

REVIEW

EWAN FERNIE. *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*. Foreword by Jonathan Dollimore. Pp. xxiii + 312. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Graham Holderness

Ewan Fernie's title tell us that this book is about both the 'demonic', and 'experience'. The 'demonic' is associated with a 'potential for creativity over what merely is' (p. 10), and is to be found in an impressive pantheon of major canonical authors: Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, as well as theologians and philosophers such as Luther and Hegel. The demonic is otherwise known as 'evil', but is redefined here as a 'violent hostility to being' which is both existentially terrifying and fundamentally creative.

Fernie also sets out to reclaim 'experience' as the true ground of the literary imagination. Experience was of course once the proper territory of post-war literary criticism (New Criticism, Leavis, early Marxist criticism), until post-structuralism demonstrated the extent to which experience is invariably contaminated by ideology. Today we are much more accustomed to methodologies that separate literature from life, and valorise the objective and dispassionate in literary interpretation. Fernie explicitly dissociates himself from these methods, on the grounds that they 'involve abstraction from experience'. (p. 5), and demands a subjective personal engagement with literature that opens the reader to the power of texts.

The complexity and challenge of Fernie's account can be tested in his chapter on *Macbeth*. His Macbeth is a kind of demonic superhero, whose 'supercharged moment of negativity ... exceeds all forms of ordinary existence'. (p. 51) 'The poetry of Macbeth is instinct with a creativity in destruction, investing the murderer not just with a world-changing destroying power, but with a world-changing destroying

power *in which strange life stirs*' (p. 62) Macbeth transcends what merely is, and reveals the dark powers that lie beyond being: 'Macbeth is most alive in his sheer negation of life'. (p. 67) Ultimately this amounts to 'a metaphysic in which evil is primary' (67) And there is no limit to this ambition. Macbeth and Banquo commit the ultimate sacrilege by re-crucifying Christ when they 'memorise another Golgotha' and Macbeth breaks open the Lord's anointed temple and *steals* the life of the building, 'an extraordinary image of Macbeth killing God' (p. 67)

Mere 'being', that life-as-it-is that Macbeth must transcend, is embodied in the figure of Duncan. 'Duncan represents the humdrum creatureliness – the anxiety, stupidity and mutability – such ambition has to overleap'. (p. 55) Duncan is a 'hypocrite', a 'scarecrow king', 'creepy'. (p 55) He is 'a miserable, tainted, unholy thing'. It is by representing Duncan as loathsome and repulsive in his neediness and dependency that the play 'makes its bid for our complicity in Duncan's killing'. (p. 59) Or to put it another way, in order to valorise the demonic energy of Macbeth, Fernie has found it necessary to exaggerate what he sees as the old king's loathsome dependency. He is well aware of this: the murder of Duncan is at the same time 'squalid and reprehensible', like killing a baby or your elderly father; Duncan's 'appeal to our compassion is a powerful appeal to the sheer unglamorous creatureliness we all share with him'. (p. 63) At one point Fernie introduces a strange unexplained echo of the figure of the 'Suffering Servant'; in Isaiah, saying of Duncan: 'He has no majesty, no beauty of speech or person ...' (p. 56). 'But Macbeth rebels against the givenness of life, as surely he must' (p. 63) The Suffering Servant is of course a prototype of Christ, so this imperative again is nothing less than to 'memorise another Golgotha', a sacrilege that seems to be regarded as necessary if mere being is to be transcended. The literary imagination is invited to share indiscriminately in the 'unglamorous creatureliness' of humanity, and in the violence that provokes us to destroy it within ourselves.

This level of analysis has little use for contemporary allusion or topicality. To give one example, Fernie minimises the function of the

Porter in *Macbeth*, characterising him as a superficial parody of the true demonic, stranded between a fairground mediaeval Hell and an idiom of smart contemporary reference. (p. 52) No-one is really interested in his topical allusions: ‘who but the scholars care about the corner-cutting of an English tailor once *Macbeth* is in town?’ But Fernie here glosses over the fact that those topical references, to the ‘farmer’ and ‘equivocation’, are what connect the play to the Gunpowder Plot, and thus provide a context in which *Macbeth*’s black and deep desires can be understood. They also make it possible to read the play alongside the language of modern Islamic terrorism, which is surely as much a part of our ‘experience’ as the Western canon. Fernie even mentions the suicide terrorist as an instance of the failure of Kantian reason: ‘the figure of the suicide bomber, who has so much torn into our contemporary world’ (p. 15) *Macbeth* can take us to the heart of both Jacobean and contemporary terrorism. But what do we do with that experience? Surely we have to reinstate the methods of historical knowledge, political criticism, theoretical analysis in order to know what to do with these insights, how to act upon them. Otherwise, after such knowledge, what forgiveness?

Fernie does however pay more attention to the political concerns of Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann, and stresses continually how the demonic is related to revolutionary politics in its wish to transcend givenness and the status quo; but also in its self sacrificial aspect in passive, rather than active, possession, which brings the possessed in range of radical Christian openness to the Other. At times the demonic even offers an illicit image of goodness. This is particularly evident in Fernie’s discussion of *King Lear*. In ‘Poor Tom’, openness to possession gives us a new image of radical susceptibility, even of love, and thus perhaps of an aspect of Christ. In these later chapters the book shifts from its focus on the wicked heroism of destroyers, to a troubled recognition of the closeness of the possessed to the saints. The demonic carries us beyond bourgeois ethics into a more extreme spiritual territory, without denying that there are also more ordinary and normative kinds of goodness.

In theological terms there is something deliberately heretical about Fernie's approach. Setting out to show how evil and good are inextricably intertwined, and that good is never free from evil, he goes further and produces what is essentially a negative theology of goodness. Fernie comes closest to acknowledging this in his chapter on *Measure for Measure*. He writes beautifully of Angelo's temptations, which raise the question 'as to whether our purest and most sacred feelings can ever be free of demonic elements'. Again, so far, so good. But then: 'For love itself ... is a temptation here, even love of what is highest and most rightly lovable'. Now Fernie ruptures the barrier between the literary text and the (male) reader's imagination. 'I am not a rapist. But ...' 'Love is virtuous in its cherishing of another's inimitable separateness, which desire indissociably acts against'. Our empathy with Angelo identifies us (men) with the rapist. But where did that 'inimitable separateness' come from? Not from experience, surely. The term 'rape' becomes almost meaningless, as it is redefined from a crime of violence to any attempt to constrain the 'inimitable separateness' of another human being. It is to be found at its most extreme in the corrupt and depraved condition of an Angelo, but also in 'the most sinisterly everyday domestic shape of a complacent husband making a move on his bride'.

In terms of ethics and morality, rape and unwanted sexual attention from a loved one may share something in kind, though they are surely far distant in degree. But experience (other people's, not our own) would surely tell us something different. To be raped is to be violated by an act of violent cruelty. To be sexually pestered by someone you love is just to be annoyed; it goes with our 'unglamorous creatureliness'. The one is an act of hate; the other can be mediated by love. In order to recognise this, we need both a broader and more inclusive concept of experience, but we also need to reintroduce the ethics and politics and theology that can help us to configure such actions, as instances of human behaviour in the real world, appropriately.

I do not find the proposition that goodness is inextricably intertwined with evil unacceptable, as many religious people would. But I fail to see why the logical explanation of that hybridity is that evil is primary, and goodness a deficiency. What's wrong with the other explanation, which is that evil is a necessary component of the good that yet remains sovereign in the universe? Is this not precisely what we are given to understand by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation? 'He needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man'. God became human, and therefore assumed a fallen nature. By that process evil was taken into God, and left its permanent mark. The son who is beloved, and in whom I am well pleased, is also the prodigal who waste his patrimony, and ate husks with the swine. 'For God so love the world that he gave his only begotten son'.

Fernie addresses theology directly by praising Karl Barth for acknowledging the demonic ('The negation ... the parable of death to which Christianity is definitely committed' is also 'the Titanism of revolt and upheaval and renovation'); and criticising Paul Tillich for diminishing its significance. Tillich argues that 'Christ is the one who sacrifices what is merely "Jesus" in him'. (p. 29) Fernie assumes that to jettison Jesus is to renounce the demonic, since it is only in the human form of the Godhead that evil might find a place. But this is again to misunderstand the Trinity. Tillich was arguing there specifically against the 'historical Jesus'. But in Incarnational theology, Jesus and the Christ are one. When the Son talked with Satan in the wilderness, or when Jesus of Nazareth was recognised by demons in Gadarene, or when he endured his dark night of the soul in Gethsemane, this was God's experience. It is always God who struggles with Satan in the person of the Son. After the Crucifixion Christ descended into Hell. In *The Shaking of the Foundations* Tillich rather fancifully suggests that after death every soul mimics this encounter and experiences its own Harrowing of Hell: 'when the soul leaves the body, it must pass over many spheres where demonic forces rule; and only the soul that knows the right and powerful word can continue its way to the ultimate depth of the Divine Ground'. (p. 68) Tillich knew as well as anyone the necessity of embracing the

demonic: 'Every element seems to be reversed ... The command to sacrifice one's intellect is more demonic than divine ... Every step into the depth of thought is a breaking away from the surface of former thoughts ... Paul, Augustine and Luther ... experienced this breaking away as death and hell. But they accepted such sufferings as the road to the deep things of God'. (p. 69)

I am sure Fernie is equally committed to knowing 'the deep things of God', though he would not wish to name them in the same way. *The Demonic* certainly takes us some way towards these 'things', through its masterly studies of great literature. The search continues, and readers wishing to follow that thrilling and dangerous road will find Ewan Fernie a companionable guide.