Roger Caillois

METAMORPHOSES OF HELL

Learned and voluminous works, of course, have brought together and compared the representations men have fashioned for themselves of the Beyond—in other words, of the kind of life in store for them after death. Sometimes the authors of such compilations have tried to classify these imaginary worlds and discover by what secret laws the after-universes where the dead live were designed, and in what spaces, both near and irremediably separate, they were located. It is not always easy to reach them, even if it is inevitable. As for returning, it is impossible, aside from a few legendary exceptions: a goddess, Ishtar; a fabled hero, Orpheus; a man who was raised from the dead but of whom nothing further is known, Lazarus.

Furthermore, as far back as the oldest evidence goes, men have always imagined the after-world as containing both a place of punishment for wrongs committed in this one, and also, but less clearly, a region where praiseworthy actions were rewarded, especially if such actions had been ignored. Yet, recently, this belief as old as history has become more and more blurred and is even fading away—to such an extent that, from a certain point of view, and if we consider the West in the broad sense of the word—I mean as any region of the world where universities, libraries and laboratories exist—our century may pass for the one that marks the disappearance of Hell, or at least its eclipse or its metamorphosis.

Translated by Mary Burnet.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217402208505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It does not seem to me premature to recall briefly the chief ways in which our species, practically everywhere, has been led to imagine this posthumous empire where the condemned suffer frightful and precise tortures, and then to try to see how its representation has developed, and finally to suggest some of the reasons which, almost everywhere and almost at the same time, have incited and continue to incite mankind, after so many centuries, to give up the idea, so firmly and generally entrenched, of a concrete, punitive Beyond.

It is easy to understand the salutary prudence that leads religions, which by nature are the guarantors of good and evil, to ascribe to a universe that is inaccessible, unverifiable, unexplorable except at the price of death, which is irreversible, an absolutely equitable retribution that is a consolation for the insufficiencies and inequalities of human justice. It is therefore logical that religions divide the Beyond into two symmetrical kingdoms. In complementary and opposite places, the wicked expiate their sins in torment and the good enjoy no less eternal delights. Theoretically the two are in balance; in fact, they are not. Hell is almost always varied, spectacular, paroxystic and personalized; Heaven is almost without exception uniform in color, iridescent at best; harmonious, or in any case without discord; monotonous, and consequently threatened with boredom; anonymous—that is, without particular delights that fit the merits the individual has acquired as the punishments of Hell fit his crimes. Another, no less significant contrast is that ready-made beatitude rewards a whole life of irreproachable virtue, whereas specific tortures usually punish a single but glaring sin. To realize how far such inequality goes, one has only to remember that the Inferno is the only part of Dante's poem that has achieved a certain popularity, and that this is because of the pictures of tortures it shows.

In the beginning, the other world looks sometimes like an extension and sometimes like the antithesis of the country where the living resided. For the living merely exaggerate, carry to an extreme, the charms or disadvantages of their habitat or way of life. Those who live inland set the place of reward in the heights of the firmament, and that of punishment in the depths of the earth. Coastal peoples think that the sea-lanes lead the chosen toward Islands of the Blest and the damned toward

submarine kingdoms or places covered with perpetual mists. Desert nomads aspire to paradises of springs, orchards and shade, and fear a dusty, torrid Hell. Conversely, the mere thought of an arctic Hell sends shudders down the spines of those who already suffer from a cold climate and hope for the warmth and harvests of eternal summer.

The same pattern of contrasts and amplifications applies to the fauna of the empire of the dead: some peoples fill their Gehenna with the dangerous or repulsive animals they feared throughout their lives, while others cannot conceive an Eden without the familiar species that were their faithful, beneficent companions in life: the horse for the Mongol rider, the camel for the Bedouin, the dog or the seal for the Eskimo. The animals of paradise are friendly and nourishing, harmless and tame. There is nothing surprising about them: they are those of earthly life. Even the unicorn is no exception to this rule, for his reality was not questioned until very late. Hells, on the other hand, are filled with a fabulous and frightening collection of scaly dragons; and, like Cerberus, three-headed monsters guard their gates.

The nature of the joys and punishments suffers from the same basic disparity. True, they are not essentially different from the delights and sufferings known on earth. But they have acquired the intensity, the perpetuity, and, so to speak, the security they lacked. The pleasures reserved for the elect in the Moslem paradise are distinguished by their amiable, well-bred sensuality. Other havens of coarser delights were designed for the happiness of gluttons or brutes: their satisfactions take the form of bountiful feasts or opportunities for constant athletic or warlike exploits: a table always piled with food, game that keeps coming back to life, battles where the heads of the fighters are stuck back on their trunks and wounds close immediately—all these are pleasures that, without leading to satiety, extend and renew those of life. In the same way, Tartar tortures, Ixion's fiery wheel, the Danaides' bottomless barrel, the rock of Sisyphus, the branches that constantly escape the lips of Tantalus—all these involve hunger, thirst, fire, useless effort, and constantly disappointed hope: there is nothing here that each of us cannot understand or that he has not felt at least once. This is hardly astonishing. What is more surprising is that nothing in the Elysian Fields is so eloquent as these impressive settings. Similarly, in Christian

mythology, there is no common measure between the cauldrons of boiling oil, the red-hot tongs, the melted lead poured into wounds, the salt-rubbed flesh of those who have been flayed and the contentment of waving palm-branches and praising the Lord while listening to angels' harps. I know that the joy felt is ineffable. But ineffable is one of those words whose use requires the least imagination.

Mankind has thought of another solution, which depends less upon contrasts. Sometimes the world of the dead is conceived as one of shades or reflections. All that is left of the living is their empty shell, transparent, weightless, colorless, without matter or voice. Yet it remains possible to identify these vaguely outlined figures. They themselves remember their names and their past existence. They wander aimlessly in a twilight world, floating, vacant forms to whom a little blood, offered by a visitor, may give back a momentary semblance of life.

Sometimes—though rarely—a more sophisticated way of thinking imagines the throng of the dead as moving in reflected space and reversed time. They walk backwards, with their heads down, their feet treading the underside of the ground, and they get younger instead of older, progressing backward from death toward a birth which will return them to the void. But here I must stop: I suspect myself of unduly developing a clue given by Plato in passing, combining it with ancient Chinese fables concerning the mirror people, with magnetic tapes played backward, with an obsession for symmetry that prevents me from looking at the cascades in European parks without thinking, like Loti and Raymond Roussel, of those in Tahiti that fall tirelessly to meet them from the other side of the globe. No matter. Simple or reversed images, these filmy creatures mark the first stage of a growing spiritualization. Soon the body and all the emotions of which it is the seat, or which stem from its own nature, are left in the tomb and do not cross the fatal threshold with the soul or the disincarnate double. Such a separation shows the beginning of a trend which will end by completely eliminating both the old concrete nightmare of an infernal Luna Park and the promising vision of hospitable bowers: both corporal punishments and fleshly delights disappear along with musical archangels, enchanting houris and torturing demons.

In the West, Hieronymus Bosch and Dante still furnish us

with meticulous and detailed descriptions of the felicity of the chosen and especially of the hyperbolic sufferings of the damned. But, already, this is nothing more than painting and poetry—in other words, invention, ornament, allegory. The day is approaching when the punishment will become purely metaphysical: unbearable deprivation or beatific contemplation of divine splendor. No earthly comparison could tell us anything about such abstract disgraces or ecstasies.

In contrast to such a colorless and inexpressive theory of the rise or fall of souls after death, other theologians have advanced concepts which, on the contrary, stress the subjective and individual nature of the pangs or joys they feel. These pangs or joys do not correspond to any types or models, but they do correspond, with photographic precision, to the souls of the chosen or damned ones, who, as it were, are simply revealed to themselves, and obliged to contemplate their own true portrait until the end of time. Surely there is nothing more equitable than changeless confrontation with one's own precise villainy or nobleness. Even so, if justice is to be completely satisfied, no impulse of the heart, no recovery of reason, no event of life must be neglected.

Such exhaustive accounting is precisely the basis of the conception which is opposed to the unmitigated duality of Heaven and Hell—I mean the doctrine of transmigration of souls, according to which the advantages and disadvantages of each rebirth are determined by the sum of the deeds of the earlier existence. The number of souls does not change, nor does the number of the successive outward forms in which they have the opportunity of further purifying or defiling themselves. They may succeed in ridding themselves of all desires; this enables them to free themselves, finally, from the cycle of rebirths.

Such a mythology fits in more than that of Heaven and Hell with the idea of personalized rewards or punishments, made to measure, which faithfully reflect each particular case. Heaven and Hell permit only of situations decided once for all, at the moment of death, for each member of the human race; furthermore, the race keeps on multiplying, and the number of the dead keeps increasing at a dizzying rate. So that there seems to be something contradictory in a limitless multiplication of beings whose momentary singularity is made eternal, and who yet are

insignificant and as nothing in the face of imperturbable divine perfection.

Basically, the mythology of an infinitely interiorized and personalized retribution is compatible only with a theology of the migration of souls. It assumes an accounting of virtues and faults that is carried over from one lifetime to another. Consequently, it never succeeded in making headway in any place where the opposite belief was solidly entrenched.

So the fate of the blessed, like that of the damned, remained common to all members of each of the two legions, and evolution finally effaced any personal differences that had originally been assumed, where their treatment in the after-life was concerned, between disciples of great saints, just as it did between imitators of notorious scoundrels.

Yet the unsuccessful attempt does show a clear effort to ascribe more importance to the intention than to the deed. More and more, purity of heart began to take precedence over the material commission of sin. The churches were slow to accept the idea that damnation cannot be avoided or salvation gained by respecting the letter of some external code—in the beginning, an enumeration of taught and defined precepts, whether of a moral character, like not killing, or of a practical nature, like not cooking the kid in its mother's milk—to cite two of the commandments dictated to Moses by Jehovah on Mount Sinai (Exodus XX:13 and XXIII:19). The commandments not to murder and not to cook with butter (if what is really meant is a general prohibition and not the preparation of a ritual dish) are not always easy to observe, but they are clear. Some theologians have considered that divine justice, which looks into the secrets of the soul, could not be bound by hypocritical conformity probably inspired by fear or interest. Concern for the omnipotence of God, the need to safeguard His free will, have led subtle priests to imagine that His impenetrable ways should appear as such to creatures who are infinitely dependent and, on the other hand, restive and proud. Indeed, nothing decisive prevents us from imagining divine laws to be disconcerting and unfathomable, inaccessible, or even, if need be, capricious and contradictory, subject to change without warning, free to be applied to an earlier case by virtue of some retroactive edict suddenly adopted. A whimsical or mischievous god is not at all inconceivable. What

is more, such a solution is, at bottom, more respectful than a solution which would admit that a true believer might ever flatter himself that he was sure of his redemption, neglecting God's omniscience and the unpredictable character of His verdicts. At the two ends of the path, the sects that sprang up on the banks of the Euphrates (if my memory is correct) and later, in a fanatical and precise way, Jansenius, bishop of Ypres and Flanders in the seventeenth century, carried the appalling doctrine to its extreme by means of a few axioms and rigorous deduction.

* * *

I shall mention one last triumph of abstraction: the practically complete disappearance of the itineraries the soul must follow to reach the end of its voyage: the talismans with which it would do well to equip itself, the tolls it must pay, the passwords which it ought to remember, the tests from which it must emerge victorious. The viaticum and extreme unction keep something of these ancient safeguards. Nevertheless, if Heaven and Hell lie henceforth in the hearts of men, or if they are metaphysical names for states of the disincarnate soul in an environment which has neither matter nor extent, then the problem no longer makes sense. In times past the Egyptians, the Moslems, the Celts and the Greeks all showed great ingenuity in multiplying the obstacles or the formalities encountered on the decisive journey: the deceased must cross a sea of flame, a river of molten metal, a precipice on a razor's edge, sometimes with the help of an angel (hence a tuft of hair had to be left on the top of the skull, so that the angel might seize it), must be able to put the required money into the hand of the funeral boatman, to identify the landmarks and the beacons, the enigmatic signals made by a Cimmerian or a Hyperborean—by definition, beyond the Pillars of Hercules and all human cartography.

Of these "travel orders" for the use of the dead, I shall cite those which appear at the beginning of the last book of the Odyssey—probably introduced by the Pythagoreans—and which have caused a great deal of ink to flow. Often I have recited to myself the foreign syllables of this passage. I took pleasure in wandering through the cosmic labyrinth they evoke even before I learned that they designate the obligatory stages of the last

crossing. With the golden wand he uses to put human beings to sleep or to wake them up, the Cyllenian Hermes leads toward the empyrean the souls of the suitors Ulysses has just massacred. They utter raucous, plaintive cries, like bunches of bats suddenly chased out of their dark caves. In the *Republic*, where he likes to take poets to task, Plato condemns this metaphor because he considers it vulgar. For my part, I find it deeply moving. I can never exhaust its resonances. Then comes the enumeration of the halts on the journey. I cannot refrain from quoting them in the original, for it seems to me that there are few passages of evocative poetry where the music of the vowels, alternately clear and muted, so effectively serves its aim, which here is to give credibility to the half-real onomastics of a visionary world:

> Πὰρ δ'ἴσαν 'Ωκεανοῦ τε ῥοὰς καὶ Λευκάδα πέτρην,
> ἠδὲ παρ' 'Ηελίοιο πύλαν καὶ δῆμον 'Ονείρων
> ἤϊσαν αἶψα δ'ἵκοντο κατ' ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα
> ἔνθα τε ναίουσι ψυχαὶ, εἴδωλα καμόντων (XXIV, 11-14)

They are: the banks of the river Ocean; the White Rock where the initiate's dive offers him to the god of light; the gates the sun passes through when it reaches the horizon of the celestial vault, between Cancer and Capricorn; the people of dreams who have been brought together in the Milky Way and who are made up of the souls who get their first nourishment there, before they fall into the cycle of generations; and finally the field of asphodels where, returning from their journey, they taste the endless calm of heavenly immortality. The ghosts of the avid, boastful, lecherous suitors are suddenly, without purgatory nor penitence, mingled with the shades of Achilles and Patrocles, Ajax and Agamemnon, all the heroes of the epic, whose exploits and glory contrast with the suitors' impudence and their ignominious end. Later, they will be joined by the bloodless and imponderable double of Ulysses, their murderer.

At first sight it would seem that there could be no more striking illustration of the basic identity of human destinies, not only in the face of death, but after. In fact, what we have here is not at all a disabused and equalitarian eschatology, but an allegory used by semi-secret sects who reserved eternal

happiness for an aristocracy of initiates whom they had taught and taken into their midst and who had promised to follow strictly their code of hygiene and morals, if not their political line. So it would not be correct to believe that, in classical antiquity, a daring doctrine managed to free itself from man's universal and persistent need for a decisive justice.

The allusive presence of such a doctrine in the Odyssey so strongly contradicts the descent into Hell in Book XI, where the tortures of Hades are described in detail, that it is hard to see anything other than a late interpolation in the heavenly journey of Ulysses' victims.

There are baffling cases which lead one to puzzle about the notion of Hell which they presume or imply. The Yezidis, an abominable and shrewd people who live in the Sindjar mountains, west of Mossoul, are considered devil-worshipers. In fact, they believe it useless to worship a good God, since He is good and therefore could not have any idea of harming them. They reserve their devotions and offerings for the Archangel of Evil, whom they venerate in the form of a peacock. On the other hand, Zoroaster, who like them was a dualist and whose doctrine may have influenced theirs, forbade sacrifices to demons, because he thought such sacrifices strengthened instead of appeasing them. I wonder how the Yezidis conceived the Kingdom of Shadows over which he whom they tried to propitiate presides. Did they hope to receive privileged treatment? Did they think Hell would bring a reward for their perverse piety?

Their decision was not the only one of its kind. Others, through hatred of the God of the Bible, have adored Satan, the snake, Cain or Pharaoh. History is scattered with these religions of blasphemy, usually born of revolt and despair. They take the opposite tack from orthodox teaching and invent diabolical liturgies. They scandalize and become the subject of stereotyped calumnies. Usually a general massacre puts an end to the adventure. One of the most widely circulated historical dictionaries of the nineteenth century describes the Yezidi mountaineers thus: "They hate Islam, drink a great deal of wine, pitilessly torture and kill Mohammedans, often attack caravans, and show much kindness to Christians." Drunkards, cruel, pillagers, traitors to their faith—what more could they be blamed for? It seems that Raschid Pasha exterminated them

in 1834. As has happened to the Albigenses, the Anabaptists, the Taborites and numerous aberrent movements, sometimes ascetic, but always opposed to orthodoxy and thus immediately accused of the worst depravity, fornications and sacrileges. Yet even today, listening to the rumors around the souks of Bagdad, one might believe that the Yezidis continue to forbid entrance to their region and to worship the evil peacock.

To take the side of Hell is still to believe in it, especially if one aims by so doing to stave off the threat of it. The real recession accompanies the development of incredulity. It stems from the progress of morals, reason and knowledge, all together.

* * *

In a collection that Jorge Luis Borgès and Adolfo Bioy Casarès recently devoted to the hypotheses that men have drawn up for themselves concerning survival in the Beyond, there is no allusion to the Yezidis, no text from Homer, Virgil or Dante, or from the Egyptian Book of the Dead or the canonical writings of other religions. The authors decided at the outset to leave out the big, generally accepted settings. They had a different aim. This very disdain illustrates the development I have just summarized. The two authors deliberately brought together, in the greatest disorder, not the images furnished by traditions and churches, nor the intuitions of mystics, poets, philosophers and tellers of tales, but the reflections of airily detached or skeptical thinkers who have commented on or distorted at will the dogmas or conjectures offered to them concerning the places and settings in which man's headlong actions receive rewards or punishments that are equally inexorable and eternal. Wisely, the compilers took care not to forget the rebels who have considered such disproportionate retribution absurd, ridiculous or odious. Their very personal anthology, the fruit of almost haphazard reading rather than of systematic research, is above all a sort of invitation. Not only do they not conceal this fact, but they present their book precisely as an invitation: in fact, the collection appeals to each reader to add to it by contributing from his own store of knowledge, his own discoveries, perhaps even from his own reflections. This invitation constitutes the originality of the anthology—so free, so natural, so absent-minded, as it were: it

appeals to the user and convinces him that his own contribution has its place among those that are already included in the still-open repertory. It seems to me that it provides a timely occasion for reflection, starting out with the opinions it brings together, on the decline of a concrete Heaven and Hell, on the void that their decline has left in the spontaneous postulations of the human conscience, and on the way in which passing fancy has tried to fill in this unbearable emptiness.

Diverse though we may observe it to be, inherited imagery was uniformly based on the universal and persistent need of men for a supernatural justice that would avenge them for the wrongs of which they were victims or witnesses on earth. This demand turned out to be so fierce that it led them to postulate, for the sorrows and joys of the other world, limitless duration and unbearable intensity. Gradually such retribution became offensive to the spirit of charity and discouraging to credulity. It also seems that in the world of the heart, as in the syntax of justice and reason, there exists an entropy like that seen in physical phenomena: a similar tendency to reach the same levels, tensions, temperatures. Here, too, everything seems to be weakening, reaching a balance in a sort of lukewarmness, an irreversible indifference. In addition, it is no longer the flesh but the soul that must be rewarded or tormented. Heaven has become a name for the transforming union that dissolves personal identity in a rediscovered unity, and Hell a name for the private curse that keeps from the damned one the ecstasy he burns to share. No imagery: the first term stands for fulfillment, the second for frustration. Between the two, the contrast is no longer anything more than a sort of change of sign in a form of algebra as theoretical and distant as that which expresses the weak interactions of elementary particles. Heaven is no longer so delectable nor Hell so agonizing. The empty nirvana is not far away. The soul that has left the body no longer hopes for anything more than quietude, eternal rest—in other words, an absence, or at most a pale euphoria. Today, perhaps, Dante ought to reconcile Judas and Beatrice in the same final indistinction.

* * *

The only Beyond that the modern world imagines is—as might be expected—like itself: bureaucratic and administrative. It

owes its essential traits to the American cinema. Hell is reached by crossing a kind of plain from which mist rises. Uniformed officials take charge of new arrivals. Once the formalities are taken care of, the newcomers are introduced into the new universe, full of corridors, elevators, files, documents, lists and catalogues. The atmosphere is that of an immense government agency, where —not surprisingly—no one is ever seen except underlings, or at best a department head: the image of a complex, inextricable, irresponsible organization. The god of the dead, who remains invisible, has become a sort of immigration director. There is no contrast between the point of departure and the destination, and, on arrival, the treatment is the same. Neither torments nor ecstasies: monotony for all. The modern Beyond is not a world of extremes, but a twilight land. Only, filing cases have replaced the asphodels.

Apparently this model turned out to be unsatisfactory. Situated in the beyond, it appeared improbable even though it transposed into eternity the dullest characteristics of daily existence. It extended into the next world a uniformly distributed monotony that was neither attractive nor terrifying.

While the modern consciousness rejects any posthumous universe, it has not given up antitheses. It keeps a nostalgia for marvelous pleasures, a fear of unbearable torments. But to modern man it seems unreasonable to situate them after death or even in the ends of the universe. He has only to look around him, or to extrapolate what is shown by history or current events. History has indeed emptied the Elysian Fields and the shades of Tartarus, but the recent history of the planet has had no trouble providing images that are just as evocative. The screen and the tabloid press give descriptions of *la dolce vita* that are an enviable copy of the heavenly joys now open to doubt. Lustful debauchery thus seems within reach, at the price of a fortunate coincidence where a stroke of luck may make up for lack of fortune, just as winning the big prize in a lottery suddenly brings the opulence that a lifetime of labor rarely ensures. Symmetrically, the concentrationary universe furnishes a terrible and immediate picture, which does not hark back to a problematic Gehenna and which horrifies more than the pangs of remorse. The dreadful memory continues to express, if not the unavoidable end, at least the tendency of an impersonal society where fussy officials, just as devoid of

guilt or innocence as their imaginary predecessors, take away even hope—that is their role—from the multitude of wretches under their supervision. As is logical, and satisfying to their spitefulness, they consign the rebellious to the nethermost circle of a domestic damnation—a damnation to which death does not introduce them but from which, on the contrary, it frees them.

Under these circumstances, it would seem that there is virtually no further for the imagination to go. But in fact it refines, it complicates, it sets up the tortures of the old Hell in the contemporary world. It assigns to science and technology the task of providing the tormentors with a more efficient array of tools. They have electricity, acids, supersonic waves, lasers, a thousand machines and poisons that are rightly or wrongly considered capable of intensifying suffering and making it last. Beside them, neurologists and cardiologists regulate the pain to keep it slightly short of the breaking point. Orderlies and doctors bring the victim back to consciousness between two series of "interrogations." The rhetoric of hyperbole has constantly increased and embellished itself. Esthetes' inventions describe new torments. Cheap films, popular literature and comic strips vie with one another to feed man's stubborn complacency toward cruelty—a complacency long since illustrated by Tibetan silks and the frescoes of Pisa. Strange alliances are forged. A foretaste of them was given in *Le Jardin des Supplices* ("The Garden of Tortures"). This novel, published in the last year of the nineteenth century, shows tortures based on sex, which make use of delight itself, imposing it, forcing it, transforming it into abominable and finally mortal suffering. Nowadays the treacherous groves, the smiling retreats of the sinister park are replaced and multiplied by soundproof cellars, perfectly equipped. Here experienced torturers, artists at their trade, work under spotlights on throbbing flesh and exposed nerves. Nor is there any lack, as Baudelaire, said about Goya, of

> ... naked young girls
> to tempt the demons as they straighten their stockings.

They spice the torture with a mirage of lust. But they hardly try to make the torturers tremble. Their role is secondary; they merely appear, or at most pass the instruments. They are neither

patients nor operators, only lightly clad servants. Their reserve, like the impersonal roles in which the torturers usually remain, prevents us from confusing these horrible, icy rituals with the real crimes of a Gilles de Rais or an Erzebet Bathory, and still less with Sade's scenes of obsession, where the torturers are the protagonists. Here it is the opposite. Sexual satisfaction remains secondary; in fact, it only appears implicitly. The mission of the attractive assistants charged with awakening desire is merely to remind the victim how near is an Eden to which he would be immediately admitted if he made the smallest concession —perhaps only a slight, but irremissible, fluttering of the eyelids.

The combination is ancient. The Indian ascetics, a Saint Anthony in the early years of Christianity, also had to know how to resist the torments inflicted by demons as well as the delights proposed by immodest young exhibitionists. But the scenes of torture and temptation took place in the forest or desert, far from everything, in an uncertain geography. In addition, they had a markedly hallucinatory character. Finally, they consisted mainly of tests that opened the way to eternal salvation.

The connivance is kept. The means are the same, even if the setting has become familiar, almost trivial. Decidedly, it has served no purpose for philosophers to dissipate the phantasmagoria that naive superstition, as well as cautious theology, had at least relegated to the other side of the grave or to the far ends of the inhabited world. "If you chase away Hell, it comes back at a gallop"! And it comes nearer: to the street corner, within arm's reach. It used to play only rarely the role of the perverse ideal, suspicious and hence all the more attractive. It was a feared and naive threat, not a repressed, unconfessed, throbbing, saturnine desire—obtainable, if only one gave in to it and made a little effort. It seems that now the aim is to convince the rebel that if he will only give in, he will go from an abyss of suffering to the summit of delight. All that is needed is to take the first step. It is not Heaven, but Hell, that helps those who help themselves!

The exacerbation of the suffering inflicted, as well as the almost exclusively sexual nature of the promised joys, is hardly surprising at a time when cruelty and eroticism are riding the crest of the wave. Since, in addition, our time is going through exceptional technical and industrial development, science could not fail to be

given a leading role in a Hell situated this side of a death that opens out on nothingness. So the three outstanding elements—violence, sex and the machine—are spontaneously joined together in a way that combines their practically unrivaled prestige.

The truth is that the zones of the formerly supernatural rewards and punishments have contaminated each other. To a point where they sometimes look like partners. Yet the accursed (or protected) areas keep enough specific characteristics to oppose each other, some replacing the lost empyreans and the others the devalued Gehennas.

They continue to look like marginal residences. To some extent, their secrecy makes up for their nearness. It is not easy to get into them: passwords are needed, and tactics of approach, and the connivance of the people inside. On one side is a world of luxury and lust, an atmosphere of licentiousness, of celebration, accented by jewels, furs, nudity, tasty food, wine, lighting effects and aphrodisiac, euphoric or hallucinogenic drugs. On the other side are the appurtenances of an operating room, where dental, surgical and welding instruments are displayed. In both cases, attentive and apparently uninvolved assistants are present: here, musicians and footmen are substituted for angels or for Hebe or Ganymede; there, human tormentors take over from the demons of yore—without being unworthy of their predecessors, on the contrary. In the two cases the term is the same—a temporary loss of consciousness—but the signs are opposite: ecstasy or fainting, swoons brought on by pleasure or pain, but always corresponding to excessive, eradicating sensations which transcend expressible states of consciousness, and of which it used to be believed that only the approach of the absolute could give an idea.

Although many landmarks permit us to follow a certain continuity, essential differences in the identity of the protagonists reveal a significant reversal.

Not only is the acculturation of Heaven and Hell in a mysterious universe of cellars and palaces, lost in the country or hidden in the heart of cities, accompanied by the juxtaposition of the settings for superlative delights and disintegrating tortures. In the horrible dungeons it is the innocent or the heroes who are delivered to the cruelty of the neuropathic jailers, while in the adjacent boudoirs the show-offs, the scoundrels and the

perverts give themselves over to dilated, poisoned pleasures. For —and this may be the first sign of a decisive turning point—the pseudo-elect do not enjoy the contemplative blessings of Paradise: the new ecstasies are more spasmodic than serene. They often bring on madness and death, just as do the brutalities of the torturers.

It might even be doubted that these accursed pleasures revive the joys of the blest in another form. If they do not represent the other face of Hell, they do at least stem from the first function of the devil, who appears as a tempter before he reveals himself as a tormentor. Hence the fact that the pleasures of the privileged company, far from bearing the stamp of serenity, almost necessarily consist of violent shocks, a succession of orgasms and prostrations. These enjoyments have a seismic character. They lead neither to well-being nor to appeasement. They obviously belong to the realm of transgression. The pleasure is almost derived from blasphemy, or at least from a deliberate defiance of natural or permitted behavior, of customs and laws.

Felicity in the Elysian style had become tiresome because it was flavorless; it turned into orgiastic effervescence, at once fascinating and convulsive, which in the end is the opposite of the seraphic happiness that for a long time was the lot of the chosen. Similarly, it is just as clear that the tortures undergone by the victims do not represent any expiation. The tormentors want their victims to retract. They want to wrest from them an entreaty, a confession, a secret. Their aim is to make the victims give in, or, as they put it, *crack*. The pain they inflict does not redeem; it breaks and degrades. So the recent mythology propagated by films and the popular press shows a double swing of the pendulum: the forbidden pleasures reserved for a wealthy or bought elite, whose luxury as well as its debauchery is an insult to the humble, are opposed to frightful jails where the just are tortured, almost as punishment for, and in proportion to, their integrity. The descent to earth of the hallucinated and symmetrical other world formed by Paradise and Hell has twice reversed its vocation: an exaggerated and insistent imagery shows us, in neighboring and communicating settings, foul depravity triumphant and the humiliated, broken courage of martyrs without a halo, Lucifer-like in part, who seem to show more pride or stubbornness than piety.

* * *

At this point in the argument, a scruple makes me hesitate. Is it legitimate to compare a purely fictitious universe, born of the whims of a multitude of scribblers and picture-makers, each following his own caprice, to vast coordinated representations which are the objects of a practically unanimous faith and which have the support of religions, churches and theologies? On reflection, in spite of these obvious differences—which also, if I am right, stem essentially from the development of customs and ideas—the earthly avatar of Hell finally belongs less to the worldly and romanesque field (to put it plainly: to literature) than to mythology in the strict and proper sense of the term. To be convinced of this, it would be well to try to draw the boundary between myth and arbitrary fictions due to the fantasy of inventive minds.

In the first place, the myth is not individual. It enjoys a diffuse authority of which it is itself the source. It transposes the reality it feeds upon onto an impressive stage. Its heroes are hardly superhuman, and move in a world which is content to magnify everyday settings. Exploits and trials are not merely fictitious: they derive from a certain truth which may be approximate, hazy and changing, and of which a number of versions are accepted, but which to a great extent carries with it a rather vague, obscure belief that lacks both the precision and the obligatory character of a dogma. In the second place, the mythical environment, with the characters who people it and the adventures they go through, has a power that enchants those who like such stories; without realizing it, this audience carries their contagion. Each listener ensures and extends their credibility; he has a tendency to be inspired by them and to recreate them around him, at least in daydreams. Above all, these phantasms are compelling, many-formed, superimposable, secretly shared, and all the more exalting because they are prone to illustrate condemned forms of behaviour: lust, cruelty, murder, everything that society rejects and punishes. From them shines forth a supernatural incandescence that seems to cover with a fabulous and revered precedent the model it proposes to the daring. I admit that the example is not often followed and that everything remains in a state of reverie and stray impulse. But this confused temptation, which

characterizes the myth, continues to ferment, and to arouse desire and shudders.

The fictional works that propagate the new fable are, like myths, practically anonymous; they have the same collective character, for the names of their authors are rarely remembered. The heroes, on the contrary—again like those of myths—are strongly personalized: they have an appearance and ways of behavior that are recognizable and constant. Again as in myths (or tales), they go from one episode to another that is hardly different—or rather the variety, far from scattering the interest, contributes, through the similarity of the adventures, to the coherence and stability of the ghostlike, fringe universe in which both the places of everlasting delight and those of eternal suffering are located.

The mode of existence of Heaven and Hell, the fate of the chosen and the damned was not of a different nature. Here we may recognize practically all characteristics that I have just tried to define. True, the means of circulation are notably different; each belongs to its own time. On the one hand we have tales, fables and sermons, the capitals of columns and the doors of churches, the boards where the mysteries were played, or, in antiquity, theogonies and epics, vase paintings, the rites and mimicry of feasts and processions, performances of tragedies; on the other, printing and type plates, the screen, the radio, the poster, the serial story and television, which have no less power today. The most widely circulated novels, and those that act most strongly on docile emotions, are those that are read with bated breath and beating heart, in complete indifference to the means used. The showing in the dark of animated, luminous, fugitive pictures, over which one cannot linger, makes it difficult for reflection to measure their truth and for sensitivity to appreciate their beauty. They are provided with the best weapons for imposing their magic and, at the moment of screening, they are ideally defended against the two attitudes that would permit the audience to escape them: critical detachment and esthetic judgment. These get their revenge later, but among a very small number of professionals and amateurs. The immense majority keep first impression: the difference is that they receive this impression by more persuasive channels than of yore.

Now it is through these channels that current profane repre-

sentations of Heaven and Hell are dispensed to them: no less abundantly and sometimes in an almost hypnotic manner. So the new myths have been able to inherit from the old fables and take their place. On the other hand, the new myths have taken an almost opposite direction, multiplying scenes of pernicious pleasures instead of radiant blessings, sufferings that are iniquitous instead of being expiatory. In addition, the joys and pains are now just behind a thin curtain; to reach them or to face them one no longer has to cross the threshold of death.

The metamorphosis of the obsolete Beyond, and the setting up of its substitute in the society of the living, probably stem from a deeper change: the religious and providential vision of the world has been dethroned by the triumph of the spirit of exploration, of testing and checking, by the rejection of the irrational and invisible, which brings about the denial of a Kingdom of Heaven and an infernal abyss. So the imagination is forced to make up for the loss. It must reconcile the hallucinating with the admissible: the fantastic element in ghost stories, which used to frighten, has come to meet the wonderment of fairy tales, which used to enchant. It is no longer possible to develop a panorama filled with marvels, bristling with monsters, since physics and biology deny them in the name of principles learned at school, confirmed by constant osmosis, and doubted by nobody. Speculation is goaded in a totally different direction—the one dictated by the only conception with which everybody agrees. A conception which is all the more unshakable because, most of the time, it remains unformulated.

The mythical, which lives in the intermediate region between faith and doubt, now needs a scientific background: to appeal to the credulousness of its audience, it now talks about robots, electronics, machines able to reproduce themselves, which free themselves from man and reduce him to slavery. Every other form of the fantastic has become pure entertainment, empty of resonance: it hardly succeeds in arousing the ounce of suspicion, the "but suppose it were true" that momentarily paralyzes skepticism, always on the alert on this point.

Emptied of the supernatural, space has nothing left in it but asteroids and galaxies; and the depths of the earth, nothing but sial and nife. So Heaven and Hell have had to adapt themselves

to the new rules of the game. Everybody is fairly well convinced that it is only here on earth, and while we still breathe, that our nerves can make us scream with pain or swoon with rapture.

I do not think it is evaggerated to see in such a basic development the slow-working and distant (I would say deep if I weren't afraid of the epithet) cause of the emergence of an up-to-date phantasmagoria. It is true that the two mythologies are so strongly opposed, not only through their settings but also through their ethical significance, that one at first hesitates to compare them, or one wonders whether the human adventure, having reached its peak, has not just started to go down the other side of some gigantic ridge. After all, it has always been in the nature of myths to be nourished by the dreams of their time and to provide observers with a recognizable spectrum of these dreams.

In addition, such a reversal has more than one harmonic. I shall mention only one. Earlier utopias—Plato's, Thomas More's or Campanella's—described ideal communities where all paradoxes were resolved and where admirable, lasting arrangements had been made of the happiness of all. But it has often been noted that recent utopias—Aldous Huxley's or George Orwell's—conjure up nightmare societies, monstrous and cold, based on flawless tyranny, horror and automatism. Fear has replaced hope. The radical changes of sign, in the same direction, of two sorts of half-visionary representations do not seem to be the result of chance.

However, I am not convinced that we should be upset by such symptoms, even if their convergence seems alarming. They may be only vain semblances of passing clouds, a kind of interlude without a morrow. Nonetheless, they constitute a useful warning. So it has been justifiable to bring together the first elements of a "file" on fables that succeed in getting themselves adopted. For my own part, I confess, I would have preferred that the gradual disappearance of Hell had come about only through the progress of lucidity and justice, and especially without the rise, as its frightful and menacing counterpart, of this reversal, this half-abdication of the imaginary, which, through bravado, spite or despair, has invented a mixed, near and plausible substitute for the old, inaccessibile realm of the dead—a substitute which,

this time, is a provocation and no longer a compensation, not even in the way a balance wheel would be if it could regulate the drive of wild, fertile energies—perhaps the only ones that can be fertile if they are channeled, and devastating if they are abandoned to their violence (I do not even say stimulated).