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A Logotherapeutic Reading of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book I

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Abstract:

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the figure of Satan is one of extreme importance since he becomes the driving force behind the plot of the epic. His fate, and indeed his decisions, have a much greater bearing on the course of events than on the decisions of any other character. Therefore, it is important to look at how Satan conducts himself in the beginning of the epic, in Book I, and how he conditions himself mentally to assume the role of the leader of his host of rebel angels. This paper attempts to look at the inner workings of Satan's psyche, by looking at how he conducts his own Logotherapy, a psychotherapeutic technique/treatment developed by the persecuted Victor E. Frankl, who suffered the hardships of a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. This paper shows how Satan overcomes his initial doubts about himself, shakes off his scruples and trains himself through self-affirmations to take control of the situation after they land up in Hell. Most importantly, this paper shows how Satan's control of himself and others is based on his desire to find a higher meaning in life, a trademark of logotherapy.

Keywords: logotherapy, leadership, life's meaning, positive self-affirmations, mental strength.

In the beginning of *Paradise Lost* Book, I, Satan is the first to recover from the shock of being hurled from Heaven to Hell, while his troops still lay unconscious. Here, Milton gives us several clues to understand Satan's mental condition. The epic narrator informs us that Hell is a 'dungeon horrible' where 'one great furnace flamed' that scalds the skins of everyone. We are also told that the place overwhelmed them with 'floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire.' This obviously is an inhospitable atmosphere for anyone, but for Lucifer and his followers, this place really *is* Hell, since they are so used to the pleasures and comforts of Heaven. He is tormented, as the narrator says, by the thought of 'lost happiness and lasting pain', surveying the ruins about him with 'baleful eyes.' Satan is in no condition

to lead his troops since he himself is yet to fully acclimatize to this new place. He looks at Beelzebub for inspiration and support, and when that fails, he ends up giving his deputy a stern lecture.¹ At this point, it is safe to say that Satan's punishment and fate is akin to the Jewish people who suffered in the concentration camps in Nazi Germany under Hitler. Satan is a victim of God's punishment, even if he, unlike the Jews, was responsible for his fate.

In his Preface to Victor E. Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Gordon W. Allport observes that the freedom to choose an attitude with which to counter life's onslaughts, is the last of man's great freedoms.² In a similar fashion, Satan too must act quickly and *choose* his attitude if he is to keep his spirits high and have any realistic possibility of gathering his troops and retaliating against God. If the beginning of Book I suggests Satan's deep dejection, the latter part of the poem shows Satan as an upbeat and optimistic war strategist. He quickly changes his attitude with these emphatic words that tuns his miserable worldview on its head:

'Farewell happy fields
Where joy forever dwells! Hail horrors, hail
Infernal world!' [lines 249-251]

This is a pivotal moment in Satan's career. He is about to shed any remainders of Luciferian qualities and is to go completely dark. Here we clearly see that Satan prepares his mind for the new life ahead. After being 'hurled headlong' into hell by God, Satan knows that he cannot ever go back to his quiet and peaceful Luciferian life. Therefore, instead of ruminating on what could have been, he bounces back and hails the underworld, announcing himself as the terrain's new master:

'And thou, profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor, one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time!' [lines 251-253]

It is interesting to see Satan's quick acknowledgement of his state of mind. This is where he gives us a hint of his mental condition immediately after landing in Hell and after he has conditioned himself to his new life as the supreme leader of the dark army. In essence then, in Book I, we get to see two versions Satan. The first, a vulnerable and self-doubting

fallen warrior; the second, a determined and optimistic leader. This metamorphosis is largely due to his positive self-affirmations, such as:

‘The mind is its own place and in itself

Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.’ [lines 254-255]

Satan becomes far more concerned about his state of mind than about the horrible surroundings he finds himself in. He has understood the fundamental aspects of survival in Hell: the right mental attitude coupled with resilience and positive thinking. If he is to survive in the underworld and mount a serious challenge to God for the throne of heaven, he must not lose hope. This is the exact mental attitude adopted by the survivors of the Holocaust, as Victor E. Frankl describes in his book. After the prisoners become used to the initial shocks of concentration-camp lives, they start viewing the world differently³, gaining an objective detachment and a new perspective to survive. What makes Satan’s position unique is that unlike the Jewish victims, Satan is, from the very outset, thrust into a leadership role. He feels wholly responsible for the sufferings of his thousands of followers, since they were his troops, his ‘rebel angels.’ It is here then that we look at Satan from yet another perspective: his feeling of remorse and guilt for pushing his troops into sharing his fate. He is still yet to let go of his angelic qualities of pity and charity. Satan then is bogged down by three different negative thoughts: the thought of defeat against God, his banishment from the comforts of Heaven for good, and his guilt for having led his followers to a similar fate. Satan therefore has a long and arduous mental battle before him, one in which he must heal himself first before he can lead others.

Logo therapy is a form of psychotherapeutic treatment in which a person is helped to reach a fuller meaning and understanding of his life. As Frankl himself describes it, logotherapy ‘focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.’⁴ Projected as he is in this unusual leadership role, Satan now searches for the bigger meanings of his hellish existence:

‘Here at least

We shall be *free*...

Here we may reign *secure*.’ (italics mine) [lines 258-260]

Satan wants the freedom and the security to peacefully strategize his next moves. He now completely immerses himself into new projects. He deliberately stops himself from thinking any more of the past, since 'now the thought/ Both of lost happiness and lasting pain/Torments him'(Milton). He wants to keep himself busy, and the only productive way of doing it is to mobilise his demoralised army. This, ultimately would lead him to his life's true meaning and purpose.

Positive self-affirmations also help Satan greatly in his quest to find meaning in his life, a charmed existence in which suicide is not an option, given the immortal nature of angels. In fact, it may even be argued that Satan's own speeches, aimed at rousing his followers, actually helped perform his own therapy, as much as it helped replenish the morale of his troops. His own speeches, operating as positive self-affirmative thought capsules, actually help Satan in re-conditioning his mental state. The speeches, laced with strong, powerful thoughts help him bounce back from his own mental setback and regain his confidence. The speeches therefore have a dual function: they are as effective for boosting Satan's own confidence as they are for his troops. After recovering from his initial shock, he wholeheartedly attempts to make Hell his new Heaven/haven, his new impenetrable fortress:

'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!' [line 263]

With the help of his troops, Satan builds his office, Pandemonium and forms a council of advisors to tackle problems related to the conquest of Heaven and the tampering of the purity of Adam and Eve. Satan throws himself seriously into the role of a leader. Even when he was not fully in control of his emotions (and surroundings), Satan was actually fulfilling his role quite well. He was the one who recovered first from the shock of the Fall. He was the one who addressed Beelzebub in his first ever speech at Hell, a feat no less remarkable for the incredible physical and cerebral effort that it must have taken than for the rich detail and oratory skills he displays here. Satan's first speech is laced with inspirational quotes that can infuse any army anywhere in the world with an immense wealth of inspiration. However, what makes it truly remarkable is that Satan had not yet assumed full control of his mind while delivering it. He was speaking more as an inspirer than a believer. He was still not fully in control of his mind. In spite of this, he still managed to pull off one of his best speeches.

In his paper 'The Psychology of Literature', Louis Dudek argues that the application of psychological frameworks helps in the gleaning of life embedded in literature far more than the lens of philosophy or theology. (Dudek) This is mainly because a psychological take

on the characters of literature prove to be far more relevant to the reader since his own experiences and understanding of life comes into play. As has been observed elsewhere, the 'lack of meaning is the chief source of stress as well as anxiety, and logotherapy aids the patients to reach the meaning of life.' (Selva) At the beginning of Book I, Satan undergoes an existential vacuum because he could see with searing clarity his bleak future, laced with perpetual misery in the domain of Hell. Only by assuming control of his mind could he change the course of his destiny, and ensure that Hell provided him with a solid underground base from which he could initiate his resistance movement.

Satan's next speech in which he rouses his host of rebel angels from their dazed stupor shows all the makings of a true and gifted orator. Back in his element now, he delivers a provocative speech aimed at making his followers ashamed of themselves for taking so long in recovering from the Fall:

'Or have ye chos'n this place
 After the toil of battle to repose
 Your wearied virtue for the ease you find
 To slumber here...' [lines 318-321]

The speech has its desired effect, for the epic- narrator informs us:

'They heard and were abashed and up they sprung' [line 331]

It is a very quick and impressive turnaround, especially for someone who has till then felt tremendously out of place and out of confidence. Satan rediscovers his role as a leader, which makes him a more sure-footed individual. He has found the meaning of his existence, a realisation of his own value and potential to rally his troops to victory against God. It must have also been immensely comforting to know that he could still command the same respect and obedience of his troops as before; that the mammoth defeat against God had not created doubts about his potential for leadership in his troops' mind. Satan's incredibly strong mind and his proclivity for self-therapy helps him make an impressive comeback, and infuses much-needed confidence into his system. He finds meaning and purpose in life through his leadership role, hatching plans to beat God and become the monarch of Heaven. In this respect, Satan's evil machinations to destroy God's best laid plans are nothing more than a sort of coping mechanism, a way to keep himself busy by doing work that he feels is

productive and meaningful to him. Thinking about the tortures of Hell, and of the happiness of a past life in Heaven, only leads to more sorrow and depression; thus, he throws himself fully into work. The inhospitable landscape, the skin-scalding fire and the ever-burning smell of sulphur actually provides the perfect stimulus for Satan to focus his mind into the task of dethroning God. Doing this keeps him occupied with important, meaningful work, and makes him forget about Heaven-Home. He deliberately chooses the life of a Sisyphus, a workhorse, an entity in an eternal mission to replace good with evil, as he himself tells his troops:

‘Our labour must be to pervert that end
And out of good still to find means of evil,
which oftentimes may succeed so as perhaps
Shall grieve him...’ [lines 164-167]

Satan utters these words long before he has conditioned his mind to accept his fate, yet in these very words do we find the crux of his mission and indeed of his very existence. The aim of his life becomes to ‘grieve’ God and pervert all the good that God is trying to create in the world.

Logotherapy is essentially about finding the meaning of existence in a situation where there isn't any, or at least where meaning does not become openly apparent. This is especially true for Satan because soon after his and the rebels' deportation, no course of action seemed viable to him. Yet, his immense hatred for God and his sense of ‘injured merit’ proved to be great catalysts to infuse him with action and take charge of his mind. When life gets tough, people cling on to even the most inconsequential of things for solace and comfort. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor E. Frankl describes an incident in which one of his fellow prisoners had been insisted by the other prisoners to read a love poem which the former had written. Upon listening to the poem, Frankl could not help laughing because he thought the poem to be appalling. Yet, Frankl believes that this seemingly inconsequential act of laughter amidst the misery of the concentration camp may have saved him from becoming too depressed and disillusioned with life.⁵ Happiness can be found in even the simplest of everyday acts; a smile can change a perspective. Satan finds joy, purpose and meaning in his destruction of God, and therefore, he makes this his life's eternal mission.

Notes

¹ In lines 143-155, Beelzebub innocently points out to Satan his suspicion that God could have banished them to Hell to undergo 'eternal punishment', to which Satan angrily retorts: 'Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable...' One explanation for Satan's angry response is that Beelzebub, far from assuaging Satan's own fears and insecurities, is actually pointing out to him the exact reason of his worries: mainly that he and his host of rebel angels are now doomed for a life of eternal misery in Hell. Beelzebub in fact echoes Satan's own troubled thoughts. Satan seeks out Beelzebub for support, but ends up receiving more negative feedback, making his task of retaining a positive mindset, harder still. Satan wants to find something positive to cling on to, and he expects Beelzebub to provide it. However, Satan finds Beelzebub going through the same anxieties as him, and this dual affirmation of negatives deepens Satan's fears, and indeed irritates him. Beelzebub opens his suspicion with a question, 'But what if He, our conqueror...?', thrusting Satan into a leadership role, suggesting that he is looking at Satan for answers, guidance and support. Yet, Satan was then in no position, mentally, to lead Beelzebub. This is a unique situation in which both the leader and the follower look at each other for guidance and support to acclimatize themselves with their new situation.

² *Man's Search for Meaning*, Preface: 'In the concentration camp every circumstance conspires to make the prisoner lose his hold. All the familiar goals in life are snatched away. What alone remains is "the last of human freedoms" - the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances."' Pg. 12

³ *Man's Search for Meaning*, Chapter One: 'But the prisoner who had passed into the second stage of his psychological reactions did not avert his eyes [to the brutalities suffered by others] any more. By then his feelings were blunted, and he watched unmoved.' Pg. 40.

⁴ *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pg. 121

⁵ *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pg. 62: 'He did not need to be asked twice and quickly produced a kind of diary from which he began to read samples of his art. I bit my lips till they hurt in order to keep from laughing at one of his love poems, and very likely that saved my life...'

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