

Satan on the Hearth

Satan on the Hearth

Carlton Culmsee

Feeling chilly whenever cozy old myths are stripped off, we knit new ones. Even in this age of science when we often fancy that now, forever, we will scorn the fabrication of myths as childish, we have an even keener need for myths than before, especially for self-flattery we may gain from a warm delusion that salves our pride. The new myths, like the old ones, are partly efforts to explain the inexplicable, partly metaphors for misty insights, but mostly they are escape devices.

Today's Myth-Maker

One of the first tasks for today's myth-maker is to give man back some sort of dignity. He lost much when 19th-century science shattered him, mixed him up with the other talus fragments, and subjected him to the physical laws assumed to regulate the mechanisms of nature. Determinism—which is both thralldom and relief from individual responsibility—has been called the common element in the three revolutionary isms (Marxism, Darwinism, and Freudism) we inherit from the 19th century. Under the total impact man dropped from a little lower than the angels to a little lower than the dogs, in the estimation of some. One American Nobel prize winner in literature urged man to emulate the dog, for, he said, the dog is more honest and clean; and he declared bulls to be braver, generally nobler beasts than man. This viewpoint was a negative boost for an older belief that we can place our trust in a deep, natural source of strength and virtue if we keep the spring unpolluted. This faith in natural goodness certainly has much to commend it. But we went to a desperate extreme in our reaction against what we took to be oversublimated concepts of man based on the theology of special creation and the possession of a soul.

Therefore, it seemed necessary to pull the Promethean myth down from the shelf and dust it off to help once more to restore man's self-esteem. In the new version he did not merely defy the gods by introducing fire upon earth: he was himself a reluctant ambassador sent by a superior race to challenge the imbecilic brute forces that rule this globe. He became Heroic Man, model umpty-seven. Unfortunately he could not do much more than struggle to the summit where the path ended, bare his breast, hurl imprecations in the teeth of the storm—and await the inevitable bolt, or pneumonia. This was the escape into immedicable despair. It gave man

a forlorn dignity; it also excused him of responsibility for constructive effort and for failure: the odds were impossible.

Slavish Determinism

This was a flight from evolutionary science, in the circumscribed definition that spelled slavish determinism with the only upward path by way of merciless death to the unfit, into which class the materialists seemed to throw all artists, poets, the sensitive and imaginative. This has been termed a revolt against depersonalization. When everything seemed trending toward a cold analytical world in which all that man had thought was proud, noble, subtle, and strange about himself was being dispersed among the chemical elements and elsewhere, the individual rose in rebellion. The Age of Natural Science became also the Age of Psychology and Psycho-analysis—a most lyrical and introspective age, the age of such men as Proust and Joyce. It became an Age of Music, an Age of Emotional Transports as well as of Science. It became the Age of Existentialism, of Heidegger and Sartre. With the stimuli of scientific boldness and experimental methods, some peered within as never before, and were appalled by what they glimpsed; they were appalled and fascinated.

This was not entirely new. Theology and law had, of course, been concerned with our propensities for evil and with punishments here and hereafter intended to deter wrong-doing. However, if Hawthorne brooded over the bottomless pits of wickedness in humankind, what could Faulkner's generation of moralists think?—but for accidents of birth and propaganda, you and I might have been Nazi executioners converting thousands of fellow-beings into fertilizer and lampshades. The Grendel-hungers of Hitler and his henchmen have unfolded for us as new information has come to light. Documents indicate that Auschwitz and Maidenek were only pilot plants in the master plan, that after the Jews other religious and racial minorities were listed for extermination, then the German officer class, and later, British males (British girls were worth saving) and populations of small subject countries. Furthermore, massacres of millions in the Ukraine and elsewhere in the Communist bloc are coming to be regarded even by “retarded liberals” less as necessary steps toward a humane future than as revelation of man's abysmal brutality.

The foregoing illustrates a significant change in our national mood from exuberance to doubt or even dread. Some have thought our 19th-century optimism grew out of that youthful phase of history when we gorged at the “Big Barbecue” of free natural resources. Then when frontier exhilaration trickled away into dry sands of the sub-humid West, America is thought to have emerged into disillusionment and pessimism, feelings deemed fitting for adulthood. Apparently, however, inhospitable regions

did not force maturity upon America by blighting the frontier dream but only supplied concrete illustrations for a dark view of life which persons in many parts of the Old World and the New were coming to hold. The "Great American Desert" of veritable sand and cactus became less significant than the use of it as a symbol. Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" was an early word-etching of a world wasteland which T. S. Eliot and others have described more recognizably for us. This is a universal barren where many wander dejectedly, not sure whether to be more affrighted by the rank caverns of animality that lie behind them and within, or the misty gulf of meaninglessness that opens ahead.

20th Century Desert of Spirit

There are, as we have said, several avenues of escape from this desert of the spirit. But that chosen for this discussion is the titillating one in which the wanderer turns his childhood world of religious orthodoxy inside out and upside down with spectacular effects. Even in this disillusioned time man contrives to resurrect a phoenix from the scientific incinerator in which he burns creeds he has come to view with skepticism or boredom. One such return from an inert materialism, from ashen meaninglessness to a strange mystique, is the transformation of hostile nature into a malign deity. Thus we finally introduce the bad actor named in the title. In this concept Satan has not finally won the War in Heaven and usurped the throne—he has sat there all the time, asserts the new theology. God's benevolence was a fairy tale we fabricated, so the feeling is, to warm our shivering limbs and hood us from truths we feared to face. The Devil no longer sits by the fireplace in a more or less comfortable family group where he cooperates, if grudgingly, to help realize some far-off divine event. He has, in the opinion of some, evolved from an avuncular black sheep to a rapacious father. In audaciously bitter cases, authors have flouted tradition to "show" mothers as she-devils, Venus flytraps, monsters devouring their young. Writers different as Vardis Fisher and Tennessee Williams have contributed to this black current. Although diabolism is an intoxicating escape from meaninglessness, it is itself a religion of despair.

Two Types of Despair

At this juncture let's discriminate between two kinds of despair, shallow and profound. Because all of us possess a full complement of human traits and susceptibilities, all of us probably feel both types. We can agree with Bernard G. Murchland that "Despair has become. . . *the* human condition," and that "It would be hard to find a major author of our century unaffected by despair." He mentions Kafka, Gide, Mann, Moravia, St. Exupery, Roger

Martin du Gard, Malraux, Camus, Joyce, Lawrence, Hemingway, Orwell, Faulkner, and Huxley among others. Despair is the logical next step after a pollyannaism, a reaction of the wise against such optimism. Winthrop S. Hudson points out that “the burst of technological and industrial expansion which followed the Civil War had created an unbridled cheerfulness, confidence, and complacency among the American people. It was the Horatio Alger era of seemingly unlimited opportunity. . . . This temper was reflected and further fortified among Protestants by a growing conviction that the mission of Christianity had been fulfilled in church-going America.” Because, he ventured, “the current ideas and ideals seemed to be blessed by the tangible benefits of an astonishing material prosperity, they concluded that the *laissez-faire* code of the developing industrial society actually represented God’s way of doing things. . . . “This type of good-feeling, supported by no intellectual or theological content worth mentioning but founded largely on the sand of material prosperity, could lead only to a treacherously shallow pessimism. For the masses, disillusionment came any time they lost their hope of becoming millionaires or lost their health; for the wealthy, despair came any time that, fascination with material goods and power failing them, they felt the emptiness of soul which power and possessions could not fill.

This is different from the insight of the tough-fibered philosopher, saint, or other person who sees despair as a condition of existence, then goes on from there, accepting life yet seeking to transcend mortality in some way, endeavoring to do what Samuel Miller said a clergyman must do: “by an alchemy of his own he must make sense of things, or be honest and humble in knowing he can do no more than to face them wisely and bravely.” Bertrand Russell wrote that we must descend to the bedrock of ultimate despair, then build toward hope. The serious writer who has vision and conscience struggles to prepare what Albert Camus termed “a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism.” But there are writers and writers, thinkers and thinkers; the difference is where the dominant emphasis is placed, what is sought. Out of a shallow despair the confirmed satanist attempts to invert the ethical structure, to make white black and black white, sin virtue and virtue sin.

Suspicious of an Angry God

Suspicion that man may be at the mercy of powers antagonistic to him and too powerful to challenge successfully is, of course, not new. Thinkers have long brooded over the possibility, and writers from ancient times have created masterful characters to make them victims of unfathomable Fate. But monotheism and science, old and modern pantheism have teamed to

this extent, that we commonly postulate unity at the core of all. There is now, as previously suggested, no household of deities good, bad, both. For many there is neither a neutral Divine Ground nor a reservoir of energy which is potentiality to man's hand; there is a malevolent mind or tendency dominant in the universe, "evil enthroned"; there is no God but God and He an evil one. Sadly, the revival of Melville meant, for many, only that he had been ahead of his time in illustrating this assumed malevolence in God or nature; and most interpreters missed the novelist's intimations of something transcending the inimical.

Steps toward a "religion" of ultimate despair have been taken by many and worship of a kind has commenced. Reference is not to such phenomena as the medieval Witches' Sabbaths, which were probably survivals of ancient fertility rites, and other pagan ceremonies among peoples who still regarded Christianity as an alien creed. True, there are said to have been voices of utter hopelessness at these observances, but there is reason to believe that they were raised in protest at oppressions by feudal and clerical authority. The targets of wrath were corruptions of originally acceptable functions, so that the irreverence could have been aimed obliquely at restoring what the people viewed as mercy and justice.

The change from a Wordsworthian ecstasy over nature to a morbid view has affected more persons than is generally supposed. This reversal in the romantic outlook did not, of course, await our era of titanic wars; it was anticipated by decadent romantics of the 18th and 19th Centuries. The Marquis de Sade, whose writings depicted a type of sexual perversion so vividly that they put the word "sadism" into the dictionary, declaimed in the late 18th Century: "Nature averse to crime? I tell you, nature lives and breathes by it; hungers at all her pores for bloodshed, asks in all her nerves for the help of sin. . . . Good friend, it is by criminal things and deeds unnatural that nature works and moves and has her being. . . ." A century later the English poet Swinburne, a disciple of de Sade's, averred that cruelty and crime are universal laws of nature, that God is the "supreme evil." The sin presented by Swinburne, however, is often identified as such by the poet. Indeed, he sometimes ranged it in dismal contrast with virtue. In our century the Italian poet, novelist, and dramatist, Gabriele D'Annunzio, ventured beyond most Satanics by cloaking evil in mystical heroism and beauty. He further confused the issue by personally assuming the character of a dashing warrior who could inflame the imagination of the young with patriotic deeds as well as words. Perhaps he converted few to his inverted faith; but the uncritical acceptance of such figures presumably for technical virtuosity, among certain literary leaders is little aid to persons seeking to set up viable scales of values.

Confusion of Blurred Thinking

The confusion of many seekers after culture would be ludicrous if it were not evidence of dangerously blurred thinking. Many admirers of Byron, for example, lump his Satanism and his other work together indiscriminately. Another Satanist was, as I suggested, Swinburne. Quiller-Couch tells us of the exhilaration that swept Oxford at the appearance of Swinburne's first successful book, the groups of students ecstatically chanting stanzas from the poems. The enthusiasm had to cool, of course, and, when later fruits of his "baneful fluency" added little beyond accentuation of obtrusive mannerisms, Swinburne began to take the rank his gifts merited. But significantly, it was his excessive alliteration, wearisome repetitiveness, and prolixity that drew the critics' disapproval. Probably still prejudiced in favor of anyone who thumbed his nose at hypocritical Victorianism, they rarely touched upon his diseased parts. To many otherwise apparently healthy minds, he was in his senility revered as "a giant asleep under the pines."

Surely the literary league ladies must have felt uneasy when they assumed reverent postures before certain British or French poets and novelists who derided ideals which these matrons expected their husbands and sons to observe strictly! Even better than American critics whom I have read, Aldous Huxley suggested our confusion of mind. In his essay attacking Wordsworth's nature-worship, Huxley termed nature "always alien and inhuman, and occasionally diabolic." There and elsewhere he repeatedly emphasized treacherous traits of nature. He did not propose that man, a stranger in a strange world, should adapt by becoming as strange as that world, should regard his emergent human qualities and culture as themselves alien or false. But the ordinarily sound Huxley did assert that the poet, the artist, must be "of the devil's party" and must "champion the devil."

Diabolism, it can be seen, enjoys considerable respectability. It has previously been entertained at the extremes, among bored sophisticates and irresponsible have-nots. Going about the world, you detect evidences of old and new belief in it from the Kurdish Yazidis' devil worship to modern voodoo rites. It fumes up naturally as an effort in interpret inexplicable evil in man or nature, and to propitiate a deity who may be omnipotent or alert for the decisive moment to strike.

Diabolism Widespread

Diabolism is not confined to neo-primitive decadents and beatniks and literary irresponsibles, however. The doctrine that ends justify means—when the means are inhuman—is akin to diabolism. Fanatical communists,

fascists, and race supremacy bigots can thus regress into species of Satanism at the moment they feel most righteous.

We must acknowledge, however, that there probably have always been liberals who recognized that the Man of Reason (reason in the narrow, flat sense) tends to condemn persons who explore unknown areas in unconventional ways. These liberals are eager to be open-minded about new adventures in learning or feeling. Certainly the more earnest rebels are likely to break the bonds of mere habit and stir a fresh awareness, even if they do not arrive at epochal discoveries. Also our wisdom has never been sufficient to resolve the ambiguities and conflicts in nature, or between man and nature. It is obvious to thoughtful persons that the struggle is not between outright good and evil but between different orders of potentiality and creativity. Today the low-level scientism that finds its certainties only in empirically established data can, when it rules a limited mind, be an enemy of truth on higher planes. So the tolerant and intuitive strive to keep open-minded for areas unexplored or canceled out, so that they may break crusts of prejudice and thrust up through overheads of vested ignorance. There are always necessities and opportunities for adding to understanding, and these do not daunt the enterprising.

The novel, it can be said in this connection, is *novel* for two reasons. (It should never be tedious because routine life is tedious, as the science-intimidated Veritists held.) One is that people are entitled to legitimate extensions of knowledge and experience. The other is that novelty of raw experience and acquisition of new knowledge can mean what is more important than either—awakening in the better Buddhist tradition. “Enlightenment” in the centuries-old Occidental definition is usually substitution of fact for illusion; but more significant is the awakening, the rebirth of deep, vivid awareness on imaginative and intuitive levels.

Therefore the wise, with prudent reserve, refuse to reject the Satanists out of hand. They are wrong or right—wrong when, defending the rebels, they find themselves victimized by charlatans or degenerates; right when the apparent Satanists turn out to be pioneers who force their way into a productive new tract.

The Challenge to the Critic

The problem for the conscientious critic is complicated by the fact that every human king is equipped with a full inventory of human qualities. Where the dominant emphasis falls is decisive. The final impact of a work must be appraised in determining what an ostensible Satanist's influence may be. If we must choose between Swinburne and D'Annunzio, for example, we should take the former; for usually he placed health in distinguishable contrast with disease. On the other hand, D'Annunzio attempted

to make vice appear virtue, diabolism a godlike attribute, and thus essayed to confuse or divert the impulse toward wholesome on-going life.

Sometimes diabolism goes from confusion into conviction. There is an illustration in the decadent poet Sebastian, a brooding presence who never makes his entrance on stage in Tennessee Williams' play *Suddenly Last Summer*. In this drama a mother's over-possessiveness frustrates life. She is identified with the Venus flytrap, engulfer of unwary fragiles. To her son she becomes proof that nature is a monster destroying her offspring. When he sees predatory birds darken the sky of the Encantadas and swoop down to kill millions of newly hatched turtles in lustful carnage, he declares that he "has seen God." Appearing evil, God seems to "Saint" Sebastian to demand an inverted morality and worship in shrines at which, as Swinburne wrote, "a sin is a prayer." His final act is to immolate himself for cannibalistic young degenerates, who combine the febrile decadence of urban slums, the alpha and omega of despair that is loathing, not the longing that seeks hope. This development is the logical culmination of steps from a suspicion of hostile nature to abject subservience before a deity who disdains life. But one must concede that Williams obviously viewed these perversions of mother and son with abhorrence.

Probably no literary leader of our time would admit to being a "card-carrying member" of the cult of diabolical despair. He would, as a matter of fact, insist that he glorifies man's spirit in the tragic sense, and his followers might term him a moralist who does not flinch from the most repellent facts. These authors can be termed moralists in that they reveal man's weaknesses and evil with terrifying vividness. But their feeling is not, I believe, comparable to the righteous wrath which some sociological novelists between the wars leveled at social abuses. It offers us little or no hope. In judging the ostensible Satanist, one should ask whether, for reasons of despair or irresponsible salesmanship, he tends to loosen man's grip on fundamental life forces, or whether he is seriously pioneering neglected or new areas which promise fruit in future.

Fundamental Question

Perhaps the fundamental question still is this: How can a monster of perversion such as the Marquis de Sade—at least as he portrays himself—win the half-gleeful acceptance which he has gained from many readers?

That he did exist, that he offers a subject for scientific analysis, is true; but this fact does not supply a satisfying answer. Those most engrossed in him do not appear to be equipped to investigate him scientifically. As a matter of fact, there may be no one thus equipped because science as we know it does not take cognizance of the very essence of de Sade or of any human being.

Yet the answer to the question may not, after all, be difficult. Man thinking encounters many of the same adverse forces in every age: the gross obvious fact that man must survive as a physical organism confers meretricious priority upon the sub-human factors involved in the perpetuation of his mere physical existence. Distinctively human traits and potentialities—Aldous Huxley summarized them as intelligence, friendliness, and creativity—and their fulfillment may be the only real excuse for the whole clanking, grinding, shuddering juggernaut of our machine culture. Yet try to find anything like unashamed acknowledgment of their importance even among the educated! The goal becomes consumption, minimal or conspicuously wasteful; the means become ends; and the reason for the entire structure becomes buried under an avalanche of expediency which misses its own goal.

The protests of those penetrating enough to assess the damage being done will range from mild criticism to the perversities of a fallen angel such as some critics see in de Sade. The degree of preposterous fallacy occurring in the latter type of protest will be proportional to the amount of smug, obtuse error against which the protest is aimed.

Sadism True Freedom?

But if the mad zeal of such protests can become thus comprehensible, if it can be seen as a heroically dangerous dose of literary strychnine to the diseased society, what of the sober half-acceptance by the presumably responsible and respectable? A *Saturday Review* reviewer of the book, *The Life and Ideas of the Marquis de Sade*, asserts that true sadism “is a plea for absolute freedom, a total revolt against all law, whether divine, social, or natural, in the name of nature itself.” We may be victims of the purblindness of which I spoke when we express surprise that such defiance can do more than catch a momentary startled glance. Scientific curiosity must be largely discounted as a reason for the current revival of interest in the iconoclastic Marquis for, as previously commented, persons interested enough to read de Sade and ponder him are not equipped (if anyone is) to deal with his central premise, which seems to deny science, natural law, the hypothetical consistency of the universe.

Anyone, of course, can be bewildered at the obtrusion of the demonic, the malign, into movements that promised only benevolence. There is, for example, our science-technology alliance: although it is truly a horn of plenty, some influences seem determined to pervert it to harmful ends. The “nuclear club” (there may be a dozen member nations by 1975) presents shocking pictures of large and smaller nations straining their resources, neglecting their dire needs in education, food and health to gain power for destruction beyond our imagining. Small wonder a devil seems to leer from

the mushroom cloud! Along the domestic horizon, other ogres loom. People feel a dread of inexplicable evil when they read increasing numbers of news stories about incredible vandalism, thrill burglaries, thrill "muggings," thrill murders. Psychology does not fully explain why many thousands of young people riot in resort towns with utter callousness to the rights and feelings of others. There appears to be more in this than the instinctive aggressiveness Freud feared might disrupt society; it is more than animal spirits and postponement of adult responsibility. In the worst cases it reflects a virulence actively destructive of human welfare, even of the wrong-doers. Refusing to blame Lucifer, any twentieth-century man still can wonder and dread.

But the more imaginative and philosophical, if they approve de Sade, probably do so for this reason: his assertion of human freedom is the most extreme position possible. It sounds bugle notes to hearts repelled by the prospect of being masticated in the maw of the machine, whether the dominant force be corporate gigantism or monstrous statism, hearts which are revolted by maceration in the machine in any of its forms and washed down into a vat where their tissues are transformed into crude by-products without regard to the most valuable element of all, the essence of humanity, the priceless emergent of biological and social and spiritual evolution.

Sometimes I pass an animal by-products plant. Drove of gaunt, broken-down horses wait beside it. They horrify me. What if I saw clean-limbed, spirited young thoroughbreds confined in the corral around that ghastly gray building waiting, not to fulfill their destiny of running beyond the wind, but to be knocked in the head and made into glue and horsehide, and meat for ranch minks? You too would feel inexpressible outrage and terror.

So the sensitive and responsible in our age will identify de Sade's as the extremest of protests against brute, callous blindness to the faculties which make the human being worth bothering about. That is why the diabolic current in our literature can become transmuted into something that seems, in a devious way, a courageous and necessary expression. Admittedly, diabolists are not always sincere; they may sometimes be as exploitive and unscrupulous as "pushers" of narcotics to teen-agers. But when their "controlling interest" is serious, they are, in a sense, created by the bleak flatness of our culture, by its fixation on a low plane of thought. They are truly fallen angels, descended into the abyss where most of us, as perverse as they but in an opposite mode, flounder in default of a clearer light.

In the psychic as in the physical world, action and reaction tend to be equal. Thus we absorb that toxic by-product of a generally wholesome tendency, the fact that well-meaning seekers longing for *certainty* have unintentionally dehumanized science and hence all life to some degree, for everyone is more or less a creature of his age. At least by depreciating the

very qualities which make human beings capable of being true seers and scientists, we have driven many imaginative souls into expressing revulsion in opposite error. This is not intended to vindicate diabolists. Whatever explanation we make of them, we cannot explain away the fundamental error: "To make God the author of evil would be to contradict the idea of God. . . ."¹ Evil is potency misapplied, out of control. To make a deity of it is to "return to religion" with a vengeance—against humanity.

Dr. Culmsee is dean of the College of Humanities and Arts at Utah State University and professor of American civilization. The editor of *Utah Sings*, Vol. 2, he has also published widely in *The Graduate Journal*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Physikalische Blatter*, and other journals.

1. S. Radhakrishnan. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New York, 1959), p. 203.