

The Prince of this World

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

There was a tendency in those hungry for practical results . . . to call upon spirits of terror and compulsion, to move Acheron in despair of moving the gods. There is always a sort of dim idea that those darker powers will really do things, with no nonsense about it.

G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*

CHESTERTON IS AT THIS POINT discussing the god Moloch honoured in ancient Carthage with infant sacrifice. Given the nature of such paganism, one can readily appreciate the central place exorcism occupied in early Christianity as a vivid demonstration of the continuing power of Jesus over the Devil. Those Christians recognized not only that Satan and his legions exist but also that they are active in the world. Both of these convictions are suspect today, as we resort to psychology for relief in mental distress and to medicine in physical need. Chesterton, however, knew differently.

I am not proud of believing in the Devil. To put it more correctly, I am not proud of knowing the Devil. I made his acquaintance by my own fault; and followed it up along lines which, had they been followed further, might have led me to devil-worship or the devil knows what.

Autobiography, chapter 4

From seeing a devil behind every tree we have now lost sight of him altogether. Each of these attitudes represents an extreme, with the latter case, perhaps, the more dangerous in that Satan, still active, is incognito. Three popular films—*The Dark Knight*, *A Law-Abiding Citizen*, and *Drag Me to Hell*—illustrate the point in that they express an unsettling aspect of our culture, that evil has expanded to fill the vacuum formed in men who have abandoned faith in God. I begin with *The Dark Knight* and *A Law-Abiding Citizen*, which are similar in two ways. First, the evil genius possesses stupendous preternatural powers that keep him two steps ahead of the law; and, second, he more or less successfully corrupts the principles of his seemingly noble opponents.

The Joker (Heath Ledger) is Batman's opposite in *Dark Knight*. He is single-handedly able to mine a huge hospital and blow it to smithereens with the push of a button on his cell phone. Earlier, again it would seem completely on his own, he had filled the cargo holds of two ferries with explosives, both of which he threatened to detonate if the passengers on one did not blow up the other, and *vice versa*. He is also ubiquitous. He appears at the bedside of the D.A. in the guise of a nurse, effortlessly bypassing all security, just as he simply walked in on a secret meeting of mobsters or crashed a reception in the penthouse of Bruce Wayne (alias Batman, played by Christian Bale).

Clyde Shelton (Gerard Butler), the maddened anti-hero of *A Law-Abiding Citizen*, is equally powerful in creating mayhem. Like the Joker, he is as effective behind bars as

he is outside. Even in solitary confinement he is able to blow up a series of automobiles and plant enough napalm in the town hall to burn it to the ground with all the civic officials inside. At the beginning of his rampage he had effected the brutal murder of his primary victims, the two men who, in the course of a robbery, had killed his wife and young daughter. Thus, unlike the Joker, Shelton has a motive, of sorts, which in the course of a decade had magnified itself until he views the entire legal establishment as implicated in the crime he is avenging. Like the Joker he has an extensive collection of high technological gadgetry at his immediate disposal, and he knows how to use it. The flimsy rationale for his actions is inadequate to account for his berserk mode of revenge, which goes far beyond even what an imagination corrupted by cinema and the web would consider plausible. In other words, these characters are satanic in their extraordinary potency for evil as well as in the open nihilism of the Joker and, more subtly, in the over-the-top excesses of Shelton.

Equally demonic is the effort of these criminals to corrupt their opponents. The Joker exploits the very virtues of his opponents: the D.A.'s affection for his fiancée, Batman's vigilante campaign against crime, and the familial responsibilities of various minor characters. His technique, repeated several times in the film, is a skewed version of the principle of double effect, which states that in certain circumstances a moral agent can tolerate evil in acting to achieve a comparable good. The Joker, in order to demonstrate that everyone is not only corruptible but already corrupt, forces people to do something wrong for an apparent good: he will stop murdering people if Batman reveals his identity; he will not destroy a hospital if a man is killed; he will not blow up those ferries if one set of passengers murders the other; the life of the D.A. will be spared if his fiancée is allowed to die. The obvious flaw in the positing of these dilemmas is the lack of connection between the alternatives. Blowing up one ferry does not *ipso facto* save the other, nor does killing someone prevent the hospital from being destroyed, especially as the promised reprieve comes from a mass murderer. Batman, in the final scene, escapes this false dilemma by sparing the Joker's life. The D.A., however, does not and, to the satisfaction of the Joker, enters on a murderous quest for revenge after the death of his fiancée. The range of Shelton's assault on the integrity of his opponents in *A Law-Abiding Citizen* may be narrower, but it is not any less telling. Detective Nick Rice (Jamie Foxx), who is to be the final victim, eventually discovers the madman's *modus operandi* and so is able to foil the scheme to burn down the city hall. But Rice then positions the apparatus of death in Shelton's prison cell, bringing him to the fiery end that he had intended for the city council. Shelton's revenge is thus complete. He has achieved more than Rice's death, he had reduced him to a version of himself.

Drag me to Hell is a comic version of these themes, although here preternatural powers act overtly. The film self-consciously veers between comedy and horror. In the opening sequence an ambitious loans officer, Christine Brown (Alison Lohman), refuses an extension to an old hag who, after some bruising and battery in the parking lot, curses her. The rest of the film chronicles Brown's attempts first to convince others of her danger and then to escape its consequences. All the paraphernalia of horror films are tediously introduced—shrieks, ghoulish figures appearing out of nowhere, oracular mediums, and gallons of vomit. The vehicle of the curse, it turns out, is a button, which the young woman eventually returns to the witch, or thinks she has. Her live-in

boyfriend presents it to her at the end of the film, and in the final scene she *is* dragged to hell.

The link between this film and the other two very different ones is what is *not* present: the Church or more generally Christianity. In the past, when Satan attacked the victims could obtain help. I haven't seen *The Exorcist* (1973), but reviews indicate that something was in fact done to limit or halt the terrifying intrusions of Satan into the world. Nowadays people are on their own; the results are not reassuring. Our contemporary sophisticates have actually revived old-fashioned Manichaeic dualism in which the forces of evil are in control of the physical universe, undeterred by the relatively puny powers of virtue. *The Dark Knight*, as the Joker himself notes, is a version of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but one in which Mr. Hyde has the upper hand. In the final scene, with the D.A. dead but the Joker—like the eerie figure of Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*—still standing, suggests that the career of this agent of evil is not over. What startles in these films is the sight of evil for the sake of evil, without a motive or, in *A Law-Abiding Citizen* and *Drag Me to Hell*, without a motive commensurate with the harm done to the victims. Étienne Gilson in *The Terrors of the Year Two Thousand* (1949), identified in the philosophical nihilism of Sartre and Nietzsche attitudes that have now filtered down to the level of popular entertainment:

Quis ut Deus? It is I, says man. When we no longer want to be the image of God, we still can be his caricature! . . . Let us admit that the adventure is enticing. You press a button, and the earth bursts like a gigantic bomb whose pulverized fragments are lost in a shower of stars. . . . It is possible that another will then be born, but that is not certain; in the meantime, what is certain is that ours will be ended.

This gratuitous depravity represents a departure from the classic form of the crime story. Father Brown, for example, demonstrates his acumen by penetrating Chesterton's clever red herrings. Among the variety of possible motives for the criminal act, Father Brown discovers the real one in his sympathy for the criminal mind or his recognition of man's weakness, two qualities conspicuously absent from these films. In "The Honour of Israel Gow," for example, what seems to be a blasphemous desecration of religious images turns out to be an instance of Scottish literalism and thrift. Nevertheless, Chesterton did depict arbitrary cruelty in the character of General Sir Arthur St. Clare:

"Where would a wise man hide a leaf? In the forest."

The other did not answer.

"If there were no forest, he would make a forest. And if he wished to hide a dead leaf, he would make a dead forest."

There was still no reply, and the priest added still more mildly and quietly:

"And if a man had to hide a dead body, he would make a field of dead bodies to hide it in."

"The Sign of the Broken Sword"

Chesterton traces this mad violence to a perversion of religion:

St. Clare was a hell-hound. . . . In each of the hot and secret countries to which the man went he kept a harem, he tortured witnesses, he amassed shameful gold; but certainly he would have said with steady eyes that he did it to the glory of the Lord. My own theology is sufficiently expressed by asking which Lord?

Something similar is found in "The Eye of Apollo," where Kalon has re-established the worship of the sun, which ironically renders its devotees blind: "Whether or not that devil [Kalon] deliberately made her blind, there is no doubt that he deliberately killed her through her blindness." The fanatical secularism of Aristide Valentin, Chief of the Paris Police, is equally hellish:

Valentin is an honest man, if being mad for an arguable cause is honesty. But did you never see in that cold, grey eye of his that he is mad! He would do anything, anything, to break what he calls the superstition of the Cross. He has fought for it and starved for it, and now he has murdered for it.

"The Secret Garden"

By making his detective a priest, Chesterton highlights the need for a spiritual solution to the problem of evil. In doing so he is following up on a lead that the New Testament itself provides. There Satan recognized his enemy: "I know who you are, the holy one of God." Once, themselves powerless to exorcise a possessed boy, the disciples questioned Jesus: "Why could we not cast out the demon?" The reply, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer and fasting," is not likely to be acted on in an age devoted to self-fulfilment and hedonism. These films are more frightening in their implications than in the violence and horror they present, for without God man is indeed at the mercy of powers he can neither control nor comprehend. ❧