



The earthly hell in the origins of HeavyMetal.

El infierno terrenal en los orígenes del Heavy Metal.

DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.axxv.n79.26a21

Bianca Natascha Pérez González *

University of Guadalajara (MEXICO)

CE: nataschaperez18@gmail.com / ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2281-5409

* Degree in Hispanic Letters and intern of the Master's Degree in Comparative Literatures from the University of Guadalajara. He is currently studying a degree in Anthropology at the University of Guadalajara and teaches Spanish Language and Humanities at the baccalaureate level.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCoercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Received: 27/01/2020

Reviewed: 18/10/2020

Accepted: 11/17/2020

ABSTRACT

Heavy Metal, as a movement of art and social commitment was born as an expression of counterculture in its denial to be part of a society plagued by ethical and moral incongruities, establishing Existentialism as its dominant philosophical foundation.

In the decadent religious context that characterized the twentieth century, the french philosopher Jean- Paul Sartre begets two plays, *No Exit* (1944) and *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951), that will come to lay the foundations of one of the most transcendent hells for contemporary thought: otherness.

In his music, Black Sabbath, as a pioneering group of this musical genre, contains in his lyrics the Sartrean concept of The Otherness as earthly hell. From the symbolic deconstruction of the myth of heaven and hell from the Western Christian tradition, Black Sabbath re-signifies hell to propose a rational explanation of the problems of his time and to make it the metaphor



for the disillusionment and nihilism of a modern Europe, in which mythical icons are being replaced by representations of concrete reality.

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre. Black Sabbath. Otherness. Hell. Myths.

RESUMEN

El Heavy Metal, como movimiento artístico y de compromiso social nace como una expresión de contracultura en su negación por formar parte de una sociedad plagada de incongruencias éticas y morales, estableciendo el Existencialismo como su fundamento filosófico dominante.

En el contexto religioso decadente que caracterizó al siglo XX, Jean – Paul Sartre engendra dos obras teatrales, *A puerta cerrada* y *El diablo y dios*, que vendrán a establecer las bases de uno de los infiernos más trascendentes para el pensamiento contemporáneo: la otredad.

En su música, Black Sabbath, como grupo pionero de este género musical, contiene en sus letras el concepto sartreano de La Otredad como infierno terrenal. A partir de la deconstrucción simbólica del mito del cielo y el infierno de la tradición cristiana occidental, Black Sabbath resemantiza el infierno para proponer una explicación racional a las problemáticas de su época y convertirlo en la metáfora del desencanto y el nihilismo de una Europa moderna, en la que los íconos míticos están siendo reemplazados por representaciones de la realidad concreta.

Palabras Clave: Jean-Paul Sartre. Black Sabbath. Otredad. Infierno. Mitos.

Introduction

The appearance of *The Other* as a literary motif has been a constant, either as an expression of the anguish of the human being before the threat of that which is alien to him – and therefore cannot have control over it – as a means to express the fear of demonic beings and entities that -apparently-



haunt the world of the living or as a revelation of the fear of monsters, ghosts and inner demons, which torment him.

Because of the Western tradition of defining reality from a binary thought, we cannot stop talking about the *we* when we talk about the *self*. For the *self* to define itself, it needs to contrast itself with the *other*, with its alter *ego*: "Otherness... it always complicates the existence of the *self*, so the most appropriate way to talk about it is the *we*. " (Ruiz. 2007, p. 9). This duality is the result of "a society that always looks at itself – narcissistic – [and that] generates the ghost, the unfolding and even invisibility: the total annulment of the individual in society" (Ballesteros, 1998).

Heavy Metal as an artistic and social movement was born as an expression of counterculture in its denial of being part of that otherness of false morality, establishing existentialism as one of its predominant ideological bases. Black Sabbath, as a pioneer group of this musical genre, proposes a deconstruction of the myth of heaven and hell of the Western Christian tradition to contain in its songs the earthly hell of Sartrean.

Wicked world, Luke's Wall, Hand of doom, Solitude and *Into the void* (Black Sabbath, 1971a) are some of the songs of the English band in which Hell ascends to Earth at the moment when otherness is recognized as a reason for suffering. Said in the words of the author: "Hell is the others."

The twentieth century is the century of *hell*, according to George Minois (2005, p.453). Already from the nineteenth century, at the height of Romanticism and under the aesthetic and ideological influence of The Cursed Poets, the foundations on which the Christian hell had been built for almost two millennia begin to falter. Devotees still attended liturgical ceremonies and fulfilled their religious duties, however, they begin to deny the existence of a real, physical underworld with flames and laments. This leads to a total rethinking of the Western European worldview, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, hell begins to multiply until it becomes a hell tailored to each individual. Hell becomes *hell* (Minois, 2005, p.425).

Thus, while the clerics firmly uphold the reality of tangible hell, geographically located in the heart of the earth, to ratify the fear of God through the fear of eternal physical suffering, writers,



philosophers, artists and thinkers paganize the averno and propose new scenarios where to suffer the condemnation of the Last Judgment, spaces not only physical, but also spiritual.

In the decadent religious context that characterized the twentieth century, Jean – Paul Sartre engenders two plays, *Behind Closed Doors* and *The Devil and God*, which will come to lay the foundations of one of the most transcendent hells for contemporary thought: otherness.

If one thing is clear, it is that, from his origin, man has been threatened by the anguish of knowing who he is and if he really is as others see him. The other then becomes its antithesis and enemy, but in its mirror at the same time: the fact that the other knows more about the *self* than the *self*, confers on otherness a certain power over that *self*, whounconsciously or consciously becomes its prisoner and slave. So does Black Sabbath in Luke's *Wall*, explaining that *others* wage war just for fun and treat people like chess pawns.¹

Sartre mentions that being evil implies needing the suffering of others in order to exist (1944, p.21). Therefore, the otherness of which Black Sabbath speaks in the previous fragment is equally evil, since it rejoices in the suffering of others in the face of the war caused by that indeterminate powerful entity, just as it enjoys playing with them and their destiny as chess pieces, a metaphor where man is also objectified.

Black Sabbath makes it clear that "God is dead." It is no longer that supernatural being who possesses the power to kill and judge humanity, now that role is fulfilled by humanity itself, although not everyone confers the power to execute it, but only those whom his own lineage has chosen as leaders: the politician, for example, judges and kills the subordinate man, lower; he has to choose who lives and who dies in *Wicked world*. (Black Sabbath, 1969).²

God is no longer all-powerful, he is now rather a Nietzschean superman, endowed with a power that man himself - similar, but otherness at the same time - bestowed upon him, thus transforming him into executioner and master of the destiny of the earth and its inhabitants, of the will and human freedom as manifested by the Birgminhan gang in a fragment of *Lord of this world*:

¹ "Making war just for fun / treating people just like pawns in chess / wait 'till their judgement day comes..."

² "A politician's job they say is very high / for he has to choose who's got to go and die".



"You made me the creator of the world where you exist / the soul I took from you was not even needed" (Black Sabbath, 1971b).

In addition to power, abuse and wars, simulation transforms otherness into the hell of its fellowmen. In a malicious and perverse reality "the world is such an evil thing" (Black Sabbath, 1969). While some send good wishes to their friends, others count the deaths caused by the hands of man, *explains Wicked world*. God and his counterpart, the Devil, now coexist on earth: "People give good wishes to all their Friends / while people just across the sea is counting the dead" (Black Sabbath, 1969).

A number of cultural dichotomies result from these verses. Good wishes, friends and goodness correspond to a space close to the sender: goodness is *here*; while death, doom and evil are in a distant space, divided by a sea: evil, then, is *there*. Whatever that sea to which it refers, it becomes the metaphor of the border between the alien and the own, the strange and the known, the foreign and the local, where it is precisely the semantic field of the negative that defines that *other over there*, contrary to the *self*, which is described from a semantic field of the positive. Again, evil is recognized in *otherness*, as *the foreign*.

It is remarkable the constant concern for the definition of being from otherness both in the lyrics of Black Sabbath and in the play *Behind Closed Doors*, which reinforces the correlation of the *self* and the *we*, but at the same time generates a reciprocal repulsion provoked by the constant and eternal inquisitive gaze of plurality towards the singularity: "Remember that I am here and that I am looking at you. I will not stop looking at you for a single moment..." (Sartre, 1944, p.28).

In this Sartrean play, Estelle, one of the protagonists of the story, strikes up a conversation with Inés, a character with whom Estelle is trapped in Hell. In this dialogue, Estelle assures that when she does not see herself, when her reflection is absent (in the hell of this work there is no mirror) her existence becomes doubtful, "When I do not see myself, I have to feel myself ... I wonder if I really exist" (1944, p.16).

In the absence of a mirror to recognize herself, the only solution she has to validate her existence is to see her reflection in Agnes' eyes. It is a relationship of identification between the



punished -Estelle- and the punisher -Inés-, who is given the power to make a person exist through the projections in his eyes. It is not possible for them to live together because it is hell for them to understand that they will spend their entire existence together, but neither can they live apart, because it is in the gaze of the other person where they become real, existing beings. As in a game of mirrors, the moment he observes his reflection in the gaze of the other, then he is convinced that he exists and can know himself, but only as the eyes of the other see him.

In *both* BlackSabbath's *Behind Closed Doors* and *Solitude*, the characters manage to open the impassable door of hell to escape it. However, the overwhelming freedom makes the prisoners hesitate:

Inés. -What about you? (To Estelle) So who? Which of the three? The road is free. Who is holding us back? Ah, it's to die of laughter! It turns out that we are inseparable (Sartre, 1944, p.32).

The world is a lonely place, you are alone / [...] you only laughed when I asked you to stay / I have not stopped crying since you left...³ (Black Sabbath, 1971c).

The possibility of freeing oneself from the executioner is tangible, as real as the fear of freedom itself, of emptiness, of uncertainty, of the desert, of the unknown, of otherness, but, above all, of non-transcendence, which makes them desist from leaving and separating from it. When the door is opened, none of the characters try to break through it and break free. In that fragment of *Solitude*, despite the fact that the executioner has abandoned the enunciant, he continues to mourn his absence and feel the loneliness of the world. They exist in his *alter ego* and without them, Nietzsche would say, "the desert grows."

The victims remain at the side of their executioner and mirror, since in them their existence is tangible, visible. In otherness they show themselves and appropriate themselves,

³ "El mundo es un lugar solitario, estás sólo/ [...] tú sólo reíste cuando te pedí que te quedaras / no he parado de llorar desde que te fuiste..."



until they achieve the unfolding of identity in a process of fusion⁴ of beings. There is no physical torture or bodily suffering, yet they are all in hell; they are eternally condemned to unfolding, to be united and at the same time split from their otherness, one being the nemesis of the other: "there is no need for grills, hell is the others" (Sartre, 1944).

What then happens to hell where bodies burn and souls burn? Now it materializes in the War, in the earthly hell that Black Sabbath describes in his song *Hand of doom*: "First it was the bomb, the napalm of Vietnam/ [...] you escape from life, reality is like this." (Black Sabbath, 1970a).⁵

"And god allowed him that War? ... He says that nothing happens without his permission," asks The Woman in *The Devil and God*, to which the baker replies: "Nothing, except for the evil that is born of the perversion of men" (Sartre, 1986, p.21). Black Sabbath also answers that question with the verses of *Lord of this world*: "Your world was made for you by someone above/ but you chose evil ways instead of love." (Black Sabbath, 1971b).⁶

It is not that God has turned the world into a hell, it was man himself in his free will who chose his hell, although in doing so, he also condemns his fellowmen to live it. "I want to choose my own hell," says Inés (Sartre, 1944, p.18), which is why she fears her freedom so much, because she becomes aware that she is free to create a new hell for others. The punishment for this freedom that condemns others to the abyss is the hell of suffering on earth, hopelessness and uncertainty.

The executioner of the executioners is Satan, who ascends to make the Earth his reign, spreading among the spirits hatred towards their fellowmen translated into evil towards the world, which finally sickens those souls of a suffering for which there is no cure or atonement, explains Black

⁴ Elena Otto Cantón, in her article "The theme of the double in William Wilson, by E.A. Poe", explains that there are three procedures from which the unfolding of identity can be reached: the *metamorphosis* of a subject in different forms, the *merger* of two originally distinct individuals into one and the *fission* of a single individual into two personalities. (2005, p.1)

⁵ "First it was the bomb, Vietnam napalm, disillusioning, you push the needle in/ from life you escape, reality's that way"

⁶ "Your world was made for you by someone above / but you chose evil ways instead of love"



Sabbath, "... war pigs crawling / asking for mercy for their sins / Satan, laughing, spreads his wings [...]". (Black Sabbath, 1970b).⁷

Sartre, on the other hand, opens the door to an opportunity for redemption. However, it is the prisoners themselves who reject salvation by renouncing exile and embrace the fate of hellish doom in exchange for arising the certainty of existence that otherness provides them,

INÉS. - Dead! Dead! Dead! Not the knife, not the poison, not the rope. It's already done, do you understand? And we are together forever. (Laughs.)

ESTELLE (laughing). - Forever, my God, how weird! Forever!

GARCIN (laughs looking at both). - Forever! (Sartre, 1944, p.56).

In short, although hell is transported to Earth in the present and to the spiritual plane after death, the symbols of hell are not substantially altered with respect to the traditional Christian conception of hell. The atoning fire, Satan as the lord of darkness, the location of hell on a lower and underground plane, the descent of the damned to hell, the Last Judgment, condemnation, remain as representative symbols of this space of punishment, mainly in the work of Black Sabbath. However, these referents are deconstructed in the structuring of the sacred and profane spaces in Sartre's work, are resignified and adapted to a more tangible hell and are updated to the problems and social requirements of a rational explanation of good and evil, beyond the merely mythical or metaphysical.

The constant between the expression of good and evil in Black Sabbath and Sartre is that both retain the Christian signs and symbols of evil, but resemantized in such a way that they become a metaphor for the disenchantment and nihilism of a Europe of the twentieth century, of modernity, in which the collective imaginary is constituted more by symbols of concrete reality than by intangible mythical icons.

In Sartre's texts we can notice a separation of the canonical worldview from the myth of hell. It deconstructs the Catholic myth to erect a hell tailored to a society immersed in a war context

⁷ "... war pigs crawling/ begging mercy for their sins / Satan, laughing, spread hi swings".



around themes such as alienation, capitalism, destruction, war and the devaluation of the spiritual plane.

Camus's *The Stranger*, the Freudian *It*, the *Umheimlich* of Kafkaesque Man, the Nietzschean Superman, as well as Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Panther*, are nothing more than archetypal representations that allude to the existentialist hell, the echo of which resonates in the songs of Black Sabbath: the hell of having to endure oneself eternally as a split subject, whose condemnation consists in looking for in the other his Platonic "other half" who, nevertheless, becomes his judge and executioner, in his hell and, even so - as in Stockholm syndrome - remains attached to him:

We are victims, I thought, of a double mirage. If we look outside and try to penetrate things, our external world loses in solidity, and ends up dissipating when we come to believe that it does not exist by itself, but by us. But, if convinced of the intimate reality, we look inside, then everything seems to come from outside, and it is our inner world, ourselves, that vanishes. What to do then? (Machado, 2006, p. 274).

References

- Ballesteros, A. (1998) *Narcissus and the Double in Victorian Fantasy Literature*. Cuenca: University of Castilla –La Mancha.
- Black Sabbath (1969) *Wicked world*. On *Black Sabbath* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Black Sabbath (1970a) *Hand of doom*. In *Paranoid* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Black Sabbath (1970b) *Luke's Wall / War pigs*. In *Paranoid* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Black Sabbath (1971a) *Into the void*. In *Master of reality* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Black Sabbath (1971b) *Lord of this world*. In *Master of reality* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Black Sabbath (1971c) *Solitude*. In *Master of reality* [CD]. London: Vertigo Records.
- Machado, A. (2006). *Battlefields*. Spain: Chair
- Minois, G. (2005) *History of Hell*. Barcelona: Paidós.



- Otto, E. (2005) The Theme of the Double in William Wilson by E.A. Poe. In *Show. Journal of Literary Studies*. Obtained from Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero30/wwison.html>.
- Ruiz, J. (2007) "Introduction". In *Alteridad a philosophical journey*. Tlaquepaque: ITESO.
- Sartre, J. (1944) *Behind closed doors* [Huis clos]. Alfonso sastre, translator. [PDF]
- Sartre, J. (1986) *The Devil and God*. Madrid: Alianza Losada.