

# On The Devil, and Devils

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1880

To determine the nature and functions of the Devil, is no contemptible province of the European Mythology. Who, or what he is, his origin, his habitation, his destiny, and his power, are subjects which puzzle the most acute theologians, and on which no orthodox person can be induced to give a decisive opinion. He is the weak place of the popular religion—the vulnerable belly of the crocodile.

The Manichæan philosophy respecting the origin and government of the world, if not true, is at least an hypothesis conformable to the experience of actual facts. To suppose that the world was created and is now superintended by two spirits of a balanced power and opposite dispositions, is simply a personification of the struggle which we experience within ourselves, and which we perceive in the operations of external things as they affect us, between good and evil. The supposition that a good spirit is, or hereafter will be, superior, is a personification of the principle of hope, and that thirst for improvement without which present evil would be intolerable. The vulgar are all Manichæans—all that remains of the popular superstition is mere Machinery and accompaniment. To abstract in contemplation, from our sensations of pleasure and pain, all circumstance and limit; to add those active powers, of whose existence we are conscious within ourselves; to give to that which is most pleasing to us, a perpetual or an ultimate superiority, with all epithets of honourable addition; and to brand that which is displeasing with epithets ludicrous or horrible, predicting its ultimate defeat, is to pursue the process by which the vulgar arrive at the familiar notions of God and the Devil.

The Devil was clearly a Chaldæan invention, for we first hear of him after the return of the Jews from their second Assyrian captivity. He is, indeed, mentioned in the Book of Job; but, so far from that circumstance affording any proof that that Book was written at a very early period, it tends rather to shew that it was the production of a later age. The magnificence and purity, indeed, of the poetry, and the irresistible grandeur of its plan, suggest the idea that it was a birth of the vigorous infancy of some community of men. Assuredly it was not written by a Jew before the period of the second captivity,—because it speaks of the Devil, and there is no other mention of this personage in the voluminous literature of that epoch. And that it was not written by a Jew at all may be presumed, from a perpetual employment, and that with the most consummate beauty, of imagery belonging to a severer climate than Palestine.

But to return to the Devil.—Those among the Greek Philosophers, whose poetical imagination suggested a personification of the Cause of the Universe, seem, nevertheless, to have dispensed

with the agency of the Devil. Democritus, Epicurus, Theodorus, and perhaps even Aristotle, indeed abstained from introducing a living and thinking Agent, analogous to the human mind, as the author or superintendent of the world. Plato, following his master, Socrates, who had been struck with the beauty and novelty of the theistical hypothesis, as first delivered by the tutor of Pericles, supposed the existence of a God, and accommodated a moral system of the most universal character, including the past, the present, and the future condition of man, to the popular supposition of the moral superintendence of this one intellectual cause. It is needless to pursue the modifications of this doctrine as it extended among the succeeding sects. This hypothesis, though rude enough, is in no respect very absurd and contradictory. The refined speculations concerning the existence of external objects, by which the idea of matter is suggested, to which Plato has the merit of having first directed the attention of the thinking part of mankind... A partial interpretation of it has gradually afforded the least unrefined portion of our popular religion.

But the Greek Philosophers abstained from introducing the Devil. They accounted for evil by supposing that what is called matter is eternal, and that God, in making the world, made not the best that he, or even inferior intelligence could conceive; but that he moulded the reluctant and stubborn materials ready to his hand, into the nearest arrangement possible to the perfect archetype existing in his contemplation:—in the same manner as a skilful watchmaker, who, if he has diamonds, and steel, and brass, and gold, can compose a time-piece of the most accurate workmanship, could produce nothing beyond a coarse and imperfect clock, if he were restricted to wood, as his material. The Christian theologians have invariably rejected this hypothesis, on the ground that the eternity of matter is incompatible with the omnipotence of God. Like panic-stricken slaves in the presence of a jealous and suspicious despot, they have tortured themselves to devise some flattering sophism, by which they might appease him by the most contradictory praises—endeavouring to reconcile omnipotence, and benevolence, and equity, in the author of an universe, where evil and good are inextricably entangled, and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are for ever baffled by misery and decay. The Christians, therefore, invented or adopted the Devil to extricate them from this difficulty.

The account they give us of the origin of the Devil is curious:—Heaven, according to the popular creed, is a certain airy region inhabited by the Supreme Being, and a multitude of inferior Spirits. With respect to the situation of it theologians are not agreed, but it is generally supposed to be placed beyond the remotest constellation of the visible stars. These spirits are supposed, like those which reside in the bodies of animals and men, to have been created by God, with foresight of the consequences which would result from the mechanism of their nature. He made them as good as possible, but the nature of the substance out of which they were formed, or the unconquerable laws according to which that substance, when created, was necessarily modified, prevented them from being so perfect as he could wish. Some say that he gave them free-will; that is, that he made them, without any very distinct apprehension of the results of his workmanship; leaving them an active power which might determine them to this or that action, independently of the motives afforded by the regular operation of those impressions which were produced by the general agencies of the rest of his creation. This he is supposed to have done, that he might excuse himself to his own conscience for tormenting and annoying these unfortunate spirits, when they provoked him by turning out worse than he expected. This account of the origin of evil, to make the best of it, does not seem more complimentary to the Supreme Being, or less derogatory to his omnipotence and goodness, than the Platonic scheme.

They then proceed to relate, gravely, that one fine morning, a chief of these spirits took it into his head to rebel against God, having gained over to his cause a third part of the eternal angels, who attended upon the Creator and Preserver of Heaven and Earth. After a series of desperate conflicts between those who remained faithful to the ancient dynasty and the insurgents, the latter were beaten, and driven into a place called Hell, which was rather their empire than their prison, and where God reserved them, first to be the tempters, and then the jailors and tormentors of a new race of beings, whom he created under the same conditions of imperfection, and with the same foresight of an unfortunate result. The motive of this insurrection is not assigned by any of the early mythological writers. Milton supposes that, on a particular day, God chose to adopt as his Son and *heir*, (the reversion of an estate with an immortal incumbent, would he worth little) a being unlike the other Spirits, who seems to have been supposed to be a detached portion of himself, and afterwards figured upon the earth in the well-known character of Jesus Christ. The Devil is represented as conceiving high indignation at this preference, and as disputing the affair with arms. I cannot discover Milton's authority for this circumstance;<sup>1</sup> but all agree in the fact of the insurrection, and the defeat, and the casting out into Hell. Nothing can exceed the grandeur and the energy of the character of the Devil, as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. He is a Devil, very different from the popular personification of evil, and it is a mistake to suppose that he was intended for an idealism of Evil. Malignity, implacable hate, cunning, and refinement of device to inflict the utmost anguish on an enemy, these, which are venial in a slave, are not to be forgiven in a tyrant; these, which are redeemed by much that ennoble in one subdued, are marked by all that dishonours his conquest in the victor. Milton's Devil, as a moral being, is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in a purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy—not from any mistaken notion of bringing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the open and alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments.

Milton so far violated all that part of the popular creed which is susceptible of being preached and defended in argument, as to allege no superiority in moral virtue to his God over his Devil. He mingled as it were the elements of human nature as colours upon a single pallet, and arranged them into the composition of his great picture, according to the laws of epic truth; that is, according to the laws of that principle by which a series of actions of intelligent and ethical beings, developed in a rythmical tale, are calculated to excite the sympathy and antipathy of succeeding generations of mankind. The writer who would have attributed majesty and beauty to the character of victorious and vindictive omnipotence, must have been contented with the character of a good Christian; he never could have been a great epic poet. It is difficult to determine, in a country where the most enormous sanctions of opinion and law are attached to a direct avowal of certain speculative notions, whether Milton was a Christian or not, at the period of the composition of *Paradise Lost*. Is it possible that Socrates seriously believed that Æsculapius would be propitiated by the offering of a cock? Thus much is certain, that Milton gives the Devil all imaginable advantage; and the arguments with which he exposes the injustice and impotent weakness of his adversary, are such as, had they been printed, distinct from the shelter of any

---

<sup>1</sup> For Milton's purpose there is quite sufficient authority in the second Psalm and the twelfth chapter of the Revelation. The Revelation, though purporting to relate to the future, of course draws upon tradition and antecedent literature for its imagery.

dramatic order, would have been answered by the most conclusive of syllogisms—persecution. As it is, *Paradise Lost* has conferred on the modern mythology a systematic form; and when the immeasurable and unceasing mutability of time shall have added one more superstition to those which have already arisen and decayed upon the earth, commentators and critics will be learnedly employed in elucidating the religion of ancestral Europe, only not utterly forgotten because it will have participated in the eternity of genius.<sup>2</sup> The Devil owes everything to Milton. Dante and Tasso present us with a very gross idea of him. Milton divested him of a sting, hoof, and horns, and clothed him with the sublime grandeur of a graceful but tremendous spirit.

I am afraid there is much laxity among the orthodox of the present day, respecting a belief in the Devil. I recommend to the Bishops to make a serious charge to their diocesans on this dangerous latitude. The Devil is the outwork of the Christian faith; he is the weakest point. You may observe that infidels, in their novitiate, always begin by tremulously doubting the existence of the Devil. Depend upon it, that when a person once begins to think that perhaps there is no Devil, he is in a dangerous way. There may be observed, in polite society, a great deal of coquetting about the Devil, especially among divines, which is singularly ominous. They qualify him as the evil spirit; they consider him as synonymous with the flesh. They seem to wish to divest him of all personality; to reduce him from his abstract to his concrete; to reverse the process by which he was created in the mind, which they will by no means bear with respect to God. It is popular, and well looked upon, if you deny the Devil "a local habitation and a name." Even the vulgar begin to scout him. Hell is popularly considered as metaphorical of the torments of an evil conscience, and by no means capable of being topographically ascertained.<sup>3</sup> No one likes to mention the torments of everlasting fire and the poisonous gnawing of the worm that liveth for ever and ever. It is all explained away into the regrets and the reproaches of an evil conscience, and, in this respect, I think that the most presumptuous among us may safely say—

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

On the other hand. Heaven is supposed to have some settled locality, and the joys of the elect are to be something very positive. This way of talking about a personage whose office in the mythological scheme is so important, must lead to disbelief. It is, in fact, a proof of approaching extinction in any religion, when its teachers and its adherents, instead of proudly and dogmatically insisting upon the most knotty or unintelligible articles of their creed, begin to palliate and explain away the doctrines in which their more believing ancestors had shewn a reverential acquiescence, and an audacious exultation of confidence. It is less the opinion of the person himself than that of those by whom he is surrounded, which gives that air of confidence by which the most absurd tenets have been transmitted from generation to generation. A man may, in truth, never have considered whether there is or is not a Devil; he may be totally indifferent to the question; yet it may occur to him to state his positive opinion on one side or the other. The air of confidence with which he does this, is manifestly determined by the disposition with which he expects his opinion to be received. One illustration of this view of the subject is afforded by a circumstance in the life of Dr. Johnson, the last man of considerable talents who shewed any

---

<sup>2</sup> Compare this and the preceding paragraph with that passage in *The Defence of Poetry* which begins with the words *The poetry of Dante* (Vol. III, p. 126); and note how admirably Shelley was able to adapt his profound criticism alike to the purposes of satire and those of a higher strain.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Marlowe's *Faustus*, Act II, Sc. 1: "Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed In one self place; but where we are is Hell, And where Hell is, there must we ever be: And to be short, when all the world dissolves, And every creature shall be purified, All places shall be Hell that are not Heaven."

serious attachment to the ancient faith, and whose life and death, as compared with that of his contemporary, Hume, affords a just standard of the consolations of the Christian or the Infidel systems. A gentleman inquired of Johnson what he meant by *being damned*? "Sent to Hell and punished everlastingly," he replied.

The Devil is Διάβολος, the Accuser. In this character he presented himself among the character he presented himself among the other Sons of God before his Father's throne, to request to be allowed to tempt Job by tormenting him. God, it seems, had some special reason for patronizing Job, and one does not well see why he spared him at last. The expostulations of Job with God are of the most daring character ; it is certain he would not bear them from a Christian. If God were a refined critic, which from his inspiration of Ezechiel would never have been suspected, one might imagine that the profuse and sublime strain of poetry not to be surpassed by anything ancient, much less modern, had found favour with him. But to return to the Devil, the Accuser. In this view he is at once the Informer, the Attorney General, and the jailor of the Celestial tribunal. It is not good policy, or, at least, cannot be considered as constitutional practice, to unite these characters. The Devil must have a great interest to exert himself to procure a sentence of guilty from the judge ; for I suppose there will be no jury at the resurrection—at least if there is, it will be so overawed by the bench, and the counsel *for the crown*, as to ensure whatever verdict the court shall please to recommend. No doubt that, as an incentive to his exertions, half goes to the informer. (What an army of spies and delators all Hell must afford, under the direction of that active magistrate, the Devil!) If the Devil takes but half the pleasure in tormenting a sinner which God does, who took the trouble to create him, and then to invent a system of casuistry by which he might excuse himself for devoting him to eternal torment, this reward must be considerable. Conceive how the enjoyment of one half of the advantages to be derived from their ruin, whether in person or property, must irritate the activity of a delator. Tiberius, or Bonaparte, or Lord Castlereagh, never affixed any reward to the disclosure or the creation of conspiracies, equal to that which God's Government has attached to the exertions of the Devil, to tempt, betray, and accuse unfortunate man. These two considerable personages are supposed to have entered into a kind of partnership, in which the weaker has consented to bear all the odium of their common actions, and to allow the stronger to talk of himself as a very honourable person, on condition of having participation in what is the especial delight of both of them, burning men to all eternity. The dirty work is done by the Devil, in the same manner as some starving wretch will hire himself out to a king or minister, with a stipulation that he shall have some portion of the public spoil, as an instrument to betray a certain number of other starving wretches into circumstances of capital punishment, when they may think it convenient to edify the rest, by hanging up a few of those whose murmurs are too loud.<sup>4</sup>

It is far from inexplicable that earthly tyrants should employ these kind of agents, or that God should have done so with regard to the Devil and his Angels; or that any depositary of power should take these measures, with respect to those, by whom he fears lest that power should be wrested from him. But to tempt mankind to incur everlasting damnation, must, on the part of God, and even on the part of the Devil, arise from that disinterested love of tormenting and annoying, which is seldom observed on earth. The thing that comes nearest to it is a troop of idle dirty boys baiting a cat; cooks skinning eels, and boiling lobsters alive, and bleeding calves, and whipping

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paragraph IX of the *Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte* (Vol. II, pp. 110 and 111), in which Shelley puts this point with desperate earnestness.

pigs to death; naturalists anatomizing dogs alive, (a dog has as good a right and a better excuse for anatomizing a naturalist,) are nothing compared to God and the Devil judging, damning, and then tormenting the soul of a miserable sinner. It is pretended that God dislikes it, but this is mere shamefacedness and coquetting, for he has everything his own way and he need not damn unless he likes. The Devil has a better excuse, for, as he was entirely made by God, he can have no tendency or disposition, the seeds of which were not originally planted by his Creator; and as everything else was made by God, those seeds can have only developed themselves in the precise degree and manner determined by the impulses arising from the agency of the rest of his creation. It would be as unfair to complain of the Devil for acting ill, as of a watch for going badly; the defects are to be imputed as much to God in the former case, as to the watchmaker in the latter. There is also another view of the subject, suggested by mythological writers, which strongly recommends the Devil to our sympathy and compassion, though it is less consistent with the theory of God's omnipotence than that already stated. The Devil, it is stated, before his fall, was an Angel of the highest rank and the most splendid accomplishments, who placed his peculiar delight in doing good. But the inflexible grandeur of his spirit, mailed and nourished by the consciousness the purest and loftiest designs, was so secure from the assault of any gross or common torments, that God was considerably puzzled to invent what he considered an adequate punishment for his rebellion; he exhausted all the variety of smothering and burning and freezing and cruelly-lacerating his external frame, and the Devil laughed at the impotent revenge of his conqueror. At last the benevolent and amiable disposition which distinguished his adversary, furnished God with the true method of executing an enduring and terrible vengeance. He turned his good into evil, and, by virtue of his omnipotence, inspired him with such an impulse, as, in spite of his better nature, irresistibly determined him to act what he most abhorred, and to be a minister of those designs and schemes of which he was the chief and the original victim. He is for ever tortured with compassion and affection for those whom he betrays and ruins; he is racked by a vain abhorrence for the desolation of which he is the instrument; he is like a man compelled by a tyrant to set fire to his own possessions, and to appear as the witness against, and the accuser of his dearest friends and most intimate connexions; and then to be the executioner, and to inflict protracted torments upon them. As a man, were he deprived of all other refuge, he might hold his breath and die—but God is represented as omnipotent and the Devil as eternal. Milton has expressed this view of the subject with the sublimest pathos.

It is commonly said that the Devil has only precisely so much power as is allowed him by God's providence. Christians exhort each other to despise his attacks, and to trust in God. If this trust has ever been deceived, they seem in a poor way, especially when it is considered that God has arranged it so that the Devil should have no inconsiderable portion of the souls of men. A pious friend of mine tells me that she thinks that about nineteen in twenty will be damned. Formerly it was supposed that all those who were not Christians, and even all those who were not of a particular sect of Christians, would be damned. At present this doctrine seems abandoned or confined to a few. One does not well see who is to be damned, and who not according to the fashionable creed.

The sphere of the operations of the Devil is difficult to determine. The late inventions and improvements in telescopes have considerably enlarged the notions of men respecting the bounds of the universe. It is discovered that the Earth is comparatively a small globe, in a system consisting of a multitude of others, which roll round the sun; and there is no reason to suppose but that all these are inhabited by organized and intelligent beings. The fixed stars are supposed to

be suns, each of them the centre of a system like ours. Those little whitish specks of light that are seen in a clear night, are discovered to consist of a prodigious multitude of suns, each probably the centre of a system of planets. The system of which our earth is a planet has been discovered to belong to one of those larger systems of suns, which, when seen at a distance, look like a whitish speck of light; and that lustrous streak called the milky way is found to be one of the extremities of the immense group of suns in which our system is placed. The heaven is covered with an incalculable number of these white specks, and the better the telescopes the more are discovered, and the more distinctly the confusion of white light is resolved into stars. All this was not known during the gradual invention of the Christian mythology, and was never even suspected by those barbarians, in the obscure extremities of the Roman Empire, by whom it was first adopted. If these incalculable millions of suns, planets, satellites, and comets are inhabited, is it to be supposed that God formed their inhabitants better, or less liable to offend him than those primordial spirits, those angels near his throne, those first and most admirable of his creatures, who rebelled and were damned? Or has he improved like a proficient in statuary or painting, proceeding from rude outlines and imperfect forms, to more perfect idealisms or imitations, so that his latter works are better than his first? Or has some fortunate chance, like that which, when the painter despaired of being able to depict the foam of a horse, directed the sponge so as to represent it accurately, interfered to confer stability and exactness upon one, or how many, among the numerous systems of animated nature? There is little reason to suppose that any considerable multitude of the planets were tenanted by beings better capable of resisting the temptations of the Devil than ours. But is the Devil, like God, omnipresent? If so he interpenetrates God, and they both exist co-essentially; as metaphysicians have compared the omnipresence of God, pervading the infinity of space and being, to salt mixed with water. If not he must send some inferior Angels, either to this or some other planet, first to tempt the Inhabitants to disobey God, and secondly to induce them to reject all terms of salvation; for which latter purpose, it seems equally requisite that he should take up his residence on the spot; nor do I see, how he or God, by whose providence he is permitted, that is to say, compelled to act, could commit a business of such high moment to an inferior Angel. It seems very questionable whether the Devil himself, or only some inferior Devil, tempted and betrayed the people of the Earth; or whether Jupiter, a planet capable of containing a hundred times more inhabitants than the earth,—to mention only the planets of our own system,—or the Sun, which would contain a million times more, were not entitled to the preference.

Any objection that might arise from the multitude of Devils, I think futile. You may suppose a million times as many devils as there are stars. In fact you may suppose anything you like on such a subject. That there are a great number of Devils, and that they go about in legions of six or seven, or more at a time, all mythologists are agreed. Christians, indeed, will not admit the actual substance and presence of the Devils upon Earth in modern times. Or, in proportion as any histories of them approach to the present epoch, or indeed any epoch in which there has been a considerable progress in historical criticism or natural science, they suppose their agency to be obscure and superstitious. There were a number of Devils in Judea in the time of Jesus Christ, and a great reputation was gained both by him and others, by what was called casting them out. A droll story is told us among others of Jesus Christ having driven a legion of Devils into a herd of pigs, who were so discomfited with these new invaders that they all threw themselves over a precipice into the lake, and were drowned. These were a set of hypochondriacal and high-minded swine, very unlike any others of which we have authentic record; they disdained to live, if they

must live in so intimate a society with Devils, as that which was imposed on them, and the pig-drivers were no doubt confounded by so heroical a resolution. What became of the Devils after the death of the pigs, whether they passed into the fish, and thence by digestion, through the stomach, into the brain of the Gadarene Ichthyophagists; whether they returned to Hell, or remained on the Earth, the historian has left as subject for everlasting conjecture. I should be curious to know whether any half starved Jew picked up these pigs, and sold them at the market of Gadara, and what effect the bacon of a demoniac pig, who had killed himself, produced upon the consumers. The Devils requested Jesus Christ to send them into the pigs, and the Son of God shewed himself more inclined to do what was agreeable to the Devils than what was profitable to the owners of the pigs. He had, no doubt, say the Christians, some good reasons. Poor fellows! They were probably ruined by this operation. The Gadarenes evidently disapproved of this method of casting out Devils—they thought probably that Jesus shewed an unjust preference to these disagreeable beings; and they sent a deputation to request him to depart out of their country. I doubt whether the yeomen of the present day would have treated him with so much lenity.

Among the numerous theories concerning the condition of Devils, some have resorted to the Pythagorean hypothesis, but in such a manner as to pervert that hypothesis, from motives of humanity, into an example for cruel tyranny. They suppose that the bodies of animals, and especially domestic animals, are animated by Devils, and that the tyranny exercised over these unfortunate beings by man is an unconscious piece of retaliation over the beings who betrayed them into a state of reprobation. On this theory Lord Erskine's Act<sup>5</sup> might have been entitled "An Act for the better protection of Devils." How devils inhabit the bodies of men is not explained. It cannot be that they animate them like what is called the soul or vital principle because that is supposed to be already preoccupied. Some have supposed that they exist in the human body in the shape of *teniæ* and *hydatids*, but I know not whether those persons subject to vermicular and animalcular diseases, are the most likely to be subject to the incursions of Devils from any reason *a priori*, although they may safely be said to be tormented of Devils. The pedicular diseases on this view of the subject may be the result of diabolical influence, the sensorium of every separate louse being the habitation of a distinct imp. Some have supposed that the Devils live in the Sun, and that that glorious luminary is the actual Hell; perhaps that every fixed star is a distinct Hell appropriated to the use of its several systems of planets, so great a proportion of the inhabitants of which are probably devoted to everlasting damnation, if the belief of one particular creed is essential to their escape, and the testimony of its truth so very far remote and obscure as in the planet which we inhabit. I do not envy the theologians, who first invented this theory. The Magian worship of the Sun as the creator and Preserver of the world, is considerably more to the credit of the inventors. It is in fact a poetical exposition of the matter of fact, before modern science had so greatly enlarged the boundaries of the sensible world, and was, next to

---

<sup>5</sup> More strictly speaking Lord Erskine's Bill; for Shelley did not live to see an Act passed on this subject. Lord Campbell tells us in his *Lives of the Lord Chancellors* that Erskine "almost entirely confined himself for some years to a subject which he made peculiarly his own, and with which his name will ever continue to be associated." On the 15th of May 1809, he made a memorable speech, in moving the second reading of his Bill "For the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," which, however, was thrown out by the Commons after passing the Lords. Erskine reintroduced it with amendments in 1810, but withdrew it after it had passed the Committee of the Commons. It was not until the 22nd of July 1822, a fortnight after Shelley's death, but while Erskine was still alive, that the measure, having been brought forward by Mr. Martin, M.P. for Galway, became law, and set the example which has since been so largely followed by legislators throughout the civilized world.



pure deism or a personification of all the powers whose agency we know or can conjecture, the religion attended by the fewest evil consequences.

If the sun is Hell the Devil has a magnificent abode, being elevated as it were on the imperial throne of the visible world. If we assign to the Devil the greatest and most glorious habitation within the scope of our senses, where shall we conceive his mightier adversary to reside? Shall we suppose that the Devil occupies the centre and God the circumference of existence, and that one urges inwards with the centripetal, whilst the other is perpetually struggling outwards from the narrow focus with the centrifugal force, and that from their perpetual conflict results the mixture of good and evil, harmony and discord, beauty and deformity, production and decay, which are the general laws of the moral and material world? Alas! the poor theologian never troubled his fancy with nonsense of so philosophical a form. He contented himself with supposing that God was somewhere or other; that the Devil and all his angels together with the perpetually increasing multitude of the damned were burning above to all eternity in that prodigious orb of elemental light, which sustains and animates that multitude of inhabited globes, in whose company this earth revolves. Others have supposed Hell to be distributed among the comets, which constitute, according to this scheme, a number of floating prisons of intense and inextinguishable fire; a great modern poet has adopted this idea when he calls a comet

"A wandering hell in the eternal space."

Misery and injustice contrive to produce very poetical effects, because the excellence of poetry consists in its awakening the sympathy of men, which, among persons influenced by an abject and gloomy superstition, is much more easily done by images of horror than of beauty. It often requires a higher degree of skill in a poet to make beauty, virtue, and harmony poetical, that is, to give them an idealized and rhythmical analogy with the predominating emotions of his readers,—than to make injustice, deformity and discord poetical. There are fewer Raphaels than Michael Angelos; better verses have been written on Hell than Paradise. How few read the Purgatorio or the Paradiso of Dante, in the comparison of those who know the Inferno well. And yet the Purgatorio, with the exception of two famous passages, is a finer poem than the Inferno. No poet can develop the same power in that part of his composition where he feels himself insecure of the emotions of his readers, as in those where he knows that he can command their sympathy.

As to the Devil, and the imps, and the damned living in the Sun, why there is no great probability of it. The Comets are better fitted for this; except that some astronomer has suggested the possibility of their orbits gradually becoming ecliptical, until at last they might arrange themselves in orbits concentric with the planets, lose their heat and their substance, become subject to the same laws of animal and vegetable life as those according to which the substance of the surface of the others is arranged. The Devils and the damned, without some miraculous interposition would then be the inhabitants of a very agreeable world; and as they probably would have become very good friends from a community of misfortune and the experience which time gives those who live long enough of the folly of quarrelling—would probably administer the affairs of their Colony with great harmony and success. But there is an objection to this whole theory of solar and planetary Hells; which is, that there is no proof that the Sun and the Comets are themselves burning. It is the same with fire as with wit. A man may not be witty himself as Falstaff was, though like him he may be the cause of wit in others. So the Sun, though the cause of fire, may only develop a limited proportion of that principle on its own surface. Herschel's discoveries incline to a presumption that this is actually the case. He has discovered that the cause of light and heat is not the burning body of the Sun itself; but a shell as it were of phosphoric vapours,

suspended many thousand miles in the atmosphere of that body. These vapours surround the sphere of the Sun at a distance, which has not been accurately computed, but which is assuredly very great, encircling and canopying it with a vault of ætherial splendour whose internal surface may perform the same office to the processes of vital and material action on the body of the sun, as its external one does upon those of the planets. A certain degree of plausibility is conferred on this notion by the observation that the interior surface, as far as can be collected from a view of the sides of the chasm, is of an obscurer colour than the external one: what are called spots in the sun, being no more than immense rents produced probably by streams of wind in the incumbent mass of vapours, which disclose the opaque body of the sun itself. All this diminishes the probability of the sun being a Hell, by shewing that there is no reason for supposing it considerably hotter than the planets. Not to mention that the Devils may be like the animalculæ in mutton broth, whom you may boil, as much as you please, but they will always continue alive and vigorous.

The idea of the sun being Hell, is an attempt at an improvement on the old-established idea of its occupying the centre of the earth. The Devils and the damned would be exceedingly crowded in process of ages, if they were confined within so inconsiderable a sphere.

The Devil and his Angels are called the Powers of the Air, and the Devil himself Lucifer. I cannot discover why he is called Lucifer, except from a misinterpreted passage in Isaiah, where that poet exults over the fall of an Assyrian king, the oppressor of his country:—"How art thou fallen, Lucifer, king of Morning!"—The Devil after having gradually assumed the horns, hoof, tail, and ears of the ancient Gods of the woods, lost them again, although wings had been added. It is inexplicable why men assigned him these additions as circumstances of terror and deformity. The Sylvens and Fauns, with their leader the great Pan, were most poetical personages, and were connected in the imagination of the Pagans with all that could enliven and delight. They were supposed to be innocent beings in habits, and not greatly different from the shepherds and herdsmen of whom they were the patron saints. But the Christians contrived to turn the wrecks of the Greek mythology, as well as the little they understood of their philosophy, to purposes of deformity and falsehood. I suppose the sting with which he was armed gave him a dragon-like and viperous appearance, very formidable.

I can sufficiently understand why the author of evil should have been typified under the image of a serpent; that animal producing merely by its sight so strong an associated recollection of the malignity of many of its species. But this was eminently a practice confined to the Jews, whose earliest mythology suggested this animal as the cause of all evil. Among the Greeks the Serpent was considered as an auspicious and favourable being. He attended on Æsculapius and Apollo. In Egypt the Serpent was an hieroglyphic of eternity. The Jewish account is, that the Serpent, that is the animal, persuaded the original pair of human beings to eat of a fruit, from which God had commanded them to abstain, and then in consequence God expelled them from the pleasant garden, where he had before permitted them to reside, God on this occasion, it is said, assigned a punishment to the Serpent, that its motion should be as it now is along the ground upon its belly. We are given to suppose, that before this misconduct it hopped along upon its tail; a mode of progression which, if I was a Serpent, I should think the severer punishment of the two.[6] The Christians have turned this Serpent into their Devil, and accommodated the whole story to their new scheme of sin and propitiation.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Percy Bysshe Shelley  
On The Devil, and Devils  
1880

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Prose\\_Works\\_of\\_Percy\\_Bysshe\\_Shelley/  
On\\_the\\_Devil,\\_and\\_Devils](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Prose_Works_of_Percy_Bysshe_Shelley/On_the_Devil,_and_Devils)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**