

Satan's fall

This is a book about the Devil.

But if the name sounds familiar to almost everyone, defining Satan with precision takes us to a knot similar to the one made by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein regarding the chromatic universe:

“When we are asked what the words 'red', 'yellow', 'blue' and 'green' mean, without any difficulty we point to objects that have these colors. But our ability to explain the meaning of these words do not go further.”

Who is Satan? The personification of evil? Such a definition, the most immediate and commonplace, doesn't close the subject. To begin with, because, save a few universally shared misfortunes, such as diseases or natural disasters, what we call evil has a moral origin and, as such, changes according to the circumstances, dressing itself on and off with the most different colors. It is therefore difficult to establish any trace of identity on such a shifting matter. Furthermore, there are those who believe in the existence of a being of mystic origin that orchestrates all the misfortunes in the world, while others — today in an increasing majority — consider the Devil a mere allegory invented by humans to justify them. But the simplicity of this division — supporters of a real Satan versus those of Satan as metaphorical fantasy - is also apparent and even those who consider it an abstract concept are capable of pointing out with ease which of the beings represented on the pages above is the Devil. Therefore, the Devil arouses from religious beliefs and visions of evil, but, in addition to accompanying the transformations of both over time, simultaneously starts to run in a parallel lane, detached from its primary function.

Does the Devil exist? As the result of a long and complex tradition it does. To some people, in the form of a fearsome real creature, for others not.

The tradition that gave rise to it may even be long and complex, but the Devil as we identify him today has very precise date and place of birth: it is the work of the Catholic Church, in the feudal Europe of the High Middle Ages.

Of course, both the figure of Satan and the church erected around Jesus predate this time.

And neither one nor the other is European by birth. But more than five centuries were necessary for Catholicism to consolidate its doctrine, as was slow and slant the way in which the deliberative process of definition of the texts that, once grouped, would become what we regard as the Bible. The exact measure between the divine nature and the human nature of Christ, for example, was only defined in the Council of Chalcedon, in 451. And, in a sermon given in the year 591, it was Pope Gregory I who for the first time considered three Marys mentioned in the Gospels—the devotee who visits the tomb of Christ, the one of whom he cast out seven demons and the sister of Lazarus who anoints his foot; with no apparent connection between them other than the name — as a single person, thus creating the famous figure of the repentant prostitute Mary Magdalene, who has yielded lots to chew on since then. It was no different with the Devil: its theological synthesis was crystallized in the early period of the Middle Ages, as well as the landscape of his abode — hell — and his own name, for even then Belial, Beelzebub, Mastema or Azazel, for example, also served to designate the being at the head of the evil forces.

Henceforth, the more the Catholic Church expanded its power across Europe, the greater was the protagonism of Satan. As far as we know, there are no graphical representations of the Devil until the 6th century — all paintings found from the Roman catacombs ignored him solemnly — but at the turn of the first millennium his frescoes and codices second in popularity only to the image of Jesus Christ, his great enemy in the cosmic war between the good and the bad.

It is worth mentioning that the fact that this consolidation narrative takes place during that specific time

serves to disclaim much of the now obvious conflict between

reality and fantasy: the medieval mentality recognized the first in the second, not on the scientific and Historic bases established later. The very notion of time, of the duration of a man's life in the face of the immense whole, was not as clear as it would be in following centuries. Nor the separation of heaven and earth. Satan, therefore, was present in a concrete way, delimited by what the term meant in the mind of the period. Not only was he present but also active, calling on his hordes to spread suffering and death, instigating every human being to succumb to sin in order to, once delivered to his domain, face an endless cycle of the most excruciating punishments.

Faced with such terrible threats, how could one be saved? Where to escape from the clutches of evil? The Catholic Church provided the answer: itself. It is easy, therefore, to discern one of the great reasons why the Devil acquired such a leading role during the Middle Ages: passed the theological discussions of the centuries subsequent to the birth of Christianity, the clergy entered a more pragmatic phase of maintaining the conquered power. The more fearful the forces of evil were, the greater the need for all to submit, without question, to the rules of the only institution that claimed to be able to face them. Therefore, the creature that was born in the devotional sphere saw its strength exponentially amplified to become also a control instrument.

But Satan wouldn't be considered a universal character if he was restricted to a single religion, however big and powerful the medieval Catholic Church might have been. However, the imposition of what became known as "Western civilization", born with the maritime expansion of the 15th century, and since then making use of the most diverse modalities of economic domination, from the colonial system to the cultural industry, to maximize its power, resulted that many of the products of European culture (such as Satan or the alphabet with which these words are written) came to be considered and accepted as universal. And so, the Devil won a free pass to parade through the four corners of the globe.