
CURRENT BOOKS

Speak of the Devil

THE ORIGIN OF SATAN. By Elaine Pagels. Random House. 256 pp. \$23

THE DEATH OF SATAN: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil. By Andrew Delbanco. Farrar, Straus. 320 pp. \$23

Satan did not step suddenly from the shadows, absolute evil all at once, co-star in the cosmic drama. He found his way into the part, matured to the role. It took centuries for the Christian devil to arrogate to himself the various characteristics of the devils who make scattered appearances in the Bible. Satan is present in only a few places in the Old Testament, most prominently in the Book of Job, where he seems to be a member of God's court who, with God's permission, is allowed to test Job. The snake is perhaps the best-known symbol associated with Satan, but Genesis does not identify him with the cunning creature who persuaded Eve to try something new.

Just how closely the Old Testament Satan is to be associated with evil is a matter on which scholars differ. To his successor in the New Testament and beyond, however, the scent of evil clings like a signature cologne. The creature conjured up today in the popular imagination by the word *Satan* is a mix of malevolent beast and fallen Miltonic presence, hooved and horned and burnt red by the circumstances of his overheated home. (Is the use of the male pronoun contested, by the way, or are those who have made God "She" disinclined to give Satan a makeover too? Is he still "All yours, guys"?)

The titles of these two new books, by Elaine Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton University, and Andrew Delbanco, a professor of English at Columbia University, make them sound like proper bookends to the life and career of the Lord of Evil. (All that's missing is an appropriate bridge volume, something like *Satan: The Working Years*.) In fact, however, the two books are strikingly

dissimilar, in purpose and approach.

Pagels, the award-winning author of *The Gnostic Gospels*, here continues her study of early Christianity. Specifically, she wants to show how events related in the Gospels about Jesus and those who supported or opposed him "correlate with the supernatural drama the writers use to interpret that story—the struggle between God's spirit and Satan." She explores the "specifically *social* implications of the figure of Satan: how he is invoked to express human conflict and to characterize human enemies within our own religious traditions." Her intention is to expose "certain fault lines in Christian tradition that have allowed for the demonizing of others throughout Christian history."

Pagels argues that Christians reading the Gospels for almost 2,000 years have always identified themselves with the disciples and, as a consequence, have necessarily identified the disciples' opponents, "whether Jews, pagans, or heretics, with forces of evil, and so with Satan." This Satan was born, she believes, sometime in the second half of the first century A.D., when adherents of the Jewish sect that became Christianity began to associate those who resisted their teaching with diabolical forces.

The Jewish proto-Christians found evil in their differences with other Jews, and the polarization was progressive. The first stage of demonization saw them turn against those closest to them ("intimate enemies"), the rabbinical leaders of Jewish society at the time of the war with the Romans (A.D. 66–70). For Pagels, the war and its aftermath drove a wedge between Jews who embraced Jesus' teaching and were trying to convert other Jews to their beliefs and Jews who held to their traditional faith. These resistant Jews were seen as allies of Satan's cause, the cause of darkness and evil. In this early demonization, so integral to establishing the new faith, Pagels

finds the seeds of the violence that Christians would work on Jews during the course of the next two millennia.

But the demonization did not stop with Jews. As Christianity spread around the Mediterranean, Christians discovered enemies at every point along the sweeping radius of their influence: non-Jews whose minds were closed to conversion also took on the mantle of Satan. Eventually, the serpent bit its tail: Christians found unorthodox thinkers in their own midst—and they too underwent demonization.

Pagels's argument depends on reading the Gospels in the following chronological order, so that the Passion narratives assign increasing blame to the Jews for Jesus' death: Mark first, written near the end of the war with Rome, and reflective of divisions in the Jewish community that the war made worse; then Matthew and Luke, from the decade A.D. 80–90; and finally John, from the mid '90s. She makes much of the first chapter of Mark, in which the Spirit descends on Jesus as he is baptized and then sends him out into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. In the last chapter of Mark, the risen Jesus sends the disciples out into the world to baptize believers and gives them the power to cast out devils. Thus, a cosmic struggle frames the narrative. Pagels wants its representation in Mark to mirror the conflict between Jews-turned-Christians (the forces of good) and the Jewish majority in first-century Palestine (Satan's team).

Pagels refers the reader to other scholarly work (including her own) for elaboration. But the evidence, no matter how ingeniously manipulated, remains incomplete and ambiguous. It cannot convince because, as she herself is at pains to remind the reader, the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the Gospels remain, and perhaps will always remain, controversial. From the evidence we tease theory, not fact, and from the same evidence others will tease another theory. A book to be published in 1996 will offer new evidence that Matthew's Gospel

should be dated no later than A.D. 50. So early a date for Matthew would play havoc with Pagels's speculation about the chronology and purpose of the Gospels.

Pagels concedes that many Christians through the ages—Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther King are named—have resisted demonizing their opponents, but these, she claims, are the exceptions: "For the most part, however, Christians have taught—and acted upon—the belief that their enemies are evil and beyond redemption." The assertion is dramatic, but is it true without an awful lot of qualification? Of course, many readers of the Gospels have called those who will not accept their faith devils. Yes, there were Crusades and an Inquisition and a St. Bartholomew's Day.

But those are the extreme cases. What about the ordinary? The Roman Catholic tradition in which I was raised in mid-20th-century America taught us to pray for the conversion of "nonbelievers" but never once to identify them with Satan. On the contrary, each was a soul to save—a potential Catholic. The only individual I remember being denounced as "evil" and "a devil," maybe even *the* Devil, was Stalin—and about him the nuns were more savvy than the apologists.

In truth, though, there was no need to identify "the other" with the Devil. The Devil was all too real himself. Our devil was the devil of 1 Peter 5.8, the one who went about like a roaring lion looking for someone to eat. What mere nonbeliever could measure up to that? Who had time for "the other" (that creature of recent academic making)? You had all you could do to worry about yourself. The cosmic struggle was less significant than the daily personal struggle to lead a good and moral life. It's because you were so often tempted from the clear path of resolve into the delicious woods on either side that you were prepared to believe it was the Devil doing the deflecting.

This daily devil is absent from Pagels's account, though I suspect he has been a whole

lot more present to individual Christians and important to their lives for 2,000 years than her cosmic warrior. She writes, "The figure of Satan becomes, among other things, a way of characterizing one's actual enemies as the embodiment of transcendent forces." Yes—but in that "among other things" may hide the clever beast's most abiding and significant self.

We are light-years from ancient Palestine and cosmic struggle between good and evil in the contemporary world of Andrew Delbanco. "We no longer inhabit a world of transcendence," he writes, and the change, which some would see as a sign of maturity, is for him a mixed blessing at best. Indeed, there are moments, he admits, when the loss of a sense of transcendence is "unbearable." Delbanco's book, an eloquent, morally charged work of cultural, social, and intellectual history, uses American literature to explore how the country came untethered from its traditional religious moorings and how our language was "evacuated of religious metaphor"—metaphors such as "Satan." It is "the story of the advance of secular rationality in the United States, which has been relentless in the face of all resistance."

The concept of evil does not accord comfortably with our modern world view, for which the dominant mode is irony. Yet metaphysical need is not so easy to pull as a tooth. "Despite the monstrous uses to which Satan has been put," writes Delbanco, "I believe that our culture is now in crisis because evil remains an inescapable experience for all of us, while we no longer have a symbolic language for describing it." We want Satan back, and need to find new ways to conceive his reality, for "if evil escapes the reach of our imagination, it will have established, through its elusiveness, dominion over us all."

Delbanco's provocative sweep through American history leaves few religious ideals upright—and moves at so swift a pace that the reader's doubts about much of the grim, dra-

matic, academically astute generalization simply eat dust. Puritanism devolves from "a religion of self-effacement before an angry God" to "a religion of individuals striving under the gaze of a parentally proud God," and sin becomes "a synonym for the disreputable." By 1700, Satan begins to lose his moral content and his credibility. He goes from being an attribute of the self to a visible being outside the self, subject to dismissal in every one of his forms. By the mid-19th century, when the marketplace rules supreme and liberal individualism is increasingly the norm, he has been disavowed in literature, folklore, theology, and psychology. The color is gone, and not merely from his cheeks.

The Civil War is a crippling blow to faith and belief; in the land it bloodies grows a culture of doubt. America becomes modern, and, for Delbanco, "the emergence of chance and luck as the chief explanations and desiderata of life is perhaps the central story of modern American history." Evil is just bad luck. Soon, America enters its great age of scapegoating, when evil becomes synonymous with a foreign face. Belief bumps finally against our contemporary postmodern sense, or non-sense, of the self and our reflex disavowal of personal responsibility for any action, no matter how awful. How can we accept the irreducibility of evil in the self when there is no self? "As a society," Delbanco writes, "we seem to have virtually no beliefs left." But we had better learn to believe again, he urges, and soon.

The difficulty with both these books is that their catchy titles promise much more than their sober texts deliver. Reality is messier than any theorizing about it. You just can't coax every bee into the hive. Pagels's essay makes you doubt by the end the possibility of neatly defining at this late date "an" origin for Satan. Delbanco does an autopsy on the Devil's corpse, but the thing keeps twitching during the procedure.

To say "Americans" have lost the sense of evil, or a sense of transcendence and its complications, is to say only that "some" Americans have lost them. Millions have not,

and hold to their reality with a conviction that is properly religious. There are others for whom the impulse to believe may exist without formal religious motivation. Why do so many people put themselves through a hell far less hospitable than Dante's by reading the unreadable novels of Stephen King—reading them willingly, that is, by lamplight rather than at gunpoint—or the fevered oeuvre of Anne Rice, which is not merely unreadable but unspeakable? The need to encounter good and evil plainly marked, in their local, regional, and cosmic varieties, numbs all aesthetic sense in these folks. Why have angels become such a hot commodity in recent years, after languishing for so long on stained glass windows and greeting cards? What's going through people's heads when they dial "psychic hot lines"?

All this is trivial evidence, perhaps. But the figures on how many Americans still believe in God are not trivial. Nor is the strong,

and growing, fundamentalist presence in the country. There are people who know evil all too well when they see it, and they see it all too often. Americans—*some* Americans—have not entirely given up on the possibility of transcendence, even if they're looking for light (and darkness) in all the wrong places. Delbanco insists that the old language of evil has become a collection of dead metaphors and that you can't get back a sense of evil in ways that have been superseded by history. I wonder. Rationality might argue so, but will its low and even voice carry over the noise of stubborn conviction and irrational faith? To those who want to set tombstones atop the graves of transcendence and the Devil, the prudent advice may be "Hold off carving the dates."

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The Stately Homes of Russia

LIFE ON THE RUSSIAN COUNTRY ESTATE: A Social and Cultural History. By Priscilla Roosevelt. Yale. 384 pp. \$45

Russian literature from Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* (1833) and Gogol's *Overcoat* (1842) to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) seems preoccupied with the agitations of urban life, especially those of Peter I's capital, St. Petersburg. But the literature has a rural side as well, concerned with the gentry's country residences and the worlds of nature and the peasantry in which those estates were immersed. For the century and a half before 1917, this second locus of Russian literature was the more important of the two, as Priscilla Roosevelt makes clear in her excellent book. By turns literary history, sociology, econom-

ics, art history, and architectural history, *Life on the Russian Country Estate* has something for everybody. Indeed, in its sheer inclusiveness lies one of the book's greater appeals.

The world into which Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy were born, and whose passing Anton Chekhov later mourned, was, like so much in Russian culture, created "from above" by the will of the tsars. Russia's rulers cut a simple deal with the gentry. In effect, they commanded, "Serve the crown, and in return the crown will reward you with land and control over your farm labor." Thus was Russian serfdom born at the beginning of the 17th century. By the late 18th century, the grandees were no longer required to serve in the government, though serfdom continued and the gentry still exercised many state functions locally.