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The Evil Demiurge

MAN, APART FROM A FEW ANOMALIES, does not have a bent for the good; what god would prompt him to it? To perform the tiniest act untainted by evil, he must overcome himself, do violence to himself. Whenever he succeeds, he provokes, he humiliates his master. And if he happens to be good not by effort or stratagem but by nature, he owes his goodness to some lapse on high, for he stands outside the cosmic scheme, he was not foreseen in any divine plan. It is difficult to understand what place he occupies among beings, if indeed he is one. Perhaps he's a ghost.

Good is what was or will be; it is what never is. A parasite of memory or of anticipation, either defunct or potential, it could not be present, nor survive on its own: so long as it is, consciousness has no awareness of it, apprehending it only after it vanishes. Everything goes to prove its unsubstantiality. It is a great, unreal force, a principle which, at the very outset, aborted: a failure, an immemorial collapse whose effects come to light with the unfolding of history. In the beginning, in that pandemonium which set the world inching toward life, something unmentionable must have occurred which, even now, pervades our malaises, if not our reasoning. How can we not presume that existence was fouled at its source, existence and the very elements? He who does not feel compelled to entertain this hypothesis at least once a day will have sleep-walked through life.

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It is difficult, it is impossible to believe that the good god, the "Father," was implicated in the scandal of creation. Everything leads us to absolve him, to find its author in a god devoid of scruples, a tarnished god. Goodness does not create: it lacks the imagination needed to fashion a world, even a slapdash one. A mixture of goodness and wickedness may, if it comes to that, foment an act or a work. Or a universe—but ours, in any case, is far more readily traced to a suspect god than to an honorable one.

The good god was decidedly not equipped to create: he pos-

esses everything . . . except omnipotence. His deficiencies being the measure of his greatness (anemia and goodness go hand in hand), he is the prototype of inefficacy: he can't help anyone. . . . We cleave to him only when we have divested ourselves of our historical dimension; directly we reassume it, he becomes a stranger, he is incomprehensible—he does not fascinate us in the least, having nothing of the monster in him. So we turn to the creator, an inferior and officious god, an instigator of events. To understand how he was able to create, one must imagine him in the clutches of evil, which is innovation, and of good, which is inertia. This struggle undoubtedly proved damaging to evil: it must have emerged tainted by good, which explains why the creation could not be wholly evil.

Since evil presides over everything corruptible, everything alive that is, any attempt to prove that it encompasses less being than good, or even none at all, would be ludicrous. In point of fact, it comes close to monopolizing it: it is real, exaggeratedly so, it is the *boundless* (in the positive as well as the negative sense) since things need its mediation to go beyond their confines, flowering or going to seed. Without it, growth would be stunted, the possible abolished, eternity attained, and life reduced to a bout of fever. For life cannot be considered *healthy* unless its principle is, unless we postulate the hygiene of evil. It is evil, in any event, that by shaking the One ensconced in its identity, broke it into the bits we are; it is to evil, the artisan of individuals, that we owe vigor and style. It goads us, fortifies us, opposes any return to the unity that prevailed before fragmentation, before consciousness went astray. Good, on the other hand, by inviting us to recover the All, tries to redress the scattering, the dispersion; as nostalgia for what we were before . . . being, it is, metaphysically speaking, a thing of the past, outmoded. In loving only what confirms us as individuals, we proclaim, whether we like it or not, our gratitude to the evil god, to the dispenser of existence and author of the universal diversification. Good makes us flabby. If we cultivate it or merely find ourselves drawn to it, we lose our vigor and our spring, we abdicate our condition as creatures and, ultimately, exile ourselves from the world. People who homogenize evil and nothingness fancy this a means of *saving* the poor good god. Saving him would take the courage to separate his cause from that of the

demiurge. Christianity, because it quailed at the idea, had to spend its entire career promoting, as best it could, the implausible notion of a merciful god: a futile enterprise which robbed it of its energy and compromised the god it sought to preserve.

We cannot help but believe that the creation, which was never more than roughed out, could not possibly have been finished, nor deserved to be, and that it is, on the whole, a *mistake*; in the light of this, man's famous breach figures as a minor version of a far graver breach. What are we guilty of? Of having followed, more or less slavishly, the creator's example. The fatality that was his we clearly recognize in ourselves: it is no coincidence that the hands that formed us belong to an unhappy and wicked god, to an accursed god.

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Predestined as we are in our beliefs, whether we believe in the supreme but impotent god, in the demiurge, or in the devil, we do not choose what we worship or blaspheme.

The devil is the representative, the delegate of the demiurge, whose affairs he oversees here below. Despite his prestige and the dread his name evokes, he is only an administrator, an angel superintending a menial task—history.

The demiurge is far more influential: how could we face our tribulations without him? If we measured up to them, or were even faintly worthy of them, we could refrain from invoking him. But, confronted by our patent inadequacies, we cling to him, we even beg him to exist; if he turned out to be fiction, our distress or our shame would be incalculable. On whom else could we then unburden our shortcomings, our woes, ourselves? Set up, by our decree, as author of our deficiencies, he serves as the scapegoat of all we were not able to be. When, in addition, we make him bear the onus of this bungled universe, our minds are set somewhat at rest: no more uncertainty about our origins or our prospects, we feel fully secure in the insoluble, free from the nightmare of promise. He's worth his weight in gold: he even absolves us of our regrets, since he has assumed the very *initiative* for our failures.

It is far more important that we trace our vices than our virtues to the divinity. We resign ourselves to our good qualities, but

our faults chivvy us and torment us. Being able to project them into a god capable of falling as low as we, and who is not the wan prisoner of commonly canted attributes, consoles and reassures us. There has never been a more *useful* god than the evil one. Don't we always have him near at hand to catch our flow of bile? Hatred, whatever form it takes, is ultimately aimed at him. Since we are persuaded that our merits are unrecognized or spurned, we cannot believe that such widespread iniquity is man's doing alone. It must have a higher source, it must be mixed up with some ancient subterfuge, with the very act of creation. We know then whom to blame, whom to vilify; nothing flatters and sustains us more than being able to situate the source of our indignity at the farthest remove from ourselves.

As for the God who is properly so called, the good and feeble one, we find ourselves in harmony with him whenever all trace of a world in us is obliterated, during those moments which postulate him, moments consubstantial with him, in which he is conjured forth, *created*, rising from our depths to the greater humiliation of our faculties of sarcasm. God is the death knell of irony. Directly the latter collects its wits and gains the upper hand, our relations with him cloud and bog down. When this occurs, we are past querying ourselves about him, we want only to expel him from our concerns and our rages, even from our scorn. So many before us have dealt him blows, that it seems idle to belabor a corpse. Yet we continue to reckon with him, if only through our frustration at not having felled him ourselves.

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To avoid the difficulties peculiar to dualism, one could imagine a single god whose history observes two phases: in the first, he is wise, sallow, involuted, never visited by the remotest whim to assert himself: a god *asleep*, worn out by his eternity; in the second, he is enterprising, frenzied, prone to commit error after error, and indulges in an activity reprehensible in the extreme. On further reflection, this hypothesis does not seem quite so clear and serviceable as that of two gods squarely opposed. But if you find that neither gives a just account of the world, you can always fall back on the view held by certain gnostics that everything came into existence when lots were drawn by the angels.

(It is pitiful, it is degrading to liken the divinity to a person. Never can it be an anonymous idea or principle for anyone who has observed the Testaments. Twenty centuries of quibbling are not forgotten in a day. Our religious life, whether it draws its inspiration from Job or from Saint Paul, consists in quarrels, excesses, rabidity. Atheists, who are so quick to wield invective, prove beyond a doubt that their intended victim is *someone*. They shouldn't strut about; their emancipation is not as complete as they fancy: they have precisely the same idea of God that believers do.)

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The creator is the absolute for the outer man; the inner man, on the contrary, considers creation an irksome detail, a useless, indeed baneful episode. He is intent on freeing himself, purifying himself of everything, including *light*—a blot and obstacle for the consciousness which senses strains on every level of being as it works its way toward the far reaches of nothingness. The mind hostile to whatever assumes some form, to whatever recalls the face of a universe, refuses, through hunger for the unspoiled, to come to terms with anything, anything but the “superessential abyss,” as Ruysbroek calls it, which, despite the Flemish contemplative, does not ask of its aspirants that they necessarily have faith, provided they have done with appearances, with realities themselves. Every deep religious experience begins where the demiurge ceases to hold sway; it has no use for him, denounces him and is his very negation. So long as he haunts us, he and the world, we have no means of escaping either, of rejoining, in a burst of annihilation, the uncreated, and dissolving in it. With the aid of ecstasy—whose object is a god *without attributes*, an *essence* of god—we soar toward a form of apathy even purer than that of the lord of lords himself, and if we plunge into the divine, we are nonetheless beyond any form of divinity. That is the final step, the climax of mysticism, its starting point being a break with the demiurge, a refusal to traffic with him any longer and to applaud his handiwork. No man kneels before him, no man worships him. The only words spoken to him are the very opposite of prayers—the sole form of communication available to a creature and creator who are equally fallen.

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By being taxed with the functions of father, creator, and general manager, the official god was exposed to attacks that, inevitably, proved his undoing. Who knows how long he might have lived if only people had heeded Marcion, of all heresiarchs the one who stood foremost in the fray against the conjuring away of evil and who did more than any other to promote the glory of the evil god, by hating him so staunchly. There are scarcely any examples of a religion that, at its debut, bungled so many chances. We would undoubtedly be quite different today if the Christian era had been inaugurated with anathemas hurled against the creator, for permission to set upon him would surely have lightened our burden and rendered the past two millennia less oppressive. The Church, by refusing to incriminate him or to adopt doctrines that would condemn him, was necessarily resorting to slyness and falsehood. At least we can take comfort in noting that the most alluring chapters in its history have been written by its intimate enemies, all those whom it fought and expelled, those who, to save the honor of God, risked martyrdom by impugning his credentials as a creator. Enthusiasts of the divine void, of that absence in which the sovereign goodness takes delight, they knew the joy that comes of hating one god, and of loving another utterly, unreservedly. Carried away by their faith, they were in no condition to detect the particle of trumpery lodged in every torment, however sincere it may be. The notion of *pretext* had not yet been born, nor had the temptation, besetting us in this modern age, to hide our anguish behind some manner of theological acrobatics. Yet they were not free of ambiguity; it existed, however, on the instinctual level. These assorted gnostics and manicheans were, if anything, *depraved* with purity, haunted by horror. Evil attracted them, filled them nearly to overflowing: without it they would have been vacant. They pursued it, they would not let it go, even for an instant. And if they contended with such vehemence that it was *uncreated*, secretly they hoped that it might endure forever so as to enjoy it and be able, for eternity, to exert their combative virtues. Having, for love of the Father, reflected too closely upon the adversary, they were to end up with a better understanding of damnation than of salvation. That is why they were able to grasp so

thoroughly the essence of the *here-below*. Will the Church, after having spat them out, be deft enough to adopt their theses, and charitable enough to give the creator a starring role, in order to excommunicate him at last? Its one chance of rebirth lies in exhuming the heresies, in recanting its old curses in order to pronounce new ones.

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Timid, lacking in dynamism, the good is unfit to put itself across; evil, which is far more zealous, wants to impart itself, and succeeds because it possesses the twofold advantage of being fascinating and infectious, which explains why it is easier for an evil god to reach out, to come out of himself than it is for a good god.

This inability to stay put within oneself, which the creator demonstrated in a sorry spectacle, is something we have all inherited; by *engendering*, we continue, in another way and on another scale, the enterprise that bears his name. Deplorable mimics that we are, we add to his "creation." Without the impulse he gave, the desire to lengthen the chain of beings would not exist, nor would that compulsion of ours to engage in the promiscuities of flesh. Every procreation is suspect; angels are, happily, incapable of it, the propagation of life being an activity reserved for the fallen. This leprosy is impatient and eager, it loves to grow rampant. We must discourage procreation, since the fear that humanity will become extinct is baseless; whatever happens, there will be found on every side an ample supply of dolts whose one desire is to perpetuate themselves, and if they, too, lost their appetite, two hideous people could always be found to couple for the cause.

It's not so much the *taste* for life we must combat as the craving for "posterity." Parents, *progenitors*, are either trouble-makers or maniacs. Isn't it utterly demoralizing that the merest runt has the power to impart life, to "bring into the world"? How can it help but fill us with dread or repulsion, this miracle that, in a twinkling, transforms any Johnny-come-lately into a demiurge? What should be a gift as rare as genius has been conferred indiscriminately upon everyone: a counterfeit munificence that has discredited nature for good.

The criminal injunction of *Genesis*, "Be fruitful and multiply," could not have issued from the mouth of a good god. "Be

sparse" is more likely what he would have said, if he had had any say in the chapter. Nor would it ever have been in him to add those baleful words, "replenish the earth and subdue it." We should drop everything at once and erase them, purging the Bible of the guilt it incurred by accepting them in the first place.

Flesh is spreading apace, like gangrene, over the surface of the globe. It doesn't know enough to observe limits, it keeps raging despite its orgies, it mistakes its defeats for conquests: it will never learn. It belongs above all to the dominion of the creator, and into it he projected all his wanton instincts. Logically, observers of the flesh should stand less chance of being smitten by it than those who help it endure, who assure its continuation. That is not the case, because they do not know with what perversion they are allied. One day pregnant women will be stoned, the maternal instinct banned, sterility acclaimed. Those sects that looked askance at fertility—the Bogomils and the Cathars—were right to condemn marriage, an abominable institution which societies have always defended, to the huge despair of those who resist the common hypnosis. Whoever procreates loves the scourge, wants to see it thrive and increase. They were right, those ancient philosophers who thought of fire as the essence of the universe, and of desire. For fire burns, devours, consumes; both sire and destroyer of beings, it is, by its nature, murky, infernal.

This world was not created in joy. We *procreate*, however, in pleasure. No doubt, yet pleasure is not joy but a simulacrum of it: its function is to hoodwink, to make us forget that the creation, down to its smallest detail, bears the imprint of that initial sadness from which it sprang. Inherently deceiving, it is the same sensation that allows us to go through with a certain performance of which, in theory, we disapprove. Without its help, chastity would make advances, seducing even rats. But only when absorbed in sensual ecstasy do we perceive to what extent pleasure is illusory. Through ecstasy it reaches its height, its greatest intensity, but there, at the summit of its success, it finds, gaping before it, its own unreality, and plummets into the void it is. Ecstasy is the *disaster* of pleasure.

The Immaculate Conception is something less than fatuous. Those who promulgated the idea knew what they were about. We find it inadmissible that a god, or for that matter a man, could is-

sue from a round of gymnastics consummated by a groan. It is odd that after such a long period of time, "evolution" has not managed to fashion some other formula. But then why should it waste its energy when the one in vogue is working full swing, to everybody's satisfaction. Let's make one thing clear: we hold no brief against life, which is mysterious and bewildering enough to please anyone; what isn't is the exercise in question, whose facility, *given its consequences*, we can only deplore. Knowing what fate metes out to each of us, we stand confounded by the discrepancy between one moment of oblivion and the prodigious sum of disgraces that ensues. The more one mulls over this subject, the more convinced one is that the only people who have any understanding of it are those who opted for debauchery or forbearance, rakes or geldings.

Since procreating supposes an unspeakable lapse of mind, it is certain that we would—if we acquired some sense, if, in other words, we became indifferent to the fate of the species—keep only a few samples of it, the way we save specimens of animals threatened with extinction. Let us block the path of flesh, let us strive to stunt its appalling growth. We are witnessing a veritable epidemic of life, a pullulation of nondescripts. Where, and how, can we still meet God face to face?

No man is constantly subject to the obsession with horror we sometimes succeed in averting our gaze from it, in almost forgetting it, especially when we contemplate some landscape devoid of our fellow men. Directly they intrude, our mind is re-obsessed. If we were inclined to absolve the creator, to consider this world acceptable and even satisfactory, we would still have reservations about man, that black speck of creation.

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We are at liberty to imagine that one day the demiurge, when struck with the inadequacy or the perniciousness of his work, may wish to bring about its doom, and even arrange to disappear along with it. But it is also conceivable that, from the beginning, his one concern has been to destroy himself, that the future may unfold according to the workings of this slow self-destruction. An unfolding that could be sluggish or breathless, but in either case, would mean an involution, a self-scrutiny leading to the rejection of creation by its author.

There is nothing in us more deeply-rooted and less perceptible than the feeling of some essential failure: it is everyone's secret, including the gods'. The remarkable thing is that most people don't even suspect that they experience this feeling. By a special favor nature has granted us, we are destined to remain unaware of it: the strength of a being resides in his inability to know how alone he is. A blessed ignorance, thanks to which he can bustle about and act. Has his secret just been revealed to him? Directly it is, his spirit of enterprise fizzles, for good. That is what befell the creator, or will befall him, perhaps.

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To have lived from the outset with the yearning to identify ourselves with something, not knowing with what. . . . It is easy to pass from unbelief to belief, or the other way around. But what is there to convert to or abjure when in the clutches of chronic lucidity? Devoid of substance, it offers no content which one could gainsay; it is vacuous, and a void cannot be gainsaid. Lucidity is the negative counterpart of ecstasy.

Whoever identifies himself with nothing finds no identity in himself either, which prompts those faithless cries, those vacillating convictions, those fevers deprived of fire, that duality impairing our ideas and even our reflexes. The ambiguous, which governs all our relations with this world, and with the other, was something we kept to ourselves at first; then we spread it all around so that no one could escape it, so that no one alive might still know what to believe. Nowhere is anything *clear*: we are to blame that things themselves stumble and collapse into perplexity. Where is there a single pristine object, a single object still intact to which we can hold fast? The false has wormed into matter, making of it this swindling lump from which we shrink with mixed feelings of disgust and fright. What we need is the gift to imagine the possibility of praying, which is indispensable to anyone who has hopes of being saved. Hell is *inconceivable* prayer.

The establishment of universal ambiguity is our most calamitous exploit; it has made us rivals of the demiurge.

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We have been happy only during times when, eager to efface

ourselves, we accepted our nothingness with alacrity. Religious feeling emanates not from the recognition of our insignificance, but from our enthusiasm for it, from our need to wallow in it. How will this need, which is inherent in our nature, be appeased now that we can no longer live in the wake of the gods? In former times, it was they who forsook us; now we forsake them. We have lived familiarly with them too long not to find them undesirable; they were so close at hand we could hear them *stir*; they would lie in wait for us, they would spy on us: we no longer felt at home. . . . Well, experience has taught us that there is no more odious creature on earth than our neighbor. Knowing that so little space separates us from him prevents us from breathing, and makes our days and nights equally unlivable. It's useless to spend hours meditating his ruin for he is there, appallingly present. All our thoughts invite us to suppress him: when, at length, we resolve to do it, an attack of cowardice stays our hand. Thus we are potential murderers of anyone living in our vicinity and, for being unable to commit that murder, we devour ourselves and grow embittered, triflers and bunglers in crime.

If, under the gods, everything seemed simple, that is because, in the light of their immemorial indiscretion, we had to get rid of them at all costs: they were already too cumbersome to be dealt with gently. That explains why each of us could not but add his tiny voice to the general uproar against them.



Man is a perverse animal; he loves only what he destroys. He relishes remorse, or at least regret: he idolizes his victims. Ever since we liquidated the gods, we have been talking about them constantly; we have all become theologians. . . . So long as they were around, we placed all our hope in science; now we see all too clearly that they had more to offer than science does. So we have come to rely upon them once again, if only to punish ourselves for having been ingrates. In any event, we are not about to forget them. They haunt us, and will continue to do so for a long time to come; it is even possible that all future history will be reduced to a rumination on their fate. Formerly, when their glory was at its height, people would, after dunning them with sacrifices and praise, treat them tactfully, and leave them be;—only we har-

ass them unremittingly, conjuring forth their shades with fussy single-mindedness. We fling ourselves at them, asking questions, we discover in them secrets we planted there to give an aura of substance to our erudite but ineffectual piety. When faith, for lack of an object, degenerates into an historical or psychological mania, self-reflection being its one pursuit and justification, the act of prayer is watered down to nostalgia for prayer, or to the theory of prayer. We don't know to whom to turn, we are thrust upon ourselves: an elegiac void has supplanted several centuries of subversive void. How have we managed to dismiss so many gods? Happily, we have one remaining. . . .

When we think about these millennial companions or enemies, about all the ring-leaders of sects, religions and mythologies, the only one whom we are loath to give up is this demiurge, to whom we are attached by the very ills which, we want to think, he has sponsored. The least act in life, or simply life itself, brings him to mind. Every time we consider life, and ponder over its origins, it amazes and frightens us, for it is a frightening miracle which must derive from *him*, a special god standing completely apart. It does no good to contend that he doesn't exist when our daily bewilderment calls for his reality and proclaims it. Will someone object that it's possible he did exist, but died like the others?—our bewilderment would not be daunted, it would go to work resuscitating him, and endure as long as our wonder and our fear, as the quaking curiosity we feel about everything that is, everything alive. Someone will say, "Overcome fear, so that only wonder survives." But, in order to overcome it, to dispel it, one would have to attack its very principle and raze its foundations, rebuild nothing more nor less than the entire world, nimbly change demiurges, in short, one would have to confide oneself to some *other* creator.

[*Translated by Frederick Brown*]