كثير من اللحظات الحاسمة في الملحمة عن طريق الثورة الناتجة عن عصيانه و الذي ادى الى الانهيار داخل النظام الهرمي. لذلك فان خسارة الشيطان لمنزلته من قبل الرب جعله يحاول جاهدا الاستحواذ على الانسان الذي يعتبر المخلوق المفضل لدى الرب و جلبه الى قعر الهرم في سلسلة الوجود كنوع من الانتقام الموجه ضد الرب.