

## BERANGER'S "BON DIEU" AND "BON DIABLE"

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THE MAN who first said a good word for the Devil in the nineteenth century did not belong to the Romantic school. A greater *révolté* than the Romantics, Jean Pierre de Béranger (1780-1857) had to be attracted to the great Rebel.<sup>1</sup> But in contradistinction to his Romantic contemporaries, our song-writer, who was nurtured in the teachings of the eighteenth century, continued the Classical tradition in his dealings with the Devil. He treated Satan in a humorous vein and used him mainly as a medium for satire. The satirists have at all times employed the prosecuting attorney at the celestial court extensively in their sarcasms, whether on politics, religion or domestic affairs; and, as was the case of William Hogarth, this practice often recoiled on their own heads.

It is known that Béranger believed neither in the Devil nor in Hell. As a matter of fact, his belief in a benevolent Deity may also be called into question. He remained an unbeliever to the end of his days. Upon reading Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* (1802), he made in his twenties a grand but fruitless effort to become orthodox in his faith. The exertions on the part of his sister, a nun, to convert him to Catholicism during the last years of his life, proved just as unsuccessful. Certain it is that he did not believe in a Devil external to man and in a Hell as a geographical unit. In a very characteristic fragment, entitled "Enfer et Diable," and written between 1847 and 1851, our author teaches the important if not orthodox lesson that every human being is his own devil and the maker of his own hell:

<sup>1</sup> Béranger was the moving spirit of the revolution of 1830, and, according to Moritz Hartmann (*Bilder und Büsten*, Frankfurt a.M., 1860), even issued the proclamation to the French nation on that occasion. Our poet also helped Rouget de l'Isle, author of the *Marschllaise*, which, according to Chateaubriand, was of infernal inspiration.

"Sachez que chacun est son Diable  
Que chacun se fait son Enfer."<sup>2</sup>

The Persian poet has expressed the same idea in the following couplet:

"I sent my soul into the invisible,  
Some letter of the after-life to spell.  
By and by my soul returned and answered,  
'I, myself, am heaven and hell."

#### LA DESCENTE AUX ENFERS (1812)

"Vous n'avez pas des idées justes de notre enfer," complains LeSage's Asmodeus.<sup>3</sup> In this ribald song impiously named after the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* (3rd cent.), we find Béranger's vindication of the Devil and Hell. Our ballad-maker descends to the domain of the Devil on a broomstick in company with a modern witch, a young and beautiful woman. As the imps of Hell lack no appreciation of beauty, they come in swarms to kiss her naked feet. The netherworld, according to our author, is not what the lying priests have always described it to be. They used the fear of Hell as a means of driving men into the Church. The underworld resembles more a voluptuous Turkish harem than a vaporous Turkish bath. The court of the King-Devil cannot be surpassed in luxury by that of any earthly ruler. Our visitor to the infernal regions found no traces of kettles or flames and heard there no howling or gnashing of teeth. On the other hand, he found the floor strewn with oyster shells and empty bottles. The souls who are fortunate enough to go to Hell, eat and drink and make merry. Nothing is less frightful than the sight of Satan. The infernal monarch is a devil of a good fellow *chez lui*. He issues his severest decrees to the clinking of glasses and the playing of reed-pipes. His infernal majesty is a very genial host and entertains his guests royally. The spiritus infernali is surrounded at the banquet table by a crowd of red-faced drinkers, for whom he keeps pouring bourgogne and champaign. There is not much decorum in the halls of Hell. Ixion

<sup>2</sup> "Know that everyone is his own devil and that everyone makes his own hell.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Shaw, in his *Man and Superman* (1903), is of LeSage's opinion when he says that "Lucifer himself is contemptuous of mankind, and is more than vexed that hell is so little appreciated on earth. François Villon knew nothing of the underworld when he said: "Hell frightens."

is sleeping on the shoulder of Tantalus who is dead drunk, and Epicurus is making love to Ninon de Lenclos. After reading this poem, one is inclined to exclaim with St. Paul: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" The author himself draws a lesson from his words:

"Si, d'après ce qu'on rapporte,  
On bâille au céleste lieu,  
Que le diable nous emporte,  
Et nous rendrons grâce à Dieu."<sup>4</sup>

#### LE BON DIEU (1820)

Béranger's "bon Dieu" is not much different from his "bon Diable." In this song we find the conception of a God, who, in a similar way, eats and drinks, sleeps and swears. This indulgent, even negligent God suffers his arch-enemy the Devil to play havoc with his world and laughs when he hears that our kings claim to represent him on this earth. The monarch of the Heavens amuses himself in his gay moments by passing in review the proceedings of popes and princes in this world—qu'on prétend que je gouverne; and each of his reflections ends in the exclamation:

"Si c'est par moi qu'ils règnent de la sorte,  
Je veux bien que le diable m'emporte."

The Byronic Devil is nearer the truth when he exclaims in *The Vision of Judgment* (1822): "I've kings enough below, God knows!"<sup>5</sup>

#### LA MORT DU DIABLE (1828)

This is a satirical song directed against the Jesuits. Béranger was always poking fun at the priests. Even the Pontiff in the Vatican was not spared by his bold and boisterous satire. In Voltairean

<sup>4</sup> This song has naturally enough not been translated into English. The Germans have rendered this couplet as follows:

"Wär' die Sage ausser Zweifel,  
Und im Himmel gähnten wir,—  
Ei, so hol'uns doch der Teufel,  
Und wir danken Gott dafür."

<sup>5</sup> This passage from Byron was quoted by the present writer also in his controversy with Mr. H. G. Wells, in regard to the latter's project of "Crowned Republics," which was printed in the *New York Nation* of February 14 and May 4, 1918

fashion he laughed Old Mother Church to scorn. For mere humor, this poem is almost unrivalled. It figured prominently among the poems selected as a basis for Béranger's indictment. The piece was denounced by the priests as irreligious and blasphemous, and its author was declared an enemy to religion. To this day, Béranger is believed by the Catholics to have been diabolically disposed. The archbishop of Paris and the other bishops hurled their anathemas in pastoral letters against our poet.

In "la Mort du Diable," Béranger gives the old legend of the death of the Devil a new and novel turn. He is not concerned with the demise of the high and mighty personage but with the events following it. The song is a satirical attack against Satan's supposed successors. The monks and priests wail when the news of the Devil's death reaches them. The reason is not that they loved Lucifer so well. What worries these good men is the fact that they have lost with his death their means of a livelihood. The Devil being dead, what man will now pay them to be delivered from his clutches? But Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the order of the Jesuits, bids them to stop their wailing. He himself now intends to succeed to the power of the prince of this world; and in order to be delivered from him, men will now pray and pay more than ever before. The reader would like to hear the poem in Béranger's own words. It is not so easy to give in a few excerpts an idea of the delicious humor and irony which this poem contains. We shall give it then in full first in the original and then in the first English translation.<sup>6</sup>

Du miracle que je retrace  
 Dans ce récit des plus succincts  
 Rendez gloire au grand saint Ignace,  
 Patron de tous nos petits saints.  
 Par un tour qui serait infâme  
 Si les saints pouvaient avoir tort.  
 Au diable il a fait rendre l'âme.  
 Le diable est mort, le diable est mort.

Satan, l'ayant surpris à table.  
 Lui dit: Trinquons, ou sois hommi.  
 L'autre accepte, mais verse au diable.  
 Dans son vin, un poison béni.

<sup>6</sup> This poem has been repeatedly rendered into English. The translation quoted in this paper appeared in the *Westminster Review*, Vol. LX (1829), pp. 210-3.

Satan boit, et, pris de colique.  
 Il jure, il grimace, il se tord ;  
 Il crève comme un hérétique.  
 Le Diable est mort, le diable est mort.

Il est mort ! disent tous les moines ;  
 On n'achètera plus *d'agnus*.  
 Il est mort ! disent les chanoines ;  
 On ne paiera plus *d'oremus*.  
 Au conclave on se désespère :  
 Adieu puissance et coffre-fort !  
 Le Diable est mort, le diable est mort.

L'Amour sert bien moins que la crainte ;  
 Elle nous comblait de ses dons.  
 L'intolérance est presque éteinte ;  
 Qui rallumera ses brandons ?  
 À notre joug si l'homme échappe,  
 La Vérité luira d'abord :  
 Dieu sera plus grand que le pape.  
 Le Diable est mort, le diable est mort.

Ignace accourt : Que l'on me donne.  
 Leur dit-il, sa place et ses droits.  
 Il n'épouvantait plus personne :  
 Je ferai trembler jusqu'aux rois.  
 Vols, massacres, guerres ou pestes,  
 M'enrichiront du sud au nord.  
 Dieu ne vivra que de mes restes.  
 Le Diable est mort, le diable est mort.

Tous de s'écrier : Ah ! brave homme !  
 Nous te bénissons dans ton fiel.  
 Soudain son ordre, appui de Rome,  
 Voit sa robe effrayer le ciel.  
 Un choeur d'anges, l'âme contrite,  
 Dit : Des humains plaignons le sort ;  
 De l'enfer saint Ignace hérite.  
 Le Diable est mort, le diable est mort.

[I sing today a lay of lays,  
 A glorious miracle you'll see,  
 Give the great saint Ignatius praise,  
 Of little saints the glory he.  
 A dirty trick—if saints can trick,  
 And if the truth may all be said,  
 Has done the business for Old Nick,  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Old Nick went out one day to dine,  
 And pledg'd the saint to drink his health,  
 Aye, said the saint—and in the wine  
 Some holy poison dropp'd by stealth;  
 Gripes seiz'd the Devil—cruel-sick—  
 He swears—he storms—and hangs his head,  
 Then bursts, as bursts a heretic—  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Alas! He's dead—the friars said,  
 The Devil an Agnus shall we sell;  
 Alas! the canons cried—he's dead—  
 Not one *oremus* shall we tell.  
 The conclave is in deep despair,  
 Power and the iron chest are fled,  
 O we have lost our father dear,  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Love is not half so strong as fear,  
 For fear was constant with her gifts.  
 Who now her blazing torch uplifts?  
 If man from us should once be free,  
 What light may beam upon his head;  
 God greater than the Pope shall be—  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!

Ignatius came—"Let me but take  
 His place—his right—and see: in brief—  
 He has made men for ages quake.  
 I'll make kings tremble like a leaf!  
 With plagues, thefts, massacres, I'll ban

Both north and south—where'er I tread;  
 Leave ruins both for God and man—  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!"

"Come, blessed one," they uttered, "come,  
 We hallow thy most saintly gall"—  
 And now his Order—sent from Rome—  
 O'ershadows, darkens, curses all.  
 I heard a choir of angels tell  
 Their sympathies for man, they said,  
 "Ignatius is the heir of Hell,  
 The Devil's dead—the Devil's dead!"]

#### L'ANGE EXILE (1828)

Béranger, however, could also speak of Satan seriously. In this poem addressed to a young woman, in whom our author believes to have discovered an angel exiled from Heaven, the legend of the fall of the angels is treated seriously. Among the legions of Lucifer was an angel who repented of his sin. The Lord brought him up from Hell to pass a period of probation on earth. This exiled celestial moves among men with his divine lyre to charm away their sorrows and to comfort them in their afflictions. As soon as he redeems himself in the eyes of God, he will be recalled to Heaven.

According to another version of the legend,<sup>7</sup> the angels who were not hurled into the bottom of Hell but banished to our earth had maintained a neutral position in the rivalry between the Lord and Lucifer. It is not so generally known that during the war in Heaven the angels were not wholly divided into two opposing camps. There were many spirits who, untouched by partisan passions, remained aloof from the conflict and refused to don the uniform. They demanded their right of keeping out of a war which they did not bring about and in which they had no interest whatever. When the Lord defeated his enemy and cast him and his legionaries into the abyss, he did not hurl also the neutral angels into Hell, but, in order to give them another opportunity to choose between him and his rival, cast them down to the earth to which the scene of the battle

<sup>7</sup> This legend is an attempt at a reconciliation of two contradictory passages relating to the punishment of the revolting angels; cf., Rev. xiii., 9 and xx., 3.

had been transferred. From these angels, who married mortal maidens (cf. Gen. vi., 1), there has developed a race which has always shown a striking contrast to the human family. It has furnished humanity with its prophets and poets, with its reformers and revolutionaries. All great men at all times and in all places have belonged to this mysterious race which does not proceed from father to son, like other races, but appears here and there, at recurring intervals, in the families of mankind. The descendants of this union between the sons of God and the daughters of men have always stood in the first ranks of those who seek peace and abhor murder. They have proven valiant warriors in the eternal conflict between the Good and the Evil for the mastery of the world. They have long ago redeemed themselves, but they will not return to Heaven until they have also redeemed all men.