

THE SATANISM OF BARBEY D'AUREVILLY.

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“WHAT is his (man's) religion?” queries the Shavian Devil. “An excuse for hating me.”¹ Jules Amédée Barbey d'Aureville seems to have formed an exception to this general rule. His religion, to all appearances, was a pretext for loving Lucifer. This author's conversion in 1846 was the starting-point of an absorbing preoccupation with the Devil and all his works. When Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* appeared in 1857, Barbey stated in a review that the man who cultivated these poisonous flowers had but two courses open: to blow his brains out or—to turn Christian.² To avoid the humiliation of crawling to the Cross, Barbey did not start writing his diabolical stories until after his conversion. In contrast to Adolphe Retté, another diabolical story-writer, Barbey went *de Dieu au diable*—from the Divinity to the Devil.³ Although continuing to profess a belief in the Prince of Peace, he undertook to preach the Prince of the Pit. “If he still pretended to honor the Church,” says J. K. Huysmans, who afterward also joined the group of decadent and diabolist writers,⁴ “he, nevertheless, addressed his prayers, as in the Middle Ages, to the Devil.”⁵ Clinging to the Cross of Christ with one hand, he upheld with the other the diadem of the Devil. This creator of diabolical characters stoutly main-

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1903), p. 107.

² “Après les *Fleurs du Mal* il n'y a que deux parties à prendre pour le poète qui les fit éclore, se brûler la cervelle ou se faire chrétien.” *Les œuvres et les hommes. Les poètes* (1863).

³ Adolphe Retté, author of *Treize idylles diaboliques* (1898), tells the story of his conversion in a book with the title *Du diable à Dieu* (1907). For his conversion see the essay “The Confession of M. Retté” in Henry Scott Holland's *A Bundle of Memories* (1915), pp. 185-9.

⁴ See the present writer's article “The Satanism of Huysmans” in *The Open Court*, Vol. XXXIV (1920), pp. 240-51.

⁵ “S'il prétendait toujours honorer l'Eglise, il n'en adressait pas moins comme au moyen âge ses postulations au Diable.” *A Rebours* (1889).

tained that his creations were the natural children of the Church. He prefaced his stories with a declaration of belief in the Devil and called to witness the teachers of the Church. "I have always believed," Barbey writes in his preface to *l'Ensorcelée* (1854), "... in the intervention of occult and malignant powers in the struggles of humanity.... In regard to the intervention of the malignant powers in the affairs of humanity, I have as support the testimony of the Church, and I do not, moreover, believe that what is going on at present in the world permits the most recalcitrant to doubt it."⁶ In his preface to *les Diaboliques* (1874)⁷ Barbey again describes himself as "the author...who believes in the Devil and in his influence in the world."⁸

The position which Barbey takes in regard to his belief in the Devil cannot be assailed. His assertion that the Devil is as essential to religion as the Deity cannot be gainsaid.⁹ He is wholly right when he maintains that you cannot be a believer in the Almighty and be a dis-believer in the Adversary. The belief in the Devil is an important part of the teachings of the Church. It is the pivotal point of the Catholic scheme of salvation. What need would there, indeed, be for salvation through Christ if there were no Satan constantly plotting against man? It is, furthermore, wholly in conformity with the Catholic creed if Barbey sees the paw of the Devil rather than the hand of God in the affairs of life. The Church has always taught that the evil influence has a stronger hold upon mankind than the good influence. It is part of the doctrinal system of the Church that the Devil can and actually does exercise a greater power—physical as well as moral—over man than God. Barbey's belief that it is the Devil rather than the Divinity that pulls the human puppets on this stage which we call the earth is canonically correct. Is not the Devil the prince of the world (Joh. xiii. 31; xiv. 30; xvi. 11; Eph. ii. 2; vi. 12), nay even the God of this world—*deus hujus saeculi* (2 Cor. iv. 4)? Do we not infer from another

⁶ "J'ai toujours cru...à l'intervention des puissances occultes et mauvaises dans les luttes de l'humanité....Quant à l'intervention des puissances mauvaises dans les affaires de l'humanité, j'ai encore pour moi le témoignage de l'Eglise, et d'ailleurs je ne crois pas que ce qui se passe tout à l'heure dans le monde permette au plus recalcitrant d'en douter." *L'Ensorcelée*, p. 61.

⁷ This collection of ten tales is considered by Philip Treherne, *Louis XVII and Other Papers* (1912), 137, the most characteristic of all of Barbey's imaginative writings.

⁸ "...L'auteur qui croit au Diable et à ses influences dans le monde."

⁹ The German rationalist of the eighteenth century Christoph Friedrich Nicolai already said that God and the Devil make up the whole of religion.

biblical passage that the authority over the world has been delivered to Satan who can give it to whom he will (Luc. iv. 6) ?

Now that the belief in the Devil and the use of the word devil have gone out of fashion we fail to grasp the importance of the doctrine of the Devil for our ancestors. These scoffers, who at the very mention of his name burst into shouts of laughter, should be reminded of the fact that not so very long ago it was authoritatively declared in the ecclesiastical courts that a denial of the Devil's personal existence constituted a man a notorious evil liver and a depraver of the Book of Common Prayer. At least in one country of Europe the Devil has not yet lost his legal status. Ireland still recognizes witchcraft as an offence against the law. In the Commission of Peace the newly appointed magistrate is empowered to take cognizance, among other crimes, of "Witchcraft, Inchantment, Sorcery, Magic Arts."¹⁰

From the days when Athanasius was writting the life of St. Anthony in devil-fighting heroics, man's evil thoughts and acts have been considered by the faithful the machinations of the Evil One. Heresy was traced by the Church to the blowing of Beelzebub's bellows into the ears of humanity. For the Roman religionist the belief in the Devil as any other belief has been fixed *ne varietur* by the Church. It follows, therefore, that the belief in the Devil as the power that directs our destinies must form for every Catholic a part of his religion. In other words, every Catholic is necessarily a Satanist. Jules Lemaitre, another of the *grands converti*, may think that the denial of Satan is a stronger sort of Satanism than the belief in him, and that the real Satanist was the atheist Sainte-Beuve rather than the Catholic Barbey.¹¹ There can be no question, however, that Satanism in its original meaning is nothing but the belief in Satan as the controlling power in the world's affairs. Just as deism means a belief in God (Deus), and Christianity implies faith in Christ, so is satanism or diabolism primarily the belief in Satan or Diabolus.¹² As a Catholic believer Barbey necessarily was a satanist, and in portraying the Devil's activity on this earth he is wholly within Catholic teaching and tradition. His method is sound theology, whatever we may think of it in other respects. If a novelist is permitted to resort to providential intervention, why should he not be allowed also to get the

¹⁰ Cf. St. John D. Seymour, *Irish Demonology and Witchcraft* (1913), p. 248.

¹¹ Jules Lemaitre, *Les contemporains*, 4th series (8th ed., 1889), p. 54.

¹² Eugène Grèle, *Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. L'œuvre* (1904), p. 121

Devil to help him out of a difficulty? In what respect, pray, is infernal machinery inferior to celestial machinery? Why should *diabolus ex machina* not be just as good as *deus ex machina*? If we allow extra-human powers to intervene in the affairs of man, the representatives of both realms ought to enjoy equal rights. From the theological point of view the introduction into literature of superhuman characters, evil as well as good, offers no difficulty whatever. From the point of view of psychology, however, no influences for good or evil which do not flow from man's character can be considered. But Barbey makes no claim whatever upon psychological truth. He never attempts to explain psychologically the acts of his characters. It is his method to develop and to explain an extraordinary, an abnormal condition of spirit, and to avoid all psychological motivation by attributing it to the Devil. In this respect, too, Barbey is a consistent Catholic. To explain in a natural way the unusual thoughts or acts of man would run counter to the teachings of the Church. According to Catholic belief the human mind cannot accomplish anything unusual without the aid of Satan. Barbey's contemporary, the Marquis de Mirville, also refers all unusual phenomena to the Devil.¹³ Theology and psychology do not mix well. A Catholic novelist must not attempt at all to explain man's acts through his character. In conformity with the Catholic creed he must account for each act by the whispering either of a good or of a bad angel. Barbey as a Catholic novelist had to adopt this method of motivation and present his characters as moved by a mysterious hand. As he was, furthermore, convinced of the predominance of evil in the world, he could not fail to see the Devil wherever he turned his eyes. That is why the Devil is so frequently recurrent in his pages. As a matter of fact, it is the Devil who is the real hero in his stories. Satan does not appear in person, but he is the power in whom all Barbey's characters live and move and have their being. For Barbey is interested not so much in the person as in the power of the Devil. His stories deal with demonic possession rather than diabolical personality. All his characters are diabolically demented, bewitched or possessed of the Devil. His women especially will be found to be of a diabolical temperament. There is not a woman in *les Diaboliques* who is not possessed of at least seven demons.¹⁴ "Diabol-

¹³ Marquis de Mirville, *Des esprits et de leurs manifestations fluidiques dans la science moderne* (1858).

¹⁴ "Pas une de ses femmes qui ne soit complice de la moitié des démons." Léon Bloy, *Un brélan d'excommuniés* (1889), p. 42.

ical," remarks their pitiless painter, "diabolical indeed. Not a woman in this book who is not more or less diabolical. Not a woman whom a man could call seriously and truthfully an angel..... Not a woman who is pure, virtuous, innocent.....These sinning women belong body and soul to the Devil."¹⁵

Barbey's conception of woman, too, is based on Catholic teaching and tradition. As Satan is the eternal tempter, so is the woman in the eyes of the Church the eternal instrument of temptation. Woman was conceived by the medieval monks and missionaries as *instrumentum diaboli*, as the most efficient of stalking-horses behind which the Devil went hunting for souls. Love is held by this diabolical doctor to be nothing short of demonic possession, and its enjoyment is certain to lead man to eternal perdition. As in Rops's etchings, so do we behold in Barbey's stories woman in her worship of Lord Lucifer. She is an adept in all black arts and an expert in all forms of sexual perversion. The woman wallows in the wildest orgies of lewdness and licentiousness, continually invoking, extolling and worshiping the Devil. To the credit of the author it must be admitted that his stories do not fail of their purpose as announced in their preface, and that his inventions of sorcery and sacrilege, of witchcraft and wickedness, of debauchery and depravity, of erotomania and theophobia will terrify the most hardened reader. But it is not so easy to discover the moral aim which this doctor of the diabolics claims for his stories. As a matter of fact, the French government sued Barbey for corrupting the public with his *Diaboliques* as it had prosecuted Flaubert for the publication of *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire for his *Fleurs du mal*. Whether or not we see in Barbey, as we do in Baudelaire, his contemporary and comrade-in-letters, a man who obtains delight from treading on forbidden ground, we find it rather obvious that he considered it all a matter of mirth. His men, who are slightly less diabolical than his women, are described with an obvious complaisance. These vassals of Satan have been most carefully and most sympathetically drawn. They are the elect of the Devil, and the *élite* of mankind. Barbey makes them inherit the earth and play the lord over their fellow men. They are endowed

¹⁵ "Diaboliques, il n'y en a pas une seule ici qui ne le soit à quelque degré. Il n'y en a pas une seule à qui on puisse dire sérieusement le mot de : Mon Ange! sans exagérer. Comme le diable, qui était un ange aussi, mais qui a culbuté,—si elles sont des anges, c'est comme lui,—la tête en bas, le...reste en haut! Pas une ici qui soit pure, vertueuse, innocente.... Ces pécheresses ont le diable au corps et au cœur." Preface to the first edition of *Les diaboliques*, p. 6.

with an insolent, joyous, imperial, Don Juanesque beauty, a beauty which they preserve even unto the end of their days, "as if," exclaims their chronicler, "they had concluded a pact with Satan." But in contrast to all other men who dared to deal with the Devil, Barbey's men never fulfil their part of the agreement. They never pay the penalty of their impiety and perversity. Barbey's sympathy for his diabolical men cannot be mistaken. He sinks his personality wholly into them and fully identifies himself with them.¹⁶ They are but the projections of his own ideal self. Mesnil, Brassard and Ravila apparently are portraits of their painter. Barbey even went so far as to give the third of these three diabolicals his own two personal names Jules Amédée.

Barbey thus transcends the Catholic belief in the person and power of the Devil. This fanatic, this frantic Catholic evidently not only believes in the Devil, but really worships him. He not only accepts Satan, but also accords him a seat in the sanctuary. Barbey informs us that the Devil is rather interesting, from the ethical as well as esthetical point of view.¹⁷ Of all Devils it is Satan who appeals to our author most. "This fallen angel, coming from a good family," Barbey tells us, "has more wit than all the other demons whom he commands."¹⁸ What won our author for Satan was that distinguishing trait in the discrowned archangel's character which brought about his downfall. It was the empyrean rebel's cry *Non serviam* which found a strong echo in the heart of the literary-feudal *grand seigneur*. Barbey was, indeed, *fier comme Lucifer*, as the French saying runs. This poor scion of an old aristocratic family was of a very proud spirit. His friends, Rémy de Gourmont tells us, suffered much from his diabolical arrogance and audacity. The quality which Barbey admired most in Satan, however, was his power. This stalwart reactionary to Romanism and Royalty, this champion of medievalism and monarchism, loved power above everything else in the world. He called power "the most beautiful thing there is in the world after virtue."¹⁹ This lover of power could not help but fall down and worship the almighty god of evil and prince of this world. As a matter of fact, Barbey felt himself so much kin to Satan through his haughty spirit and love of power, so fully identified himself with his hero that he ended by

¹⁶ Cf. Ernest Seillière, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (1910), p. 190.

¹⁷ "...Moralement comme esthétiquement c'est intéressant, un démon."

¹⁸ "Cet archange tombé, étant de bonne maison, a plus d'esprit que les autres diables dont il est le chef." Cf. Seillière, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ "...La force la plus belle chose qu'il y ait dans le monde après la vertu."

believing that he was the Devil himself. Toward the end of his life he used to sign his letters *le prince des ténèbres* (the Prince of Darkness). "A devil" seems to have been the consensus of opinion among his friends regarding our author (*François Laurentie*). Barbey certainly had *le diable au corps*, which is, according to Voltaire, the necessary prerequisite for success in any of the arts.²⁰

In all truthfulness, however, it must be stated that with Barbey as with Rops wickedness was all pose. They both portrayed diabolism, but they never practised it. Barbey's personal life was almost monastic, the general view gathered from his writings to the contrary. Anatole France, who is the authority for this statement, tells us that Barbey wrote as an angel and as a devil.²¹ "A confessor by impiety," is the term this critic applies to our author. Philip Treherne has Barbey's dual character in mind when he calls him "a Mephisto in mufti."²² This eccentric Romantic succeeded in combining the role of champion of the cross and the crown with that of apologist of dandyism and diabolism. He was a Bonaldic Traditionalist²³ and a Byronic Titan, a compound of Joseph de Maistre²⁴ and of Alfred de Musset. Barbey's Romanticism was half Seraphic and half Satanic. His great literary ancestor, however, was Chateaubriand.²⁵ His writings may be considered as the natural offspring of *le Génie du Christianisme* (1802). It is from Chateaubriand that Barbey like Baudelaire²⁶ derived his Catholic Satanism, the belief in Satan as the most essential element in the Catholic creed, as well as his Satanic Catholicism, that mingling of pagan sensuality with Christian sentiment, that sort of religion which should furnish occasion for esthetic pleasure and pious emotion. "Sentimentalism in religion," says Professor Guérard, "is ever a dangerous thing; but when it is intensified in literature, it leads straight to—the Devil."²⁷ Of further influence on Barbey were the writers of fan-

²⁰ "C'est le diable au corps qu'il faut avoir pour exceller dans tous les arts."

²¹ Anatole France, *La vie littéraire*, 3d series (1891), pp. 37-45.

²² Philip Treherne, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²³ Louis de Bonald, author of *La théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux dans la société civile* (1796), was a defender of authority in things spiritual as well as temporal.

²⁴ Joseph de Maistre, author of *Du Pape* (1819) and *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (1821) headed with Bonald the movement back to Rome and Royalty.

²⁵ Cf. Edmund Gosse, *French Profiles* (1904), p. 96; *North American Review*, Vol. CXCII (1910), p. 485.

²⁶ James Huneker, *Iconoclasts* (1905), p. 352, believes that it was from Baudelaire that Barbey got his brand of Catholicism.

²⁷ Albert L. Guérard, *French Prophets of Yesterday* (1913), p. 35.

tastic stories of the first half of the century.²⁸ Of foreign writers the German Hoffmann²⁹ and the American Poe³⁰ have been counted among his literary ancestors.

But Barbey d'Aurevilly surpassed all his masters in the art of giving his readers the holy shudder. Rémy de Gourmont, who calls our author "one of the most original characters of the nineteenth century,"³¹ counts his stories among the greatest masterpieces of the last century in France. "If Balzac had written *les Diaboliques*, he tells us, "it would be regarded as the greatest of his works." Paul de Saint-Victor compares Barbey's stories to "the philters that sorcerers brewed in which were asphodels and vipers, tiger's blood and honey." But alas! this diabolical dish is hard to digest for most of us.³² The disdainful dandy knew very well that his writings would never be popular, but he suffered poverty and misery rather than cater to the mob. He used to say that his works were read by thirty people only. Included in this number was, of course, Satan himself. It is to be hoped that the Devil, in return for the signal services Barbey rendered him, has finally left him to God.

²⁸ Cf. J. H. Retinger, *Le conte phantastique dans le romantisme français* (1908), p. 130.

²⁹ Cf. Auguste Dupouy, *France et Allemagne* (1913), p. 103.

³⁰ Cf. *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. LXVIII (1891), p. 699.

³¹ Rémy de Gourmont, *Promenades littéraires*, 1st series (1903), p. 258.

³² Of all of Barbey's imaginative writings *Une Histoire sans nom* (1882) has been translated into English and published, with impressions of the author by Edgar Saltus, in the "Lotus Library" (Brentano's, 1919). This *Story Without a Name* recalls in its essential points Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Marquise von O. . . .* (1808). Of his critical works *Du dandysme et de George Brummel* (1845) was rendered into English by Douglas Ainslie and published, in 1897, under the title *Of Dandyism and of George Brummel*. His poem "Le Cid," which is now very popular as a recitation, has been translated by Miss Betham-Edwards in her book of essays *French Men, Women and Books* (1910), which also contains a portrait and a study of our author.