The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by Edward C. Hegeler

VOL. XLI (No. 9) SEPTEMBER, 1927 (No. 856)

CONTENTS

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GEORGE SAND

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THE SUPERNATURAL OF GEORGE SAND[1]

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

GEORGE SAND (1804-1876) retained longer than any other member of the Romantic generation of 1830 a distinct liking for the fantastic. In contrast to the majority of the French Romantics, for whom the employment of the fantastic in fiction was but a part of their aesthetic theories, it was with her a matter of temperament. George Sand had from her tenderest childhood a disposition for the mysterious and marvellous, which her early environment tended to develop still further. The supernatural surrounded on all sides a child who was only too much disposed to enjoy its charms. The superstitions of the peasants of Berry in the midst of whom George Sand passed her childhood took a strong hold on her mind. During the long winter evenings, the hemp-dresser of Nohant, seated in a corner of the hearth, would tell some lugubrious legend in which figured demons, ghosts or goblins, and the mind of the child who listened to it on her visits to the villagers was kindled.

George Sand's early reading still further increased her natural propensity toward the prodigious. Already as a child, prior to her entry into the convent, she came in contact, as she tells us herself, with the English "roman noir" and read with delight and terror the works of Anne Radcliffe.[2] The effect of this early reading remained with her to the end and can be traced in the works of her maturity. George Sand, just as the other Romantics in France, was, in her treatment of the fantastic, subject to impressions from abroad. In

[1] Written on the occasion of the demi-centenary of her death (June 7, 1876).

[2] *Histoire de ma vie*, t. III, ch. ii.

her novel, *le Château des déserts* (written in 1847 and first published in 1851), the supernatural is in the end explained away exactly in the manner of Mrs. Radcliffe. Reminiscences of Lewis' novel, *The Monk*, with which George Sand must have become acquainted at the same time, may be detected in her novel *Lélia* (1833). The monk Magnus, who is in love with Lélia, believes that he has been fascinated by the eyes of the Fiend and is on the point of exorcising him with book and bell. It will be recalled that, in the English novel, Ambrosio also believes that the woman he loves is an incarnation of the Devil.

But greater than English influence on George Sand was that of Germany. The woman novelist, together with the other French Romantics, fell under the spell of the fantastic fiction of the German Romantic School. E. T. A. Hoffmann, the most prominent among the German fantastic fictionists, exerted, as is well known, a very great influence in France. He practically directed the French Romantic movement about the year 1830. At a time when Heinrich Heine could write: "In Germany to-day Hoffmann has no vogue whatever," all the great French writers of the Romantic generation read and imitated him. George Sand held him in high esteem and employed his stories as models for many of her writings. Her play, *la Nuit de Noël* (1863), is drawn from Hoffmann's *Meister Floh*, and her novel *le Diable aux champs* (written in 1851 and first published in 1855-56), also shows the influence of this German story-writer. Her fantastic tales written toward the end of her life, *la Reine Coax* (1872), *le Nuage rose* (1872) and *le Géant Yéocis* (1873) are fully in the manner of Hoffmann.

Goethe was next to Hoffmann in his influence on George Sand. This woman writer was attracted to *Faust* primarily through its fantastic element. The philosophical content of Goethe's great poem first escaped the French Romantics. Their interest was limited to its fantastic parts. George Sand thus counted *Faust* among the great fantastic plays in her *Essai sur le drame fantastique*: *Goethe, Byron, Mickiewicz* (1839).

In her novel, *le Château des déserts* previously mentioned, we find a Witches' Sabbath which recalls the Walpurgis Night in *Faust*. Goethe's influence is especially evident in her fantastic drama, *les Sept cordes de la lyre* (1839), which is no more than a copy of *Faust*. Albertus, the principal character in this play, is an off-spring of the German philosopher. He too is tempted by Mephistopheles

in his ambition to wish to know and comprehend all. Supreme wisdom finally fills his soul when he has learned to know love. This play has also a philosophical import. It symbolizes by the harmony of the strings of the lyre the harmony to which humanity should be attuned.

The supernatural figures principally in the pastoral romances of George Sand. This novelist found pleasure in seeking the marvellous among the classes of men who wish to find relief in their imagination from the humdrum rounds of their daily occupations. She wished to show that the countryman, in contrast to the city-dweller, still has eyes to behold wonders. The fantastic element seems to George Sand to be one of the forces of the popular mind. It is interesting to note that the writer who had the honor of giving to the peasant his place in literature and who was the first to consecrate a series of great works to the portrayal of rustic life was also the first to discover the part that the marvellous plays in the mind of the peasant. George Sand describes the tiller of the soil with his joys and sorrows, his songs and dances, his beliefs and customs, his traditions and superstitions.

The fantastic not only figures in her fictional writings; it was also deemed worthy of special critical consideration. On the occasion of the exhibition of paintings of rural customs in Berry by her son, Maurice Sand, she wrote an article on the rustic legends of the region. This article, which appeared anonymously under the title "Légendes rustiques" in the *Magazin pittoresque* for November, 1857, is also known, on account of its subject-matter, as "Légendes fantastiques."

George Sand was interested in illuminism and occultism and wrote mystic and symbolic books, such as *Consuelo* (1842-43) and its sequel, *la Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (1843-45). In the thirteen "books" of these two novels, the lives of the principal characters are so to say bathed in an atmosphere of mystery and marvel. Count de Rudolstadt, a man of a mystical mind and an adept of occultism, is persuaded that he has seen again the soul of his deceased mother incarnated in an old beggar-woman. When he, in his turn, is laid to rest in the vault of his ancestors, Consuelo believes that she sees him in the magic mirror of Count de Saint-Germain and imagines on several occasions that she hears the sound of the divine bow of his violin.

George Sand, together with the other Romantics, was inter-

ested in the Devil. But it must not be inferred that she held a belief in the Devil and all his works. Like all Romantic humanitarians, this woman writer did not believe in a personal Devil and a material hell. Already as a child she was repelled by what she called "the fiction of hell." In her *Essai sur la drame fantastique* already mentioned, she brands as an intellectual crime "the frightful belief in eternal damnation, the most guilty notion that one can have of the Deity." Baudelaire, who hated George Sand, remarked a propos of her disbelief in the Devil and hell that she had "good reason to wish to suppress hell."

Satan was to George Sand as to many other Romantics the symbol of revolt and the support of all the weak and downtrodden. In her novel *Consuelo*, she puts into the mouth of the rebel archangel the following words:

"I am not the demon. I am the archangel of rightful revolt and the patron of great combats. Like Christ, I am the God of the poor, the weak and the oppressed."

George Sand, as a good Romantic, admired Milton's Satan and praised the Puritan poet's portrayal of the fallen angel. She says somewhere in her writings: "Milton made the thunderstruck forehead of his rebel angel so noble and so beautiful." In her description of the legends of Berry, she tells of Georgeon, the evil spirit of the Black Valley and mentions the local belief that the Devil holds his Sabbath at the cross of the Bossous.

But George Sand is wary in conjuring the Devil up from his subterrenean habitation. In a letter dated September 2, 1838, she praises Hoffmann for making the Devil appear in his "ecstacies" not in person but as a philosophical concept.[3] The appearance of Mephisto in her play previously mentioned must be considered as an exception. The Tempter was brought over bodily from *Faust*. Although the word "diable" appears in a few of the titles of her works, the Devil does not show himself in person in them. The novel, *le Diable aux champs* previously mentioned, does not contain the Devil. Nor is the principal character in her comedy, *le Démon du foyer* (1852), a horned and hoofed individual. The romance, *la Mare au diable* (1846), deals not with the Devil but with Death. This story of a diabolical pond takes its title from the dismal engraving of Holbein's *Laborer*, in which the skeleton Death

[3] *Lettres d'un voyageur* (1837).

is represented as skipping along whip in hand by the peasant's side in the field and urging on the team drawing the plough so that he may finish his work and follow him.

In her novels *Consuelo* and *la Comtesse de Rudolstadt* George Sand deals with a medieval sect which is supposed to worship Satan. Our novelist, together with many other members of the Romantic group, wished to bring about a reconciliation of good and evil, aspired to marry Hell to Heaven. Lélia already said that "the spirit of evil and the spirit of good are but one spirit: God." In *Consuelo,* George Sand puts this idea in the mouth of the heretical sect of the Lollards: We read:

"A mysterious and singular sect dreamed . . . of uniting these two arbitrarily divided principles into one single principle. . . . It tried to raise the supposed principle of evil from its low estate and make it, on the contrary, the servant and agent of the good."

George Sand, along with the other Romantics, predicted the day when the Devil should regain Heaven and occupy his former seat at the right hand of the Lord. Further on in this novel the following paragraph will be found:

"In the opinion of the Lollards, Satan was not the enemy of the human race, but, on the contrary, its protector and patron. They held that he was a victim of injustice and jealousy. According to them, the Archangel Michael and the other celestial powers who had precipitated him into the abyss, were the real demons, while Lucifer, Beelzebub, Ashtaroth, Astarte, and all the monsters of hell, were innocence and light themselves. They believed that the reign of Michael and his glorious host would soon come to an end, and that the Devil would be restored and reinstated in Heaven with his accursed myrmidons. They paid him an impious worship and accosted each other by saying, *Celui à qui on a fait tort te salue*—that is to say, He who has been misunderstood and unjustly condemned, salute thee—that is, protect and assist thee."

The French Romantics held views which were already taught by the Gnostics, are found in the books of the Kabbalists and the Magi, and were shared by many medieval sects. The German Luciferians of the thirteenth century, among other heretical sects, believed that Lucifer had been unjustly banished from Heaven and pronounced anathema against St. Michael, his conqueror. In our own country,

a Universalist minister, the Reverend Mr. Tillotson, was deposed from his church for wishing to extend its doctrine of universal salvation to Satan. The orthodox teaching is that the Devil cannot do penance and receive pardon like Adam. The Church has always taught that Satan is a devil through all eternity. He is damned beyond redemption. In the Persian eschatology, however, Ahriman will be the last to arrive purified in the paradise. According to the belief of the Yezidis in Asiatic Turkey, the rebel angel will some day be restored.

The belief in the Devil's pardon and restoration to Heaven was also held by several Church fathers. The germ of this belief is in the passage: "Even the devils are subject unto us through thy name" (Luke x. 17). Origen entertained the hope for the Devil's restoration to Heaven. His belief in the salvalibility of the Satanic nature was shared apparently by Justin, Clemens Alexandrinus and afterwards by Gregory of Nyssa and Didymus. Thomas Aquinas, it is said, could hardly be happy from thinking of the irreversible doom of Satan. He passed a night in prayer for the salvation and restoration of the Devil. "O God," he prayed, "have mercy upon thy servant, the Devil." Father Sinistrari, the famous *Consulteur* of the Inquisition, argued that demons were included in the atonement wrought by Christ and might attain final beatitude. He even intimated, though more timidly, that their father, Satan himself, as a participator in the sin of Adam and sharer of his curse, might be included in the general provision of the Deity for the entire and absolute removal of the curse throughout nature. Saint Theresa did not wish that one should speak ill of the Devil and pitied him for not being able to love.

In a thirteenth century poem, *A Moral Ode*,[4] we find the assertion that the Devil himself might have had mercy had he sought for it.

The idea of the salvation of Satan was a part of the Romantic humanitarian movement which a misanthropic humorist has named "redemptorism," that desire to rescue criminals and courtesans by means of love, that hope of the final triumph of universal good. This ideal found expression in different forms in Goethe, in Burns, in Byron, in Blake, and in Victor Hugo. Goethe intimated that he had written a passage "where the Devil himself receives grace and

[4] *Old English Miscellany.* (Early English Texts.)

mercy from God." Byron shared this Romantic belief in the salvation of Satan in predicting a time

> "When man no more can fall as once he fell,
> And even the very demons shall do well!"

This ideal has been expressed by Robert Burns in a single verse of his "Address to the De'il", which touches the heart without offending the intellect.

Henry Mills Alden has uttered his belief in the following words:

"Lucifer is the light-bearer, the morning-star, and whatever disguises he may take in falling, there can be no new dawn that shall not witness his rising in his original Brightness."[5]

[5]This *motif* has also been treated by Bailey in his *Festus*, by Wilfred S. Blunt in his *Satan Absolved: A Victorian Mystery* (1899) and by Kurt von Rohrscheidt in his *Satan's Erlösung* (1894). The Romantic dream of the salvation of Satan has been treated at length in the present writer's recently published book: *Satan et le Satanisme dans l'Oeuvre de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Les Pelles Lettres).