Reviews

Lucifer Rising (Yet Again)

***American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* by Michael W. Cuneo. New York: Doubleday, 2001. 301 + xv pp.**

***Lure of the Sinister: The Unnatural History of Satanism* by Gareth J. Medway. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 465 + ix pp.**

***Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media* by Bill Ellis. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000. 332 + xix pp.**

According to Mark's gospel, Jesus was an excellent exorcist: After meeting a man obviously beside himself, the Lord determined that the stranger was possessed by an "unclean spirit." Since demons are capable of conversation, Jesus had a chat with the forces of darkness, primarily to make sure the man was not simply insane: "What is thy name?" the Son of God asked of the possessing demon. "My name is Legion: for we are many," it responded. After a little small talk, Christ verbally exorcized Legion by casting it into a heard of swine, which in turn "ran violently down a steep place into the sea" and drowned (Mark 5: 6-20).

Claiming to "do what Jesus did" in the twenty-first century, Bob Larson makes a living by traveling across the United States casting out demons at small conventions and workshops to roomfuls of true believers. Larson's Denver-based ministry is the most widely known and successful representative of the "Deliverance" movement, an offshoot of American Pentecostalism that began fomenting during the rise of the religious fundamentalism in 1970s. In general, the movement began when a number of Christian charismatics began to worry that the "charismata," or gifts of the spirit such as speaking-in-tongues, prophecy, and so on, might actually be demonic afflictions. Members of the movement believe that dabbling in the occult (such as reading a *Harry Potter* novel or a horoscope in the newspaper) and cursed familial bloodlines risks surrendering one's body to possession by demonic spirits.

Despite these fantastic notions, by the mid-1980s belief in demonic possession spread from Deliverance groups to the general public, resulting in a full-blown rumor panic in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. For a number of folklorists and sociologists, this period of American popular history has been dubbed the "Satanic Panic" (largely as a result of Jeffrey S. Victor's sociological study by the same name). During this time, lurid stories about Sa-

tanic goings-on in suburbia, clandestine child-pornography rings organized by daycare providers, and demonic possession were common in the mass media. A spate of television shows and specials, including segments on *20/20*, numerous talk show episodes, and an influential two-hour Geraldo Rivera exposé on NBC titled "Devil Worship: Exploring Satan's Underground," helped to propel demonic fantasies into the collective imagination.

Combined, Cuneo, Medway, and Ellis' studies help to describe the rhetorical function of the mass media in regard to the demonic. Although each study avoids disciplinary categorization, one can best characterize the subject of each book as *mass rhetoric*, or a kind of sociological rhetoric that is not reducible to the conscious intentions of rhetors and audiences. Rather, these studies can be said to chronicle the largely unconscious effects of the demonic once unleashed into mass media. Each book helpfully details a facet of the popular history of the demonic, mapping a Satanic panic that continues to inform our collective understanding of "evil" today. Cuneo's book focuses specifically on the phenomenon of exorcism from the 1970s to the present; Medway's study traces the history of the demonic from the seventeenth century to the present; and Ellis' research tackles the popular history of darkness by examining it in terms of folklore, legend and myth.

Although the phenomenon of spiritual possession can be traced to the hinderquarter voices of *engastrimyths* (such as the Delphic Oracle in antiquity), Michael Cuneo, a sociologist at New York's Fordham University, makes a strong case for the dominant role of the entertainment industry in crafting the contemporary obsession with possession. "Only with the release of [the film] *The Exorcist* and the publication of *Hostage to the Devil*... did fears of demonization become widespread" (272). Indeed, only after William Friedkin's frightful vision of William Peter Blatty's yarn about the Catholic rite did the Deliverance movement gather any momentum; prior to the film, these conservative Christians lacked a descriptive pedagogy of possession. St. Mark, nor Matthew, Luke and John for that matter, did not have much to say about how a possessed person behaves; after Linda Blair's frightful profanities and projectile vomiting, however, the American public finally had an object lesson in the sangfroidic failures of Satan.

Cuneo's *American Exorcism* details the "burgeoning phenomenon" of exorcism in the United States, typified by the spate of recent films devoted to the demonic (the re-release of *The Exorcist*, and the debut of films like *Bless the Child*, *Lost Souls*, and *Stigmata* in recent years are just a handful of examples) . Divided into three basic lines of analysis, Cuneo traces the proliferation of the practice from a handful of "maverick" Catholic exorcists and charismatic "entrepreneurs," though the Deliverance movement, to the more recent interest in exorcism among Catholics (in the year 2000 the Archdiocese of Chicago appointed an exorcist for the first time, for example). Be-

cause the practice of exorcism is, fundamentally, a *conversation* with the demonic (or for the nonbeliever, with a split personality), scholars interested in dialogical processes may find inspiration in Cuneo's discussion of exorcism as fresh and fecund site of investigation.

Written in a conversational style for a general audience—replete with no-no's like sentence fragments and the like—*American Exorcism* avoids the norms of academic prose, and most sources go undocumented. Cuneo has nevertheless written an entertaining and lively book that should not be dismissed as "popular." Not only did Cuneo interview many of the individuals he writes about, but he also attended numerous exorcisms, lending his ethnographic observations a kind of credibility often lacking in academic scholarship. Cuneo's book not only serves as a quick introduction to exorcism as it is practiced among both Protestants and Catholics in the United States, but is also an exemplary demonstration of how scholars can extend their expertise outside of the university to reach larger audiences.

Medway's *Lure of the Sinister* is a lengthy, erudite study of the *idiom* of the demonic, which he simply terms "Satanism." Like Cuneo's book, Medway's writing is leisurely by traditional academic standards, peppered with barbed witticisms and humorous asides. The book, however, is exhaustive in terms of documentation and attention to detail, which can become tedious at times. Although the focus of Medway's book is the Satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s (seven of thirteen chapters are devoted to these twenty years), Medway goes to great lengths to provide the prehistory of Satanic rhetoric in Western Europe and the United States. The stars that emerge in Medway's prehistory resemble Léo Taxil (otherwise known as Gabriel Jogand-Pages), a prankster, pornographer, and the leader of the French anticlerical movement in the late nineteenth-century. Taxil wrote a number of books about Freemasonry, but his key claim to fame was the myth of the Palladian Order, supposedly a co-ed cabal of Satanists plotting to rule the world through Masonic Lodges. Now a familiar legend among conspiracy theorists, the Palladian Order was Taxil's joke: "Palladism, my most beautiful creation, never existed except on paper and in thousands of minds!" revealed Taxil at the 1897 meeting of the Geographical Society in Paris (17).

Given Taxil's success in proliferating and encouraging untruths, Medway's study demonstrates how mass rhetorics generally resemble traditional, sender-receiver models of persuasion in terms of their exploitation of the logic of probable truths. This is why, for Medway, the history of Satanism (which begins roughly in the seventeenth century and extends to the present) is in actuality a history of public gullibility. Chapters leap from one smirking occultist or deluded crusader to the next: in the early nineteenth century Aleister Crowley, dubbed "the wickedest man in the world," was rumored to sacrifice children, largely as a result of the rhetorical blinds common in his

many occult books (141); the late Anton LaVey, the so-called "Black Pope" and leader of San Francisco's Church of Satan, was a consummate prankster and did little to counter the wild rumors circulating about him (21-22); Michelle Smith and Lauren Stratford, both psychologically troubled women who claimed to have participated in Black Masses as children, published their lurid tales in the international bestsellers *Michelle Remembers* and *Satan's Underground* respectively. Smith and Stratford were later revealed to be frauds, but only after their stories received massive media attention, particularly on television (e. g., Stratford appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show,* 175-179).

In the end, the story Medway tells is twofold. First, no rumor of Satanic crime or demonic possession has ever been confirmed true—at least of the murderous variety. "Insofar as Satanic crime exists, it is usually the work of teenage dabblers," says Medway. "Public imagination, however, tends to go to excess over their activities," usually by embellishing centuries-old myths and stories about animal sacrifice and blood ritual (351). The latter brings Medway to his second general observation, that Satanic stories have remained largely unchanged for centuries. The only contemporary difference between seventeenth-century and twentieth-century Satanism, for example, concerns the role of children:

> In witch trials, the most important point was usually to establish that the accused had made a pact with the Devil, since this was regarded as so abominable that, if proved to the court's satisfaction, other charges hardly mattered. Today, making a Satanic pact is not a crime (leaving aside the question of whether a modern jury would be convinced by a parchment signed "Beelzebub"), but child abuse is regarded as exceptionally serious, and in such cases it is often possible to bend the rules of evidence in the same way witch hunters did. (330)

Importantly, demonic rhetoric from its inception has been characteristically prophetic in tone: If there is no evidence of evil goings-on, it is because Satanists are able to hide their crimes with supernatural skill. In addition to Medway's brief remarks, readers interested in learning how this process works itself out in the media are encouraged to see Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's excellent films, *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996) and *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations* (2001), which document this contemporary, witch-hunting process with disturbing clarity.

Of the three books reviewed, Ellis' *Raising the Devil* comes the closest to explaining the cultural function and mechanics of the demonic idiom as a mass rhetorical form. A folklorist by training, Ellis treats Satanism, demonic possession, and related phenomena as narrative objects which are used to

restore "the narrator's control over chaotic situations." By defining cattle-mutilation as the work of a Satanic cult, for example, a group or community names and thereby contains a perceived threat: the act of labeling "a social threat allows people to put a name, a face, and an agency onto a poorly defined problem." Retelling rumors, myths, and legends is a kind of "magical means of reducing the unknown into cultural language" in order to restore a sense of stability and control (xviii). In general, the explanation Ellis offers is easily translated into the vocabulary of what has been called "therapeutic rhetoric" in Communication Studies.

Ellis begins his book by locating the origin of the Satanic panic in general with the Pentecostal movement, and in particular with the theological writings of the German Charismatic Lutheran, Kurt E. Koch, and the British-born H. A. Maxwell Whyte. Koch's influential book, *Between Christ and Satan* (1962), and a number of books written in the wake of its success, helped to develop a kind of clinical psychology based on Germanic folk healing—basically a kind of exorcism. Koch's work is frequently cited by early leaders of the Pentecostal movement. Whyte's claim to fame is the practice of "pleading the blood," or chanting the word "blood" repeatedly, which was first popularized in his *The Power of the Blood* (1959). Together, the work of Koch and Whyte introduced glossalia and exorcism into the Charismatic scene in the United States, which, corroborating the history of Cuneo and Medway, began to gather momentum in the 1970s in parallel with the rise of Christian conservativism or fundamentalism.

Ellis then moves to describe how deliverance or exorcism has "real effects on the believer," and explains how religious ritual and myth places the true believer into alternate states of consciousness (32-61). Further, Ellis explains that "persons in an alternate state of consciousness can gain an uncanny ability to pick up (or invent) and use a foreign language in a way that they would find impossible in their normal state" (55), demonstrating how speaking-in-tongues can be perceived as a "miracle" by the true believer. Frequently Ellis reminds the reader of the power of the imagination and the primary role it plays in religious spectacle. Examining the use of a Ouija board as an alternate form of exorcism (62-86), recovered memories and hypnotic regression (87-119), subversion myths (e.g., the Palladian Order, the Illuminati, and so on, 121-142), Black Mass rumors (143-166), hippie cults and LaVey's go-go brand of Satanism (167-201), urban vampire cults (202-239), and the cattle-mutilation panic (240-278), Ellis skillfully demonstrates through case-studies how fantastic stories comprise powerful forms of psychological healing. Ultimately, for Ellis the idiom of the demonic is a mass means of coping.

So why are these studies of the demonic and Satanism important to rhetorical scholars? Why is the popular history of the demonic idiom signifi-

cant? There are a number of answers, but three seem to me the most important. First, our symbolic repertoire for "evil" is severely limited, reducible ultimately to the Western, Christian rendition of Lucifer or Satan. All three authors demonstrate—Medway most directly—how myths and legends about the Devil and demons have changed very little in the past 500 years. Although the addition of child abuse is new and the characteristic atrocities of alleged Satanists are more extreme (Medway reminds us that genital torture, for example, is something that some hard rock fans willingly pay to see on stage these days, so demonic atrocity must be increasingly outrageous), "the devil or demons made them do it" is the logic structuring contemporary Satanic rumor and myth. Our President's relative inability to describe Islamic extremists as anything other than "terrorists" or simply "evil" in recent months is case-in-point.

Second, and more important, the fear of the demonic can lead to grave injustices. As is well-known, the witch hunts of the seventeenth century led to the murder of hundreds of accused witches. More recently, three day care providers from the McMartin preschool in Santa Monica were convicted of running a Satanic, child prostitution ring; while the charges were eventually dismissed, the media accounts of the McMartin case helped to persuade thousands of Americans, if not millions, that there was a Satanic conspiracy afoot. As the strongest (albeit limited) vocabulary of "evil" in our culture, the demonic idiom was and can be used to justify the persecution and condemnation of human beings on the basis of accusation alone. Although Andrew Delbanco's observation that the decline of good ol' Protestant binaries has created a contemporary crisis in the moral imagination, particularly in respect to personal responsibility, may be correct (*The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, 1995), it is certainly not the case that the demonic and Satanic have disappeared. In light of the United State's bombing of Afghanistan, calling someone or a group "evil" or demonic continues to justify otherwise unacceptable violence. Indeed, the power of strange rhetorics—be they of the Devil or UFOs—resides precisely in their therapeutic functions. Naming a given phenomenon as evil or "Satanic" not only restores a sense of control, but absolves one of the imperative to interrogate the self and risk the discomfort of responsibility or guilt.

Third and finally, given the rhetorical power of the demonic in language and symbol, these books demonstrate the incredible and often forgotten power of the imagination, the ability of even the most fantastic of narratives to assuage communities and restore a sense of order. If millions of individuals can believe that a supernatural being descended to earth from the Heavens for the express purpose of being impaled on a cross to bleed unto death, then it is most certainly understandable how hundreds of thousands of individuals, including highly trained law-enforcement officials and well-respected

clinical psychologists, could believe in an underground conspiracy of child-abusing Satanists. The mind and its rhetorical productions are both sources of terror and places for coping. Without critical reflection, however, terror and coping too easily become the same thing.

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