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The Demon of Technology: The History of Western Demonology and its role in the contemporary nature-technology debate

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Abstract: Contemporary advanced technology seems to raise new and fundamental questions as it apparently provides a human subject with an infinite range of incoming possibilities. Accordingly, research on the implications of technology is massive and splits into hard critics and faithful supporters. Yet, technological activities

cannot be defined in terms of their products alone. Indeed, every technological behaviour unfolds the very same tension against what would have been *naturally* impossible, in absence of that same behaviour. Thus, the debate on technology appears to be independent from any level of technological sophistication, and so its roots can be traced back in the dawn of Western thought. In this article, I argue that the faithful and sceptic views today at stake on hard-technology can be explained as a revival of the twofold attitude towards demons, developed in the history of Western thought. I show how demons have always embodied the human natural limits and the incomprehensible aspects of reality. Exactly as in the case of demons, hard-technology is now seen as a fearful destroyer of both nature understood as a complex system and human naturalness or as a trustful way to save humanity from decay, which complements what is *naturally imperfect* and, then, perfectible. Yet, none of these irreducible approaches opens a satisfactory path towards the solution of the contemporary issues on technology. On the contrary, by drawing upon ancient Greek neutral demonology the debate on technology may be definitively returned to its teleological and ethical dimension.

Keywords: demons, philosophy, technology, human nature.

Introduction

The adventurous and lucky traveller,¹ who has the chance to join in a Burmese celebration, will often notice floral compositions and fruits all around the sound system. Such colourful adornment is the result of the guests making offerings to *Min Mahagiri*² a ‘Nat’ (i.e. a spirit), patron of technology since, according to the Burmese mythology, in life, he had been the son of a blacksmith and a

¹ The following argumentation has been already shared with an Italian audience in Postiglione, 2019.

² Cf. Bekker, 1988; De Caroli, 2004.

blacksmith himself. Such an extension of the concept of ‘technology’ puts a high-fidelity audio system and the handiwork of a blacksmith on equal footing and is philosophically relevant. Indeed, the worship of *Min Mahagiri* conceives of very sophisticated contemporary technological products as quantitatively (and not qualitatively) different from simpler human artefacts. In other words, it conceives of a silex flaked by *Homo Habilis* two million years ago³ and contemporary artificial intelligences, as occurrences of the same activity, despite being enormously different in terms of complexity.⁴ This attitude seems to be conceivable – at least to a certain extent – as intuitively, every technological behaviour unfolds the very same tension against what would have been *naturally* impossible,⁵ in absence of that same behaviour. In other words, a tension between what would be apparently proper of a human being and the possibility of acquiring new properties through technology. Roughly, if nature is meant to represent a certain set of laws and possibilities, sentences like ‘human beings cannot fly’ and ‘human beings are not supposed to claw’ seem to make sense. Again roughly, a technological behaviour apparently overturns these alleged limits and allows human beings to fly with an aircraft and slash with a knife. Sure enough, evolutionism provided a new framework into which the *nature-technology* tension can be read. Indeed, from an evolutionary standpoint, this tension appears to be weaker than before: every technological behaviour always – and necessarily – discloses nothing but a certain set of skills, acquired during a species’ evolution. Quite fairly, whatever a human being is able to use and produce must be included within his/her behavioural patterns as a species-specific activity, resulting of adaptation. The role played by this evolutionist claim in the *technology-nature* debate is not to be underestimated. Indeed, the tautological assumption, on which contemporary, extreme supporters of hard-technology ground their belief, is ultimately derived from an allegedly evolutionist view: *what can be*

³ To which the birth of technology is conventionally connected.

⁴ And, of course, despite they raise enormously different ethical concerns.

⁵ ‘Naturally’ is used here in a loose sense and it mainly refers to the status quo.

done by a human being falls within the range of human possibilities. When doubts of sort are raised about the most recent technological advancements, they are quite rudely brushed off with this apparently strong argument; in other words, since mankind is able to do (or produce) such things, they pertain to its nature. In this path, the so-called trans-humanist views arose, in the wake of the exploding technological advancement of recent years, raising the bar a bit higher. According to trans-humanism, the contemporary age would be nothing but an intermediary step between an outdated *natural era* and the future and now imminent *conquest of nature* at the hands of mankind. Besides, trans-humanists strive to save humanity from decay, by complementing – through technology – what is *naturally imperfect* and, then, perfectible. According to this view, then, nature would be under attack and bound to perish; namely, technology would be supposed to overcome nature.

The idea that human nature changes in accordance with – and is influenced by – technology is somewhat attractive. Yet, even in a future scenario in which mankind will actually be able to bend nature to its purposes, the most relevant questions about human identity will perhaps remain unaffected. As the trans-humanist avoids the impasse of defining human nature, by relying on the above mentioned tautology, a contemporary naturalist⁶ holds that the rising technological sophistication, beyond certain limits and possibilities, would endanger both nature understood as a complex system and human naturalness. According to this latter view,⁷ it is nature itself that already provides reasonable limits within which ‘good technology’ must be kept, so to prevent an unnatural technological decline.

⁶ ‘Naturalist’ is here used in reference to those who believe in the relevance of nature, as it is experienced. A position somewhat connected with an ethical/religious afflatus.

⁷ Net of several sub-distinctions, it seems possible to broadly summarise the approaches to the problem of the *technology-nature* relation, into these two categories.

Once put in these terms, it appears to be clear how the debate on the relation between human thought, nature, and technology grounds its roots in ancient sources or, even before, in the dawn of Western thought. The myth of Prometheus,⁸ who defies the gods by stealing fire and giving it to humanity as civilisation, is paradigmatic in this respect. Is Prometheus exceeding the boundaries of what was then supposed to be natural for human beings, in accordance with the divine creative scheme of the Greek gods? Is he a sacrilegious titan who carries out a hubristic⁹ action? Or, on the other way around, he is a humanist hero, integrating human nature with a new power (i.e. human being = subject capable to deal with fire, since now on)? Another example: in the history of Western culture, Faust's deal with the devil plays a role of paramount importance¹⁰ as a reflection of the human intimate and ancestral aspiration to resist the human finiteness (and death) and of the human vain attempt to rise above nature. I argue that similar deals with the forces of evil, alchemic experimentations, inventions, hubristic actions etc. represent – in some sense – nothing but previous attempts to address exactly the same concerns that contemporary supporters of advanced technology try to face: all of them have always been means of overcoming the limits of nature. Intriguingly, traces of such Prometheic attempts can be found in contemporary society as well as in the Bible and in the Neo-platonic occultism, to name but a few. The human intimate desire to overcome nature has frequently been summarised by demonic entities, who promise to free mankind from the bounds of nature. In opposition, another tradition developed around the same attitude of the contemporary naturalist (who is sceptic against technology) and that has been nourished by the influence of Christianity during the Middle Age. As nature is perfect and not perfectible – or, it is perfectible only to a certain extent – and it is

⁸ Cf. West, 1966; West, 1978. Cf. also Hansen, 2005; Kerényi, 1997.

⁹ From the Ancient Greek term ὑβρις (i.e. 'exaggerated pride or self-confidence' <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hubris>), often used in reference to ambition resulting in defiance of norms and gods.

¹⁰ Further insights on this theme are provided below in the text, along with the bibliographical references.

often the result of a divine project; within this tradition, all demonic figures – being a representation of the doubts and dissatisfactions about the limits of human nature – were feared or (later on) debased and mocked.¹¹ In accordance with the contemporary adversary of hard technology, this tradition conceives of all attempts to exceed nature as destined for failure – both actual failure or leading to ethical decay – while only the faith in a hereafter can be considered as an actual way to escape the laws of nature.¹²

This is enough, to state that the debate on technology ultimately, appears to be a version of the clash between a strongly humanist idea of the world and the spiritual need to find a satisfactory answer to the great questions about human nature and life. In this light, the debate on technology ends up as an analysis on the human condition, spirituality and possibilities. Technology promises to overcome nature for the human sake. The tension between those who support hard technology and those who try to resist its temptation (so to preserve nature) is nothing but a re-presentation of the two main attitudes held towards past demons. In this sense, technology represents one more attempt to rationalise and command what is incomprehensible or uncontrolled in nature; in other words, technology appears to be the demon of contemporary age. It is worth say a few world, then, about the long history of this unsolvable tension between the strive to understand and need to believe.

¹¹ In the *commedia dell'arte*, the emergence of masks such as the French Harlequin and Scaramouche as well as the Italian Pulcinella, all possessing demonic facial traits, represents this tendency. Cf. Lima, 2005; Mercey, 1840; Baldi, 1966.

¹² A more recent and laic version of this view holds that, given the appropriateness and perfection of the allegedly natural status quo, there is simply no need to overcome such limits.

The Role of Demons at the Origins of Western Thought

The English term *demon*, as well as its counterpart in numerous other European (and non-European) languages¹³ derives from the Greek word δαίμων. Such a persistent presence testifies the relevance of the concept of δαίμων within the history of Western thought. In the Ancient Greek culture, this term had a neutral connotation,¹⁴ referring to a variety of super-human entities – whether they were good or evil. Such a view seems to provide a different perspective from which the contemporary debates on technology may be seen under a new and diriment light. To it, then, is worth dedicating some attention, after a quick glance at the historical dimension of the role of demons in Western thought, and its unexpected connection with many of the contemporary concerns about technology. A history that may well be longer and more relevant than usually expected.

When early Christians started using the term ‘demon’ in a negative nuance, making reference to all *unintelligible* and *untrustworthy pagan deities* they were doing nothing new,¹⁵ Indeed, apart from the Greek intellectual parenthesis, super-human demonic entities have often been represented as a synthesis of all the unintelligible aspects of nature, considered as extraneous to the gods and hence, falling outside the range of possibilities ascribed to mankind – and so again, as *exceeding the divine order of nature* (which is intelligible, instead).

When it comes to prehistoric times, it is not always easy to distinguish demonic entities from gods. Palaeolithic art unfolds a

¹³ German, Turkish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Euskara (and others) all have *daimon*, similarly, Italian has *demone*; Spanish has *demonio*; Portuguese has *demônio*; French has *démon* etc.

¹⁴ Cf. Liddell & Scott, 1996; Morwood & Taylor, 2002.

¹⁵ Emphasising the unreliability of non-Cristian gods and deities, early Christians also used the term Διάβολος (i.e. *he who divides/calumniates*) in reference to the incarnation of evil.

number of ambiguous figures that can be seen as demons. In Europe, the most important examples of figures as such are represented by the so-called ‘Sorcerer’ at Trois Frères (in Ariège, France) and the anthropomorphic, bird-headed figure found in the cave of Lescaux (France). However, an interesting insight is provided by the North-American cosmogonic myths¹⁶ according to which some entities, aiming to *ruin the perfection of creation, introduced death into it*. Intuitively, as a consequence of their action, these demons are indirectly responsible for the emergence of *human doubts about life, and the (from now on) finite order of nature and so, of the consequent human attempts to overcome natural laws*.



Figure 1: Painted and engraved figure of the Sorcerer (source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sorcerer-prehistoric-art-figure>)

Though not divine, such demonic entities were supposed to be somehow familiar with proper divinities, so to ideally balance the power of benevolent gods, by representing the ancestral experience

¹⁶ Cf. Hultkrantz, 1981.

of the problematic aspects of reality. As I said, demonic figures of this sort summarise what is unpredictable in nature and extraneous to human understanding. This sense of uncertainty seems to share some common traits with the feelings at the base of today's human technological behaviours. Indeed, once mankind starts reasoning about this sense of uncertainty, only two options seem to remain open: mankind feels constrained to obey to the laws of nature – even when they are incomprehensible – or attempts to resist them. Scrambling the perfect natural balance was not a feature ascribed to demons in the North-American cosmology alone. Indeed, the same applies to the majority of ancient religions. The ‘seven evil entities’ (i.e. *udug* or *utukku*)¹⁷ mentioned by the Mesopotamian magical texts are responsible for the emergence of human diseases.¹⁸ As well as the *udug*, Ancient Egyptian demons possess animal and horrific features and are clearly distinguished from the gods who occupy their own realm (the *duat*).¹⁹ As an example, the figure of ‘*Ammit*’ (*m-mwt* i.e. “devourer of the dead”) is a part lion, part hippopotami and part crocodile entity supposed to devour those who are judged guilty in the afterlife. Again, *Ammit* testimonies the idealisation of death as a terrible and incomprehensible mystery, completely extraneous to nature and derived from the ancestral and prehistoric myths of the demonic introduction of death into the divine creation.

¹⁷ Drawnel, 2014.

¹⁸ Here again, in facing diseases, mankind was forced to bend nature to its purposes by means of pharmaceutical technology and knowledge or obey to natural laws.

¹⁹ Hart, 2005.



Figure 2: *Ammit* – Detail of the 'Book of the Dead' – *Papyrus of Ani* 1250BC (circa). The British Museum, London, UK.

Relevant demonic figures are also found within the Islamic,²⁰ Chinese²¹ and Zoroastrian mythologies.²² Yet, it is in the tradition of Manichaeism that the representation of demons moved a number of further steps and consolidated its (quite) hidden connection with the human attitude towards technology. Over time, indeed, the focus of human reflection was slightly switching from the mere divine dimension to a more critical sense of self-reflection about the role ascribed to mankind in the sketch of nature. As a result, Manichaeism summarised human vices and sins into a whole chaotic and uncontrolled sense of rebellion against the calmness and perfection of nature. Demonic figures do not represent anymore, according to Manichaeism, what falls beyond the limits of nature but rather what

²⁰ Lange, 2015; El-Zein, 2009.

²¹ Yang *et al.*, 2005.

²² Interestingly, in certain Zoroastrian texts (i.e. the *yasht*) demons are named *Asura* and they entertain a fierce rivalry with the benevolent god. Differently, in the *Gatha* both a benevolent and a terrific demon are represented. The latter, known as *Ahra Manyu* (or later, *Ahriman*) is the terrific counterpart of the supreme god *Ahura Mazda*; yet given its clear inferiority, it is harmoniously comprehended into the Zoroastrian universe. Cf. Nigosian, 1993.

we experience *inside nature* and still we are not able to understand. A whole portion of the human experience was so deemed as counter-natural or evil and, on this presupposition, the rise of the well-known anti-god²³ of Manichaeism took place.

On the contrary, Hebraism never makes mention to an incarnation of evil into a real entity, on a par with and opposed to god, and all evil figures are always represented as inferior to god. The *Ancient Testament* contains several references to demonic and/or malefic figures. Some of them possess animal or terrific traits, as the so-called monsters of the liquid element (such as the Leviathan) and the monsters of desert;²⁴ while all of them depend on the major evil force of death (named as בְּלִיַּעַל *Belial* or אַבְדֹּן *Abaddon*). Yet, drawing upon Manichaeism, fallen angels who stood against god play a crucial role in the Bible's demonology. It is Satan (from the Hebrew שָׂטָן = accuser/adversary), who "introduced" death into the world",²⁵ and, most importantly, it is to Satan that *god assigned the role of investigator*.²⁶ Satan asks, provokes and has a skeptic attitude towards god and mankind. Once again in this longstanding history, the king of demons represents a *personification of doubts about nature*, here described in terms of god's will. Later on, scholastics attempted to systematise a Christian demonology. Manichaeism, and its idea of the evil as a counterpart of god, along with the teachings of Origen of Alexandria,²⁷ were condemned respectively in 561 (First Council of Braga) and 553 (Second Council of Constantinople). Christian theologians categorised the ancestral sense of uncertainty and doubts about nature and life and put it down as one of the so-called 'truths of faith': Satan and his demons tempt mankind, as the snake tempted Adam. A temptation which seems to be directed

²³ The *King of Shadows* presented into the tradition of Manichaeism constituted the roots of the later christian conception of devil, and relates to *Ahriman* into the Zoroastrian tradition and the primordial demon *Iblis as Qadim* in the islamic world.

²⁴ Among others, cf. Jer. 50:39 on the fall of Babilonia; Isa. 23:13 on the fall of Nineveh; Isa. 34: on the fall of Edom.

²⁵ Wisd. of Sol. 2:24.

²⁶ Job 1.

²⁷ Who put forth the idea of the possibility of Satan's redemption.

towards the unknown; a temptation that relies on the belief that mankind shares a sense of dissatisfaction in respect to the human condition. In other words, the devil appears to represent the same prometheic tension who put our technological capacity and hopes a step forward.

Preserving Nature or Trusting the Demon?

The idea of devil and demons as rebels against god could be interpreted as a representation of the human rebellion against the limits of nature. This issue lies at the very core of the history of Western thought and, as a result, it has given rise to an enormous philosophical and literary debate, which unfolds around two main topics, which may well constitute a paradigmatic representation of the contemporary approaches to the problem of technology: the deal with the devil and the diabolic deception.

The theme of diabolic deception is always developed, within the philosophical and literary Western tradition, as a fight against the devil. Of course human beings have first-hand experience of their finitude and share a sense of anxiety in respect to the incomprehensible aspects of life. Yet, what the demon has to offer to them is not always to tempt them, in this case; it is not worth the risk of moving against nature. In this tradition, diabolic deceptions were often described as focusing on the senses, as a way to corrupt the soul. The faithful Christian – who fights to resist against the devil’s temptations and fake promises – seems to have much in common with the contemporary naturalist who tries to preserve nature by the treats of wicked technology. Similarly, indeed, our controversial technological products – artificial intelligence, cloning, hybridisation etc. – tempt mankind with the expectation of future beneficial outcomes. Once again, a tension emerges, between the strive to dare believing the promises of technology and their rejection, grounded on the opposite belief that technology hides pitfalls, that would potentially endanger the whole system of nature. The figure of the demon looking for corruption and physical/moral violence and who

attempts to seduce men to sin, is consequently described as possessing horrific features and finds large room within medieval literature.



Figure 3: "The Devil Presenting St Augustin with the Book of Vices," c1455-1498, by Michael Pacher. Here the devil is nude, with a face for a butt.
Photo: Ann Ronan Pictures/Print Collector/Getty Images

Interesting examples of such *topos*²⁸ are *De Babilonia Civitate Infernali* by Fr. Giacomino da Verona²⁹ along with the works of

²⁸ In this path the work of Dante Alighieri could also be placed. However, the demonic figures included in his *Divina Commedia* are meaningfully allegoric and encompass this theme, but not limit their function to it.

²⁹ 1250 ca. Cf. Contini, 1970. p. 134; De Sanctis, 1940. p. 73-78, 133-145, 197-203, 262-267, 321-332.

Domenico Cavalca³⁰ and Jacopo Passavanti.³¹ Later on, however, the submissive approach to the fight against the devil was increasingly substituted by a desecrating taste, according to which the devil's attempts to deceive are often devoid of any tragical tension. Italian works such as Boccaccio's novel³² of *Nastagio degli Onesti* and Machiavelli's *Belfagor Arcidiavolo*³³ as well as Spanish works such as *El Mágico Prodigioso* (i.e. *The Mighty Magician*, 1673) by Pedro Calderón de la Barca³⁴ and Mira de Amescua's *El Esclavo del demonio*³⁵ all go in this very same direction.

However, the other theme – referring to the *devil offering science, knowledge, power and/or money* through deals – is even more relevant for my purposes here. Indeed, the description of the devil, as possessing intellectual features, overcomes the medieval image of the fight against the devil. Over time, with the advent of renaissance and post-renaissance, Western thought was stimulated by a renewed idea of free scientific research and the devil was increasingly described as an allied of mankind. In this fervent atmosphere, the diabolic temptation – or, to fulfil the parallelism here presented, the need to overcome nature – could not be focused anymore on the irrationality of the senses. Rather, it aimed at the rational thought of mankind: it now was a temptation of an *intellectual kind*. For this reason, the devil has no need to deceive or frighten. He is now described as possessing human features, appearing to human beings with no disguise. Accepting the intellectual offer of the devil is a free choice of the modern man, well

³⁰ Cavalca, 1474. Cf. Petrocchi, 1967; Getto, 1967, p. 14, 71, 82, 88; Foster, 1969.

³¹ Passavanti, 1495. Cf. Aurigemma, 1957.

³² Day 5, Eighth novel. Boccaccio, 2003. Cf. also Ginzburg, 1980.

³³ Retrieved online at http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume_4/t96.pdf. Cf. also Hoenselaars, 1998. Intriguingly, Machiavelli's *Belfagor*, the devil who comes to earth in order to find a wife, influenced John Wilson's *Belphegor, or, The marriage of the Devil* from 1630 (cf. Wilson, 1691).

³⁴ *El mágico prodigioso* is included in Menéndez Pelayo, 1881.

³⁵ Mira de Amescua, 2004.

aware of what is at stake, in such a deal: namely, his eternal anxiety towards the boundaries of nature.



Figure 4: Scene from 'Faust' by Charles Gounod (1818-1893). Photo: Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis via Getty Image

The theme of the pact with the devil originates in the legend of Theophilus of Adana³⁶ – a cleric in the sixth century Church – who is said to have resorted to a deal with the devil, when removed from his occupation as a major-domo for the bishop of Adana in Cilicia. Notably, the devil demanded his soul and apostasy in exchange for power, money and his resumption. However, according to the myth, after seven years of dissoluteness, Theophilus repented and broke his deal through prayer. Since XV century onwards, this traditional thematic slightly modifies, following the diffusion of the Arabic and judaic mystic, the resurrection of Neo-platonism in opposition to the scholastic tradition, the new geographical discoveries and a new positivist and scientific awareness (which brought a renewed interest for occultist sciences). Medieval reports of Theophilus's encounter with the devil, once translated, became widespread in Germany,

³⁶ Root, 2017.

France, Spain and all around Europe and integrated the rising European literature on alchemy and magical practices (examples of which, range from *The Torchbearer* by Giordano Bruno³⁷ to Della Porta, Shakespeare, Marlowe and other Elizabethan poets' works). In Germany³⁸ Trithemius, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Reuchlin all testimony the growing interest towards occultism, which was towed by the idea of the *power of mankind and human reason over the world*. Reality has to be studied in all its aspects in order to be dominated³⁹ and this feeling connotes Satàn with an increasingly influent *prometheic* element and contributes to make of the devil the antithesis of god, often described as a liberator, as a *symbol of the human rebellion against the limits of nature*.

Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*⁴⁰ (1483) already describes the devil as an entity who is able to discuss philosophy and science; namely, as a *symbol of the travelling of human knowledge around the unexplored and forbidden areas of nature*.⁴¹ The costs of such an enterprise are analysed in Giambattista Marino's *La strage degli innocenti* (1632)⁴² and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).⁴³ However, it is trough the later works of William Blake and George Gordon Byron⁴⁴ that such

³⁷ Cf. Gatti, 2011. p. 161-171.

³⁸ For all the authors here mentioned, please, cf. Brann, 2006. p. 1135-1139.

³⁹ In the XVI century, with the advent of religious disunity and the affirmation of the heliocentric system, this renewed faith into reason stumbled and the sense of precariousness and smallness of the man in comparison with a *universe governed by extraneous and hostile laws* took over. In the paradigmatic and above mentioned figure of Faust, the magician who makes a deal with the devil and gives away his soul in order to gain super-natural powers, the spirit of the Lutheran reformation shaped the exemplar myth of the fake saviour, rebel against god, eager to know and dominate nature more than is proper to humans, a feeling similar in every respect to the proudness which moved Adam to sin.

⁴⁰ Pulci, 1998.

⁴¹ Cf. Brand & Pertile, 1999. A similar reading perhaps applies to Pluto as described in *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581) by Torquato Tasso (available at <http://mcllibrary.org/Tasso/>).

⁴² Marino, 1967.

⁴³ Milton, 2008.

⁴⁴ See especially Byron's *Cain* in which Lucifer, after his rebellion to god to help mankind, is a titan surrounded with tenebrous beauty (Byron, 1986). Baudelaire

perspective on the devil took its climax. Paradigmatically, indeed, in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*⁴⁵ (1793), Satàn is presented as a *creative principle* able to deliver mankind with knowledge and inspiration, against religion and ethical dogmas. Analogously,⁴⁶ the Lucifer presented in *Lucifero* by Mario Rapisardi (1877)⁴⁷ will end up triumphing over god *freeing mankind from any dogmatic vines with the light of science and thought*. In such longstanding intellectualistic path and drawing upon the scrappy life of an actual doctor,⁴⁸ the theme of the pact with the devil earlier made by Theophilus, emerges as the core of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*.⁴⁹ Here the help of the devil is sought by Faust in response to his anxiety of *conquering the realm of nature and acquiring – magical – omnipotence*. Intriguingly, then, a very similar intention seems to stand at the roots of the contemporary arguments supporting hard technological experimentation and, Elizabethan works as Marlowe's *Faustus* or *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* by Robert Greene⁵⁰ (1590 ca.). Over the years, the representation of Faust became more and more complex and controversial, as the relationship between human possibilities and the order of nature was changing under the blows of a growing science.⁵¹ If the figure of Faust can be a paradigmatic representation of the *technology-nature* tension, its subsequent influence on Western thought is well

also describes his Lucifer as the most beautiful angel in *Les Litanies de Satan* included in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (from 1857; cf. Baudelaire, 1975).

⁴⁵ Blake, 1975.

⁴⁶ A coeval example of variation on this theme is is represented by Victor Hugo's poem *La Fin de Satan* (1886; cf. 2013).

⁴⁷ Rapisardi, 1877.

⁴⁸ Cf. Baron, 1978; Ruickbie, 2009.

⁴⁹ Marlowe, 2007; 1962.

⁵⁰ Greene, 1927. Cf. also Weld, 1975, p. 136-53.

⁵¹ The spirit of the reformation, which had partially towed the rise of a humanist atmosphere of scientific research and contributed to push back the Middle Age, increasingly represented Faust as Reform and humanism – united against the middle age – were now on antithetic position: Faust = popular reprisal of the reformed people against humanists.

expressed by the enormous number of works referring to it. Goethe's *Faust*,⁵² in which the devil (here named as Mephistopheles) is presented as *a clever, sharp thinker, who knows a lot about real life and possesses a rationality not different from that of human beings*, is only the cornerstone of a much wider intellectual tradition. Among others,⁵³ over the later centuries, Aleksandr Pûskin confronted himself with the figure of Faust,⁵⁴ Nikolaus Lenau dedicated a poem to him⁵⁵ and Paul Valéry⁵⁶ used the figure of Faust to reflect on the burden of possessing knowledge. Clearly, it is in the same path that Thomas Mann's devil (in his *Doctor Faustus – 1947*) becomes a refined and cultured conversationalist, able to lead Adrian Leverkühn to the accomplishment of its (*unnaturally?*) perfect music and to the insanity connected to it.

Rediscovering Demons' Neutrality

As the evolution of evil figures in the history of Western thought testimony, the concerns about the *technology-nature* relationship have always accompanied our reflections about the human condition. Hence, as the current debate on the issue is often misled by statements of principle, the idea that argumentations and works carried out from past perspectives could be useful for our needs, is not farfetched. Yet, as the very same evolution of the Western demonology show, such a great intellectual effort did not pay back in

⁵² Goethe, 2014.

⁵³ The list of works dedicated to or including the figure of Faust is extremely long and cannot be exhaustively addressed in this context. Therefore, only a representative selection of works is here presented. Such a list includes Friedrich Müller' *Faust Leben Dramatisiert* from 1778 (Müller, 2013); Friedrich Klingler, whose *Faust's Leben, Thaten, und Höllenfahrt* from 1791 (Klinger, 1864) describes the devil as the revealer of the actual pittance of the human condition; Adelbert von Chamisso's *Faust, Ein Versuch* from 1804 (Von Chamisso, 2017); Christian Grabbe's *Don Juan und Faust* from 1829 (Grabbe, 1986); Heinrich Heine's *Der Doktor Faust: Ein Tanzpoem* from 1851 (Heine, 1998).

⁵⁴ Cf. Meynieux, 1968, p. 95-107.

⁵⁵ Lenau, 2017.

⁵⁶ Valéry, 1967.

terms of a renewal of approaches to the problem of technology. Whatever implication the latest achievements of contemporary technology may carry out, indeed, frequently the debate still polarises on the idea of nature as something to be preserved or overcome. As a paradigmatic example, contemporary views will be perhaps similar to those given – among the many – by Giosuè Carducci and Anatole France. On the one hand, in his *Hymn to Satan*⁵⁷ (1863) Carducci seems to give voice to the contemporary supporter of technological progress. The devil is here represented as a strenuous *rebel against any dogmatism and any spiritual and political construction; also, Satan is symbol of the 'forza vindice della ragione'*⁵⁸ which will lead mankind to unpredictable lands, through the progress, of science and technology. On the other hand, it is Anatole France who – perhaps unwittingly – gives voice to those who are skeptic about unlimited technological experimentations. Indeed, in his *La révolte des Anges* (1914) Lucifer, far from the dedication of Prometheus, is resigned and refuse to fight against god and the natural order of reality with a sense of melancholy and sagacious irony. Again, when reasoning about human possibilities, as technology imposes, only two options seem to be open. On the one hand, the prometheic conception of demons stands. In opposition, the temptation to exceed our naturalness is judged as wrong or even *unnatural*. In a religious, metaphysical or political framework, exploring the longstanding debate on human limits and possibilities may well serve as a mere benchmark to back one's ideas about technology and human nature. These two attitudes both reflect an intrinsic contradiction that would hardly lead to a satisfactory answer to the problem of technology. Of course, death is a dreadful affair for all of us. Yet, the idea of possessing a technological device that could lead to eternity appears to be puzzling – if not awful – as well. In front of the paradox of life and death, the risk of being driven by any principle – in one sense or another – is high. Likely, this would lead us to split once again between those who trust the “demonic” device and challenge death,

⁵⁷ Carducci, 2017.

⁵⁸ The vengeful power of reason.

and those who refuse eternity, in name of naturalness. However, as briefly sketched above, the ancient Greek conception of δαίμων may well offer an opportunity to escape the deadlock.

Ancient Greek demonology is extremely interesting, especially because the Greek religion managed to comprehend and contain the idea of death within the scheme of divine creation. Broadly, a δαίμων represented something in the middle between mankind and gods. Death was included and understood as pertaining to nature, rather than considered as an unsolvable mystery, somewhat introduced into it. As a result, figures connected with death do not necessarily possess horrific facial traits – as in the case of Thanatos and Hypnos. Horrific entities (such as the Herinnis, the Gorgon and the Lernean Hydra etc.) instead, all derived from past religious elements representing an ancestral religiosity, no longer understood and now inaccessible. Such entities do not seem to represent the incarnation of evil, but merely of unknown aspects of reality which are terrible only in so far mankind is *guilty of not getting to know and understand them*. Notably, in *The Iliad*⁵⁹ Homer uses both θεοί (i.e. gods) and δαίμονες (i.e. demons) as two different terms – that should be consequently distinct in meaning. Yet, their usage often overlaps – and so, the two terms appear to be somehow connected. Later on, an intriguing interpretation of the term ‘demon’ is provided by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*.⁶⁰ Here, Socrates confesses to have a demon – a sort of divine entity – helping him taking right decisions.⁶¹ Far from being an ethereal divinity, such demonic entity is presented as so close to human thought, that it seems to represent the true nature of self-consciousness.⁶² However, it is in Plato’s *Cratylus* that the word δαίμων unfolds its relevance in any dispute about technology. Indeed, at *Cratylus 398b* δαίμων is compared to δαήμων (i.e. who knows/ is

⁵⁹ Cf. as an example, Hom. *Il.* 1.222: ἦ δ’ Οὐλύμπον δὲ βεβήκει δώματ’ ἐς αἰγιόχοιο Διὸς μετὰ δαίμονας ἄλλους.

⁶⁰ Pl. *Ap.* 31c-d, 40a.

⁶¹ Cf. a very similar demonic figure, intimately close to the human affairs, survived within the exoteric tradition until Apuleius’ *De Deo*.

⁶² De Bernardi, 1992.

wise).⁶³ Fascinatingly, a demon – so understood – is not only connected with doubts and dissatisfactions about the extant laws of nature but would also be connected with the strive for research and understanding. In the Greek world, *the demon comes from the inner sphere of men*, being ignorant and – then – guilty.

Once considered in this was – as a *neutral demon* – technology in itself ceases to be an asset towards the victory over nature. Similarly it ceases to be the instrument with which mankind is condemning itself to decay. On the contrary, as within the ancient Greek mythology the conception of δαίμων depends on human guilt and virtue, similarly the debate on technology should inherently lie within the human domain. In the endless strive to understand the mysteries of nature and master its laws, the problem of technology – so interpreted – does not rest on its relationship with nature (into which technology appears to be conceivably included). Rather, those who deal with incoming powers achievable through technological activity appear to be much concerned with the understanding of the *telos* of a good action, as Prometheus did in the mist of time.

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⁶³ Cf. also Liddell & Scott, 1996; Morwood & Taylor, 2002.

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