

# hellmouth

Melanie Jackson

I saw the devil for the first time was when I was 7 years old. I was in the dentists chair for multiple extractions and fillings. It was late afternoon and I was supposed to have been nil by mouth all day. I had drunk my school issue milk earlier though, because I was too hungry to refuse - so then I had to lie about it because the dentist was humourless and cross, and so was my mother, and I hadn't the energy to take them on.

The black rubber gas mask came down over my mouth and nose and the next thing I know the devil is right in my face. He is leaning into me, pleading with me to go with him, cajoling me, then shouting at me full spittle fury, and finally he slaps me. I am terrified, but there's no way I'm giving in to him - so I kick him away, hard - as hard as I can, full force. My mother comes into my field of vision and there is panic in the room. They had been really struggling to revive me, and the dentist was still bent double, cupping his balls.



From the Anglo Saxon period of art right through the middle ages hell is imagined as a gaping mouth, such as a mouth that might belong to a great beast, or a sea creature. It is dark, cavernous, ever hungry. Hellmouth is a detached organ, obeying a reflex action, flesh that blindly pursues its bodily function even though it is separated from an active body. The mouth is engorged chomping away locked in its own hell of eternal consumption, unsatiated, insatiable. It is a body unravelled, grotesque and monstrous. It is a body part stripped of subjectivity, as you will be so. When you become food by being eaten alive you are not altered immediately - but are transformed slowly, bit by bit, into edible matter. It is death without end. I had entered hellmouth once in an amusement park, here in Blackgang Chine in the Isle of Wight, which I had believed to be enchanted and demonic. I saw the fibreglass construction not as a sign of artifice or the 'unreal', or an artifact produced by tourist machinery, but of evidence of adult collusion and submission to a greater and more elusive truth. The Satan of Dante's hell is a machine of torture - optimised, with three consuming mouths.



For years I worried that it was the milk that conjured up the devil, or at least the lie that I told about the milk, but forty years later I read this in the introduction to the Oxford Textbook of Anaesthesia for Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery :

Because of the way the UK NHS funded dental procedures, there was great pressure to see (and to treat) large numbers of patients as quickly as possible. This was especially true of paediatric patients. The numbers of children having teeth extracted under anaesthesia soared to millions. But the use of potent new drugs such as halothane<sup>24</sup> and methohexitone started to increase the death rate insidiously. Although it was called sedation, the boundary into anaesthesia was easily and not infrequently crossed. Not only did patients collapse from hypotension or respiratory obstruction, there was often no training or equipment for resuscitation. Following further widely reported deaths and in consequence increasing public pressure, there was a call for a reduction in the number of dental general anaesthetics, and an increase in safety.

This didn't happen until 1990 when the report under the chairmanship of Sir David Poswillo, The Report of an Expert Working Party on General Anaesthesia, Sedation and Resuscitation in Dentistry was published.<sup>1</sup>

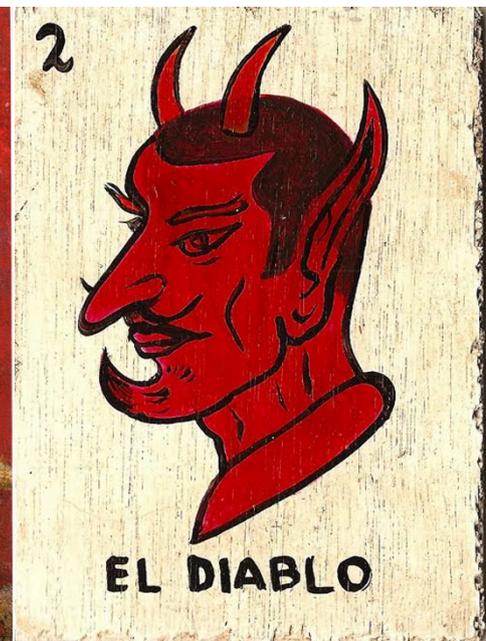
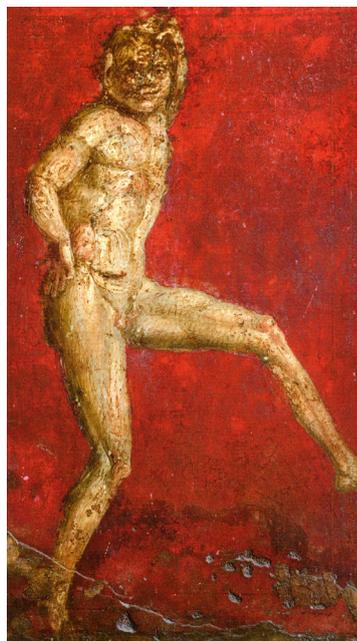


My milk teeth were all filled and as soon as my adult molars emerged they were all filled despite having suffered no pain or visible decay. My mouth is packed with amalgam.

Mercury is the only heavy metal liquid at ambient temperature. Its slippery and seductive form has always captured the imagination, and its properties in turn have been captured technically.



In natural form Mercury exists as Cinnabar (aka vermilion, mercury sulfide, HgS), and was used as a bright red or scarlet pigment at least since the Palaeolithic cave painters of 30,000 years ago and was widely used in the art and decoration of Ancient Rome (here in Pompeii), in the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, in the paintings of the Renaissance, as Sindoor in India, and in the art and lacquerware of China. In the modern period in the West, hellmouth has receded and the Devil has assumed a pan-like appearance and is invariably red.





Cinnabar yields up its mercury simply by heating it in a crucible. The easy fusion of mercury with other metals; its ability to amalgamate freely to make alloys – made it seem so useful industrially. It was used to fill dental cavities because it softens other metals to a paste that can be sculpted before it hardens. It is a liquid that can dissolve silver and gold. The ease with which it amalgamates made it instrumental in recovering silver from its ores. Mercury(II) chloride (also known as mercuric chloride or corrosive sublimate) is familiar for its use as a palliative for syphilis (along with other mercury compounds), although it is so toxic that sometimes the symptoms of its toxicity were confused with those of the syphilis it was believed to treat. Blue mass, a pill or syrup in which mercury is the main ingredient, was prescribed throughout the 19th century for numerous conditions including constipation, depression, child-bearing and toothaches. In the early 20th century, mercury was administered to children yearly as a laxative and dewormer, and it was used in teething powders for infants.

Alchemist and philosopher Ge Hong believed that both Gold and Cinnabar – if ingested – would bestow their properties on the consumer: *As for forging of gold and cinnabar, the longer one burns them, the more marvelous their transformations. When gold enters the flames, even after one hundred firings, it will not disappear. If you bury it forever, it will never decay. If one ingests these two substances, they will refine that person's body, and make it so that he or she will neither age nor die.*<sup>2</sup>

Yet the men that worked with mercury in the mines of Potosí and Heuncavelica always new that the mercury vapours and contaminated water supply did not refine their bodies the way it refined the silver and gold.



Mercury amalgamates with the body in monstrous ways: leading to sensory impairment (vision, hearing, speech), disturbed sensation and a lack of coordination. There are effects such as tremors, impaired cognitive skills, and sleep disturbance with exposure to mercury vapor even at low concentrations. Acute exposure results in chest pain, shortness of breath, cough, coughing up blood, impairment of pulmonary function, and inflammation of lung tissue. Acute exposure to mercury vapor has also been shown to result in profound disruption to the central nervous system, including psychotic reactions characterized by delirium, hallucinations, and suicidal tendency. Occupational exposure has resulted in broad-ranging functional disturbance, including irritability, excitability, excessive shyness, and insomnia. With continuing exposure, a fine tremor develops and may escalate to violent muscular spasms. Tremor initially involves the hands and later spreads to the eyelids, lips, and tongue. Long-term, low-level exposure has been associated with more subtle symptoms including fatigue, irritability, loss of memory, vivid dreams and depression.

In 1648 the Viceroy of Peru declared that Potosí and Huancavelica – a mercury mine 2000km away were “the two pillars that support this kingdom and that of Spain.” But the workers upholding these pillars succumbed to what was known as ‘Huancavelica Sickness’. It entered their bone marrow, one superintendant recorded and made them “tremble in every limb”. The tremors would become so violent that they could not feed themselves, and had to be hand fed by those with steadier hand. In resignation they made donations to the Franciscans every week for a Christian burial. When in 1604 the graves were exhumed by a superintendant the graves were said to contain puddles of mercury that had leached from the decomposing bodies<sup>3</sup>. In the Spanish diaspora the word Potosi became a euphemism for wealth and good fortune, the Cerro Ricco translates as *Rich Hill*. Locally, however, it was known as the mountain that eats men.

Whilst my mouth is still full of mercury – a myriad of products containing mercury will be prohibited by 2020. These products include batteries, compact fluorescent lamps, switches and relays, soaps and cosmetics, thermometers, and blood pressure devices, vaccines containing mercury, as well as dental fillings which use mercury amalgam.

*The Minamata Convention on Mercury is an international treaty designed to protect human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury and mercury compounds. This Convention was a result of three years of meeting and negotiating, after which the text of the Convention was signed by delegates representing 128 countries on 19 January 2013 in Geneva and adopted later that year on 10 October 2013 on a Diplomatic Conference held in Kumamoto, Japan. The Convention is named after the Japanese city Minamata. This naming is of symbolic importance as the city went through devastating incidents of mercury poisoning that took 36 years to hold to account.<sup>4</sup>*

Minamata disease was first discovered in Minamata city in Kumamoto prefecture, Japan, in 1956. It was caused by the release of methylmercury in the industrial wastewater from the Chisso Corporation's chemical factory, which continued between 1932 to 1968. This highly toxic chemical bioaccumulated in shellfish and fish in Minamata Bay and the Shiranui Sea, which, when eaten by local people resulted in mercury poisoning resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and casualties over decades and successive generations. The animal effects were so noticeable in cats it came to be known as *dancing cat fever*.



In 2015 on a visit to Bolivia, Pope Francis quoted St Basil the Great, and spoke of the “stench” of money. “The unbridled ambition of money dominates. This is the ‘the devil’s excrement’. And the service of the common good fades into the background.” The Pope went on to criticise the facets of a “new colonialism” which he said used the power of the idol of money to control free trade and impose austerity.

He said: "Colonialism, old and new, which reduces the poor to mere suppliers of raw materials and cheap labour, generates violence, poverty, forced migration and all the evils that we can see. This led to inequity and violence that no police, military or intelligence services can stop... The first task is to put the economy at the service of the people: human beings and nature must not be at the service of money. We say NO to an economy of exclusion and inequity where money dominates instead of serving. This economy kills. This economy is exclusionary."

## LES VÉRITÉS DU JOUR, OU LE GRAND DIABLE D'ARGENT.

### LES VÉRITÉS DU JOUR.

**Ain :** Quand on ne dort pas de la nuit  
En me voyant chasser l'argent  
On croit qu'il est mon seul guide;  
Car on dit qu'un siècle précieux,  
Ce métal, véritable simant,  
A nos actions seul précède.  
Si la moitié du genre humain  
Pour ce métal devient coupable,  
Mes amis, n'aie pas certain  
Que l'argent (du) entraine le diable!

J'en suis certain, le dieu du mal,  
Satan, dans sa retraite sombre,  
N'aura composé ce métal  
Qu'avec le projet infernal  
Des marchands d'augmenter le nombre.  
Il rit et dit, le dieu cornu,  
Quand la cohorte insatiable  
À ses pieds fonde la vertu;  
Croyez-moi, le diable-voeu ou diable.

Le pauvre, s'il est en procès,  
Court chez l'avocat, le consulte;  
Fludez, n'épargnez pas les frais,  
Je vous garantis le succès,  
Dici, est votre cause est juste.  
Mais des deux mains comme il reçoit,  
Théâtre, loin d'être secourable,  
Devient sourde et donne bon droit  
À celui (du) qui poursuit le diable.

Pour une spéculation  
Il est plus d'un Robert-Macaire;  
L'intrigue, avec précaution,  
Sait faire mousser l'ambition  
Et conduire à bien son affaire.  
Si honteux que soit un trafic,  
Lorsque l'usage est favorable,  
Que fait l'estime du public  
Lorsqu'enfin (du) nous tenons le diable!

Mais où peut courir ce bandit,  
Les pieds nus et couvert à peine?  
Certes, malgré son appétit,  
Ce n'est point après le crêpin  
Qu'il court jusques à perdre haleine,  
Non; mais chez vous lorsqu'ensuite on bréte,  
Un soumette point vous secable,  
Que vient-il demander la nuit?  
Il voudrait (du) trouver le diable.



Comme un insigne empêcheur,  
Ce gargouille donne sans peine,  
Tout en se proclamant traître,  
Un chat qu'il vous vend sous palmier  
Pour un vrai lapin de garenne.  
En vous accueillant chaque jour,  
Avez-vous s'il se montre affable,  
Pour parler ici sans détour,  
C'est pour mieux (du) attraper le diable.

Relevant son front impudent,  
Cette abjecte fille de joie,  
Du vice se fait ornement,  
Insulte et argue insolemment  
La sagesse qu'elle coustode.  
Mettant sous ses pieds la Vertu,  
Qui s'est pour elle qu'une faible,  
Désormais le premier venu  
Peut entrer (du) à qu'il tienne le diable.

Vous le savez tous, mes amis,  
C'est une race cosmopolite,  
Gens crochus qui, dans tous pays,  
Jadis à la porte on a mis...  
Enfin la race insatiable!  
Malgré sa laine de chérubin  
(Qui fut pour lui peu charitable),  
Le juif, pour acquiescer du bien,  
Se vendrait (du) par amour du diable.

Près du fripon, de l'intrigant  
Qui se frotte avec adresse,  
Maignement servent le dessein,  
Restent en route trop souvent,  
En courant après la richesse.  
De sa queue espèrent secours,  
Ils s'en servent comme d'un câble;  
Mais de leurs mains glissant toujours  
C'est en vain (du) qu'ils traînent le diable.

La maîtresse au foyer désert,  
L'œil triste et la mine inquiète,  
Maignement servent le dessein,  
Rémuni même convert  
Le lésineur, le poète;  
Tous deux maudissant le décret  
De la fortune inexorable,  
Ils voudraient avoir le secret  
De tenir (du) désormais le diable.

La Mort, dans ce même tabeau,  
Se rit de leur plainte inutile,  
Et dit: Du destin le plus beau  
Vous arrivez tous au tombeau,  
Car c'est là le commun aile.  
Désormais à l'abri du sort,  
On y trouve un calme durable;  
Lorsque chez vous frappe le mort,  
Que vous fait (du) l'argent ou le diable.

1 Le Mérite modeste tirant toujours le diable par la queue. 2 Le Marchand trompant le public. 3 Le Vice comble des faveurs de la Fortune. 4 La Vertu méprise et foulée aux pieds par le Vice. 5 La sous-œuvre enrichie par la Gourmandise. 6 Robert-Macaire-Duval, investisseur des Actions. 7 Le Lésineur plissant le pour et le contre à volonté. 8 Le petit Valeur de grands chemins. 9 La Justice éternelle attendant l'homme à son tribunal.

Propriété de l'éditeur. (Mignon.) Fabrique de PELLERIN, Imprimeur-Libraire, à ÉPINAL.

Freud noted the rich associations between money and dirt found in folklore and everyday language. Freud believed that the bourgeois passion for hoarding money stemmed from the infant's libidinal urge towards anal retention. He suggested that "it is possible that the contrast between the most precious substance known to men and the most worthless...has led to the specific identification of gold with faeces." There are expressions like "stinking rich" and "filthy lucre, dirty money". In legends, the gold which the devil gives his paramours turns into excrement after his departure, and according to ancient Babylonian doctrine gold is 'the faeces of hell.'"

Ferenczi writes "Pleasure in the intestinal contents becomes enjoyment of Money, which is nothing other than odourless, dehydrated filth that has been made to shine."<sup>5</sup>

At peak production 85% of the Andean silver that flooded Spain in the 16th Century made Potosi a city rivalling London and Paris in size. The huge supply of silver and gold produced by Andean miners increased the supply of precious metals available for coinage in Europe eightfold by 1600. This made possible the development of capitalism and the beginnings of the urban trading economy.<sup>6</sup>



The mines that are still open today but only reveal a trickle of silver, and a reluctant supply of zinc, tin and lead – mined for by individuals with hammers, barrows and plastic explosives. El Tío still sits at the mouth of the tunnel and invites offerings to enable fecundity and protection. A trickster of sorts, El Tío is Lord of the underworld, and was said to aid miners who respect him by making regular offerings of liquor, tobacco, and coca leaves, and to punish those who ignore him or remove rich ores from the mines without proper thanks. Ritual offerings to El Tío are complemented by periodic sacrifices to Mother Earth, or Pachamama, just outside mine entrances. Llamas are typically slaughtered and their blood used to paint the mine threshold, ore carts, and other mining equipment. The prevailing ethic among native Bolivian miners in Potosí and elsewhere is to not upset a fragile balance, a reciprocal agreement between humans who need minerals to subsist and spirits who need offerings and sacrifices to continue providing.<sup>8</sup> But as miners are well aware, they need greatest protection from the machinations of the stock market where fluctuations in value from the digitised exchange are every bit as devastating as a rockfall or an exhausted seam.



In *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* Norman O. Brown says “the commitment to mathematize the world, intrinsic to modern science, is a commitment to sublimation.” Modern science has now almost completely mathematized money. The monetary functions of dehydrated filth are all but forgotten. Even paper money is getting scarce — most money now is a ghostly electronic presence.

*With this dematerialization of money has come at least a partial banishment of the guilty sadomasochism of the anus. That banishment was seen at its fullest during the 1980s, when fantasy ruled the financial scene; in the early 1990s, the repressed made a partial return, and the exuberance of the Roaring Eighties seemed a distant memory. But the psychological dethronement, however complete or incomplete, of anality and guilt, has an interesting analogue in the cultural and social transformations that so trouble American reactionaries. Capitalism, having undermined the authoritarian–patriarchal family, now produces fewer guilt-ridden obsessives and more hungry narcissists than it did in the days when gold and daddy reigned as the harsh taskmasters from whom there was no appeal. Like the narcissist, today’s consumer seems less interested in the accumulation of possessions than in the (novelty-rich, credit-financed) act of purchase itself. Rather than the guilty obstinacy of the anus — or the Puritan character identified by Max Weber as the spirit of capitalism — one detects a more primitive, fickle, and eternally dissatisfied orality.*

Wall Street: How it Works and for Whom, Doug Henwood 1997

The metals that once made money are now needed for the networked devices that facilitate its digitised exchange. And though Ge Hong was so catastrophically wrong about eating mercury, there is still a market for edible precious metals to try and satiate this eternally insatiable orality.



Silver has antibacterial properties and is believed by some to have essential healing properties, though it has been largely removed from prescribed medications since the discovery of antibiotics, and the unfortunate side effects of silver in prescribed medications. Silver particles oxidise once ingested much like a photographic plate and turn its consumers blue. There was the famous case of Paul Karson, a Californian man nicknamed Papa Smurf who following chat show and internet fame revealed how he accidentally turned his skin permanently blue with his high doses of home made colloidal silver.



In 2013 Bolivia successfully won an exemption from the ban on coca, making it a legal to chew the leaves that have been used by indigenous people there for as long as is recorded. Coca leaves are seen as essential to El Tio and to those that work the mine. Medical analysis of the coca leaf so far suggests that it's flavonoids allow fats and glucose to be metabolized differently: "These experimental findings suggest that chewing coca leaves gives a beneficial effect during a performance of exercise and that the beneficial effects are felt over a prolonged period of sustained physical activity. Perhaps this gives the users energy to function at a sustained level over long periods of time." It is believed then that coca plays an important role in maintaining physical function in high altitude and in low levels of oxygen, in the Potosi region, and in the mine. The coca leaves and alcohol, tobacco and explosives endemic to working in the mines are matched in any case by a kind of delirium that prevails around the acquisition of wealth in the banking sector "There's an epidemic of cocaine and alcohol use among 30-something bankers in the City," says Mark Dempster, an author and Harley Street addiction specialist. "It's almost normalized. For many people it starts in their 20s, but becomes critical in their 30s as their income increases and the drugs become more affordable. – People are self-medicating to cope with the stress."



The enteric nervous system contains one hundred million neurons embedded in the walls of the long tube of our gut, which measures about nine meters end to end from the oesophagus to the anus. The enteric nervous system uses more than 30 neurotransmitters, and 95 per cent of the body's serotonin is found in the bowels. An excess of serotonin is as disruptive to mental health as a deficiency. We are beginning to understand that gut microbes facilitate change not only in the gut, but affect sexual reproduction, brain physiology and neurochemistry. The interplay between what we ingest has multiple effects on motivation, and higher cognitive function. Yet these are not the organs foregrounded in the contemporary body: the genitals, mouth and anus are relegated to a minor role, as if these sophistications can be disregarded - corresponding to the sense of loss in the regenerative power of these organs. Instead the head, eyes, face, muscular system are accentuated. The contemporary troll is no longer an enchanted cave dweller, but one who inhabits the internet, a malevolent force spreading mytho-mania, a new techno-animist using the power of hate speech as a form of political currency.

In his *Natural History* written in 77 AD Pliny traces the dynamic between unchecked human desire and the ecological violence of mineral mining. He explores the earth as organism. The refusal for humans to accept this leads to its violation and our own ruin. It transforms the fertile body of earth, the regenerative potential is lost and the bowels and entrails of earth are transformed from an organ to a state of depletion, a human hell:

*WE are now about to speak of metals, of actual wealth, the standard of comparative value, objects for which we diligently search, within the earth, in numerous ways. In one place, for instance, we undermine it for the purpose of obtaining riches, to supply the exigencies of life, searching for either gold or silver, electrum or copper. In another place, to satisfy the requirements of luxury, our researches extend to gems and pigments, with which to adorn our fingers and the walls of our houses: while in a third place, we gratify our rash propensities by a search for iron, which, amid wars and carnage, is deemed more acceptable even than gold. We trace out all the veins of the earth, and yet, living upon it, undermined as it is beneath our feet, are astonished that it should occasionally cleave asunder or tremble: as though, forsooth, these signs could be any other than expressions of the indignation felt by our sacred parent. We penetrate into her entrails, and seek for treasures in the abodes even of the Manes, as though each spot we tread upon were not sufficiently bounteous and fertile for us. And yet, amid all this, we are far from making remedies the object of our researches: and how few in thus delving into the earth have in view the promotion of medicinal knowledge. For it is upon her surface, in fact, that she has presented us with these substances, equally with the cereals, bounteous and ever ready, as she is, in supplying us with all things for our benefit. It is what is concealed from our view, what is sunk far beneath her surface, objects, in fact, of no rapid formation, that urge us to our ruin, that send us to the very depths of hell. As the mind ranges in vague speculation, let us only consider, proceeding through all ages, as these operations are, when will be the end of thus exhausting the earth, and to what point will avarice finally penetrate. How innocent, how happy, how truly delightful even would life be, if we were to desire nothing but what is to be found upon the face of the earth; in a word, nothing but what is provided ready to our hands.*



<sup>1</sup> Shaw, Ian, Kumar, Chandra and Dodds, Chris “Oxford Textbook of Anaesthesia for Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery”, OUP, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Ge Hong (Ko Hung, 283—343 C.E.)

<sup>3</sup> Reader, John “The Untold History of the Potato”, Vintage, 2009

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, Marianne. “Minamata Convention on Mercury”. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Retrieved October 12, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, Volume 1: 1908-1914 Harvard UP 1993

<sup>6</sup> Weatherford, Jack “Old Knowledge From the New World : INDIAN GIVERS : How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World”, Crown, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Casikar, V, “Does Chewing Coca Leaves Influence Physiology at High Altitude?” Indian Clinical Biochemistry, 2010 Jul; 25(3): 311–314

<sup>8</sup> Lane, Kris “Potosí Mines”, Latin American History, Oxford Research Encyclopaedias  
Subject: History of Northern and Andean Spanish America, Colonialism and Imperialism, Labor History, 1492–1824 Online Publication Date: May 2015  
<http://latinamericanhistory.oxfordre.com>

<sup>9</sup> Butcher, Sarah “The 30-something bankers are not alright” 23 June 2015, efinancial careers,  
<http://news.efinancialcareers.com/uk-en/214585/the-30-something-bankers-are-not-alright/>