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## [Book review of:] Eva Marta Baillie: Facing the Fiend: Satan as a Literary Character

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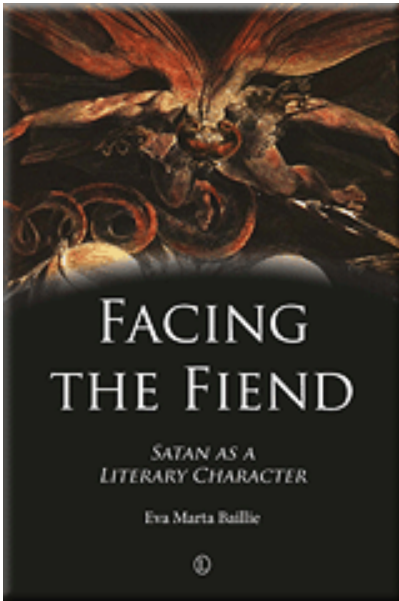
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**Eva Marta Baillie**

***Facing the Fiend: Satan as a Literary Character***

Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014. Pp. x + 207. Paper.  
£16.50. ISBN 9780718893545.

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In *Facing the Fiend*, Eva Marta Baillie maps the main features of the history of Satan as a literary character. Her book is a fascinating read: Baillie presents how the character of Satan originated, developed, and subsequently influenced personifications of evil into the modern period. Her starting point is that Satan is a literary character and that, regardless of how people view him, the literary history of Satan can and should be mapped. The three main characteristics of satanic figures in the literature Baillie deals with are: (1) Satan embodies evil “by portraying attributes that essentially negate life”; (2) the character of Satan forms a bridge between theology and literature; (3) his “place is in the story and his functions of temptation, destruction, and trial are necessary for the story” (189). Satan is therefore a literary character, necessary for the biblical story as a whole, but fictional at the same time. How did Baillie come to this conclusion?

Baillie starts by describing the literary provenance and main functions of Satan, who originates in the Hebrew Bible but rises to prominence in the New Testament, particularly in the descriptions of Paul and the book of Revelation. The approach to Satan as a literary character is laid out in this opening chapter, and its importance is emphasized by the distinction between narrative and metanarrative. The stories about God, preserved in the biblical tradition, ask to be embedded in a larger metanarrative, and for this metanarrative, Baillie argues, the world of novels, plays, stories, and literature

in general is of lasting importance. It is in this world that Baillie locates Satan: not “in an onto-theological explanation” but “in the field of imagination, expression, and phenomenology” (11). It is *in the story* that Satan should be located, and this is important, because stories are an invaluable tool for believers to understand the world. For this reason, Satan as a literary character is also present in the real world.

Part 1 of the book concerns “The Dwelling Place of Satan” and deals with Satan as an evil character (ch. 1), his origins in the Hebrew Bible (ch. 2), the development of Satan in story and myth (ch. 3), and the relation of Satan to the written word (ch. 4). The first question that Baillie addresses is whether Satan is evil. She chooses her approach not by looking into the ontological question of evil, but rather by “approach[ing] it through its expressions” (23). After discussing Leibniz and Hume and their ideas on theodicy, Baillie reaches the conclusion that in the Christian tradition Satan is not a malevolent deity, such as, for instance, the demiurge in gnostic traditions, but is consistently depicted as “a creature and therefore dependent on God for its existence” (28).

The biography of Satan, chapter 2, focuses on the origins of the satanic narrative in the Hebrew Bible, apocryphal texts, and the New Testament. Four passages from the Hebrew Bible are particularly important for the development of Satan as a literary character: the “angel of the Lord” in Num 22:21–35, who, according to Baillie, can be identified as Satan; the role of Satan as a member of the heavenly court in the book of Job; Satan as a heavenly accuser in Zech 3:1–2; and Satan in 1 Chr 21. It is here, by the way, that one of the flaws of the book shows: Baillie presents this fourth text as one of the key witnesses to the development of Satan as an independent figure but presents not 1 Chr 21 but 2 Chr 21 as part of the evidence. This type of mistake should not have made it into the printed version of the book.

In apocryphal writings and in Qumran we encounter similar figures. In the “book of Enoch” (the term Baillie uses to refer to the composite apocalypse known as 1 Enoch) we encounter the heavenly figures of the Watchers and in Jubilees a Satan-like figure by the name of Mastema. In Qumran documents a similar figure is found: Belial/Beliar.

There are many New Testament passages that refer to Satan, and Baillie lists them carefully. She argues that the “diabology and demonology of the New Testament are influenced by Hellenistic Judaism” (37). It is thus the Hellenistic context that has influenced the ideas of the early Christians on demon possession and diabolic opposition. The most important evidence on Satan in the New Testament, cited by Baillie, is his role as originator of falsehood. Paul describes him as capable of presenting himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:13–15) but also as the one who intends to outwit people (2 Cor 2:10–11). The gospels present Satan as “the ruler of this world” (esp. John 2:31; 14:30; 16:11),

and the Book of Revelation adds three elements in particular to the tradition of Satan: his relationship to the angels, his battle with Michael, and his role as heavenly accuser of humankind. Baillie shows how the early church takes up the variety of biblical traditions discussed and argues that Satan's rise to popularity originates "less in the teachings of the church than in folklore and narrative" (45). It is Origen who speaks about Satan in terms of Lucifer (Isa 14) and the fall from heaven (Luke 10:18), and it is Augustine whose picture finally became the standard narrative for the history of Christianity.

Chapter 3, "Satan in Story and Myth," deals with the role of Satan in speculations on evil. Referring to Phillip Cole's work *The Myth of Evil* (2006), Baillie states that "myth and narrative provide the space for a concept of evil" (51). Baillie searches for the narrative dynamics of Satan and makes an important observation: in whatever narrative Satan features, he is usually introduced by means of an individual encounter. Protagonist meets antagonist. The pact with the devil as literary motif was introduced by Basil the Great. Baillie also mentions the gender of Satan: he is usually seen as a male person. He rebels against what is good and intends to lead individual people astray in order that they may act against God's will. Causing people's failure is his art, and this is the art of evil.

A brief chapter on "Satan and the Written Word" closes part 1 of the book. Here Baillie pictures how books are related to Satan in various narratives in which he features. The power of books and the tradition of the *Teufelsbücher* (devil books) written by Lutheran pastors in the second half of the sixteenth century have been very influential. The two works that Baillie highlights in particular are Goethe's *Faust* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Especially Mephistopheles, Goethe's devil, has become a landmark figure. Ever since Goethe, the devil is the character who keeps the plot moving.

Part 2 of the book deals with a variety of satanic characters. It intends to picture these characters as standing in the literary tradition of Satan, though not always necessarily identifiable as devils or demons. The idea is that the tradition of Satan has influenced narratives in the modern period, and evil characters are indebted to his characteristics.

Baillie focuses on six roles played by evil literary characters that she considers related to the Satan tradition: the restless wanderer (ch. 5), the tormented shadow (ch. 6), the zeroing zero (ch. 7), the creative eliminator (ch. 8), the stumbling block (ch. 9), and the transgressor (ch. 10). For each of these roles she picks a number of literary works that attest to the prominence of this particular motif.

The first novel Baillie focuses on is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). His main evil protagonist, Kurtz, is depicted as a restless human wanderer, and according to Baillie, he prefigures many real-life characters of the twentieth century. His extreme behavior is

evidence of the evil that resides in humanity: “Evil ... is lack of restraint that arises from an inner hollowness and the lack of belief in something” (96). Marlowe is portrayed as Kurtz’s disciple, and his discipleship starts with his fascination with the horrors Kurtz stands for. In this novel, evil is seen as lingering within human nature, as the shadow of the human self. Baillie sees *Heart of Darkness* as a permutation of the conception of evil: evil is no longer located outside humanity, in a character like Satan, but is now seen as the dark side of humanity. Satan has become the shadow of human nature.

Harry Mulisch wrote the novel that Baillie next analyzes. In his *Siegfried* (2001), Mulisch tells the story of a fictitious Dutch novelist, Rudolf Herter, who is obsessed with Adolf Hitler. He hears from an elderly German couple, the Falks, that they had been responsible for raising Hitler’s otherwise unknown son, Siegfried. According to them, they had had to kill Siegfried toward the end of the war. Mulisch/Herter pictures Hitler as the ultimate antichrist figure, and this brings Mulisch/Herter to the observation that the only answer to Hitler lies in the combination of philosophy and theology. Baillie analyzes the portrayal of Hitler in this novel and concludes that it is the total absence of anything good that makes him the ultimate evil character. Hitler thus becomes a satanic protagonist because he is filled with nothingness. Baillie states that it was Karl Barth who most prominently thought nihilism to its end. Baillie combines Barth’s analysis with that of Jean-Luc Marion, who mentions the nothingness of Satan/Hitler as the paradox that as a person he is characterized by the sheer absence of being someone—he is *personne*, nobody.

Chapter 8 deals with the portrayal of evil in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). This novel tells the story of “the Kid,” who as a fourteen-year-old decides to side with a gang of scalp hunters in the American southwest in the 1850s. The novel goes back to real-life persons in this period. Its story is characterized by extreme violence, and the judge in the plot, Judge Holden, is the most satanic figure it portrays. Baillie here indicates how this judge moves “beyond the Judeo-Christian concept of Satan. Judge Holden does not rebel against the divine order, he *is* the divine order” (139). The nihilistic universe the reader encounters in this book reflects Nietzsche’s idea of a life beyond good and evil. The judge sees himself as an *Übermensch* and is portrayed as such in the plot. The plot knows no good and evil characters, only violent characters. Although McCarthy regularly refers to elements of the biblical tradition, *Blood Meridian* moves away from it. This is a world without God, a place where only violence helps the characters survive. According to Baillie, Satan has lost his place in this world, too, to be replaced by something even more threatening: a life in which human beings can only survive by killing each other.

Chapter 9 analyzes two novels that present Satan as a “stumbling block.” It begins with a bridge—the void left behind by the death of God has been the subject of philosophical

speculation in the twentieth century. Heidegger especially deals with this issue in his concept of human beings who are “cast into the world,” *das Geworfensein*. This leads to an existential state of boredom, which is the main topic in the two works dealt with in this chapter: Helmut Krausser, *The Great Baragozy* (1997; ET 1998), and James Robertson, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006). Both novels reflect a secularized society in which life becomes an existential void in which people desperately seek for God and even Satan. To put it in Gideon Mack’s words: “Without myth, cult, ritual and ethical living, the sense of the sacred dies” (quoted by Baillie, 164). These two books bring Baillie to what might be her main point: the telling of stories is a basic human activity, which is necessary in order to counter this existential void. In the telling of stories, satanic characters are necessary, and without them, the banality of evil may take over life. She explicitly refers to Hannah Arendt’s philosophy here (174–75), and it seems to me that this reference is pivotal to the whole enterprise of this book.

The final chapter deals with Satan as transgressor and describes the Russian masterwork *The Master and Margarita*, by Mikhail Bulgakov. Bulgakov wrote the book during a stretch of years, to finish it shortly before he died in 1940. The plot of the book consists of three narratives that are intertwined: the first is an apocryphal encounter of Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the second a visit the devil paid to Moscow in the 1930s, and the third the story of a Russian poet called the Master and his lover Margarita. The three layers of the novel together form a narrative that reflects a criticism of the materialist Soviet regime in terms delivered by the biblical tradition. Baillie here observes that, in this book, “we return to the theology of the early church fathers, where the parameters of ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ were not as distinct as the post-Enlightenment individual defines it” (186). Unfortunately, Baillie fails to take into account that this particular characteristic of the novel shows Bulgakov’s indebtedness to the Orthodox tradition, which provided him with his main protagonists. The book should be seen as religious critique of the Soviet government, and this is probably the reason why it had been edited and censored before finally being published in the 1960s. It is not by accident that Baillie decided to end her monograph with this particular book. It reflects a longing to move “beyond the realm of materialism and reason” (187). Reality cannot be understood in terms of matter and reason alone.

In her conclusion, Baillie summarizes her argument and states the three most important “satanic functions” (189). After emphasizing that Satan should not be studied ontologically, but rather phenomenologically, she mentions the three main characteristics that were already stated above: Satan embodies evil by portraying attributes that negate life; Satan forms the bridge between theology and literature; and, while Satan’s natural environment is the story, his functions are temptation, destruction, and trial. The various literary portrayals of Satan discussed in this book lead Baillie to the conclusion that Satan appears

in situations of conflict, but also that the character has developed. Satan of the twenty-first century is the embodiment of “boredom, destruction, and nihilism” (190). On the one hand, Satan is personal; on the other, he embodies the negation of personality. He forms the evil shadow that lurks in the dark. Literature thus contributes to the theological discourse of evil, by describing evil without necessarily interpreting or explaining it: “The nature of evil remains unknown to us; it touches us deeply and yet eludes our understanding” (194).

It is not easy to give an evaluation of this work. It forms an intriguing attempt to bridge the gap between theology and literature and engages in a fruitful conversation between the two fields. The satanic figures discussed are presented as reflections of the human fascination with evil, and they are interpreted as originating in specific cultural settings on which they also comment. The point that Baillie is making—that Satan has become a literary character and as such sheds light on the way human beings look at evil and at the world—is, however, one-sided. This is perhaps the most common modern way to look at Satan, but premodern interpretations would certainly reject the idea that Satan is confined to the realm of literature. The transition from the premodern premise that Satan is an actual person to the modern idea of him as a literary character is, unfortunately, hardly addressed in the book. This also applies to the main question this book raises: If the main antagonist in stories about God’s dealings with history should be approached as a literary character and not spoken of in ontological terms, does that not apply to the main protagonist, that is, God, too?

It is to be credited in this book that its argument moves intuitively from biblical sources and modern literature through philosophy into theology and back. It is this particular element that makes reading the book worth the effort. And exactly because of this characteristic, it is disappointing to see that the argument on average remains somewhat superficial. Baillie engages in conversations with Heidegger, Ricoeur, Jung, Barth, and a large number of other modern philosophers and theologians, but these conversations remain on the surface level.

A real problem with this book is that it contains many mistakes that would have been easy to avoid. Sometimes these mistakes originate in lack of in-depth analysis, such as is the case in the statement that Satan figures as a character in the book of Genesis (7–8). According to Baillie, Satan “first appears in our tradition in the Hebrew Bible, most poignantly in Genesis and the book of Job, and he then plays a role in the New Testament.” The problem here is that Satan does *not* appear in Genesis at all, only in later interpretations of the book. This is a fundamental mistake by the author, which causes concern with regard to the rest of her argument. A more careful and meticulous approach is necessary here. The argument should have been that the snake of Gen 3 was identified

as Satan in the reception history of this particular account. This observation would have enabled Baillie to analyze the growth of Satan as a character, but here she fails the test. The sloppiness of the book is unfortunately a fundamental flaw. As already indicated above, in her presentation of the biblical sources in which Satan occurs, Baillie mistakes 2 Chr 21 for 1 Chr 21. Such sloppiness is a severe threat to the argument made by the book as a whole. On page 45 Baillie lists Philo of Alexandria as one of the “second-century Apostolic Fathers,” apparently betraying an unfamiliarity with Philo. In the case of the Dutch author Harry Mulisch, Baillie presents him as still alive, overlooking the fact that he passed away in 2010. Then there are numerous typos: “the *The Heart of Darkness*” (96; should have been *Heart of Darkness*), “yet another apocrypha” (185); “we will never be able know” (194). There are more examples like this, yet the function of a review is not to list all the *errata* of a work but to evaluate that work. If it comes to that, the book deserves the benefit of the doubt, but it raises this doubt itself by the superficial character of the argument in combination with its many mistakes. The reader of this book ends up with mixed feelings because, in spite of its originality, it could have been so much better had it been more carefully edited.