

Satan's Space Travel: an Oblique Fall

by *Antonella Piazza*

Premise

But first who shall we send
In search of this *new world*, whom shall we find
Sufficient? Who shall tempt with *wand'ring feet*
The dark unbottomed infinite abyss
And through the *palpable obscure* find out
His uncouth *way*, or spread his aery *flight*
Upborne with indefatigable wings
Over the vast abrupt, ere he arrive
The *happy isle*; ...? (*PL*, II, 402-410, emphasis added)¹.

Satan's chief commander, Beelzebub, offers the rebel angels – fallen downwards into the bottomless pit of darkness – the solution to rise up back to light: instead of fighting back with the overpowering forces of God's army, they, in revenge, will provoke the fall and death of God's loved newly created beings: the first woman and the first man. In order to do so, the fallen spirits realize that a long, dangerous and unprecedented journey from hell to «the new world», to the «happy isle», has to be taken and that, for this venture, there cannot be a more courageously daring, cunning and physically efficient hero/pilot (as well as a space traveler as we shall soon see) than their general Satan. *Paradise Lost* is governed pervasively not just by Satan and his heroic bodily and moral bearing – as the Romantics enthusiastically emphasized – but by his solitary and wandering journey from and back to hell. Satan, in fact, leaves in Book II and goes back in Book X². His will be a *wandering* journey because if its destination – «the happy isle» – is set, its direction, the «way», the road, is not³. In a way, to «justify the ways of God to men» (I, 26) – as an atonement for the fall and a reparation for the loss of Paradise – Milton chooses Satan tracing maps and trying itineraries in a becoming unknown new space, as a paradigm of movement.

While the space of Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be reduced to a neat map/structure describing the Ptolemaic stable concentric world of Aris-

totelian Thomism with the devil fixed at its centre, in Milton's divine epic space cannot be easily represented by a map⁴. Milton's spatial dimension is crossed, defined, even created mainly by Satan's moving body and by his limited point of view⁵, so that the poem represents movement in space as well as a moving space. *Paradise Lost* features a mapping of the cosmos rather than its map or a whole cosmography⁶.

My article focuses on the directions of movement and of moving bodies in a space where Milton still keeps organically together the prescriptive ethics of the Bible, Aristotelian physics in a Ptolemaic cosmos and the new Copernican heavens of Galileo's astronomy. In *Delirious Milton* Gordon Teskey argues: «These incompatible worlds – an *old* world created by God, now in a state of advanced metaphysical decay, and a *new* world in the process of creation by humankind – collide at a historical juncture for which Milton alone was prepared». [“emphasis added”]⁷. But ultimately that «new world» – Satan's final destination – is both God's latest “new” achievement in the *Genesis* and the “new world” of the geographical and astronomical discoveries of the “New Science”.

Unlike Ulysses and early modern explorers, Satan knows where to go, but he doesn't know – unlike Ulysses and Columbus and the new colonizers – how to go: he does not know “the way”. In a narrative where apparently Satan figures as a merchant traveller and a colonizer of paradise, Samuel Johnson remarks that the subject of *Paradise Lost* is «not the destruction of a city, the conduct of a colony, or the foundation of an empire», but «the fate of worlds»⁸, that is, their space, time, motion, relations, beginning, endings, ways. If Satan's “colonial” journey has as its end the traffic of souls – made possible by the building of a bridge between earth and hell (which is the reification of his journey), it ends, on a cosmic level, entropically with hell's mouth/gates shut up by the abject body of Death overfilled with dead bodies. At the end of time, divine ecology will be accomplished and Satan barred for ever in hell (x, 629-637). But Milton had already commented on the infinite quality of creation: «Space may produce new worlds» (I, 650)⁹.

Satan gets out of Hell

Hell's gates are Satan's journey's first stop. In hell, before his departure, the effort of Satan's movement is breaking the chains and flying up: its movement is downside up: «So stretched out huge in length the Arch-Fiend lay / Chained on the burning lake; / Then with expanded wings he steers *his flight/Aloft*...incumbent on the dusky air» (I, 209-212, emphasis added). He moves swiftly flying down («Now shaves with level wing the deep», II, 634) and «then soars / Up to the fiery concave tow'ring high»

(II, 635-636). Satan's moving body delimits and describes the space¹⁰, he even creates it. When he commands his fellow angels «Awake, arise, or be ever fallen» (I, 328), Satan stands up giant-sized with a shield whose circumference «Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views / At ev'ning from the top of Fesole, / Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands, / Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe» (I, 287-291). The first (out of three) allusion to Galileo has been widely discussed. Galileo's telescope here certainly awards Satan the size and substance of an astronomical and astronaut's body. From hell – the dark pit – which, as Milton says in the *Argument*, is not “in the center”, Satan starts his “wandering” journey through space:

Meanwhile the Adversary of God and Man,
Satan, with thoughts inflamed of highest design,
Puts on swift wings, and toward the gates of Hell
Explores his solitary flight (II, 629-632).

He laboriously wins his way out of the gates of Hell, conquering the trust of its guardians -Sin and Death, his monstrous progeny – and finds himself involved in Chaos.

*Satan and Chaos*¹¹

Before their eyes in sudden view appear
The secrets of the hoary Deep-- a dark
Illimitable ocean, without bound,
Without dimension [...]
Into this wild Abyss,
The womb of Nature, and perhaps her grave,
Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly...

Satan successfully crosses the refractory Chaos (II, 871-1055). Gordon Teskey is right in distinguishing Chaos as a character, the owner of that dimension, from Chaos as the cosmic principle of a Lucretian nature as well as from Chaos as a narrative scene. It is in Chaos as a narrative dimension that Satan's movement will be now considered. He confronts:

a dark
Illimitable ocean, without bound,
Without dimension: where length, breadth, and highth,
And time, and place, are lost;

[...]
 For Hot, Cold, Moist, and Dry, four champions fierce,
 Strive here for maistrie...

At the sight of that sublime horror Satan's heart almost fails but

At last his sail-broad vans
 He spreads for flight, and, in the surging smoke
 Uplifted, spurns the ground; thence many a league,
 As in a cloudy chair, ascending rides
 Audacious; but, that seat soon failing, meets
 A vast vacuity.

Only chance lets him regain his position and he painfully makes his way with all the instruments at disposal of his metamorphic body:

O'er bog or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare,
 With head, hands, wings, or feet, pursues *his way*,
 And swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies.

Gordon Teskey argues that «Narrative makes Milton make chaos a place. Thus the place that is no place, the place “where length, / breadth, and highth, and time, and place, are lost” has place, time, height and breadth during Satan's journey»¹². Satan's body literally contributes to the making of Chaos a space and to its mapping. Milton's Chaos is a problematic category and dimension: is it opposed to Cosmos? Is it connected to, or opposed to, creation? Among other definitions, it is the poetic translation of Milton's materialistic monism. «One matter all» is Milton's unequivocal definition of his monism which points to no break between spirit and substance, form and content and celebrates, as Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* had done, the sufficiency of matter, that is its capacity to produce and sustain, in all its variety, the universe. «The thingness or substantiality of this world was, in [Milton's] theology, no small part of the glory of God. He favored marriage between the old humanism and the new empiricism, not a divorce», William Kerrigan claims¹³.

Satan's progeny, Sin and Death, at the moment of Eve and Adam's fall, tracing back Satan's itinerary, will be able to cross and penetrate the inhospitable space of Chaos by building a piece of architecture, a bridge between Hell and Earth across Chaos («Sin and Death amain, / Following his track (such was the will of Heaven) / Paved after him a broad and beaten way»). Here the mapping is shaped as bridging, as a connection between the subject and a space where subject and space depend upon one another. In Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* space is no

longer just observed by a subject, but space is where the subject finds himself enclosed with his whole body. Here an important nexus is established between internal and external spaces. The subject – Satan in this case – maps the space with his whole body: «With head, hands, wings, or feet, pursues *his way*» (emphasis added).

In the end, Satan, again with an apparently ascending movement and a terrible effort, is able to win his way out of chaos:

glad that now his sea should find a shore,
With fresh alacrity and force renewed
Springs *upward*, like a pyramid of fire,
Into the wild expanse (emphasis added).

Satan's oblique fall in the universe

Though impenetrable, Satan is able to penetrate Chaos because in Milton's monistic materialism there is no such break of continuity between substance and spirit as there is in Aristotelian physics. The movement of Satan out of Chaos, as a pyramidal missile, is unmistakably upwards: in a way he dives upwards into an undoubtedly drastically different space. He explodes into the light of creation and is dazzled by the dawn of Creation (anticipated by the poet's hymn to light – «Holy light [...] since God is light», III, 1-3). Through Satan's point of view, the poem witnesses and sings the birth of the Universe, what future scientists would call the Big Bang. And when Satan emerges in the realm of light, the universe is newly born because – according to Genesis – God's decision of creating a «new world» derives from his desire to “repair” the recent loss caused by the fall of the rebel angels. Satan's journey records and maps space, time and history in their making.

While Satan's movement in Chaos is painful – «So he with difficulty and labour hard / Moved on. / With difficulty and labour he» –, flying through the universe exhilarates him:

Round he surveys, [...] (III, 555)
[...] from pole to pole
He views in breadth, and without longer pause
Down right into the world's first region throws
His flight precipitant and winds with *ease*
Through the pure marble air *his oblique way*
Amongst innumerable stars, that shone
Stars distant, but nigh hand seemed other worlds:
Or other worlds they seemed, or happy isles (III, 560-567, emphasis added).

While Satan flies freely and lightly («with ease») through the heavens, his eyes as well as his body govern the space. Sight, as Galileo's telescope witnesses, is the privileged organ for investigating and enjoying the sky. Satan has moved from the realm of physics to the dimension of astronomy. When Satan directs «his oblique way» to the sun, Galileo is immediately evoked:

There lands the Fiend, a spot like which perhaps
Astronomer in the sun's lucent orb
 Through *his glazed optic tube* yet never saw (III, 588-590).

The sun was, so to speak, at the centre of the Copernican Revolution, of the violent struggle for hegemony of the two great systems of the world, the Ptolemaic and the Copernican. Galileo not only defended Copernicanism at the risk of his life and liberty, but proved it to be true with the help of the telescope, seminally connecting, by the use of the “glazed optic glass” theory, with technology (which is his pioneering experimental method)¹⁴. But the change of paradigm was not so abrupt and immediate as the definition of Copernican Revolution might suggest¹⁵. The two systems, in fact, still coexist in Milton's as well as in Galileo's master texts, at least in the title of the latter's masterpiece and throughout the spaces of the former's epic.

Although in Book VIII – the Book of Astronomy, inspired by Urania – Raphael warns and discourages Adam's intellectual hubris – «Be lowly wise» (VIII, 173) – the angel (a divine intelligence) recognizes the aesthetic and intellectual allure of Nature:

To ask or search blame thee not, *for Heav'n*
Is as the Book of God before thee set,
 Wherein to read his wondrous Works, and learn
 His Seasons, Hours, or Days, or Months, or Years
 (VIII, 66-69, emphasis mine).

The Archangel evidently echoes, here, Galileo's well-known position expressed in his *Copernican Letters* where he establishes a distinction as well a close relation between the Book of God and the Book of Nature. They were not incompatible books: the Bible and Nature were both divine creations though written, according to Galileo, in different languages. While in the Holy Text God speaks a figurative and metaphorical language for mankind's ethical direction, he speaks, in Nature, by mathematical and geometrical figures and symbols accessible to a knowledgeable reader. In one move Galileo both saves the authority of the Bible and, by divinizing Nature, authorizes and justifies its intellectual accessibility. If for Adam

«heav'n is [...] too high» (VIII, 172), that is not the case with both the poet and Satan. Book III opens with the poet's hymn to light and his mourning for his loss of sight which forbids him to enjoy nature and limits his knowledge:

But cloud instead, and ever during dark
 Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
 Cut off, and *for the book of knowledge fair*
 Presented with a universal blank
 Of Nature's works to me expunged and razed,
 And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out (III, 45-50).

Although the poet implores the «celestial light» to «shine inward» (VIII, 51-52), he leaves Satan's eyes the task of crossing the heavens and directing his flight through a Ptolemaic and Copernican world, where the sun seems to occupy a wonderfully strategic position:

[...] Above them all
 The golden sun in splendour likest heaven
 Allured *his eyes*. Thither his course he bends
 Through the calm firmament (*but up or down,*
By center, or eccentric hard to tell,
Or longitude) where the great luminary
 Aloof the vulgar constellations thick,
 That from *his lordly eye* keep distance due,
 Dispense light from far
 (III, 571-579) (emphasis added).

References to the Copernican question are unmistakable¹⁶. Satan follows an orbit – «by centre, or eccentric» – which addresses the crucial question raised by Galileo when in the *Sidereus Nuncius* conveyed his discovery of the satellites of Jupiter¹⁷. If heavenly bodies turned around another moving body (Jupiter and his satellites figured as a Copernican micro-system), this implied that the earth was no longer *the* only and unique fixed centre of the created universe, but that there were a lot of centres moving in different directions: «(but up or down, / By center, or eccentric hard to tell, / Or longitude)».

Satan's portentous flight from Hell to Earth is, as I've been saying, Milton's poetical mapping of the cosmos: while Chaos intractably resists Satan's movement, in the Galilean dimension of the second part of the journey, space and light coincide with Satan's exhilaration. Almost on the point of finally landing on Earth, Satan:

Took leave, and toward the coast of earth beneath,
 Down from th' ecliptic, sped with hoped success,
Throws his steep flight in many an airy wheel,
 Nor stayed till on Niphates' top he lights. (III, 739-742, emphasis added)

The second part of Satan's flight brings us – according to Angus Fletcher «directly into the *scene of sublime motion*».

In Book III Satan lands on the surface of the earth, an event that permits the poet to describe space travel in magnificent rolling rhythms-the same oceanic effect Stanley Kubrick achieved in *2001* when he suddenly shifted his musical score into Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*. Our uncertainty about knowing how to orient our perspective is Milton's chief interest; and for this passage [...] we are reminded that, for Sergei Eisenstein, the archetype of film montage was the Miltonic style in *Paradise Lost*¹⁸.

It is the motion of the fallen and falling angel, but Galileo's presence makes that fall physical as well as metaphysical. Satan's mapping flight redirects motion. In a centreless or multi centred (or infinite) universe, falling is not going just downwards, but moving in multiple directions: «His flight precipitant and winds with *ease* / Through the pure marble air *his oblique way* / Amongst innumerable stars». If the myths of Icarus and Pheton are still metaphors for Satan's vertical fall¹⁹, the movement which Satan's journey follows through both the poet's and the astronomer's universe is multidirectional. Satan as well as the celestial bodies move laterally in infinite directions:

Which else to several spheres thou must ascribe,
 Moved contrary with *thwart obliquities*,
 Or save the sun his labor, and that swift
 Nocturnal and diurnal –
 [...] which needs not thy belief. (VIII, 131-134, 136).

With Galileo motion started to be thought about “relativistically”. «Traditionally the axis of the Fall was vertical, from Heaven down to Hell below, but owing to Galileo's discovery as the ‘Law of the Fall’, which in studying the paths of projectiles, he related to lateral motions, the vertical axis has lost some of its privileged status»²⁰. When the laws of inertia made difficult to make a distinction between a state of rest and a state of motion, a point of reference or the observer's role started to acquire its fully modern sense and this is one major role of Satan's commanding eye (and body) during his astronautic trip. The cosmic idea of gravitational planes for moving planets and dimensions of stasis, moreover, allowed the boundaries of the

universe to expand according to Bruno's idea of infinite worlds, and gravity is in a large sense omnidirectionally lateral. Wondering "obliquely" is the astronomical path of the stars but also the ethical direction («the solitary way») which moves «the wandering steps and slow» of the first couple out of Eden in the last lines of the poem. Although damned and turned to Hell, Satan's pioneering journey reveals that in a decentered and omnidirectional world where movement is bound to wander and err, one's point of view – the hoped for «paradise within» in the case of the first couple – becomes the only way for a possible creative salvation and reparation. Cosmology reorients ethics, rejustifying God's ways.

«Oblique way»: Satan's and Adam and Eve's will be lateral falls. Falls will be wandering demonic flights, wandering planets and wandering human steps. The scientific as well as the moral direction of the new Copernican man are bound to err, which is also Milton's disphoric scepticism towards the Copernican paradigm. Milton's poem is the last case in which poetry could still organically include and comprehend the two books: the Bible and the Book of Nature, the reasons of faith and the reasons of science: an epic dimension which, in Milton's reparative move, does not need victims of freedom of thought like Bruno, Galileo and Milton himself.

Notes

1. All the quotations are from John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (trans. R. Sanesi), Mondadori, Milano 1990.

2. If we divide the epic in three parts of four books each, we perceive more clearly the pervasive presence of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. The first four books are ruled by him [1. *The building and government of Pandemonium*; 2. *Out of Hell into Chaos*; 3. *In the heavens*; 4. *He flies from the sun to Eden*]. In the second part (Books V-VIII) even though he is fled and is circuiting the earth in book V and VI he is the hero of the rebel army in the war in heaven; in VII-VIII God makes the world as a compensation to the loss of the rebels. In the third part Raphael speaks of the universe Satan has just crossed; in Book IX Satan causes the fall; in X he goes back to hell where he gets the wages of his sin, in Books XI-XII the consequences of Satan's temptation are unfolded. See G. Qvarnström, *The Enchanted Palace. Some Structural Aspects of Paradise Lost*, Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm 1967.

3. See S. L. Zivley, *Satan in Orbit: Paradise Lost: IX:48-86*, in "Milton Quarterly" 31, 4, 1997, pp. 130-6.

It is worth noticing that in the poem's last line at the expulsion from Eden also Adam's and Eve's way will be wandering and solitary.

4. There have been attempts to map the space of the poem, but they proved rather unsuccessful and not so faithful. See, among others, H. Williams Sage, *The Universe as Pictured in Milton's Paradise Lost: an Illustrated Study for Personal and Class Use*, Cornell University Library, Ithaca-New York 1915.

5. As A. Fowler (*Paradise Lost*, ed.) explains, Milton's cosmology is «an exact reproduction, correct in every geographical detail, of the actual world as it appears from a unique view point» (p. 447).

6. A. Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2007.

7. *Delirious Milton. The Fate of the Poet in Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)-London 2006, p. 25.

8. *Lives of the English Poets* (1779), ed. by G. Birbeck Hill, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995 quoted in G. Teskey (ed.), *Paradise Lost*, Harvard University Press, New York-London 2005, p. 384.

9. See also II, 915-916: «Unless the Almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds».

10. Satan's body, endowed with Galileo's optic glass, is defined by Denise Albanese (*New Science, New World*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 1996), as prosthetic, that is as an organism modified by a technological instrument which makes Satan the archetype of the cyborg brilliantly analyzed by Donna Haraway.

11. On Chaos as a principle connected or opposed to Creation, while R. Schwartz (see *Remembering and Repeating. On Milton's Theology and Poetics*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1993) maintains that in *Paradise Lost* Chaos is a dimension connected to Creation, C. Gimelli Martin ("*Boundless the Deep*": *Milton, Pascal, and the Theology of Relative Space*, in "English Literary History", 63, 1, 1996, pp. 45-78), by contrast, considers the principle of Chaos in opposition to Creation.

12. Teskey, *Paradise Lost*, cit., 2006, p. 70.

13. *The Sacred Complex. On the Psychogenesis of "Paradise Lost"*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)-London 1983, p. 195.

14. See Albanese, *New Science, New World*, cit., and V. Ronchi, *Il cannocchiale di Galileo e la scienza del Seicento*, Einaudi, Torino 1958.

15. «Abandonment of the Ptolemaic system was necessarily gradual, because astronomy had been the frame of almost all the old world-picture's multifarious interlocking components. Its complicated correspondences were connected through the planetary deities and zodiacal signs as if through a telephone exchange. Reordering the planets meant altering the entire intellectual world metaphors, memory systems, *encyclopaedias*, and all. A change so comprehensive called for laborious preparatory phases, for example de-animation of the macrocosmic universe. Autonomous agency had to be eradicated from the astronomical world by a painfully slow, inchmeal process. Johann Kepler (1571-1630) might calculate the orbits of the planets to be elliptical; yet, for many of his contemporaries, spiritual Intelligences haunted the ruins of the spheres». in A. Fowler, *Time's Purpled Masquers: Stars and the Afterlife in Renaissance English*, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, p. 34.

16. In 1609 as an example, Kepler had published his theory according to which planets would turn round the sun thanks to the magnetic energy irradiated by the sun.

17. There is in Milton's poem an explicit reference to Jupiter and his satellites: «and other suns perhaps/With their attendant moons thou wilt descry» (VIII, 148-149).

18. Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*, cit., p. 141.

19. In an authoritative article David Quint focuses, on the contrary, on the *divorce* between Lucretius' godless nature and Milton's providential universe. The myths of Icarus and Phaethon are in both poems – the critic argues-figures of the fall, but while in Lucretius that is a movement into meaninglessness, in Milton falling downwards and upwards are figures of damnation and salvation. «The resonance [...] of the Icarus and Phaethon myths [...] is [...] felt throughout *Paradise Lost* as it returns again and again to the opposition of flying upwards and falling down. Here, too, moralizing may help keep at bay the Lucretian prospect of a universe that is falling into nonmeaning. It is not enough to portray the Fall: fallness is measured by flightlessness or false attempts at flight», D. Quint, *Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaeton and Lucretius in Paradise Lost*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", 57, 2004, pp. 847-81; p. 871.

20. Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 146-7.