God, Man and the Devil in The Talent Scout

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

"In 1961 a very fine little novel by Romain Gary slipped into publication in the United States almost unnoticed by the reviewers. I feel that the few critics, however, that did discuss the book missed its message. Atlantic Monthly's reviewer, for instance, found the theme of the book to be centered in a denial of the existence of God and the devil: any power attributed by man to the supernatural was merely man's Faith in the words "God" and "devil." Following a semantic approach, the Atlantic reviewer went on to discuss the varied meanings that these words may have for each individual man. The central lesson Romain Gary was teaching, concluded the article, was that man --and not any supernatural force--was the real master of his fate. This interpretation of the book would place the author in the same Gnostic tradition as Archibald MacLeish, (J. B.) and Paddy Chayefsky, (Gideon)."

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This prose is available in The Angle: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1962/iss1/4
In 1961 a very fine little novel by Romain Gary slipped into publication in the United States almost unnoticed by the reviewers. I feel that the few critics, however, that did discuss the book missed its message. Atlantic Monthly's reviewer, for instance, found the theme of the book to be centered in a denial of the existence of God and the devil: any power attributed by man to the supernatural was merely man's Faith in the words "God" and "devil." Following a semantic approach, the Atlantic reviewer went on to discuss the varied meanings that these words may have for each individual man. The central lesson Romain Gary was teaching, concluded the article, was that man --and not any supernatural force--was the real master of his fate. This interpretation of the book would place the author in the same Gnostic tradition as Archibald MacLeish, (J. B.) and Paddy Chayefsky, (Gideon).

However, I feel that a subtler interpretation of what is the central emphasis of the novel is valid and plausible. The French title of the book is Le Mangeur des Etoiles (The Eater of Stars). In this title lies an important key to the story. The narrator --a man who reports rather than thinks--makes this reference to the title in Chapter XIX:

There were the twisted shadows of cacti above him, and strange-shaped rocks that sometimes seemed to move and come to life. But this was an illusion, for the earth belonged to man. His friends had often called him "the star eater" (le mangeur des étoiles). It was the name they gave in the tropical valleys of his birth to those who were mastola addicts. It gave them great happiness and permitted them to see God in their visions. But they called him that only jokingly, not because he ate the plant, which was only good enough for old peasants like his mother, but because of the hundreds of stars who had appeared in his night club; it was, they said, as if he was devouring them all, and still looking for more. Everybody needed
magic to stay alive. It just so happened that he needed it more than anyone else.

Jose Almayo determined at an early age that the only way to succeed in this “wicked world” was to be wicked. And if the world were wholly the devil’s, then one should worship him in evil so that one’s soul might be accepted by him. Jose rose to become dictator of a small Latin American nation. However, no matter how evil he became, he never did manage to sell his soul to the devil. He did meet God and the devil at the end of the book — or did he?

As in Dante’s Inferno, Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, or Shakespeare’s Tempest, all the characters in this work, from Almayo’s idealistic American mistress (a scathing caricature of our society’s values) to the diabolical Diaz, may be taken as facets of Almayo’s character. These facets are held up to different lights—natural and unnatural—so that one can really behold them in all their manifold varieties. What one sees is an Indian who was partly led astray and partly chose to go astray. Almayo was led astray by literal moralists who viewed life’s actions oversimply as being either all good or all evil. The either—or approach is exemplified by certain Spanish priests and by a Billy Sunday type of preacher from the United States. He chose to go astray by his own unquestioning acceptance and further perseverance in the belief that the world is evil. He himself is evil and willingly so. No one forced him to be what he had become. He is not stupid — much pain is spent in establishing this fact. His American mistress is mocked at for choosing her shallow alternative to the complex problem of life. Through his mocking of her, Gary is mocking “psychological deterministic” novelists.

With all this said, there still remains the problem of Almayo’s meeting with “Jack” and his sulphur-smelling companion. For many years Almayo has been trying to view the act performed by an entertainer named Jack. Almayo has been viewing one entertainer after another, hoping to find one with supernatural powers. He feels that he will finally be successful when he sees Jack, a mass-hypnotist. Just before his death, Jose
manages to see the performer. However, Jack cannot fool Almayo. Jack and his disreputable companion speak of former and greater days when they could call fire from the heavens and part the seas.

Is the irony of the story that God and the devil are myths? Is this where the emphasis falls? I think rather that Gary, with his paunchy, English, gentleman-Jack type of God and his dull, sulphur-smelling type of devil, is primarily saying that these misconceptions of God and the devil do not exist. Yet man needs a faith. Man must seek something above himself—something befitting his dignity. I do not think that Gary sees this "something" as God in the Catholic sense, because he does not know the concept which Catholic theology has of God. But he is writing in an appeal to man to live up to his potential dignity, and this is no little tribute to pay Gary. He also affirms that man cannot blame evil on forces outside him: man has free choice and is not psychologically or supernaturally determined. Read in this light, The Talent Scout has much to offer the thoughtful reader.