

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY, in his end acknowledgements to *The Exorcist*, thanks the Jesuits for teaching him how to think. And in a recent interview (*New York Times*, August 15) he states that the primary purpose of his coming film from his book is "to persuade those who do not believe that there is a case to be made for the supernatural and to offer the possibility that there is a supernatural force of evil in the universe whose game plan is to convince us that he does not exist." Film director William Friedkin, although he believes in "something unknowable," is not interested in theology, but simply in the film's visual impact on its customers—as his "The French Connection" testifies. But Blatty claims he is attached to the church as to a woman by whom he has had a child (*Times*, August 27). With these statements in mind, it seems time to take a close look at *The Exorcist*, novel and film-to-be, to see where Blatty's "thinking" would lead us.

I am afraid that Georgetown graduate Blatty may have set out to write a part commercial gimmick-shocker, part problem-of-evil think-piece, and—with the encouragement of good priest friends—part old-fashioned Christian apologetic. But he has brought forth—along with a commercial success—a piece of Catholic nostalgia of more service to the cause of superstition than to true religion.

The story takes place in the present. The campuses are in turmoil, astronauts are on their way to the moon and hippies prowl Georgetown's Wisconsin Avenue. But the church he portays is the church of the 1940s, with the preoccupations and thought patterns of the pre-Conciliar culture. Blatty's 1970 priests still say Mass in Latin, chat clerical banter at Georgetown cocktail parties, and surprise otherwise sophisticated people when they wear informal clothes.

His line of reasoning in favor of diabolical possession is almost pre-Enlightenment: that bizarre phenomena which, for us, have no known explanation, must have a "supernatu-

## EXORCISING THE EXORCIST RAYMOND A. SCHROTH

**Part commercial gimmick-shocker,  
part problem of evil think-piece,  
part old-fashioned Christian apologetic**



ral" explanation. It resembles the "God-of-the-gaps" proofs for the existence of God, that he must be, in some way, the Answer to any number of mysteries we do not understand—rather than the Lord and Father revealed to us in the self-emptying love of Jesus.

Blatty's implication that those who choose not to believe in Satan (and Blatty's story) have fallen for his game plan of convincing us that he does not exist has the same logic as the argument during the Red scare of the 1950s that the first thing a real Communist learns is to deny that he is a Communist. Besides, if Blatty's devil really wanted to lay low the last thing he should do is take over the daughter of a beautiful movie star making a film on location surrounded by Georgetown Jesuits.

Consider the plot, allegedly based on a similar case in Washington in the 1940s. Regan (Blatty makes several references to *King Lear*), the twelve-year-old daughter of the divorced star, begins to act strangely—urinating on a rug at a party, shouting obscenities, etc. at the same time that nearby Holy Trinity Church has been desecrated—the Blessed Virgin statue has been painted like a whore, the Latin altar card has been rewritten into a Latin lesbian joke!

Regan's condition gets worse and the secular scientists exhaust themselves diagnosing her nervous disorders and confidently prescribing cures that do not cure. A British movie director friend of her mother dies in a drunken fall; or did Regan, with her new Satanic strength, break his neck

and heave him out her bedroom window?

Regan's protectors strap her to her bed where she fouls the room, and screams her obscenities in many voices and strange languages; and her atheistic, but desperate, mother turns for help to Damien Karras, the Jesuit psychiatrist who has problems of his own. Karras is torn with guilt over neglecting his mother, and he also doubts the real presence of Jesus in the host at Mass.

The mother reasons that if her daughter simply imagines she is possessed because she may have read a book on witchcraft, then perhaps a mock rite of exorcism will release her. But eventually the once skeptical rationalist Karras becomes convinced by his conversations with the "demon" that a distinct howling monster really exists within the child. Old Father Merrin, a Jesuit paleontologist obviously patterned on Teilhard de Chardin, is brought in, with Karras' assistance, to perform the exorcism.

In a concluding scene that is both horrifying in its description of the girl's cursing and vomiting green on a flying, stinking bed, but disgusting in its cheap sensationalism, one priest keeps pumping her with librium while the other intones the exorcism prayers. When the older priest drops dead of a heart attack Karras, in a burst of pious *machismo*, challenges the demon to take *him* on—then crashes out the window to his death!

Did the emotionally exhausted priest-psychiatrist—like Regan, a split personality—simply crack under the weight of his and the little girl's

troubles and attempt to resolve his own tensions in a sacrificial suicide? Or did an objectively existing personal evil force actually abandon one victim for another, like the devils in Mark's gospel who, at Jesus' command, leave their victim for a herd of pigs that plunge off a cliff? Does Blatty care? Is he like Regan's movie mother who, when it is all over, still can't believe in God but can believe in the devil? Or, like some products of "Jesuit" education who have used their years on the debating teams to sharpen their wits rather than their convictions, does he simply enjoy playing with either possibility? And what point of view will the movie take? At this point I expect that, like "Patton," "Bullitt," and "The French Connection," it will have it both ways.

How unlike Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* which, through its intricacy, hints of sexuality, subtle suggestions, and clues that only reveal themselves after several readings, draws us more and more deeply into its mystery and the ambiguous relationship between the appearance of innocence and the reality of evil. And how unlike other genres—the tales of Faust, Frankenstein and Dracula—that use the *myths* of Satan, Prometheus and vampires to draw our attention to larger themes—man's lust and pride and the power of evil (like Original Sin) to perpetuate itself throughout generations.

As the book develops it is interesting that Evil personified first manifests itself in terms of the clerical, celibate, and most narrowly religious cultural conceptions of what is "dirty" and bad—defecation, sex talk and the violations of "sacred" objects. Blatty has prefaced his book with one page that mentions Dachau, Communist torture and the Mafia, as if these were evidence of Satan's power; but they have no real connection with the rest of the novel. Blatty has chosen to awaken us to the force of evil not

RAYMOND A. SCHROTH, S.J., is assistant editor of *Commonweal* and teaches in the Communications Department at Fordham University.

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through visions of social sin, of poverty, or Hiroshima or Mylai, but through the sufferings of a little girl who—he and his defenders would have us believe—was suffering not through anyone's fault nor through the ravages of mental illness but simply because an evil spirit had gotten into her.

Père de Tonquedec, the old Parisian Jesuit, one of the most renowned exorcists of recent times, reportedly told fellow-Jesuits not long before his death that he had *never* encountered an authentic case of diabolical possession; yet Blatty would have us believe that in 1970 a psychiatrist and a world-renowned paleontologist could drive themselves to death encountering

Satan on M Street in Georgetown.

As a result, one of the most remarkable characteristics of Blatty's book is the smallness of his world and the smallness of his questions. If the success of the book has any religious lesson it should be seen as a negative sign, a reminder that when true religion grows cold and remote, when the Gospel is not preached in a direct and human way, and when the church does not understand and confront evil in its social consequences—in war and oppression—people will turn to pseudo-religious substitutes—drugs, apparitions, glossolalia, violent ideologies—that seem to deal with their questions.

*The Exorcist* reader, who has also

stayed up all night with *The Godfather*, now stays up again. He may have begun depressed and confused by the experience of malice and human suffering. As he reads on he becomes as totally absorbed with the alleged symptoms of diabolical possession as he was when he first heard of demons in grammar school—or even college, and as the millions of people who have always been titillated by voodoo, witchcraft, ouija boards, the visions of Fatima, or the Loch Ness monster. He finishes as reassured as any good citizen in seventeenth-century Salem that the ultimate source of evil is not the malice and selfishness of the human will but an Outside Agitator who comes in and takes over.

## BOOKS



### *Trivial prose masquerading as verse*

#### ***The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems***

DIANE WAKOSKI

*Simon and Schuster, \$5.95*

#### ***The East Side Scene: American Poetry, 1960-1965***

ALLEN DE LOACH, Ed.

*Doubleday Anchor, \$2.50*

#### **MARK TAYLOR**

These dreadful books deserve review (if at all) only because two reputable, commercial publishers have seen fit to stamp them with their imprimaturs, a rare blessing for a collection of verse these days, and one which inevitably suggests that there is something new or valuable or important about them, that they show what is going on in poetry now, that they point convincingly to future directions. It is a suggestion that demands refutation, as a service less to truth in the abstract than to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of genuine and

unrecognized poets across the country, ranging from the competent to, who knows, the great, who pursue their craft in the awful loneliness that is the only way, and who must wonder, seeing stuff like this, what chance *they* will ever have with the bookmen. Well, I'm no publisher, I don't know what chance they will have, probably Gresham's law is becoming as applicable here as elsewhere; but it is an utterly mistaken view that the contents of these volumes represent what is decent or exciting in contemporary verse.

The dust jacket on *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems* shows Diane Wakoski standing behind a Yamaha. It's an engaging photograph, but it's one that motorcycle cognoscenti would view with disdain, for the pictured two-stroke street scrambler, unlike a Norton Commando, say, or a Triumph Bonneville, is what dedicated bikers, Wakoski's beloved Hell's Angels, for instance, call a cream puff. The bike shown, in other words, bears roughly the same relationship to a "real" street bike as most of these poems do to real poetry. (As an

image, incidentally, the motorcycle seems to contain for Wakoski about the same raw sexual energy that horses had for most of D. H. Lawrence's heroines, a development that may indicate the validity of Lawrence's worst fears for our age.)

Most of the poems are distinguishable from trivial prose statements only by the typographical conventions that make them *look* like verse. But, here, these conventions are arbitrary: they do not follow from exigencies of meter, meaning, internal consistency, or anything else, but rather from the delusion that the placing of single words or short phrases beneath each other on the page, sometimes making them flush with the left-hand margin and sometimes not, is a condition of poetry. Here, for example, is the beginning of "Indian Giver": "You gave me / this knife / yesterday / an act / of friendship, / because / I gave you / part of my lunch, / so you wouldn't have to eat / in the school cafeteria / and miss the ball game. . . ." And lines from "Letters to Shep": "Seldom have women / with as