SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL? A HISTORICAL TOUR OF LITERATURE AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

It started as an experiment: a kind of apologia for the value of literature and the humanities in helping students deal with the experience of evil. It took the form of a cross-disciplinary course based on works in literature, film, cultural history, philosophy, theology and psychology. I insisted that the subtitle, “Sympathy for the Devil?” retain a question mark, for reasons given later. The first day I asked students for a short essay on their idea of evil, then left the room to get more copies of the syllabus. In my brief absence several students had walked out. Those remaining reported that one departing student had prophesied that anyone who took the course would surely roast in hell. Despite that threat, the course kept a determined following. Then came the devastation of September 11, 2001, and I knew something had clicked. Politicians and media pundits had begun tossing the word “evil” around, a term the Oxford English Dictionary described as little-used except in literary English. Once associated with fusty fire-and-brimstone religious sermons, accusations of “evil” are now hurled at opponents from either side of a battle against terrorism. To my surprise, present and past students began thanking me – not for preparing them for the tragedy of 9/11, but for giving them tools of the imagination with which to examine its significance. What follows is a brief tour of the ideas examined and generated in that course, which focuses not entirely on the literary representation of devil figures.

After writing their initial personal views of evil, students read the New York Times altercation between Edward Rothstein, the newspaper’s cultural critic, and Stanley Fish, leading defender of postmodernism. Rothstein questioned whether pomo’s moral relativity had been shelved by the stark realities of September 11. If postmodernism challenges notions of objective truth and rejects the possibility of a “transcendental ethical perspective,” he wrote, how could they converse credibly on terrorist attacks? Fish, in this exchange, replied that postmodernists can indeed condemn terrorism, and that truth does exist ... it’s just that there can be “no independent standard of objectivity.” Rothstein responded, and I tend to agree, that this sounded a lot like the relativism that Fish heatedly denied. “In Fishean pomo,” Rothstein remarked, “all we have are competing claims, whether the issue is the numerical value of pi or the assertion

that the Mossad destroyed the World Trade Center.” Why, he asked, “does the existence of disagreement, obstinacy, error, blindness or stupidity undermine the possibility of objectively judging truth?” (NYT 7/13/02, B1).

An apt question, my students commented. They thought maybe Fish should spend some time reading Faust, as they were. Goethe’s restless doctor had his motivations – the pursuit of power and sensual experience. But getting Gretchen pregnant and abandoning her, blindly thinking that by staying away he was somehow sparing her his unsavory company, was how he chose to act. Mephistopheles facilitated their liaison, of course, but it was Faust’s self-absorbed disregard for Gretchen’s well-being that caused her to despair, lose her child, and be condemned to death for murder. Did they need an independent standard of objectivity to fault those ethics?

Rothstein noted that postmodernism is an outgrowth of Enlightenment ideas that differing perspectives be accounted for and the “other” be respected, if not fully comprehended. It seems that this very Western notion of objectivity forms part of what the Islamist terrorists are attacking. They have their own definition of truth, concerning which the weighing of all sides is rather unimportant. They have their own idea who is evil: those who do not follow their interpretation of Islam. This, my students found, replicates a very ancient practice – the demonizing of one’s rivals or opponents – described well in A History of the Devil by the cultural historian and theologian Gerald Messadié.

They learn from Messadié that the earliest figure of the devil dates from ancient Persia or Medea, when Zoroaster, a magus or Medean holy man, tried to demonize the rival Vedic pantheon. Zoroaster associated these rival gods with evil spirits who supported the Zoroastrian evil god, Angra Manyu or Ahriman, who was locked in perpetual combat with the good god, Ahura Mazda, until a final judgment day when Ahura Mazda would prove victorious. In Zoroaster’s time the Vedic priests had a lock on political power, as they alone could advise the military and political leaders, as per the ancient Hindu caste system. Zoroaster and his fellow magi, being local spiritual leaders, tried to discredit the Vedic clergy by blacklisting the old Vedic gods as demons. As Messadié explains, the battle of good and evil was posited as a matter to be resolved by the magi, who were supposedly able to determine whose soul would be saved in the final judgment. Therefore these magi had more lasting power than kings. It was “a reform unique in the history of civilization up to that point” (86), but which came to fruition only in the JudeoChristian era,