

The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West, by Michael Walsh. New York: Encounter Books, 2015, 280 pp., \$23.99 hardbound.

Barbs at the Devil

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Published online: 28 April 2016

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2016

The bold black and yellow dust jacket of James Burnham’s *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, one of my most treasured used book finds, bespeaks of the moral confidence of an earlier era.

Burnham’s book was published in 1949, just as the cultural Marxists of the Frankfurt School were worming their way into American classrooms and working devilishly through “critical theory” to undermine the moral certainty expressed by Burnham. The resulting cultural revolution, which came to fruition in

the 1960s, leaves conservatives despairing, though often unaware of how things could have gone so wrong.

Michael Walsh’s *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West* aims to describe the history and effects of the “Frankfurt scholars”—Theodor Adorno, Wilhelm Reich, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, all of them refugees from Hitler’s Nazi Germany—who poisoned academe with the nihilistic ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács.

In jaunty, often funny prose Walsh attempts to explain why the Frankfurt School belongs to the “devil’s party” by comparing its precepts to themes in various artistic works ranging from Goethe’s *Faust* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to musical compositions by Wagner and Schubert to such movies as *Roger Rabbit* and *Fatal Attraction*. These works contain warnings about diabolical forces and/or display the artistic ideal that has traditionally informed Western civilization: the heroic quest, often aided by “the Eternal Feminine.” Walsh declares that Art, “*the gift from God, the sole true medium of truth,*” is what sustained Western civilization. The groundwork for the Frankfurt

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School's destruction of art was laid during World War I, when cynicism overcame faith in the heroic quest.

Unfortunately, Walsh, a music critic-turned screenwriter, novelist, and political commentator, fails in fully executing this worthy project. For one thing, he undermines his own purpose by mixing low culture with high, throwing the popular movie in with the classic epic. For example, both *Fatal Attraction* and *Paradise Lost* are employed to show the Eternal Feminine. The result is a dizzying array of pop culture references and a superficial reading of the classics.

The promise and the problems are evident in Walsh's introduction, where he explains that he takes his title from Schubert's early opera of the same name about a poor, newlywed knight who is tempted by a seductress, but is saved by his bride in what turns out to be a dream. The happy ending—the recognition that all was a dream—has become a “groan-worthy cliché,” according to Walsh, who argues that this is not librettist August von Kotzebue's “fault, given that he wrote in a less cynical age, but anyone ever tempted to throw a shoe at the end of Fritz Lang's 1944 film noir, *The Woman in the Window*, knows what I mean.”

Unfortunately, I *didn't* know what Walsh means. I felt as if I were attempting to join a clever conversation at a cocktail party where everyone had seen the same movies.

Still, there are valuable passages to be gleaned. For example, Walsh likens the Frankfurt School refugees from Nazi Germany to the Serpent whispering to Eve, implanting doubts and questions about tradition and authority. The Frankfurt scholars convinced Western youth that they were like gods: all-knowing, all-good, all-right. The timing was propitious: in the 1960s young men were being drafted to fight in Vietnam and a blossoming civil rights movement gave moral cover to criticism of the Establishment, a stand-in for Western and American values.

Inspired by the Frankfurt School, many students formed the New Left, so named to contrast with the national and international socialist movements of the first half of the twentieth century. Today's students, taught a romanticized history by the intellectual descendants of the New Left, fancy themselves super “critical thinkers” and morally capable of discerning “microaggressions.”

They also adhere to Marcuse's concept of “repressive tolerance,” which is described by Walsh as “tolerance for me, but not for

thee.” Walsh cheekily (“But let Marcuse explain”) introduces Marcuse’s own tortured justification with an extended quotation from his 1965 essay, “A Critique of Pure Tolerance,” which concludes, “Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left.” Such a double standard is accepted on our college campuses, where critical theory pervades. Those subjected to it can no longer recognize the logical and moral contradictions.

Walsh’s clever, pithy take on the postmodern graduate seminar is also spot-on:

It is easy, in this age of political correctness, to trump up a series of latter-day charges against almost any dead individual, exhume his corpse, and, like a Cadaver Synod run by a grad-school Nuremberg court...cut off his head, mount it on a pike, and chuck the body into a ditch. (p. 139)

In the 1990s, I was forced to wrestle with critical theory in the “grad-school Nuremberg court”—English department seminars where “dead white male” writers were given a second death as they were cast into the ditch of academic oblivion.

Indeed, my professors reminded me of the devils in *Paradise Lost*, hissing in bitterness in Hell (one professor actually frothed at the mouth as he read from his manuscript on T.S. Eliot).

Another resonant aspect of Walsh’s analysis is his comparison of the methods of the professors regarding their students to Satan’s seduction of Eve through flattery in Milton’s retelling of the Genesis story. My copy of *Paradise Lost* is filled with marginal notations in Book II comparing the devils’ debates to those of the critical theorists and some of my own professors. In Hell, the devils “reason’d high”:

Of providence, foreknowledge,
will, and fate,
Fixt fate, free will, foreknowledge
absolute;
And found no end, in wand’ring
mazes lost. (bk. 2, lines 559–
61)

Like the devils, the professors felt themselves capable of perfect knowledge as they “deconstructed” “texts” and chucked tradition, moral absolutes, and even the literal meaning of the author’s words—driving the stake of sexism, racism, or classism through the author’s heart. The immediate result was literary criticism written

in language only others of the deconstructionist clique presumed to understand. The lasting result is the increasing irrelevance of the English department.

Recalling the criticism on Milton I had to read in preparation for writing my thesis, I was hoping for a retort to the womyn's auxiliary of critical theory: the feminists thrown into fainting spells by Milton's line, "He for God, she for the God in him."

Disappointingly, Walsh does not address that issue, and he furthermore fails to present Eve's heroism in being the first to admit her sin, begging for Adam's forgiveness, and thus providing him with the example for repentance before God. (Adam, in Milton's retelling, is to blame as well. Shirking his duties and allowing his superior reason to be overwhelmed by Eve's charms, Adam goes along with her plans to separate, and divide up the work, thus giving Satan the perfect opportunity to catch Eve alone.)

As Walsh tells it, however, what makes the tale a "profoundly and essentially feminist Christian myth," is that "it is Eve who falls, beguiled by the serpent's flattery (in *Paradise Lost*, Adam addresses Eve as 'O fairest of Creation, last and best of all God's works'), but it is Mary [as the second Eve] who confronts the demon and, even in

the midst of her confinement, vanquishes him."

There is no argument with that. But as he continues to discuss "female empowerment," Walsh grasps at references to Wagner, a painting by William Blake, and the movies *Independence Day*—and *Fatal Attraction*. In the last, "female empowerment" comes in the form of a wife shooting her husband's deranged lover:

Female empowerment is a theme that, despite what modern, anti-female "feminists" claim, long ago entered Western storytelling. At the end of *Fatal Attraction*, it is not the Michael Douglas character who finishes off Glenn Close's psycho stalker but his long-suffering wife, who shoots the monster as she tries to resurrect herself from a near drowning in the bathtub. (p. 69)

Then another, literal, monster is put into the category to display "female empowerment": In *Beowulf*, "the truly formidable monster is not Grendel, but Grendel's irate mother." Walsh claims that such "formidable females" give "the lie to one of Critical Theory's most persistent critiques of Western culture, that it demeans women or places them in secondary positions to men." But

this claim is undermined by examples that range from a “psycho stalker”-killer to a murdering monster to the Blessed Virgin.

A portion of the book’s subtitle, *the Subversion of the West*, promises something on the order of another James Burnham work, *Suicide of the West* (1964). But this, too, is a quick romp through history. To illustrate his point about the earlier generations’ understanding that there can be no compromise with evil, Walsh writes that after World War II our military ventures, such as the Korean War, failed and remained “a standoff” because “there have been no bedrock principles at stake.” This ignores the complicated military and political reasons for the standoff (as well as the fact that we managed to keep at least one half of the Korean peninsula free). Worse, Walsh then takes a few political jabs at the two Bush presidents over Iraq.

Alas, *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace* displays some of the same bad traits of cultural studies: the leveling of high and low (as in Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class?*) and sniping at Republicans.

The subject of critical theory deserves fuller and more serious development—chapters devoted to historical events and biographies of individuals, followed by a tracing of the ideas of the Frankfurt scholars on the key intellectual movers of the twentieth century. How often were the Frankfurt scholars cited? How did their ideas evolve into the nonsensical scholarship of postmodernism? What significant events took place in the art world and the academy as a result of their influence?

Such a book needs to be written. Walsh’s book only opens the topic, albeit often with clever barbs thrown at the devil.