

Hall Ruffy, "The Death of the Devil", Rhythm 1 (1911), pp. 24–33.

SPOILER: The Devil dies. Also spirits are mortal. After thousand of years of strenuous work, he dies the very moment he understands that the beauty of the world lies in complexity and diversity.

WHAT: what can we find in the first issue of a magazine, Rhythm, that in 1911 aimed to be "**humaner**"? how does it help us in our job today? Do we share any of its ambitions to have "purpose" and "see that the present is pregnant for the future, rather than a revolt against the past" (36)?

The story reports a late-night conversation between two gentlemen. Although they are not the kind of people we would like to be – or the kind of people Rhythm contributors wanted to be – there is much to be learnt from their words. In their amicable exchange one finds in facts the main constituents of an early 20th-century vision of the world, which has also shaped the century of two World Wars, a century of genocides, the century of an attempt at reconstruction through the leadership of the economy.

The core of this vision is the embodiment of evil for the sake of the highest good. What is at stake is then a dualist understanding of life dynamics: the world of light fighting against the world of darkness.

The roots of **dualist-thinking** are then investigated both in their **philosophical sources** and in the basic **iconography of the devil**.

As counteractive influence on our time, **difference-thinking** (or Deleuze's philosophy of differences) is also referenced here. Dualist thinking is in fact also binarist thinking; reductionist thinking; ageist thinking; racial superiority thinking; exploitist thinking. If one is allowed to make a few words up.

Finally, I tried to answer the questions: Who is the devil? What would happen if the devil was to come back today? What does the death of the devil mean for us today?

SHORT SUMMARY: One night two tweed-clothed men are sitting on the same uncomfortable bench on the Embankment. As it is inevitable, they amiably exchange their views on how unbearably disappointing our society is. It is the dawn of a new century. A new era is about to come. What a perfect opportunity to take stock of the millennial quest for the good of humanity! There is only one person, though, who could tell us all about it: the Devil.

Black or white

right or wrong

lord or working class

humans or animals

old or new

man or woman

soul or body

These are only a few of the categories on which our western brain has developed its civilization. **Dichotomies, dualisms, polarisations, binarisms** made our lives progressively easier. All questions answered. No room for doubt. No room for shades. God forbid shades.

The story of the death of the Devil is a brilliant recognition on how, through sharp dualisms, western civilization has attempted to bring manageable order into the chaos of life's forces.

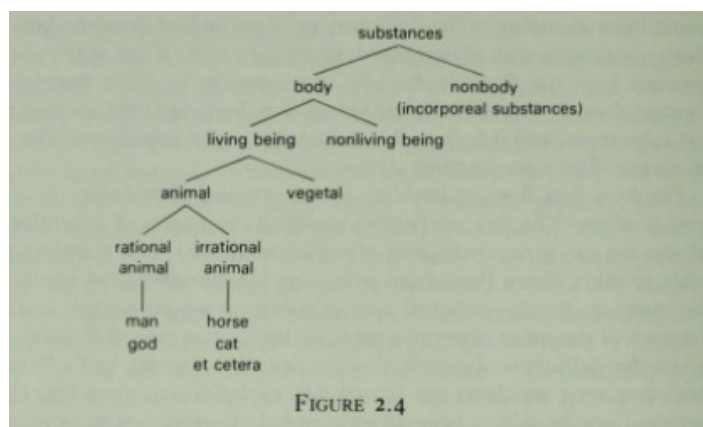
Historians often look at Descartes as the one philosopher who started all this.

(René Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, VI Meditation, 78: "It is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it"; "One's mind is a different entity from one's body"; *res cogitans* ≠ *res extensa*)

But the story actually goes way back. All the way to Aristoteles and friends.

It starts by saying that the mind is not like a bodily organ, hence in a way it is superior to any bodily organ: “The mind, since it thinks all things, must be, as Anaxagoras says, *unmixed* with any, if it is to rule, that is to say, to think” [Aristotle, *De Anima* III,4; 429a10–b9]; This leads to some incompatibility problems and also to the *queerness* of the mental. But most of all, it ends up with fanatic philosophers saying that matter is the principle of evil and that, while bodies have some degree of evil natural to them, souls are in themselves entirely good [Plotinus, *Enneades*, I, 8, 4.]. The separation is final.

The idea was to classify things in order to understand them. And what better way than to divide everything into two main groups and then again each group into two more subgroups and so on until you get to the very end? Resulting graphs look beautiful. And everybody agrees that what is beautiful is also true, right? The fancy name of *diareisis*, “division” was also fittingly applied. All happy. Until we weren’t.



(Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 60: “Now, the tree of Figure 2.4 does not account for *differentiae*”)

The charms and power of dualist thinking are difficult to resist.

Its sworn chevaliers, the devil and his fellows, were even sure to act in the service of higher beauty [or profit? possibly both]. Ruffy’s story also tells us, quite bluntly, how such a quest has ended up producing dullness, lack of joy, the annihilation of intelligence. Even worse:

the prospects of a nihilist
futurist
Übermensch
who is proudly only masculine
Heideggerian
dogmatically evolutionist
and projected well beyond himself

[rubbing his hands on tomorrow's riches].

One is here supposed to hear the progressively louder Ride of the Valkyries coming from a subconscious bluetooth speaker.

Differently, Rythm's aim is to "seek out the strong things of life". In their one-page explanation they also make sure to say that "There are *many* aspects of life's victory, and the aspects of the new art are *manifold*" (36, emphasis mine).

All over the place, philosophical inquiries today declare that dualisms are out and difference-thinking is in. "Diverse" has made its way even among gender options. We have fluidity. We have neutrality. We know how to get vocal about things. Difference-thinking is militant. It shapes our world today. We are all compost (D. Haraway). "We become universes. Becoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero" (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 1994, 169).

The time is now. However, in order for the present to be "pregnant with the future", as Rhythm contributors wish, one must admit that the present is also full of the past. Deleuze teaches us to take advantage of this ambiguity in the present time. We do not need to delete the past or deny its existence. We need no shame. We need no flame. What we need is to keep an eye on our choices today. Which means that, although we are not free of vision of the devil, we can choose to become something else, for instance to become "life".

On a side note, what strikes me in this short story is, first of all, that we don't know who wrote it.

"Hall Ruffy" is a fantastic pseudonym behind which hides very likely a woman. I can't resist the tempting conjecture that this could be Catherine Mansfield's first piece for the magazine she later so massively contributed to, as an editor and more, also emptying her pockets into it, until it could not be rescued further. I don't think this could be in any way proven though.

Besides the obvious advantages of a male pseudonym for a woman writer in 1911, I believe only a female contributor could have dared to describe the state of alleged corruption of the present day in the terms of a "woman-made world of lies and hypocrisy, the triumph of romance".

Although the devil seems to belong to religious history, much more relevant in the story is the intertwining of literary, philosophical and sociological topics.

The text brilliantly summons the devil's previous literary and iconographic incarnations:

<p>Marlow & Goethe's <i>Faust</i></p>	<p>"I was a scientist once, and a philosopher once" (25)</p>
<p>The Walpurgis night</p>	<p>"the witches and damned came flying to the revels from every point, breathless, dishevelled, frenzied; the goddesses flung their garments to the wind and showed their supple figures to the half-light of a cloudy moon, lying about in the green glades and making love to the devils, and the witches threw off their rags and became beautiful women; and goddesses and witches, the devils and damned, danced and loved and sang soft songs of sexual ecstasy, while summer breezes moaned in the trees above, and the moon hid behind the silver rims of the clouds, ashamed to show her face" (28)</p>
<p>Middle-Age and Renaissance painting and sculpture</p>	<p>"a pair of horns and hoofs and a long tail" (26)</p>
<p>Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i></p>	<p>the tempter of sinners</p>
<p>Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (Ravenna)</p>	<p>"the scape-goat of Heaven, the black-sheep of the Universe" (28)</p>
<p>Flaubert's <i>The Temptation of Saint Anthony</i></p>	<p>"I appeared to St Victor and other saints in the form of a beautiful seductress" "tempting them to exalt them" (28)</p>
<p>etc.</p>	<p>see Appendix 1: Iconography.</p>

SEE: On the whole, the devil's iconography does not seem to have adopted a dualist representation until the 17th c. and appears to be returning to more shade-full patterns in the present time.

As to the philosophical:

The two interlocutors embody an intellectualist spite for mankind, which reverberates into a **futuristic** aesthetic credo, a **hardliner evolutionist** position in science and a Heidegger-reminiscent **existentialism**. In hindsight: the main ingredients of later Fascist ideology as expressed in its clearest form by National Socialism in Germany.

While preferring night-scapes devoid of people to the polluting hassle of busy workers during the day, the narrator “hates justice” (25) and snobbishly laments lack of “taste” in his fellow-citizens. Clearly anti-societal proposals are also the object of conversation (e.g. “each one living his own life, and interfering with no one else’s”, 25).

This translates into an anti-artistic philosophy of life, which condemns “imagination*” as “the bane of man” (24). The whole of humanity is decried for having embraced a life-style based on freedom of expression:

They are going on and on, the fools don't know where. They've chained their happiness to their fancies. It is the story of Don Quixote and the Windmills. (24)

*Imagination - for classical Aesthetics [Kant] - is the free-play of our faculties producing something that although individual can be universally shared.

The antidote to the current deplorable state of affairs is then seen in the *Übermensch* “a higher form of man” who will lead to a “better state of society” (25). These futurist ideas and their political consequences are rooted in an interpretation of Darwin’s theory of evolution that, on the one hand, deems progress irreversible and unstoppable (“Why only yesterday we were snails or something,” 25) and, on the other hand, accepts backdrop ideas such as the struggle for existence and the global competition over a limited amount of resources, which will later provide a case for racial superiority thinking and social hygiene policies.

The highest metaphysical point of this framework is reached when the devil explains his deepest insight into existence. His words are a striking anticipation of Heidegger’s idea that gaining an authentic perspective on existence means reaching “being-toward-death” (*Being and Time*, 1927). “The individual who feels things,” one reads, “is conscious of something that will outlast the wildest imagination, he is conscious of Death” (26). As a powerful illustration of this viewpoint, the eternal flowing of the river Thames, which outlasts all civilisations, hence all measuring of time, points to an existential paradox: “The ephemeral is the most eternal. The realest the most unreal” (26).

Already a dear friend of philosophers in antiquity, the river and its defining flow helps us understand what is going on with Heidegger and his idea of death.

Traditionally the river tells us something very simple and yet quite head-spinning. It tells us that we have no choice but to trust our experience, even though we know it is an illusion and we can see well beyond its limits. How many times have you swum in the river Thames on a hot summer afternoon? Heraclitus famously said that “you can never step in the same river twice” (DK B91, from Plutarch *On the E at Delphi* 392b). It might appear the same to you, but the river is by definition always changing. Impermanence. Objects might appear to you to have stable properties, but this is only the illusion you yourself create, thanks to the increasingly more refined structures and tools your cognition develops. “Everything is flowing” is instead Heraclitus’ provocation against all very-human control-freak approach.

How to grasp things then if they never stay still? How to define existence if it has no stable properties? You certainly remember Descartes’ smarty pants move to tie cognition, “I think”, to the warranty of existence “therefore...”. Heidegger’s answer is a bit more refined, inasmuch as he would like to cut loose from all that tradition and especially from the embarrassing separation

between soul and body. In order to be sure that things are what they are supposed to be, Heidegger finds for mankind or *homo sapiens* a highly qualified job as “shepherd of being”. This means that humans are not here at random but, rather, they are “being-in-the-world”, in other words, they are some sort of landowners with unlimited metaphysical prerogatives. What about other living beings, you ask? Don’t worry, they couldn’t tell the difference. They are like captured by their instincts. They are quite similar to pre-programmed machines, aren’t they? This is again, proper dualist thinking: humans vs the world; life vs death; animals vs homo sapiens; enlightened people vs captured labourer; contemplating the eternal flow vs counting no-pennies in your pocket.

What is also striking is that the text also gives away what is the dramatic consequence of this illustrious dualistic tradition with the devil as its greatest propounder:

They had learnt to hate the very body he had given them, their passions, their emotions, their desires were incarnations of evil, everything—the Earth, Sun, Moon.

(28)

Who is the devil then?

The devil is a bigot. No fallen angel, but the know-it-all angel. He is a one-sided moralist who believes he knows exactly how people’s life should be like. An hypocritical dogmatic who can’t stand imperfections and sees beauty as an ultramundane ideal. A dualist. The popular incarnation of evil is just the greatest supporter of untainted and unattainable good. An absolutist. An all-good or all-evil kind of mind. The devil is the kind of person who would actively campaign against LGBTIQ+ rights [it’s either man or woman]; who would protest in front of abortion clinics [it’s either life or murder]; who would rule against environmental policies [it’s either mine to plunder or irrelevant]. The devil is a polariser, who advocates evil for the sake of eternal salvation.

What would happen if the devil came back to life and tried out some historical costumes?

Imagine the devil planning his come back. He's going for the most iconic of his attires. The one he's sure to strike an impression with. There he reaches for his horns, hoofs and tail. A touch of black make-up to go with. In no time, I fear, he would be blending in with the queueing crowd in front of a mildly fetish, mildly kinky club in Berlin. Unnoticed. Humanity unshaken.

Imagine then he would come back and pose as a great philosopher and great scientist, hoping to make a dent into human consciousness. His ideas might easily become unique selling propositions. His photo will appear in glossy magazines. His books will get the golden sticker of a best-selling author. For one season. If he knows how to play his cards wisely. Next year humanity will be talking about something else.

Imagine he raised his fists in protest then. Imagine he shouted against those who forgot him, mistreated him, turned him into a recreational mascot. Imagine he raged through the streets and the city was caught on fire. Imagine he asked for respect! We would hear his cry. Others would join in. Soon he would lead a crowd. Can you hear the police sirens approaching? Can you hear army boots marching? We are probably already cowardly turning the other way.

What happened after the devil's death?

Has all bigotry died? Do we live in a post-bigotist society? One that is able to dissolve dualism in its multiple, essential and non-essential differences? Maybe a little bit. But there is still much work to do. The death of the devil means in fact to develop the tools that are needed for an understanding of complexities and differences with no residue. It also invites us to turn to the level of immanence: "I had a lovely ideal in my mind, when I should have found it in the reality around me" (33). The first step is then to resist the temptation of dualist thinking, the second step is not to ignore the past, but to make it pregnant with the future, the third is becoming-with.

More easily said than done.

"I'm just beginning to understand—and admire, the Maker of Suns and—Light
—Oh, my heart's breaking—"

He said no more. The Devil was dead! (33)