The Serpent, the tempter, appears in the guise of the liberator, the one who raises man beyond good and evil, beyond the “law”, beyond the God of old, foe of freedom. The last two hundred years have rediscovered the liberatory principle of the world affirmed by the Ophite sect, a principle foreshadowed in the notions of Sabbatai Zevi with his Messiah consigned to the serpents.

by Massimo Borghesi
Hegel, with his dialectic of the negative, was to give rich theoretical guise to this idea. Man must sin, must come out of natural innocence to become God. He must realize the promise of the Serpent: must know, like God, good and evil. This knowledge “is the origin of sickness, but also the fountainhead of health, it is the poisoned chalice from which man drinks death and putrefaction, and at the same time the wellspring of reconciliation, since to posit oneself as wicked is in itself the overcoming of evil”.

The Ophites: the Serpent as liberator
For more than two centuries western culture has toyed with evil, coddled it, justified it. The negative communicates vertigo, delirium of omnipotence, unconfessable emotions; lights up with ruddy gleams forbidden paths, the abysses of the night, the frozen peaks. It gives its coloring to the particular modern Titanism, the provocative challenge it launches at the Eternal. If the old Faustus of Marlowe repents on the point of death, the later one lives on the outrage, yearns for dissolution. The Pact with the Serpent, as Mario Praz called one of his last books, now becomes stable. The Serpent, the tempter, appears in the guise of the liberator, of the one who raises man beyond good and evil, beyond the “law”, beyond the God of old, foe of freedom. The last two hundred years have rediscovered “The liberatory principle of the world [affirmed] by the Ophite sect”, a principle glimpsed, according to Gershom Scholem, in the notions of Sabbatai Zevi with his Messiah consigned to the “serpents”. A principle reaffirmed by Ernst Bloch in his Atheism in Christianity where the Christ-Serpent frees the world from the tyranny of Jahweh. Goethe also, according to Vittorio Mathieu, “had heard speak of the Ophite sect”. In his Goethe and his guardian devil, Mathieu observes that in Faust Mephistopheles is the “force that brings out from the shadows the positive in man”. As God says to Mephistopheles in the Prologue in Heaven, “You have only to show yourself, freely, what you are; I have never hated your peers, of all the spirits that deny, mockery is the one that bores me less. The activity of man slumps too easily and he would sink with pleasure into an absolute slumber. So I willingly put a companion beside him who spurs him on, and will act, and must, as Devil, create”. The Devil is set willingly (“gern”) by God as man’s collaborator. As Mircea Eliade remarked, “one might speak of an organic sympathy between the Creator and Mephistopheles”. Goethe makes of Mephistopheles, of evil, the spring that moves to action (“Tat”), towards what is positive. It is an idea, destined to go a long way, for which the road to Heaven passes through hell. Man becomes man, vital, intelligent, free, only by tasting the bitterness of life to the dregs. The innocence of the “beautiful soul” is, on the contrary, inertia, stasis, death. Hegel, with his dialectic of the negative, was to give rich theoretical guise to this idea. Man must sin, must come out of natural innocence to become God. He must realize the promise of the Serpent: must know, like God, good and evil. This knowledge “is the origin of sickness, but also the fountainhead of health, it is the poisoned chalice from which man drinks death and putrefaction, and at the same time the wellspring of reconciliation, since to posit oneself as wicked is in itself the overcoming of evil”. From this perspective the figure of the Rebel Angel, of the one who, by provoking man, is alleged to raise him to his freedom, shines with a new splendor. Mephistopheles becomes, step by step, the hero, the modern Prometheus, the liberator. “Without for the moment seeking the deep causes” – wrote Roger Caillios in 1937 – “one must acknowledge that one of the psychological phenomena most freighted with consequences at the start of the 19th century was the birth and spread of poetic Satanism, the fact that the writer voluntarily took the part of the Angel of evil and felt precise affinities with him. In this light Romantism appears in part as a transmutation of value”. From Byron to Vigny “satanic mythology” has worked up the figure of an “Angel of evil”, rebellious and vengeful, the premises for which go back in time.

Satan against God
Mario Práz, in his Romantic Agony, still today the most interesting work on the fascination of the demonic in nineteenth-century literature, rightly indicates the start of the process in the particular characterization of Satan offered by Milton in his Paradise Lost. It was “Milton [who] conferred upon the figure of Satan all the charm of an untamed rebel which already belonged to the Prometheus of Aeschylus and to the Capanoe of Dante”. The Adversary “becomes strangely beautiful”. As Baudelaire wrote: “Le plus parfait type de Beauté virile est Satan – à la manière de Milton”. Harold Bloom remarks on the point, “Milton’s God is a catastrophe”, as is Christ, who “is a poetical disaster in Paradise Lost”. For Blake: “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God,”
and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil’s party without knowing it”. A judgement, this, wholly shared by Shelley for whom: “Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*… Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God”.

Fearless, untamed, the Prince of Darkness appears as strenuous wrestler against the divine tyranny. Satan is Prometheus, he replaces the mythic Titan chained by Zeus to the rock, immortalized by the imagination of Aeschylus. The modern Prometheus stands against the hostile, wicked God. The Luciferine Satan appears better than the Creator: “Milton openly confers a Gnostic attitude on Satan, according to which God and Christ are only versions of the Demiurge”. The true affirmative is the devil. It is him, and not the obedient angel, who appears, ethically and aesthetically, endowed with greater fascination. As Hegel declared: “when one presents the Devil one has to show that there is in him an affirmative; his strength of character, his energy, his consequential spirit appear far better, more affirmative than that of some angel… As in Milton – adds Hegel – where he, in his characterful energy, is better than some angels”.

Thanks to Milton, to his mythic reworking, Satan makes his entry into the modern imagination. Thus occurs what Praz calls, in a chapter of his book, the “metamorphosis of Satan”, his passage from negative figure to positive hero: the sad rebel, deprived, like man, of his paradisal felicity by a tyrannical God. With great expertise Praz documents in his study authors and currents that adopted the satanic mythology. If in the eighteenth century, “The Miltonic Satan transfuses his sinister fascination into the traditional type of the generous bandit, of the sublime delinquent”, it is in the nineteenth century, in the climate of Romanticism, that he becomes the rebel, the expression of metaphysical revolt, of the “no” to creation. It was Byron “to bring to perfection the type of the rebel, remote descendant of Milton’s Satan”. With him the rebel becomes the “outsider”, impenetrable man who transcends the ordinary way of feeling, who transcends his own crimes. He is the beyond-man who stands higher and at the same time below other men. He is the unhappy one who feeds off his resentment towards a cruel God whose cruelty he imitates. According to Praz, Byron’s theology is the same as De Sade’s which, according to the author, had a fundamental influence on Romantic literature. At the center lies a hatred for creation and its author, the exaltation of pleasure and of crime as mockery, profanation, outrage. For Praz, we are faced here with a “cosmic Satanism”. Its influence is enormous. If nature creates only to destroy, to help nature is to repeat its rhythm, the pleasure of destruction, the (sadistic) taste that derives pleasure from pain, delirium from annihilation, the divine from the diabolical. It is the painting of Delacroix, the painter “described as ‘cannibal’, ‘molochist’, pain-worshipper, with his tireless curiosity for slaughter, fires, plunders, putrid-eros, illustrator of the darkest scenes in Faust and of the most satanic poems of his adored Byron; with his love of the feline… and of violent, hot countries”. It is the poetry of Baudelaire, fed on Poe and De Sade, the cosmic pessimism of which is more like the Manichaean heresy than the Christian religion: “Absolu! Résultante des contraires! Ormuz et Arimane, vous êtes le même!” It is the fiction of Flaubert for whom “Néron vivra aussi longtemps que Vespasien, Satan que Jésus-Christ”. Of *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont, who confesses to having “sung evil as Mickiewicz, Byron, Milton, Southey, A. de Musset, Baudelaire…”, and of Swinburne who, won over by the Gnostic theology of De Sade, his man in revolt declares: “… could we thwart nature, then might crime become perfect, and sin an actual thing. Could but a man do this; could he cross the courses of the stars, and put back the times of the sea; could he change the ways of the world and find out the house of life to destroy it; could he go into heaven to defile it and into hell to deliv-

*Böhme, according to Hegel, “struggled to understand in God and from God the negative, evil, the Devil”. God is the unity of the contraries, of anger and love, of evil and good, of the Devil and his contrary, the Son. In this view Christ and Satan become in some way brothers, sons of the one Father, parts of Him, moments in his polar nature. This is an idea set down by Carl Gustav Jung in his esoteric Septem Sermones ad Mortuos written in 1916, circulated as a monograph among his friends and never published. The text, which borrows conceptually from the Gnostic Basilides, affirms the “pleroma” nature of God, composed from pairs of opposites of which “God and devil are the prime manifestations”*
Life, Jung affirmed in *A psychological approach to the Dogma of the Trinity*, “as energy process needs contrasts, without which energy is notoriously impossible. Good and evil are nothing other than the ethical aspects of these natural antitheses”. For this reason Lucifer is necessary to God. “Without the latter there would be no creation, and even less would there have been any history of redemption. Shadow and contrast are the necessary conditions of every achievement”.

Satan in God

Satan is not only in Prometheus, the counter-figure for Milton’s *Fallen Angel*. Satan is also in God. The Gnostic theology that lies at the heart of the rebellious atheism of the last two centuries distinguishes between Lucifer (the liberator) and Satan (the oppressor). It finds its exemplary form in the thought of Ernst Bloch. For Bloch there is “on the one hand the God of the world who becomes ever more clearly identified with Satan, the Enemy, stagnation; and on the other the God of the future ascent into heaven, the God who drives us forward with Jesus and Lucifer”. The God of the world, creator, is the evil demiurge against whom, in Eden, the Serpent, true friend of man, rose up. It is Lucifer, with his desire to be like God, who reveals to man his destination. “Only in Lucifer, kept secret in Jesus so as to be manifested later, at the end, in the times when this countenance can reveal itself; only in Lucifer, become restless since he was abandoned the second time, since the cry went up from the cross and remained without reply, since the head of the Serpent of Paradise hanging on the cross was crushed for the second time: only in Him then, in the Hidden in Christ, as absolute anti-demiurgic, is also comprised the authentic theurgic element of he who rebels because son of man”.

The house of Lazarus, William Blake, colored engraving, Private Collection.
As illustrious forerunner of his own thinking Bloch recalls in Atheism in Christianity the figure of William Blake. The English poet, fascinated by the American and French revolutions, had, apart from the Bible, four masters: Milton, Shakespeare, Paracelsus, Böhme. To the first he dedicated a short epic poem, Milton, probably composed between 1800 and 1803. In it Urizen, the Prince of Light, appears identical to Satan. What is particular in Blake is his The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, written in 1790. Here the sanctification of the impulses and of desires, in primis sexual, “for everything that lives is Holy”, gets its theoretic consecration. For Blake there is no longer evil that denies good: evil and good are both necessary. “Without Contraries there is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious man calls Good and Evil. Good is the passivity that obeyes Reason. Evil is the activity that springs from Energy. Good is Heaven, Evil is Hell”29.

Evil, as in Goethe’s Faust, is what gives energy, that arouses slumbering good. The Devil is the force of God. In his conception Blake borrows from the first man, over the arc of modern thought, who dared to affirm evil in God: Jacob Böhme. The philosophus teutonicus, who according to Hegel “was the first in Germany to give rise to a philosophy with its own characteristics”30, respected by Leibniz, Hegel, Schelling, von Baader and the whole current of theosophy in modern thought, declared that “according to the first principle God is not called God, but Anger, Wrath, bitter fount, and from here come evil, pain, fear and the devouring fire”31. The wrath of God is gone beyond in love; nevertheless it remains the Urgrund, the original principle from which everything originates. Böhme, according to Hegel, “struggled to understand in God and from God the negative, evil, the Devil”32. God is the unity of the contraries, of anger and love, of evil and good, of the Devil and his contrary, the Son. In this view Christ and Satan become in some way brothers, sons of the one Father, parts of Him, moments in his polar nature. This is an idea set down by Carl Gustav Jung in his esoteric Septem Sermones ad Mortuos written in 1916, circulated as a monograph among his friends and never published. The text, which borrows conceptually from the Gnostic Basilides, affirms the ‘pleroma’ nature of God, composed from pairs of opposites of which “God and devil are the prime manifestations”33. They are differentiated as generation and corruption, life and death. And nevertheless “Effectivity is common to both. Effectivity unites them. Hence effectivity is above them and is a God above God, since in its effect it unites fullness and emptiness”34. This God who unites God and the Devil calls Abraxas. It is the original force that antecedes any distinction. “Abraxas generates truth and lying, good and evil, light and dark, in the same word and in the same act. So Abraxas is terrible”35. He is “love and its killer”, “the saint and his betrayer”, he is “the world, its becoming and its passing. On every gift of the sun God the devil casts his curse”36. The esoteric message of the Septem Sermones leads, as in Blake, to the sanctification of nature, to the innocence of becoming. It entailed, for that very reason, the justification of evil, of the Devil, his inclusion, as in Böhme, into a polar system. It is no accident that when Martin Buber came to know of the monograph he was to speak of Gnosticism. “It – and not atheism, which annuls God because it must reject the images that have been made of him until now – is the true antagonist of the reality of the faith”37. For Buber Jung’s psychology constituted nothing less than “the taking up of the Carpocratian argument, taught now as psychotherapy, which mystically defies the instincts instead of sanctifying them in the faith”38.

Buber’s observation was not purely conjectural. It was Jung himself who, in Psychology and Religion, had mentioned the relevance of the Gnostic Car- pocratians who sustained that “good and evil are only human opinions and that on the contrary souls, before their departure, should live to the utmost every human experience, if they wished to avoid returning into the prison of the body. Only the complete fulfillment of every exigency of life can rescue the soul imprisoned in the fleshly world of the Demiurge”39. Life, he affirmed in A psychological approach to the Dogma of the Trinity, “as energy process needs contrasts, without which energy is notoriously impossible. Good and evil are nothing other than the ethical aspects of these natural antitheses”40. For this reason Lucifer is necessary to God. “Without the latter there would be no creation, and even less would there have been any history of redemption. Shadow and contrast are the necessary conditions of every achievement”41. This shadow is first and
foremost in God, in the firstborn God, in the Unconscious that, for J ung, is the true power directing life which must be ‘humanized’ by the conscious ego. It is only in the human God, Christ, that judgement splits what is united in the pleroma (the unconscious): light and its shadow. Now the “two sons of God, Satan the elder and Christ the younger”42, the left and the right hands of God, split. “This antithesis represents a conflict taken to the extreme, and with that a centuries-long task for mankind right up to the point or shift in time when good and evil begin to relativize themselves, to put themselves in question, and the cry goes up for a beyond-good-and-evil. But in the Christian era, that is in the reign of trinitarian thought, a like reflection is simply excluded; since the conflict is too violent, that one may grant evil some other logical relation with the Trinity than that of absolute contrast”43. The divine, spiritual Trinity must reconcile itself to a ‘fourth’ principle: matter, the body, the feminine, Eros, evil, so that Christian idealism, reconciled to the world, may reach a higher unity. “So even in the time of absolute faith in the Trinity there was always a quest for the lost fourth, from the Greek neo-Pythagoreans down to Goethe’s Faust. Although the seekers thought themselves Christian, they were instead a species of Christian a latere, since they consecrated their life to the opus that had as goal the redemption of serpens quadricornutus, of the anima mundi trapped in matter, of the fallen Lucifer… our formula of quaternity goes along with their claim, since the Holy Spirit, as synthesis of the one who was originally O ne and then split, flows from a source of light and from a dark one”44. The “age of the Spirit”, in the particular interpretation that J ung gives of O oachim of Fiore, is the age that follows on the Christian aeon, the time of A braxas in which passions and reason, unconscious and conscious, evil and good, Lucifer and Christ, will become one.

In 1919 Hermann Hesse, who underwent analysis with J ung in 1920, published a novel, Demian, under the pseudonym of Emil Sinclair. In it the leading character, an untrained youth, is taught the meaning of life by a ‘free’ spirit who carries within him the mark of Cain: Demian. For Demian “The God of the Old and the New Testament is an excelling figure, but he is not what he ought to be. He is the good, nobility, the Father, loftiness, beauty, feeling: all fine things, but the world is also made of something else. And this is attributed simply to the Devil, and all this part of the world, this half is suppressed and killed with silence”45. To that, according to Demian, belongs the sexual sphere. That is why one cannot venerate God alone, “we must venerate everything and consider the whole world sacred, not just this official, deliberately separated half. Along with our service to God we should also have a service for the Devil. It would seem right to me. Or we should procure a God who encloses the devil also”46 (my italics). As with J ung this “God is called A braxas and is God and Satan and embraces within himself the world of light and the world of dark”47. He is sacred love and profane love, “the angelic image and Satan, man and woman together, man and beast, supreme good and extreme evil”48.

The view of the divine as coincidentia oppositum, a view that seals the “pact with the Serpent” in indissoluble fashion, runs through, in this way, a conspicuous part of the cultural world of the twentieth century. Let me mention, among other things, the thinking of Mircea Eliade who, in two of his writings, The myth of reintegration (1942) and Mephistopheles and the Androgynne (1962), sets out, under the influence of J ung, his view of “divine polarity”. According to this every deity is polar, beneficent and malevolent at once. The Serpent is brother to the Sun, just as, according to a Gnostic myth, Christ and Satan are alleged to be. This divine bi-unity looks forward, in man, to the reintegration of the sacred and the profane, of good and evil in a higher unity that, for Eliade, finds its symbolic goal in the figure of the androgynne.

“Everywhere at work – Romano Guardini wrote in 1964 – there is the fundamental Gnostic idea that contradictions are polarities: Goethe, Gide, C. G. J ung, Th. Mann, H. Hesse... All see evil, the negative... as dialectical elements in the totality of life, of nature”. This attitude, for Guardini, “manifests itself already in everything that is called Gnosticism, in alchemy, in theosophy. It presents itself in programmatic form in Goethe, for whom the satanic enters even into God, evil is the original power of the universe necessary as good, death only another element in that everything, whose opposite pole is called life. This opinion has been proclaimed in all forms and made concrete in the field of therapy by C. G. J ung”
Conclusion

The modern theosophy of opposites, based on the hermetic doctrine of the coincidentia oppositorum, leads to a disquieting merger of the divine and the diabolical, to the idea of the Devil in God. “Everywhere at work – Romano Guardini wrote in 1964 – there is the fundamental Gnostic idea that contradictions are polarities: Goethe, Gide, C. G. Jung, Th. Mann, H. Hesse... All see evil, the negative... as dialectical elements in the totality of life, of nature.” This attitude, for Guardini, “manifests itself already in everything that is called Gnosticism, in alchemy, in theosophy. It presents itself in programmatic form in Goethe, for whom the satanic enters even into God, evil is the original power of the universe necessary as good, death only another element in that everything, whose opposite pole is called life. This opinion has been proclaimed in all forms and made concrete in the field of therapy by C. G. Jung.”

The basic idea is that redemption passes through degradation, grace through sin, life through death, pleasure by means of pain, ecstasy through the workings of perversion, the divine through the diabolical. The fascination that the negative – a metaphor of the demoniac – exerts on contemporary culture hinges on this singular idea: that the ways of paradise pass through hell, that, as in Elémire Zolla’s title, “Descent to Hades and resurrection” are one.

To deliver oneself over to the devil, in a singular Gnostic transposition of the idea that to lose oneself is to find oneself, to open oneself to God. In this ‘sacred’ alliance Satan and God unite in man. It is the “identity of De Sade and of the mystics” hoped for by Georges Bataille. For it, the way down is the same as the way up. Faust, now, can no longer repent, not even on the point of death. The Archdemon has become accomplice, ‘part’ of God. It is the way to become God. The thrill of nothingness, of the descent into hell, goes along with the discovery of Being, of A braxas, the pleroma without countenance that endures, motionless, in the becoming of the world.

Notes

11. M. Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica [The Romantic Agony, 1933], Firenze (ediz. 1999), p. 58.
12. Ivi.
13. C. Baudelaire, Journaux intimes, cit., in: M. Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica, op. cit., p. 55.
16. M. Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica, op. cit., pp. 59-60.
19. quoted in M. Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica, op. cit., p. 199.
29. Ivi.
31. Ivi.
43. R. Guardini, Lettere teologiche ad un amico [Theological letters to a friend], Ital. trans., Milano 1979, p. 63.
46. mentioned in F. Cuniberto, Jacob Böhme, Brescia 2000, p. 119.
48. mentioned in F. Cuniberto, Jacob Böhme, Brescia 2000, p. 119.