

THE DEVIL IN LITERATURE

BY HARRY PRESSFIELD

THE devil as he is portrayed in literature deserves further consideration. Back in 1874 David Masson of Scotland wrote his essay, "The Three Devils". These devils were those created by the imaginations of Luther, Milton, and Goethe. Someone ought to write an essay on "The Four Devils", adding Dante's devil to the trio named; but, in the meantime, let us note in brief outline how different is the portrayal of the devil as conceived by these four writers.

Milton's devil is one of action. This is his chief fault. We can best understand him by what he says. He spurned contemplation. This was a natural outgrowth of that Puritanic conviction, shared by Milton, that people went to hell through too much action and too little contemplation. Because in our present-day life we lay emphasis on action, Milton's devil has become progressively more Christian. Of all the devils in literature he is the most fascinating. There is an attraction about his spirit of courage, initiative, defiance, and activity that commends him to the present generation.

Luther's devil is the most real. In its conception Luther gives us a more definite contribution than in his view of God. His idea of the devil rested on experience; for Luther's background of ideas contributed to the hallucination that visualized the spirit of

evil. Men throw ink bottles only at the things which are tremendously real to them. Our advance in natural science ridicules the projection of the devil into the phenomena of nature, but to Luther the devil was a definite resisting medium with which he was continually called upon to wrestle. The psychologist would today say that this "wrestling with the devil" was merely a matter of mental depression.

Goethe's devil is the one most true to type. In "Faust" there is depicted a devil that is a devil irrecoverably. If Milton's devil is understood by following him in action, Goethe's devil is best understood by following him in speech. We understand Mephisto by what he says. He is a being that incarnates malice always. We must not overlook the allegorical meaning that Goethe gives him as the evil spirit in modern civilization. We see him, after 6,000 years of activity, plying his business in the crowded cities of mankind.

Dante's devil is symbolic only. He is not individualized by the poet. He plays no active part in the Inferno. As Dante moves through the various circles of the "truly dead", he sees men and women who have gone to their doom through the working of the divine justice; but the devil has no part in this. He is one among others, and of all the chief. Singularly enough, his personality is not even pervasive in hell. There he is a pris-

oner and not a king. Dante's conception of the devil had no effect upon the thinking of the common people. Later the painters took Dante's devil from the pages of the Inferno and painted him upon the walls of the churches.

It is interesting to find Dante's devil locked in ice in the lowest circle of the Inferno. This is the result of Dante's reading of Matthew 25:30 in the Vulgate. In our English the verse

is translated, "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." In the Latin it reads: "There shall be weeping and chattering of teeth." Because of the chattering of teeth then it must be a place of intense cold; and there is also the symbolism that naturally associates the lowest circle of treachery with entire absence of warmth.