

THE DEVIL IN LITERATURE

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

OF all the myths that have come down to us from the East, and of all the creations of Western fancy and belief, the Devil has exercised the strongest attraction upon the human mind. The imagination of man has from earliest times persistently played with the Personality of Evil. The fiend has never failed in fascination. He is an everlasting fountain of pathos and poetry, a perennial power for interest, inspiration and achievement. So large a place has Diabolus taken in our imaginations, and we might also say in our hearts, that his expulsion therefrom, no matter what philosophy may teach us, must forever remain an impossibility. Whether or not we favor the belief in the Devil's spiritual entity apart from man's, we always show a deep interest in his literary incarnations. All intelligent men and women, believers and unbelievers, may be assumed to hold a unanimous opinion with regard to the Fiend's fitness as a fictional character.

It is generally admitted that, as a poetic person, the Devil has not his equal in heaven above or on the earth beneath. In contrast to the idea of Good, which is the more exalted in proportion to its freedom from anthropomorphism, the idea of Evil owes to the very presence of this element its chief value as a literary theme. Lucifer may have been inferior to St. Michael in military tactics, but he certainly is his superior in literary æsthetics. The fair angels—perfect in their virtues—are beyond our ken, but the fallen angels, with all their faults and foibles, are of our kin.

Of all Christian supernatural beings, it is the Devil who, as a poetic figure, is superior to the pagan divinities. In poetic possibilities no mythical personage can be compared with the Christian Devil. "The fallen archangel," said Father Duchesne, "is not only superior to the old Pluto, but is perhaps the richest dramatic type, on account

of his stormy passions." In Chateaubriand's opinion there is no poetic character, ancient or modern, to equal the Devil in grandeur. Contrasting Milton with Homer, this French writer finds nothing in the *Odyssey* comparable with Satan's address to the sun in *Paradise Lost*. "What is Juno," Chateaubriand asks in his *Génie du Christianisme* (1799-1802), "repairing to the limits of the earth in Ethiopia, compared to Satan, speeding his course from the depths of chaos up to the frontiers of nature?" "What is Ajax," he exclaims, "compared to Satan?" "What is Pluto," echoes Victor Hugo, "compared to the Christian Devil?"

The poetry of the Christian religion is mainly manifested in the Prince of Demons. Paradoxically enough, the beauty of Christianity is finally reduced, in its poetic aspect, to the Adversary. Of all Christian characters, Satan has appealed most strongly to the poets of all ages and languages. It may be said picturesquely but not inaccurately that the Devil has dominated most literary forms to the present day. To call the roll of the writers who celebrated Satan in verse and prose is to marshal the names of almost all great men of letters.

While most writers content themselves with recording the Devil's activities on this planet, there never have been lacking men of sufficient courage to call upon the Prince of Darkness in his own proper dominions in order to bring back to us, for our instruction and edification, a report of his work there. The most distinguished poet his Infernal Highness has ever entertained at his court, it will be recalled, was Dante. The mark, which the scorching fires of hell left on the face of the Florentine poet, was to his contemporaries a sufficient proof of the truth of his story.

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Lucifer looms large in literature. The "Morning Star," hurled from heaven, shines brilliantly in the firmament of fiction. The discrowned archangel has waxed truly formidable in literary stature. Beelzebub bears on his shoulders the burden of *belles-letters*. It is a significant fact that Diabolus has been the principal *motif* of inspiration for the world's greatest masterpieces. Strike the Devil out of the reckoning, and you strike out the pith and marrow of Dante, Calderon, Milton, Goethe and Byron. Sorry, indeed, would the plight of literature be without the Devil. Lacking the Devil, there would simply be no literature. With the Devil eliminated, there

would be no plot, no complication, and consequently no story. Syllogistically stated, the idea may perhaps be expressed as follows: All real stories depend upon plots; all plots depend upon the intervention of the Devil; consequently, all real stories depend upon the Devil.

Thus, figuratively speaking, the Fiend is the fountain-head of all fiction. The novel, that wanton fable, may, without straining at the figure, be considered the work of a special demon who has the function of agitating the quill. Mr. H. G. Wells, in *The Undying Fire* (1919), affirms, "Satan is a celestial *raconteur*. He alone makes stories." Barbey d'Aureville, the French diabolist, prefaces his story "Happiness in Crime" (in *les Diaboliques*, 1874) with the following statement: "In these pleasant days, when a man relates a true story, it is supposed that the Devil has dictated it." Jules de Gaultier, the great French paradoxist, is of the opinion that Evil came into the world to promote and perpetuate the art of storytelling.

The literary and artistic value of Evil cannot be overestimated. There is a fascination in Evil which allures men to the edge of the pit to gaze at all the writhing horrors within, execrable as these misshapen things may be to the stern moralist. The existence of duplicity, sensuality, knavery, and malice prepense, is not to be denied by the Realist or Romanticist—who portrays these moral abominations without greatly exaggerating their sway. These imaginative writers know that goodness and mercy are but partial ingredients in the composition of human nature, where the struggle is going on between the higher and the lower natures. It is generally admitted that a happy nation has no history. Nor can a wholly virtuous person be used as the protagonist of a novel. It is thus proved that the Diabolical is essential to all forms of fiction.

If Diabolus is essential to the novel, he is even of greater validity and necessity in the drama. There could certainly be no drama without the Diabolical. "True dramatic action," says the German dramatist, Friedrich Hebbel, "arises only when the Devil ranges himself as antagonist." As for poetry, no proof is needed that the Prince of the Pit is a patent and potent power in verse. "Poetry," recently said the French poet, Raymond de la Tailhède, "is nothing but revolution"; and it is obvious that the Devil, by his very nature, is the spirit of revolt and rebellion.

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The Devil has never been absent from the world of letters, just as he has never been missing from the realm of politics. Though the subject-matter of literature may always be in a state of flux, the Demon has been present in all the stages of literary evolution. All schools of literature in various times and tongues have set themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, to represent and interpret the Devil; and each school has treated him in its own characteristic manner. We must remember that there are fashions in devils as in dresses; and what is a devil in one century or one country may not pass muster as such in another. Each generation and each nation has a special and distinct devil related to its own temperament. The Fiend reflects the faith and philosophy of each period, each people, and each personality. Different lands each have a distinct fauna of imps, as of animals. The German devil is as different from the French devil as the racial complexion of the German is different from that of the Frenchman. Each mind, moreover, stamps the Devil with its own individuality. Thus there are as many kinds of devils as there are men and women writing of them. The literary historian will find devils fascinating and fearful, devils powerful and picturesque, devils serious and humorous, devils pathetic and comic, devils fantastic and satiric, devils gruesome and grotesque.

The Devil is an old character in literature. Perhaps he is as old as literature itself. He is encountered in the story of the paradisiacal sojourn of our first ancestors; and from that day on, he has appeared unflinching, in various forms and with various functions, in all the literatures of the world. From his minor place in the Holy Scriptures, the Devil grew to a position of paramount importance in the works of the Christian poets of all lands and languages. It is an interesting fact that the first literary document distinctly English and Christian (we refer to Cædmon) contains a personification and deification of the Power of Evil. The medieval writings simply swarmed with the spirits of hell. The illuminations of medieval manuscripts were full of ferocious demons. On the medieval stage, the Fiend even frisked in the flesh. Diabolus was undoubtedly the most popular actor in the mystery-plays, calling forth half-terrified interest and half-enthusiastic respect. Although the Devil was hailed by our medieval ancestors with such laughter

as still rings across the ages, it need not be inferred from this fact that his audience did not stand in awe and trembling of him. It is a well-known psychological fact that we strive to laugh ourselves out of our fears and to grin away our apprehensions.

The Reformation left the Devil's position intact. Indeed, it rather increased his power by withdrawing from the saints the right of intercession on behalf of the sinners. In Protestant poetry, the Devil was both the abstraction of Evil and the personal tempter of man. He was at once the great fallen archangel of heaven and the painted clown of the country-fair; the unconquered adversary of the Almighty and the buffoon baffled by book and bell.

The Renaissance, on the other hand, meant a serious setback for Satan. In its reaction against medieval thought, it disdainfully turned away from the Devil. The classical school, particularly in France, dealt Diabolus a still deadlier blow. As a member of the Christian hierarchy of supernatural personages, he could not but be affected by the ban under which Boileau, who dictated the classical creed, placed all Christian Supernaturalism. The writers of that period treated the Devil at best allegorically or satirically.

In the eighteenth century, the belief in the Devil was fast disappearing. In fact, all faith in good as well as evil was at a low ebb. This *saculum rationalisticum*, which was such a bitter enemy of the Supernatural, showed itself particularly loath to employ Lucifer in literature. The writers of that period even scorned to mock at Moloch. Voltaire, who, though believing in nothing, believed in ghosts for tragedy (*Sémiramis*, 1748), opposed the introduction of the Devil into poetry as violently as did Boileau.¹ But even this devil-despising generation produced two master-devils in fiction, LeSage's Asmodeus and Cazotte's Beelzebub—both worthy members of the august company of literary devils. The novel, considered a frivolous diversion by the French Classicists in imitation of the ancients, escaped the observation of the lawmakers of French Classicism and was, happily enough, not bound by the rules and regulations of a criticism not even deigning to pay it attention. A distinct reaction in the Fiend's favor was, however, brought about at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

¹ Henry Fielding likewise gave preference to the ghost in literature. He states in *Tom Jones* (1749): "The only supernatural agents, which can in any manner be allowed to us moderns, are ghosts."

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Satanism, and Supernaturalism in general, in nineteenth-century literature sprang from such varied roots, developed according to such various methods, and served such a variety of purposes that it is very difficult to enter into a detailed investigation of its different aspects. Supernaturalism was an important element in the Romantic movement of all European countries. It was an essential part of the Romantic recoil from the rationalism of the previous period. In their revulsion against the *salons* of the eighteenth century, the men of the nascent nineteenth sought refuge in the nursery. Thus the revival of a belief in the Supernatural was fated to come as the predestined swing of the pendulum. But this belief received a great impetus, particularly in France, from the revolutionary wars. For war spells atavism, a re-emergence of the primitive in man. In moments of danger, we always return to the faith begotten of the deep feelings and fears of childhood. When the dread of death is upon us, all thoughts which hitherto have lain hidden in some remote chamber in the back of our brain forge their way to the fore. In hours of calamity, nations as well as individuals show a tendency to return to the pious beliefs of the past.

Moreover, in times of war, the mystic notion is generally revived that the war waged upon earth is but a part of the great cosmic conflict between the powers of Good and of Evil, with each belligerent claiming the Deity, of course, for himself and assigning the Devil to his enemy. Our recent war has furnished abundant illustrations of these propositions.

The Devil, furthermore, comes into vogue during a revolution. In fact, each of the great poetic personifications of Evil appeared during a critical moment in the world's history, when the old order was disappearing to make way for the new. Periodical upheavals in the social and political world give men a renewed realization of the fact that a power of evil is always at work in their midst. This new realization of the Devil as the controlling power in the world's affairs takes form in the imagination of a Dante, a Luther, a Vondel, a Milton, a Goethe, a Chateaubriand, a Soumet, a Victor Hugo, an Anatole France, and a Bernanos.

It may also be noted in passing that most of the re-creators of the Devil were exiled from their country or ostracized from the community of their class. We need but refer to Dante, Luther,

Vondel, Milton, Byron, Heine, Lermontov, Quinet, and Victor Hugo. These men, suffering imprisonment or banishment from their country for their opposition to a tyrannical government, were naturally attracted to the archangel banished from heaven for having, in the words of Milton's Satan, "opposed the tyranny of Heaven" (*Par. Lost* i. 124).

Satan was the great inspiration of the Romantic generation. The Fiend was the very fount and foundation of the Romantic movement. He was at first dimly seen as if behind a veil. The veil was soon lifted, and he appeared in all his fiendishly fascinating beauty. Satan's shadow was cast over all the works of the Romantic period. Romanticism is thoroughly suffused with the spirit of Satan. Satanism is not a part of Romanticism. It is Romanticism. It may well be said without any levity that Satan was the patron saint of the Romantic School. He impressed it with his personality to such an extent that it was soon named after him. The expression "Satanic School" applied by Southey to the Byronic group in England was accepted by Victor Hugo as an epithet of honor for the corresponding movement in France.²

Of all European countries, France showed herself particularly eager to make amends for her long lack of appreciation of the Devil's poetic possibilities. Whether or not the Devil was indigenous or an importation in France, it is certain that he enjoyed a greater vogue there than elsewhere. The rebel of the empyrean was actually the rage of the revolting Romantics in France. The interest which the French Romantics showed in the Devil, moreover, passed beyond the boundaries of France and the limits of the nineteenth century. The Parnassians prostrated themselves at the altar of Satan in the form of Prometheus. The Symbolists, for whom the mysteries of Erebus had a potent attraction, were particularly obsessed by Diabolus. Even the Naturalists, who certainly were not haunted by phantoms, often succumbed to Satan's seduction. Foreign writers, turning for inspiration to France, where the literature of the past century perhaps reached its highest development, were also caught up in the French enthusiasm for the Devil. In fact, the prevalence and persistence of the personality of Evil in the literature of the past century constitutes one of its chief and characteristic charms.

The Devil, to be sure, did not again assume the prominent posi-

² Cf. S. Osgood: "The Satanic School in Literature," *Christian Examiner*, XXVII (1839), 145-61, and the present writer's essay: "Satanism in French Romanticism," *The Open Court*, XXXVII (1923), 129-42.

tion he occupied in medieval literature; but if he is a less important, he is a more imposing character in the literature of modern times. In our days, the Devil is not an object of contempt, but of consideration. He is treated not comically but seriously, nay sympathetically. We have come to realize that there is so much of us in the Devil and so much of the Devil in us that it would not be fair to treat him harshly.

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It is related that, after the glory of Greece had departed, a mariner, voyaging along her coast by night, heard from the woods the cry, "Great Pan is dead!" But Pan was not dead; he had fallen asleep to waken again as Satan. In like manner, when the eighteenth century believed the Devil to be dead, he was, as a matter of fact, only recuperating his energies for a fresh start in a new and nobler form.

The modern Devil is a great improvement on his prototype of medieval days. He differs from his older brother as a cultivated flower differs from a wild blossom. Diabolus has lost the awe which he exercised in the Middle Ages. He is no longer the old monster with horns, hoofs and tail, as described and illuminated in the medieval monastic missals and legends, and as he is still seen today on the capitals of the medieval cathedrals. Satan has nowadays added to that dignity of person, already conferred upon him by Milton, a corresponding nobility of character. The Devil as a human projection is bound to partake in the progress of human thought. Says Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*:

"Culture, which the whole world licks,
Also unto the Devil sticks" (i. 2495-6).

The Devil advances with the progress of civilization, because he is what men make him. He has benefited in characterization by the modern leveling tendency. Nowadays supernatural personages, like their human creators, are no longer painted either as wholly white or wholly black, but in various shades of gray. The Devil, as Renan has aptly remarked, has chiefly profited from the relativist point of view which now prevails in ethical judgments, and which no longer permits any rigid interpretation of good and evil, or any strict division of men into saints and sinners. The Spirit of Evil is better than he was, because evil is no longer so bad as it was. The Devil is no longer a villain of the deepest dye. At his worst he is the general

mischief-maker of the universe, who loves to stir up the earth with his pitchfork.

We no longer look upon Lucifer as the opponent of the Lord, who seeks to frustrate His providential plans for the human race. We regard the Devil, on the contrary, as one of the instruments in the government of the world and the education of the human race. Willingly or not, Beelzebub is the benefactor of mankind. The Devil declares himself in Goethe's *Faust* as part of that power which, though it always wills the bad, is always working for the good. Diabolus is the necessary, though unwilling, instrument of man's betterment. He supplies the motive power, without which man would soon reach the stage of stagnation. We must know the spirit that denies if we are to learn the truth. The Spirit of Negation is not man's enemy, but his companion on the path of perfection, rousing him out of his lethargy and thus prompting him onward and upward. In Nietzsche's words, the Eternal Malcontent is "man's best force," inasmuch as he represents our progressive, inquisitive nature, which will not permit us to remain satisfied with lesser achievement, but urges us on to higher and nobler aims.

In modern literature, the Devil's chief function is that of a satirist. This clever critic directs the shafts of his sarcasm against all the faults and foibles of men. He spares no human institution. In religion, art, society, marriage—everywhere his searching eye detects the weak spots. Among the recent demonstrations of the Devil's ability as a satirist of manners and morals, we may mention Mark Twain's posthumous romance *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) and Leonid Andreev's equally posthumous work *Satan's Diary* (1920).

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