In 1892, the Trinity Episcopal Church of Detroit inherited a grand new building. Designed by architectural firm Morgan and Rice in the English Gothic style, the exterior featured gargoyles on both its east and west façades. In his account of it, commissioned by Trinity Church's Ladies' Aid Society, James E. Scripps warily rationalizes the presence of these “grotesque” creatures:

The question is often asked, what [is] the significance of these monsters in a Christian church? The writer is unable to answer authoritatively, but presupposes that they symbolize evil spirits fleeing from the holy precincts, for it will be observed they all point in a direction away from the center of the church, and are found, I believe, in old churches, mainly on the exterior of the edifice.1

Thirteen years later and less than two miles away, the German-born stonemason and ex-Episcopalian Herman Menz donned the top of his small workshop at 308 Stanton Avenue with his own statue of the devil. On his 71st birthday, 5 November 1905, Menz hosted a small gathering at his home, to which he kept as a keepsake, to unveil and celebrate his Luciferian chimera.2

The inscription at the base of the statue read (in what one contemporary reporter called “dog-Latin”), Homo non est creatio, sed evolutio. Deus non fecit hominem, sed homo fecit deos (“Man was not created, he evolved. God did not make man, man made the gods”).

This incident, and Herr Menz’s subsequent notoriety, might have been lost to us but for the self-archiving impulse of Menz and his friend, physician and fellow free-thinker Dr. Tobias Sigel. Over the following three years, Menz relented in his need to display the statue on his property, sold Satan to a State Fair exhibition, capped his succinct career, and denounced his likeness. However, no sooner had these radicals employed this potent Lucifer myth than the power of the icon began to become diluted. If Satan, like God, was not to be feared, then he, too, could be mocked and dismissed, along with those who heralded his likeness.

At the time Menz’s monument was unveiled, the struggle over the meaning of this icon gave rise to complex and varied invocations towards diverse and divergent aims. The Devil still appeared in religious campaigns, doling out the fire and brimstone. Conservatives and reactionaries used labels like “devil” and “Satan” to denigrate leftist agents, and it could be argued that the embracing of this character was primarily an attempt to spin these in-sults positively.3 Furthermore, the social leftists of the time were not universally anti-religious, as is evidenced, for example, by the large and vocal Catholic presence within the Knights of Labor organization. However, examples drawn from both the scrapbook and its contemporary context show that Satan was touted often and freely, and with strong philosophical backing, as a champion of outspoken freethinkers, anarchists, and other social leftists.

Some further background is useful here regarding popular conceptions of the Devil. In his book Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World, Jeffrey Burton Russell analyzes, among his other modern guises, Satan’s characterization by the Romantic Movement. Russell posits that the Satan of John Milton’s Paradise Lost and the title character from Johann Goethe’s Faust (a devout disciple of the Devil) were both ideal Romantic heroes: “individual, alone against the world, self-assertive, ambitious, powerful, and liberator in rebellion against the society that blocks the way of progress toward liberty, beauty, and love.”4 Though Satan’s significance was not thereby fixed or codified for all to share, Romantic literature and art was so prominent in Europe and the United States that one can assume a general awareness of this characterization.

Russell also describes the significant role played by Satan (figuratively, of course) in the French Revolution of 1798, a major milestone in Western political history:

As political reactionaries made common cause with Catholics against the Revolution, republicans and revolutionaries attacked Christianity and rallied to the standard of its opponents—the greatest of whom was Satan. Christ is King, but kings are evil, and the greatest King is the greatest evil. Revolutionaries tended to perceive Satan as a symbol of rebellion against the unjust order and tyranny of the ancien régime and the model situations: church, government, and family.5

In addition to a stance against tyranny (and therefore, by default, for democracy), another key aspect of the symbolic reverence for the Devil was his desire for man “to obtain knowledge by his own efforts rather than to receive it by grace.”6 The Romantics’ merging of the characters of Prometheus—who, out of his love for mortals, bestowed upon humanity the technology of fire denied them by the gods—and Satan—who, out of his anger towards a tyrannical and fickle God, bestowed upon humanity knowledge of good and evil—was a “crucial symbolic transformation.”7 Russell asserts that this melding allowed “the Devil to be appropriated as an emblem of freedom and mobility.”8 It was this amalgamated Romantic Devil who was so useful to atheist leftist voices in the American political arena.

Menz crafted his Teufel of stone and perched him high on a pedestal, looking at the 74th birthday. All the while, he received newspaper clippings, letters, and even a script of a play devoted to Menz’s endeavour—to the University of Michigan’s Labadie Collection. A scrapbook was compiled and titled, in embossed gold leaf, Menz’s Teufel [sic] (Teufel being German for “devil”). This scrapbook chronicles the Teufel’s scandalizing career and offers a peculiar window into religious and political life in America during the peak of Progressivism.

This period, particularly from the mid-1880s to the mid-1910s, has also been called the “golden age of free-thought” in America.9 Religious authority (and its symbols) was slowly unravelling, while Robert Ingersoll—the so-called “Great Infidel”—rallied crowds at lectures across the country, as he commended and was condemned by various newspapers. Rachel Scharfman posits that the “escalating labor strife and class conflict influenced many freethinkers’ increasing attention to religion’s imprecation with capitalism. But advances in scientific theory were what most dramatically revolutionized post-bellum free thought.”10 As Darwinism and social science gained credence, the churches’ portrayals of Satan as the terrible source of damnation were losing their hold on the popular imagination. Atheist leftists found small spaces in the rhetorical environment in which they could audaciously and publicly revere the image of the great rebel angel. However, no sooner had these radicals employed this potent Lucifer myth than the power of the icon began to become diluted. If Satan, like God, was not to be feared, then he, too, could be mocked and dismissed, along with those who heralded his likeness.

1389
Viollet-le-Duc’s notion of a grand church Revolution, part of the broader European look at the cultural resonances of those chi-
des that came into being while Europe was embroiled in another upheaval. As part of his restoration of the Paris cathedral, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc began design-
ing the gargoyles and chimeras to adorn the balu-
strades in the midst of France’s February Revolution, part of the broader European revolutions of 1848. Time and circumstan-
ces rearranged these devils’ meanings, too; these demonic figures were conceived in a
time of democratic possibility, as part of Viollet-le-Duc’s notion of a grand church of secular liberty. However, by the time
the statues were finished, the milieu of the reactionary Second Empire had ren-
dered them residual symbols of violence and fear. In the broader context of early-twenti-
century popular culture, Lucifer was also
gaining face time in visages less dire than
the Christians asserted and more domestic
than the freethinkers attested. In the rela-
tively amoral world of modern commerce, the
devil was popping up in various roles: a
savvy consumer endorsing products, a
graphic novelty, and a commercial spec-
tacle. Posters and advertisements showed
Satan enjoying wine, ink, clothing, and
elixirs for his health. Two postcards in-
cluded in the Menz’s Teufel scrapbook show
mischievous images representing the
word “devil,” as in “We had a [drawing of a Satan-like character] of a time!” and “You
taunt [devil image], you’re hot stuff!”
And when the controversy over Menz’s Teufel
grew to be too much for him (or, perhaps,
when it grew enough to fetch the decent
price of $40), the stone carver sold the
statue to a proprietor of a State Fair exhib-
tion called “Inferno.”

At least one bit of ephemera found in the
boycotts. The second line of the card names
the boycott’s target: “The Devil!” The twist
that connects directly to leftist labour move-
ments of the day is in the third line: “He
doesn’t Pay…Living Wages.” The card then
cites the Christian scripture “The wages
of sin is death” and lists the ills that befall
those who follow Satan. Presumably, this
card is meant to speak to, and thus simul-
taneously implicate and evangelize, those
sympathetic to leftist labour activities.

Returning to Menz’s Teufel, the pronoun-
ced admiration for the devil in this case
was very much rooted in the Prometheus-
ian myth. Though the anti-religious
subscription on the statue itself does not
reference the Devil at all, both Menz and
Sigel had put forth laudatory statements
at the unveiling of the Teufel, accepting
as given the apocryphal Miltonian under-
standing of the serpent in Eden as a mani-
festation of Satan, and generally commend-
ing the speaker of truth and rebellious
agent of human empowerment. This senti-
ment was echoed consistently throughout
the correspondence Menz received from an-
archistic and atheistic supporters around
the country. However, Menz and Sigel took
a bizarre and literalist approach in the spe-
cifics of their analysis of the Genesis story,
and in so doing furthered the maleability
and utility of Lucifer’s significance by ren-
dering him as the antagonist of the Bible
itself. They reasoned that it was not only
the encouragement to eat of the Tree of
Knowledge that made Satan the real hero
of the story, but also that he was, strictly
speaking, more truthful than God had
been. According to their reading of the
text, Lucifer told “the first truth” in cre-
ation. As Sigel explained (in greater de-
tail than did Menz):

God allmighty lied […] “the day thou shalt
eat from that fruit, thou shalt die,” but the
devil said “God knows that the day thou
eateth from thou shalt have the
knowledge of good and evil, and evil, and be like
God and live […]” As far as we know, an-
thou through the holy book, edited by God
Allmighty, and every word of which we
must believe or be damned, the words of
God were not true; for the voracious
Eve, not only got her “belly full” of the
forbidden fruit, but stuffed Adam full of
it also, and both throve well on it. Hurrah
for the forbidden fruit! According to
Chapter 5, verse 3 and 5, Adam lived to
be 950 years of age and was dead 20 years
before he died.

By employing the Devil as the instrument
undercutting the coherence of the religious
text and, by extension, the legitimacy of
religious authority, Menz and Sigel paint
Satan not only as the liberator of Adam
and Eve, but also as the rescuer of them-
selves and their audience from ignorance
and obedience to God.

Still, the veneration of the Devil by anti-
religious leftists came in varied forms. In
1907, Maxim Gorky, the well-known Rus-
sian playwright and champion of the pro-
letariat, published a short piece in Emma
Goldman’s monthly magazine Mother Earth.
In the story, Gorky himself interviews Satan
amidst the dead souls of the powerful men
of history and, to the narrator’s delight, the
Devil reveals that he is really a revolution-
ary Socialist at heart. With a similar con-
viction, Johann Most, the leader of a large
anarchist circle in late-nineteenth-century
New York, named his second son Lucifer.
At least three anti-clerical newspapers
circulating in the US at the time named Lu-
cifer as both their figure- and masthead.
Moses Harman, a freethinking anarchist
very likely known to Menz and Sigel, was
editor of the most prominent of these, more
than twenty years before the Teufel ap-
peared. Beginning in 1881, Harman edited
the Valley Falls Liberal, from Valley Falls,
Kansas. The renowned radical paper was
dedicated to the denunciation of religion
and government, with an uncommon focus
on women’s rights. After two years, Harman
changed the name of the paper to Lucifer
the Light-Bearer, and the first issue bearing
the new title carried an explanation for the
amendment. Harman very practically sta-
ted that wider circulation beyond Kansas
called for a less localized name, but went
on to assert the good fit of this particular
moniker:

Freethought, in its character of “World’s
Savior,” propounds to you — and to the
name Lucifer, even as it has redeemed
and made illustrious the names “Infidel,”
“Freethinker,” “Atheist,” etc. While we do
not adopt the repute of any
man, god, demigod or demon as our
model, yet there is one phase of the character
of their Lucifer that is also
appropriate to our paper, viz. that of an
Educator. The god of the Bible had doomed
mankind to perpetual ignorance—they would never have[en] known good from evil if Lucifer had not told them how to become as wise as the gods themselves.17

Harman’s invocation of Satan, while subtly different from a philosophical perspective, shares the fundamental argument made by Menz and Sigel. For those opposed to a reverence for God living in a milieu that predominantly ascribed veracity to the Biblical texts, pronouncing appreciation for the Devil was a strong rhetorical act. Harman’s denial of adopting a character as a model, which of course would have been just another form of religiosity, is paralleled again by Russell’s interpretation of the Romantic Lucifer: “Their admiration for Satan was not Satanism, however—not the worship of evil—for they made the Devil the symbol of what they regarded as good.”18

Then again, Harman was writing in the early 1880s, and Menz displayed his Teufel more than two decades later, at a time when spiritualism and a general interest in the occult were also on the rise. But, even in the two years between the Teufel’s initial appearance and its second unveiling, and through Menz’s intervening attempt at public office, the tone shifted from outrage to amused dismissal. Most reporters covering Menz’s campaign for Alderman treated his threats—to “raise hell” and “make it hot” for the seated council—with mockery.

As one article published in 1908, after the second unveiling of the Teufel, remarked, “[t]here are ‘sermons in stones,’ and this particular piece of stone ought to preach a sermon of tolerance toward an old man’s foibles that can harm no one.”19

As outrage towards Menz’s public pronouncement of Satan as superior to God withered, so too wilted the political propaganda that was meant to accompany it. Indeed, when admiration for the Devil no longer carried with it the threat of persecution, the monument as a rhetorical manoeuvre seemed to lose its power. The devil, so it seems, is in the details.20

Endnotes
1 James E. Scripps, Descriptive Account of the New Edifice Erected for Trinity Church, Detroit (Printed on Behalf of the Funds of the Ladies’ Aid Society of Trinity Church, 1892), 7-8.
2 In architectural terms, a stone figure emerging from a building is only considered a gargoylie if it contains a spout and is designed to redirect water away from the building. A purely decorative, free-standing statue is a chimera.
7 Ibid., 169.
8 Ibid., .99.
9 Ibid., 175.

Bio
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