The Dethronement of the Angels

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Several striking images in Dante's "Paradiso" provide insight into the relation of angels to humanity and hence into the structure of the spiritual universe. One such image is of a point of immaterial light, so bright in its effulgence that "the eye on which it blazes needs must close because of its great keenness." (XXVIII, 17-18) Beatrice informs Dante that the heavens and all nature hang from this point and that the descending circles he observes are angelic choirs.

She names and explains the nine orders of angels, adhering to the generally accepted structure of three triads first advanced by Dionysius the Areopagite in his "Celestial Hierarchy" -- Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominions, Virtues, Powers; Principalities, Archangels, Angels. All have their degree of blessedness according to the depth to which their sight penetrates the sacred truth "in which every intellect finds rest." These spiritual beings were created, she says, not for gain of good unto Himself, which cannot be, but that His splendor might, in resplendence, say, "'Subsistō'--in His eternity beyond time, beyond every other bound, as it pleased Him, the eternal Love opened into new loves. (XXIX, 13-18)

The angels are so numerous that there is no mortal language or concept to express their great abundance. Nor is there any limit to their variety: "The Primal Light that irradiates them all is received by them in as many ways as are the splendors to which It joins Itself." (XXIX, 136-38) Beatrice notes with pleasure Dante's "high desire" to know more of such heavenly matters and warns him that the images he has been seeing, beautiful as they are, are but "the shadowy prefaces of their truth." (XXX, 78) And indeed Dante's vision is clarified as he moves on to higher and higher levels of imagination. At one point he sees flowers that appear to be permeated by burning sparks:

so into greater festival the flowers and the sparks did change before me that I saw both the courts of Heaven made manifest. (XXX, 94-96)

"Both the courts of heaven": at last Dante sees, in addition to the angelic host, the mystical eternal rose that Beatrice calls "our city." This is the company of saints--those mortal beings who have lived and died in God's grace:

In form then of a pure white rose the saintly host was
shown to me, which with His own blood Christ made His bride.[the communion of saints] But the other host [the choir of angels] -- who, as it flies, sees and sings His glory who enamors it and the goodness which made it so great -- like a swarm of bees which one moment enflower themselves and the next return where their work acquires savor -- was descending into the great flower which is adorned with so many petals, and then reascending to where its love abides forever. They had their faces all of living flame, and their wings of gold, and the rest so white that no snow reaches such a limit. When they descended into the flower, from rank to rank they proffered of the peace and the ardor which they had acquired as they fanned their sides." (XXX, 1-18)

Even apart from its visual beauty, the image is striking. The two joyous, adoring heavenly bodies are separate, though joined in a single action. One is forever immaterial -- pure spirit (the angels); the other is forever material (the saints) -- composed of highly "rarefied" materiality, to be sure, of spiritual body, but body nonetheless. The angelic host, like a swarm of bees, surrounds the great rose, dipping into it and emerging, "reascending to where its love abides forever," as bees return to the hive, and then again descending in a perpetual figure of praise and celebration. What does this image convey? For one thing, it attests that human flesh and blood will never become angelic, even in its highest form; that the angels are not the central actors in the drama, but mediators, ornamenters, enhancers, joyous expressers of the love and beauty of creation, their function adoration.

Dante is here giving visual form to the Church Fathers' view of the relation of angels to mankind, a tradition solidly established over centuries of developing doctrine. In his masterful "The Angels and their Mission" Jean Danielou speaks of "the joy of the angelic creation in seeing Christ lead humanity back into heaven at the Ascension." (48) He cites St. John Chrysostom's sermon on the Ascension, in which the great theologian points out that in this event (the ascension of Christ into heaven), "the angels have obtained what they were always waiting for": human nature raised to its beauty and glory. "Even though it has the honor of being exalted above them, they rejoice at our good, just as they suffered when we were deprived of it." (44-45) Chrysostom continues, "The angels and the martyrs meet today." One has only to look with eyes of faith to see them, he declares. "And if the Church is filled with angels, how much more is that true today when their Lord has risen into heaven! The whole air about us is filled with angels." (67) Dante's poem is imbued with this vision of the plenitude of angels, rejoicing at the beauty of redeemed humanity. Thus this greatest of medieval poets, with his intensely personal interiorization of a psychic journey, is able to work within a meticulously articulated theological structure in a quite different manner.
from Byzantine artists and medieval painters, to make of highly specified images master figures of his own imagination.

In the very last lines of the poem Dante's "transhumanized" imagination (which, as he has told us, has aimed at something never before attempted in poetry) gives him another image of the spiritual reality which he is privileged to glimpse: he sees three great circles of light, within them a smaller circle. He struggles to see how the smaller circle is attuned to the larger -- how man is contained in the godhead and yet not obliterated by it:

Within the profound and shining subsistence of the lofty Light appeared to me three circles of three colors and one magnitude; and one seemed reflected by the other, as rainbow by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed forth equally from the one and the other. . . .

That circling which, thus begotten, appeared in Thee as reflected light, when my eyes had dwelt on it for a time, seemed to me depicted with our image within itself and in its own color, wherefore my sight was entirely set upon it. (XXX, 115-32)

The human person, then, the creature less spiritual than the angels, is the "imago dei•, the image of God, destined, for all his imperfections, to incorpora••tion into the godhead. The angels, like the material universe, are in the realm of creatures outside this drama. For just as the physical world is not God, will never, like humanity, be ultimately drawn up into God, but will praise and celebrate him, so will the angels remain separate. Their task in eternity no longer will be that which they serve in time: of being helpers to a wounded humanity, guides and guardians of a damaged world -- but of singing the glory of a fully realized form -- a "new heaven and new earth." They remain the context for the drama, not the actors in it.

More than three centuries later, in the strange composite epic "Paradise Lost•, Milton is concerned likewise with making clear the difference between angelic and human natures. Incorporating into his poem the teachings of Dionysius the Aeropagite and the Church Fathers, particularly Augustine and Origen, as well as the Rabbinical writings, the Zohar and the Cabbala, Milton was able to elaborate upon the two dissimilar destinies -- the human and angelic.

In the famous Scale of Nature passage (Book V), the angel Raphael, having come to warn Adam of a diabolic visitor to the Garden, outlines the plan of God the Father in his creation of man. He begins, "O Adam, one Almighty is/ From whom all things flow and up to Him return. . . ." (V, 469-70) Things nearer to God are more spiritual, Raphael tells Adam, explaining the "Scale of Nature," or, as it was called by most thinkers until well after the Renaissance, the "Great Chain of Being." Body may gradually work itself up to spirit, Raphael informs his eager listener:

. . . .time may come when men
We may assume that Raphael is here detailing the "original plan for the human race. The human person (made up of both Adam and Eve) is placed in an abundant and benevolent earthly situation, with a destiny of becoming increasingly spiritual, so that humanity may at last "turn all to spirit" and take its place with the angels, dwelling either on earth or in heaven. To make all this spiritual progress, human beings need only to follow their supreme gift, Right Reason, an inner light which can rule over bodily elements in the human composition.

In the Genesis myth, according to Karol Wotyla, Adam and Eve have an "original unity"; together they make up the human person (God created man -- "male and female created he them"). Milton follows this Biblical tradition in making the two together the "hero" in that most fearful of epic tasks, the founding of an entire race of mortals -- Adam representing the intellectual and spiritual portion of the human person, Eve the sensuous and passionate. She is the daring, bold, creative element in this unity that constitutes the "imago dei."

In the scene where, knowing of Satan's invasion of the garden, Raphael counsels Adam concerning the importance of relying on reason rather than feeling, the angel is troubled by Adam's over-fondness for Eve. The memory of her creation is vivid and intense; Adam speaks of his "transported touch":

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Commotion strange. . . .
... . . . . [and now] when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, . . . . .
. . . . . that what she wills to do or say
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded . . . .
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He suggests that perhaps Nature failed in him and left some part Not proof enough such object to sustain
Or from my side subducting, took perhaps
More than enough; at least on her bestowed
Too much of ornament . . . .

The angel then "with contracted brow" rebukes Adam, advising him not to accuse nature. Adam has been given right reason, his majestic instructor informs him, which should act as safeguard against temptations from lower powers. What is it that so fascinates you? Raphael asks Adam. An outside? Is the sense of touch, which was also given to animals, so precious? The angel
is alarmed and indignant: Be careful, he says, that you do not
overrate your sensual appetites.

But Adam's destiny is already settled. Eve is his other
half; she is his orientation with the reality of the world, the
mystery of matter. Adam's fall is directly related to this
hidden knowledge which not even the angels possess. He knows he
is one with Eve; at her creation he uttered the joyous cry, "Bone
of my bone, flesh of my flesh." It is this choice of his own
identity that makes the fall of Adam, seen allegorically and in
retrospect, virtually inevitable. If Adam's mode of knowledge, like
the angel's, is
predominantly spiritual -- an inner contemplation and an inner
structuralizing (higher and lower reason) -- then Eve's is the
kind of knowledge that angels by their very nature cannot have
and that Adam possesses to a lesser degree than Eve, believing it
to be "lower" than reason. Hers is preeminently the knowledge of
touch: of material things uniting with material things: light
waves caressing and entering the cornea and coming to rest,
tenderly, on the optic nerve; of small, rarefied particles of
matter taken into the body through the nostrils and impressing
themselves on the olfactory nerve; of objects themselves in their
full bodiness being taken into the mouth, chewed and savored,
swallowed, and assimilated. The relationship between humanity
and things could hardly be more intimate: inscape becomes
instress -- a knowledge that cannot be known outside, or above,
the body. Eve, then is declaring herself for perception, for
feeling, for direct relation to things through the senses. What
this capacity requires is a communion with the tangible world, a
realization and appreciation of matter in the unique way of which
the human is capable. Adam and the angel think alike, for the
most part; they both think rationally, governed by right reason
and intuition, a sense of the truth of structures. Eve merges
with things, feels with and through them in a giving and taking,
an I-Thou relationship that is guided by other laws than those
that govern the reasoning process -- by an ontology of spiritual
pattern imprinted on the physical world. Hers is essentially a
sacramental mode of knowledge which, before the Fall, is whole
and immediate.

After the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge has been
eaten in a kind of declaration of self, imagination has been set
in motion, and both the creature "man• and the creation "world• are
changed. Adam has already been affected, and it would be false
of him not to recognize this actuality. Not only the Genesis
story but also the New Testament testifies to the indissoluble
unity of man and woman: the two are spoken of by Christ as "one
flesh"; and, as St. Paul makes clear, the husband's body belongs
to his wife, whom he must then love as he loves his own body.
With the fall of the innocent sensual way of knowing, human
thought and reason are likewise tainted. Adam is merely
acknowledging what has already been accomplished when he take s
the fruit from Eve, and without argument, devours it.

The consequent corruption of all things physical spoils
the original plan; Milton speaks of man's now having to proceed as from "a second stock." That stock from which the new tree will grow is the second person of the Trinity, who empties himself of his divinity to become man and take on the mysterious knowledge of the flesh as he assumes the penalty for human sin. As Ladislaus Boros has written (in "Angels and Men"), "The old order was replaced by a new one. Jesus' arrival was the coming of a new order, in which [he] superseded intermediary powers. They lost their faculty of government for ever." (32) Boros cites Paul for the main text supporting this interpretation: "On that cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them in captives in his triumphal procession." (Col 2:15)

The cosmic powers Jesus discarded were the structures of the original creation, in which the angels (both fallen and unfallen) were direct governors of those things above man, at times as "flaming ministers," judges, and adversaries. They controlled the universe with rigid laws to which man was subject. According to St. Paul:

"During our minority we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe . . . Formerly when you did not acknowledge God, you were the slaves of beings which in their nature are no gods. But now that you do acknowledge God -- or rather, now that he has acknowledged you -- how can you turn back to the . . . spirits of the elements? Why do you propose to enter their service all over again?" (Gal 4:3-9).

and further: God set Jesus "far above all government and authority, all power and dominion, and any title of sovereignty that can be named, not only in this age but in the age to come. He put everything in subjection beneath his feet . . . " (Eph 1:21-22). As Boros interprets it, what these Pauline texts are really describing is the dethronement of the angels -- the good angels as well as the bad. The necessity for a redeemer cancelled the old world order and set into motion the new.

What caused this revolution in the divine plan, was the fall of man, not the fall of the angels. Of the two, the dereliction of the rebel angels stemmed from an infinitely greater degree of malice. It consisted of knowingly choosing themselves rather than the love that animates the universe -- of cutting off a portion of that "deep and dazzling darkness" at the center of God's creation, to use the words of the mystic Henry Vaughan. This act of absolute rebellion created an outer darkness where the creature rather than the creator can reign supreme. But it is an anomaly for the angels to be for themselves, they who exist as the highest reverberation of creation, who, though they have as their purpose its guidance, could not exist without the lowest foundation of materiality. They are, one might say, the spiritual extensions of that materiality -- the invisible
structures of the visible. Hence their rebellion creates a kind of vacuum and an anti-center at the heart of things, a howling abyss of "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." And because their action was taken in absolute knowledge, they cannot repent and change. Nor can God because of them change his plan for the ultimate outcome of his creation.

Man, the crown of creation, given lordship over the animals, dominion over the earth, may be more easily forgiven for desiring not so much independence from God as union with the creation that God himself called "good," the preference of the gift over the Giver, as the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert wrote. But man's rebellion (his fall into guilty knowledge, inordinate desire, suffering, responsibility, and penance) precipitated nature's fall along with his own. And the altered position of man and the created universe affected as well the position of the angels. The fall of some from their own ranks did not modify the general role of the angels; but the fall of man changed forever the structures of heaven. The coming of Christ as redeemer of guilty man "dethroned the angels," took away their governing powers, though it did not change their nature -- did not in fact lessen their spiritual force, which they still exert for the good of man and for God's glory. The Church Fathers speak of the angels as "guardians," "protectors," "superintendents," "overseers," "shepherds," "herdsmen." Danielou quotes Eusebius in a passage where he brings together all the names of the angels: "Fearing lest sinful mankind should be without government and without guidance, like herds of cattle, God gave them protectors and superintendents, the holy angels, in the forms of captains and shepherds. His First-born Son is set above all of these." (70)

But, as Boros acknowledges, the angels remain magnificent and terrible presences, "far above everything human." Full of majesty, "they are the light and ardour of creation, and the essence of all feeling and emotion." He refers to Pauline theology, where they are called "principles of the world," indicating that the reality of things stems from them. Angels are present in our daily circumstances and in historical events. "They are present to us everywhere and incessantly, in the full immediacy of being. Hence our world is holy and the inner space of creation is already paradise." (35)

In the far reaches of our minds, we dimly remember the original plan. We sense the angelic presences and aspire to them. Our bodies partake not only of materiality, however, but, according to the Scriptural account, of fallen materiality; and our minds are subject as well to inclinations from the fallen angels. But the second plan for man and creation posits less a law of obedience than an adoption into freedom. In the second dispensation, the true path of virtue for the creature formed "a little lower than the angels" is imagination and love. Both of these actions, in proceeding through suffering and labor, continue, with the help of the angels, that process of "poiesis", 
unique to humankind, that gradually transforms the earth.

1. The quotations from "the Divine Comedy" are taken from the translation by Charles S. Singleton (Bollingen Series, Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).