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# Literature and the Problem of Evil

Edited by

Fiona Ellis, Adriana Warmbier, Marek Drwięga







## CONTENTS

ADRIANA WARMBIER	<i>Introduction</i>	9
	<b><i>Articles</i></b>	
MICHAŁ BIZOŃ	<i>Aesthetic Ethics without Evil. Aischron in Greek Popular Ethics</i>	11
KRZYSZTOF MECH	<i>The Master and Margarita: Satan, Savior from Evil</i>	31
KIMBERLY YOUNG	<i>Ivan Karamazov's Euclidean Mind: the 'Fact' of Human Suffering and Evil</i>	49
VIRGIL W. BROWER	<i>Hyde within the Boundaries of Mere Jekyll: Strange Cases of Evil in Kant &amp; Stevenson</i>	63
MŁOSZ PUCZYDŁOWSKI	<i>The Ontology of Evil and Its Anthropological Moment of Freedom in Pär Lagerkvist's The Dwarf and Plotinus' Enneads (I.VII-VIII)</i>	85
MACIEJ MICHAŁSKI	<i>Literature of Absence and the Experience of Evil (Container by Marek Bieńczyk, Is Not by Mariusz Szczygieł, and Things I Didn't Throw Out by Marcin Wicha)</i>	101
	<b><i>About the Contributors</i></b>	119







## ***Introduction***

The problem of evil in its classical form refers to the question of whether it is possible to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of God, who is a perfectly benevolent omnipotent being. In *The City of God*, Augustine of Hippo confronts this central problem: if human beings were created as good then how did *evil* come into the world? A wide range of responses to this question has been given not only in philosophy and theology but also in literature and film. "Literature is not innocent" stated Georges Bataille, who persuaded that literature can communicate fully and intensely only by acknowledging its complicity with the knowledge of evil. Literature affords diverse accounts of the manifestation of evil (its nature, origins and consequences in human life). Numerous writers have delved deeply into the psychological and metaphysical dimensions of evil, among them there are Russian novelists like Fyodor Dostoevsky or Mikhail Bulgakov. Not only have they provided a detailed insight as to how psychology is tied to the metaphysical aspect of human existence, but they have also addressed the question of whether crime and transgression can be a privileged avenue of access into the human interior. The various accounts of evil in texts—including the Bible, Greek myth, and philosophy (Plato, Plotinus, Augustine of Hippo, G.W. Leibniz, I. Kant, F. Nietzsche, and H. Arendt)—have been related to major attempts to square God's justice with the presence of evil.

The articles presented in this volume explore the intersections between philosophical thought and literary modes of representations of evil. They address not only a critical look at the classical or recent literary manifestation of evil but also demonstrate new aspects of a philosophical account of this issue. The volume begins with an article by Michał Bizoń who deals with the concept of evil in ancient Greek thought. The author focuses on two Greek terms *aischron* and *kalon*, and points out the functional, aesthetic, and ethical components of their semantic field. He argues that the functional and aesthetic components entail fundamental difficulties for viewing *aischron* as denoting moral evil. Krzysztof Mech turns to Mikhail Bulgakov's famous novel *The Master and Margarita*. The author presents Bulgakov's complex and ambiguous domain of evil which leads to the expansion of our under-



standing of the domain of good. Kimberly Young examines Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* by paying particular attention to Ivan Karamazov's Euclidean Mind. Virgil W. Brower, in turn, experiments with Kant's account of rational religion, culled from the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Miłosz Puczydłowski's essay explores a novel by Pär Lagerkvist *The Dwarf* in light of the classical metaphysics of good and evil based on Plotinus' *Enneads*. The author of the last article, Maciej Michalski, poses a question of whether literature can address evil, understood as the experience of absence and loss. He offers some answers by analyzing texts about absence, such as *Container* by Marek Bieńczyk, *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł, and *Things I Didn't Throw Out* by Marcin Wicha. The present volume does not aim to exhaust contemporary reflections on the problem of evil in literature. It is rather an overview that includes the most recent accounts addressing this question.

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Michał Bizon\*

## Aesthetic Ethics without Evil. *Aischron* in Greek Popular Ethics

### Abstract

In the paper I consider the Greek term *aischron* as a candidate for a moral concept of evil, focusing on popular rather than philosophical Greek ethical thought. I distinguish between a wide and a narrow concept of evil, focusing in the enquiry on the latter. A narrow concept of evil is limited to a moral meaning, referring to moral agents and actions. In this use evil represents the strongest negative evaluative term of moral agents and actions. I begin the analysis of *aischron* with a scrutiny of its positive counterpart, *kalon*. I synthetically discuss the ongoing discussion regarding its meanings. I then turn to the term *aischron* and its cognates and conclude that its meanings have a similar, albeit not identical, range to *kalon*. In both cases the semantic field of these terms include a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. I further argue that these three components are interconnected which suggests that the various meanings of *kalon* and *aischron* are not homonymous. On this basis I argue that the functional and aesthetic components present fundamental difficulties for reading *aischron* as denoting moral evil.

### Keywords

Metaethics, Evil, *kalon*, *aischron*, Popular Morality

In this paper, I consider the concept of evil in popular ethical thought of the Greek archaic and classical periods (roughly from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE). I use the term “popular thought” rather than “literature.” It would be inaccurate to distinguish between the study of evil in ancient Greek literature and philosophy since there was no literature in the modern sense in the archaic and classical Greek world. In fact, such an opposition would be particularly misleading in the case of authors such as Plato, who relied essentially on dramatic and narrative devices in the construction of reasoning.

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A more viable approach would be to discriminate between Greek philosophy and poetry, where the difference could consist roughly in that the claims of poetry are predominantly declarative and/or enthymematic, while philosophical texts strive towards more rigorous reasoning. Even so, this categorization struggles to accommodate such authors as Xenophanes and Empedocles on the one hand, and Isocrates on the other.

I use the term “popular” as referring to sources that can be plausibly considered to reflect an everyday understanding of ethical concepts as opposed to a theoretical (“philosophical”) systematization thereof. Naturally, the boundary between the “popular” and the “philosophical” is bound to be fluid, particularly in a period formative for philosophy as a distinct endeavor. A general criterion that should suffice is the degree of technicality and systematicity of a given source. A philosophical source is thus assumed to display a degree of technicality that made it markedly less accessible for the general ancient readership as well as a tendency towards integrating its component concepts within a systematic theoretical frame. I borrow a further but related criterion from Bernard Williams. Echoing an argument made to this effect by Nietzsche, Williams distinguished between ancient authors that offered descriptive psychological ethics and ones that sought to develop a normative ethical psychology informed by theoretical ethical preconceptions.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the following considerations are limited to non-technical sources that were addressed to the general educated readership and reflected everyday modes of thought and speech rather than examined the latter from the vantage point of a systematic ethical theory. As this criterion is only rudimentary, I concede a degree of liberality if not arbitrariness

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<sup>1</sup> Commenting on Nietzsche's *The Dawn* 168 Williams acknowledges: “There is a certain amount that is fanciful or, again, dated in Nietzsche's judgement, but it contains a helpful insight. Thucydides may not be as impartial in a local sense as used to be thought [...], but he is so in the sense that the psychology he deploys in his explanations is not at the service of his ethical beliefs. [...] But Thucydides' conception of an intelligible and typically human motivation is broader and less committed to a distinctive ethical outlook than Plato's; or rather—the distinction is important—it is broader than the conception acknowledged in Plato's psychological theories. The same is true, if less obviously, in relation to Aristotle” (Williams 2008, 161-162). Cf. Nietzsche, *Morgenröte* 168; *Götzen-Dämmerung* 2; Williams 2008, 163-164. Williams and Nietzsche argued on the basis of this distinction that Greek philosophical ethics differ substantially from popular Greek ethical thought, a contentious conclusion on which I do not take sides here. For the present purpose the weaker premise is sufficient, namely that there are ancient sources that display a marked degree of technicality and systematicity in their treatment of ethical concepts.



in making the selection. I include the Greek poetic tradition, historiography, and oratory. In addition, I draw on less technical passages from philosophical sources, such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. Excluded from the present study are the (putatively) systematic ethical theories of Plato and Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> as well as technical and revisionary conceptions of Pre-Socratic authors such as Heraclitus and Democritus.

For an inquiry about the concept of evil in popular Greek ethics it is necessary to begin with a delimitation of the relevant concept, since modern scholarship is far from consenting to a predominant meaning. It is fairly uncontentious, however, that, whatever its other features, a coherent concept of evil must express the highest degree of condemnation. Further, from a metaethical perspective it is apposite to distinguish between a broad and a narrow concept of evil. The former comprises a moral as well as a natural meaning, encompassing actions and agents but also physical and supernatural (e.g. eschatological) states and events. The latter is limited to a moral meaning, qualifying solely moral actions and agents.<sup>3</sup> The broad concept of evil is intimately related to the (originally) theological problem of evil, namely whether the presence of evil in the world can be made compatible with the endorsement of the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and supremely good God. As this problem is arguably absent from Greek thought of the archaic and classical periods,<sup>4</sup> the present study is limited to the nar-

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's conceptions of evil have been recently discussed from various perspectives in Kontos ed. 2018. For the present paper relevant are the discussions of the possibility of evil in Aristotle's ethics and politics. These are discussed in several insightful ways, all of which arguably fall short of identifying a full-blooded narrow concept of evil in Aristotle's thought. The two most promising candidates for a concept of moral evil are Aristotle's concept of vice and his concept of *thēriotēs*, the status of which in Aristotle's ethics is debated in Kontos 2018 and Perason 2018. Arguably, however, both these concepts fall short of a modern narrow concept of evil. The main reason for this in the case of vice is that this constitutes in Aristotle's scheme the opposite of virtue, and thus lies on the opposite end of the same scale of traits, rather than being distinguished qualitatively. In the case of *thēriotēs* it is debatable whether the state thus described constitutes a human condition at all, and even so whether it should more appropriately be categorized as severe illness and/or insanity. Relevant to the inquiry regarding a narrow concept of evil in Aristotle is also the consideration of failed constitutions in Kraut 2018. However, Kraut's assessment of the tyranny as a likely candidate for an evil constitution hinges on the identification of ethical vice as evil rather than severe badness.

<sup>3</sup> Authors arguing that moral evil qualifies primarily actions and secondarily agents include: Thomas 1993; Garrard 1998; Kekes 2005; Russell 2014. The inverse view is upheld by, among others: Haybron 2002; Perrett 2002; Singer 2004.

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence of unease concerning the possibility of harmonizing ethical failure and the resultant suffering (though not suffering resulting from natural disasters) as early



row concept of evil, which may be characterized as “the worst possible term of opprobrium imaginable” as used of moral actions and agents (Singer 2004, 185).

The narrow concept of evil requires further specification. Most fundamentally, for a sound distinction from the broad version, some feature associating it with specifically moral actions and agents is required. The narrow concept of evil thus implies the delimitation of a specifically moral domain of actions and agents. Moreover, within such a domain the concept of evil ought to be distinguished from moral badness and moral wrongness, wherein it usually is construed as a subtype of moral wrongness, distinguished by special traits.<sup>5</sup> Given the considerable complexity of the current discussion on the moral concept of evil it would seem that a fruitful inquiry into its ancient Greek equivalents would require either settling for one of the definitions put forward or relying on a hybrid set of criteria drawn from various approaches. The former method would of course be laden with an anachronistic bias—there is no apparent reason why this or another modern theory of evil should be particularly appropriate for transposing it onto ancient Greek sensibilities. The latter method would at best yield an artificially complex and unwieldy concept of evil and an incoherent one at worst.

Instead of adopting specific criteria for a concept of evil, I employ a method of semantic analysis. It follows from the above considerations that a narrow concept of evil is standardly taken to express the highest moral condemnation. In ordinary archaic and classical Greek, the highest positive evaluative term applied to actions and agents was *kalon* and its cognates (such as the adverb *kalōs*). As its negative counterpart the Greeks usually employed the term *aischron*. If, therefore, the Greeks had a concept of “evil” in the narrow, moral sense, it can be reasonably expected that this would be expressed by at least some of the uses of *aischron*.

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as Xenophanes, and such considerations certainly play a part in Plato’s conceptions of the divine (cf. *Republic* 10.617de; *Theaetetus* 176bc; *Timaeus* 30a; *Euthyphro*, passim).

<sup>5</sup> Several criteria for distinguishing moral evil from moral wrongness of action and agent have been suggested. For evil action as morally wrong that the agent takes pleasure in see Steiner 2002; for evil action as involving intentional harming see Calder 2013; for evil as distinguished from wrongful action by the degree of harm involved see Card 2010, Liberto and Harrington 2016; for evil action as involving a pathological motivational scheme see e.g. Thomas 1993; Garrard 1999; Steiner 2002; Perrett 2002; Calder 2003, 2009; Eagleton 2010; for evil character as involving particular emotional states see McGinn 1997.



In what follows I focus therefore on the negative term *aischron*, which I consider in conjunction with the corresponding positive term *kalon*. I begin with a brief analysis of the more widely analyzed positive term. I summarize critically the ongoing discussion concerning its various meanings and argue that the evidence supports the conclusion that *kalon* is not homonymous but rather that its various meanings, which can be grouped under the heading of three semantic components, is unified in a complex semantic structure. Moreover, the different meanings of *kalon* are cognate and include, crucially, an aesthetic meaning. I then turn to its negative counterpart, *aischron*, and argue that, despite some divergences, it has an analogous semantic field within which an aesthetic component plays an equally if not more prominent part. On this basis I argue that within the semantic field of *kalon* and *aischron* there can be identified a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. These refer to, in the case of *kalon*: i) orderliness; ii) beauty; iii) praiseworthiness. Accordingly, in the case of *aischron* these are: i) disorderliness; ii) ugliness; iii) shamefulness. Moreover, the three semantic components co-determine their respective meanings which are ultimately unified in a single, albeit complex, semantic structure. *Kalon/aischron* refer, respectively, to order/disorder, the outward manifestation of which is beauty/ugliness, and which inherently merits praise/shame. In the concluding section I argue that the functional and aesthetic components raise difficulties for a narrowly moral meaning of these strong evaluative terms. If *aischron* is not homonymous then, regardless of its ethical semantic component, the functional and aesthetic meanings effect a concept too capacious for it to work as an equivalent to the modern narrow concept of evil.

### The meanings of *kalon*

The positive term *kalon* has received considerably more attention than *aischron* and a brief study of its meaning will thus serve as a convenient prolegomenon to the study of its opposite. *Kalon* is the standard adjective referring to physical beauty (cf. *Iliad* 19.285, 23.66; *Odyssey* 19.208; Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 10(11).103; Sophocles, *Oedipus in Colonus* 576-578; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.6.30; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 2.1; Plato, *Hippias Major* 291c, 293a; cf. Konstan 2014).<sup>6</sup> It also denotes that which is fitting or appropriate (e.g. *Odyssey* 14.253, ἐπλέομεν βορέῃ ἀνέμῳ ἀκραεῖ καλῶ; Sophocles, *Electra* 384; Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 5.59.60; Plato, *Hippias Major*

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 4.1448b12; *Poetics* 7.1450b34-39; *Parts of Animals* 1.5.644b22-45a36.



295c; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.8.26; cf. Dover 1974, 69-73). These two meanings may be closely allied, as in Plato's *Hippias Major*, or one of them may be suppressed, as in Aristotle's characterization of *to kalon* in the *Rhetoric* 1.9 (where he draws on popular usage) as that which is in itself desirable and (therefore?) praiseworthy (*Rhetoric* 1366a33-34). These ambiguities are often lost in translation. Thus, where the *Septuagint* uses *kalon*, the Vulgate has at times *bonum* (e.g. Gen. 1:10), yet at times *pulchrum* (e.g. Song 1:15). Most importantly for the present study, *kalon* has what LSJ calls "a moral sense." Indeed, *kalon* constitutes the term of highest approval as applied to actions from Homer to Aristotle and beyond.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, as will be discussed in detail below, the negative phrase *ou kalon*, being roughly equivalent to *aischron*, is the term of greatest reproach as referred to actions and denotes that which is not to be done under pain of the highest sanction (cf. *Iliad* 9.615; *Odyssey* 8.166, 20.294; Sophocles, *Antigone* 72; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.155; Andocides 2.9).

Much effort has been put into reconciling these meanings of *kalon*.<sup>8</sup> It is widely recognized that, although *kalon* most commonly refers to physical attractiveness, it cannot be universally rendered as "beautiful," not least for the reason that even in its aesthetic use its meaning does not overlap with the English term "beautiful."<sup>9</sup> Firstly, objects commonly considered beautiful, particularly works of art,<sup>10</sup> are not typically qualified as *kalon*. Secondly, *kalon* refers to things not normally taken to be beautiful physically, even aesthetically (in the modern sense), particularly things that would today be commonly considered to belong to the sphere of morality (Kosman 2010,

<sup>7</sup> "So it is for the sake of the beautiful (*kalon*) that a courageous person endures and performs emotions and deeds appropriate to courage" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b23) [The courageous person acts] "for the sake of the beautiful (*kalon*) for that is the end toward which virtue is directed" (1115b12-13).

<sup>8</sup> As Kosman remarks, this is not a merely a matter of translational difficulty, but reflects substantive differences in ancient Greek ethical thought and modern moral philosophy: "The impossibility of finding, for *ousia* and the complex of associated terms I mentioned earlier, a simple and unelaborated translation that might map the ontology of the ancient world onto current philosophical parlance reveals more general differences between ancient and modern philosophical imaginations, and not simply between ancient and modern philosophical lexicons. [...] The impossibility, however, of finding an exact mapping of *sôphrosunê* reveals differences between the cultural and moral discourse of our world and that of ancient Greece much more general in scope" (2010, 351).

<sup>9</sup> "So in Philostratus' *Imagines*, to take one example, *kalon* words appear only in descriptions of the subject matter of the art, not in descriptions of the art" (Kosman 2010, 351).

<sup>10</sup> But cf. Lear 2010, 360-361.



324, cf. 351).<sup>11</sup> The complexities of meaning associated with *to kalon* were recognized by Aristotle, who suggested that this term is homonymous on the grounds that it has different opposites (*Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22).<sup>12</sup>

Yet, a strictly homonymous, i.e. equivocal reading of *kalon* has been resisted. In one passage, Aristotle himself claims that *kalon* and the fitting (*prepon*) are equivalent (*Topics* 5.5, 135a12-14), thus tying the term to a single dominant meaning. On a more cautious approach it has been argued that, different uses of *kalon* notwithstanding, its various meanings are “related to one another essentially” (Kosman 2010, 347). This obtains for its uses in popular but also in philosophical sources,<sup>13</sup> as can be seen in Plato’s *Symposium* where Diotima’s reasoning relies crucially on a progression of various non-technical uses of *kalon*, which implies that she (and Plato?) takes these uses to be at least analogous (Lear 2010, 359).<sup>14</sup> This line of reasoning is corroborated by other related uses of *kalon* in Plato and Aristotle where the term is taken in what is arguably a popular meaning.<sup>15</sup> In an at-

<sup>11</sup> “The concepts of beauty and of the *kalon* share a central and important applicability to the countenance [...] of persons [...] but at that point their semantic courses diverge” (Kosman 2010, 351). Cf.: “Whereas we go on to treat landscapes and paintings and music as central cases of beauty, the Greeks turn instead to actions, institutions, and virtues as paradigm cases of the *kalon*” (Lear 2010, 357).

<sup>12</sup> For various homonymous uses of *kalon* in Aristotle cf.: i) Aesthetic: ugly people, *Generation of Animals* 769b18-20, referring to ugly people; [*Mir. Ausc.*] 830b16-19, referring to the beauty of the cuckoo; *History of Animals* 616b16-18, referring to the beauty of a bird’s plumage; ii) Goal-directed order: *Parts of Animals* 644b32-645a1; 645a23-25, 640a33-b1, referring to that which has a final cause; *Generation of Animals* 760a32, referring to the *taxis* of nature iii) Abstract order: *Metaphysics* 1078a31-b2, referring to mathematical objects; *Poetics* 1450b36, *Politics* 1326a33; *Topics* 116b21, that *to kalon* consists of order and greatness; iv) Ethical: *Eudemian Ethics* 1248b23-25; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176b7-10, referring to noninstrumental goods, what is praiseworthy. Cf. Irwin 2010.

<sup>13</sup> “Plato and Aristotle’s use of *kalon* as a moral predicate is standard and unmarked, and [...] our use of ‘beautiful’ as a moral predicate is not” (Kosman 2010, 350; cf. 346-347).

<sup>14</sup> “Plato’s argument at *Republic* 401b–403c that one’s taste for the *kalon* in poetry, music, and boys’ bodies shapes one’s sense of the *kalon* in human character is not persuasive unless there is some robust unity to the concept. The point is not so much that his argument is not in fact persuasive; the point is that it is hard to see how Plato himself could have thought it was persuasive unless he thought that *kalon* named something robust. Likewise for Aristotle: the comparison of the virtuous person’s delight in *kala* acts of virtue to the musically educated person’s pleasure in *kaloi* melodies (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a8-10) would hardly be worth making if *kalon* did not mean the same thing in both cases and point to a property more interesting than the merely commendable” (Lear 2010, 359-360).

<sup>15</sup> “Aristotle assumes that good musicians produce *kala* ‘melodies and rhythms’ (*Politics* 8.6.1341a14). No one could reasonably deny that *kalon* means ‘beautiful’ here. Aristo-



tempt to reconcile these uses, Aryeh Kosman proposes to read *kalon* within a “rhetoric of appearance”: *to kalon* is the appearance of the good (*to agathon*), the “shining forth of the thing’s nature” (Kosman 2010, 355), the manifestation of a thing’s “integrity of being” (354). Appearance refers here to that which is inherently subjective and intersubjective. Therefore, what is *kalon* is also that which is inherently desirable (Kosman 2010, 355-356; cf. Aristotle, *Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22). According to Kosman, *to kalon* and beauty both refer to the appearance<sup>16</sup> of virtue, but they have a different meaning, for the meaning of appearance has changed since antiquity and is now more sharply opposed to a thing’s being. Appearance, and thus beauty, but not *to kakon*, is skin-deep. Gabriel Lear extends this to say that *to kalon* is the appearance of *to agathon* that is inherently pleasing. But the notion of pleasure has also changed, which in antiquity was “practically meaningful,” while in modern philosophy it tends to be taken as non-representing (Lear 2010, 359). This may be particularly relevant for comparisons of the ethical import of pleasure in e.g. Aristotle and Kant (cf. Korsgaard 2008, 174-207). Rachel Barney, on the other hand, argues that *to agathon* and *to kalon* are closely related in meaning in that both refer to order (Barney 2010, 365).<sup>17</sup>

He was not deaf to the aesthetic appeal of music, and ‘beauty’ brings out that aspect of music better than any other word. Now, in the previous chapter, he had said that when one listens to musically accompanied words that portray ethical deeds, one learns how to correctly assess and enjoy ‘decent characters and *kalais* (dative plural of *kalon*) actions’ (8.5.1340a17–18). So, when one listens to musically accompanied words that represent the *kala* actions of good people, one undergoes an imaginative experience of something that is *kalon*. [...] For [Aristotle], beautiful music is beautiful in part because it is about actions that are *kala*. It would be implausible to suppose that here ‘*kalais* actions’ does not mean ‘beautiful actions’” (Kraut 2013, 236). Cf. the argument of Gottlieb, who notes that both Plato and Aristotle liken virtue to musical attunement: “Aristotle describes the person who has the virtue of mildness as being disposed meanly and not violently or slackly (sphodrôs kai aneimenôs, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.5.1105b25-28, Gottlieb 2010, 379). Cf. Plato, *Republic* 441e: “a god has given music and physical training to human beings, not, except incidentally, for the body and the soul but for the spirited and wisdom-loving parts of the soul itself, in order that these might be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to the appropriate degree” (trans. Grube/Reeve 1992, cited in Gottlieb 2010, 380).

<sup>16</sup> The term appearance denotes for Kosman primarily that which is apparent to the senses. As Lear 2010 points out, this may cause problems for his argument. However, one may take “appearance” in this characterization of *to kalon* in a wider sense to include mental perception of e.g. scientific proofs. Cf. Lear 2010, 360.

<sup>17</sup> A key passage for the argument linking *to kalon* with order is Plato’s *Philebus* 64, ff. Cf. Barney 2010; Gottlieb 2010, esp. 378; Meinwald 2008. Aristotle standardly couples order with magnitude as a necessary condition for being *kalon*: “A *kalon* animal and every



They are distinguished on the level of psychology, with *to agathon* being connected with desire and *to kalon* with admiration (Lear 2010, 360-362; cf. Gottlieb 2010, 379). *To agathon* is the object of desire, *to kalon* is the object of *eros*.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, the various uses of *kalon* may be collected under the heading of three general semantic components. These are: i) order ii) beauty, and; iii) praiseworthiness. Moreover, the three semantic components are not independent of each other. How they are connected is a contentious matter. It may be argued that one of them is primary in relation the two remaining.<sup>19</sup>

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*kalon* thing made up of parts must not only have them properly ordered (*tetagmaena*), but also be of a particular magnitude. The *kalon* is a matter of size and order (*taxis*), and therefore impossible either in a very small animal [...] or in one that is very large" (*Poetics* 7, 1450b34-39). In the *Metaphysics* 13.3.1078a31-b1 Aristotle makes the same point arguing that the unchanging objects of geometry are *kalon*: "The most important kinds of *kalon* are order (*taxis*), proportion (*summetria*), and definiteness (*hōrismenon*)". As Kraut notes, this is the reason that nothing can be added or subtracted from what is *kalon* without making it worse (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.1106b9-12; Kraut 2013, 234). In the sphere of ethics, it could be argued that the doctrine of the mean applies an analogous formalism to agency (cf. Kraut 2013, 234). Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 5.9.1309b23-24 on noses that are most *kala* for being straight.

<sup>18</sup> "A thing's being *kalon* is not a cosmetic supplement, a surface that is painted in; it is the shining forth of the thing's nature. The *kalon* is, then, not something in addition to the good, and so to speak on its surface. It is the mode of the good that shows forth; it is the splendor of the appearance of the good. The *kalon*, we might say, is the splendid virtue of appearance. So the argument I've proposed is finally a simple one. Beauty is a mode of the good, as the *kalon* is of the *agathon*. In this regard, the beautiful and the *kalon* are analogous modes of a general and catholic desirability" (Kosman 2010, 355).

<sup>19</sup> Irwin argues that Aristotle uses *to kalon* to denote distinct properties. *To kalon* is not equivocal but it is homonymous. It has a single reference, but multiple differing senses (Irwin 2010, 382). Not all *kalon* things are such because of a single property, particularly not because of beauty, the different senses of *kalon* share an essential core that implies the term should be translated uniformly. Irwin points to the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1122a34-23a17 where *kalon* is used to qualify balls, bottles, works of art, and the object of virtuous actions. Since these uses are close apart but suggest different senses, Irwin proposes the translation of *kalon* as "fine," which is unitary but wide enough to encompass the difference in nuance (Irwin 2010, 391). Kraut argues that there is always an aesthetic component to the meaning of *to kalon* including, crucially, ethical uses. Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169a26-29 that in performing virtuous actions the virtuous person gains *to kalon* which more than compensates for possible losses. Parsing *to kalon* in this passage as "fine" or some other abstract and general term is less than explanatory. Kraut argues that Aristotle's argument is best understood if one takes *to kalon* to mean beautiful. When Aristotle says that there are three kinds of choice worthy goods, namely the beneficial, the pleasant, and *to kalon* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.3.1104b30-31) it would be uninformative to parse *to kalon* here as praiseworthy, because that would leave the question of why such



This approach, however, is less than satisfactory in accommodating the above-mentioned arguments from analogous uses of *kalon*. A preferred approach would be to integrate the three semantic components in a unified semantic structure. As discussed above, this approach yielded an interpretation of *kalon* as meaning orderliness and fitness that is inherently manifested in beauty and which is for this very reason praiseworthy. This unity of the meanings of *kalon* does not preclude their variegated use as conditioned by specific contexts.

### The meanings of *aischron*

How does the unity of meaning and variety of uses of *kalon* bear on the meanings and uses of its negative counterpart, *aischron*? Indeed, there are far reaching parallels between the uses of *kalon* and *aischron*. As with *kalon*, *aischron* is the standard term denoting physical quality, in this case negatively (e.g. *Iliad* 2.216; Herodotus, *Histories* 1.196; Hippocrates, *De articulis* 16). It may mean physical discomfort as well as mental dissatisfaction (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 923; cf. Dover 1974, 71). It is also a key evaluative term, referring to what is base and shameful (*Iliad* 2.298; Aeschylus, *Septem* 685; Sophocles, *Electra* 621, 989; Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 476; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 511; Andocides 2.9; Plato, *Symposium* 183d; cf. Dover 1974, 70). Crucially, *aischron* is the strongest evaluative Greek term referring to actions. Actions thus qualified are on the whole not to be performed under the gravest of sanctions (Sophocles, *Ajax* 473; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.155, cf. also the examples below). As in the case of the various meanings of *kalon*, is difficult if not impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between these uses, and they are often employed interchangeably, as is the case e.g. in Plato's *Gorgias*.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore plausible to conclude that *aischron* covers the same semantic field as *kalon*, albeit with a negative valence: it is that which is disorderly and unfitting, physically repelling, and blameworthy.

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objects of choice are praiseworthy. It cannot be parsed as good or pleasant, on pain of repetition. Kraut does not argue against parsing it as "pleasant," and concludes that the passage does not tell against an aesthetic reading of *to kalon*.

<sup>20</sup> "I suggest that we think of Plato's *Gorgias*, a dialogue that highlights the opposition between the *kalon* and the *aischron*. It's easy to understand that opposition simply as an opposition between the beautiful and the ugly. But such a simple understanding overlooks a fact made clear in the *Gorgias*, the fact that the fundamental meaning of *aischron* has less to do with something's being ugly than with its being shameful. What the argument of the *Gorgias* reveals is that these concepts are together importantly situated in the register of honor and shame, and what this means more generally is that they are in the register of our appearance to one another" (Kosman 2010, 353; cf. Fine 2016).



In the Homeric epics *aischron* is the strongest term of reproach used of actions, denoting primarily failure: "It is *aischron* to remain long and return empty-handed" (*Iliad* 2.298; Adkins 1960: 33). This also implies public disapproval, denoted by the term *elencheiē* (cf. *Iliad* 2.284-88). The reference to failure is supported by the affinity between *aischron* action and the strongest term of denigration used of people, namely *kakos* (cf. also *ponēros* and *deilos*). The opposite of the *kakos* is the *agathos*, referring to the person endowed with "competitive excellences." It denotes especially men who "successfully exhibit the qualities of a warrior," who possess "wealth and social position," the resources enabling their success. The *agathos* is he who does not fail in his role as a leader and protector of his dependents, both in war and in peace. Thus, the strongest words of commendation in epic language denote men of success. Accordingly, as Adkins concludes, "the most powerful words in the language are used to denigrate those who fail" (Adkins 1960, 34). Therefore, the worst kind of action, denoted by the term *aischron*, refers to failure.

When used of people, the adjective in the masculine and feminine denotes primarily physical ugliness (Adkins 1960, 30-31).<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the neuter form of the adjective retains an aesthetic semantic component. However, *aischron* action is condemned not primarily for being unseemly or downright ugly, but for constituting failure. This is seen in that the term *kalon*, which in later texts functions as the standard negative counterpart of *aischron*, is not used as a term of commendation in reference to successful actions. In Homer *kalon* has a narrower meaning, referring to physical beauty and seemliness. If the aesthetic component was crucial for the force of these terms, then *kalon* would in Homer be as strong a term of commendation as *aischron* is as a term of condemnation; but it is not (Adkins 1960, 43-46). Nevertheless, in Homeric language there is a clear nexus between failure and ugliness/unseemliness, as seen in the term *aischron*, with the first trait being of primary importance and the second as its outward manifestation. The close association of ethical baseness and physical ugliness is apparent in the description of Thersites (*Iliad* 2.211ff). He is both a cantankerous curmudgeon, viciously malicious towards the *basileis*, and simultaneously described as grotesquely ugly and disfigured. He is explicitly called

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<sup>21</sup> *Aischron* is not the only term to qualify actions in Homer. Another, closely related term is *elencheiē*, which refers to the feeling of shame and public reproach incurred as a result of having committed an *aischron* action (Adkins 1975: 33). I do not discuss *elencheiē* because it lacks the aesthetic connotation of *aischron*, while it is not a primary term of reproach.



*aischistos*, which is revealingly ambiguous: it refers to Thersites as a whole, taking his ethical and physical features together (*Iliad* 2.216). The coupling of these two traits constitute the quality of meriting the strongest disapproval. Moreover, what is *aischron*, unseemly failure, incurs public reproach and thus the force of this quality is inherently bound with its intersubjective scrutiny.

The nexus of physical and ethical virtue is thus already present in the Homeric epics, but it becomes more robust and fortified in lyric poetry, especially that produced for or in a sympotic context. The affinity of psychic and physical features is apparent also in Tyrtaeus fr. 10, where *aischron* (as well as *kalon*) refer interchangeably to traits of the body and character. As in the case of Plato's *Symposium* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the ambiguity of these two terms appears to be exploited by Tyrtaeus self-consciously to argue his point (cf. Adkins 1960, 163-164). It is not that these terms are used equivocally; rather, they are variegated manifestations of a unified by a core semantic structure, which allows one to emphasize different components of their meaning depending on the requirements of argumentation and context.

The nexus of physical and ethical virtue is vividly expressed by the phrase *kalos kagathos*, denoting a person of a build character and physical beauty (Solon 1.38-39; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14, 4.4.10-13; *Symposium* 3.4, 8.3, 2.4; *Cyropaedia* 5.1.18; *Agesilaus* 11.6; Plato, *Republic* 3.401d-402a, 4.425de, 6.489e-490a). *Kalos* was a standard term of commendation of *erōmenoi* in pederastic relationships. It was standardly inscribed on vases awarded as gifts to *erōmenoi* by their *erastai* (cf. Dover 1989, 15-19, 57-60). Although it continued to be used as the highest term of commendation when used of actions and character, *kalon* possessed a strong aesthetic, indeed physical connotation, as is seen in the scholion cited by Plato in the *Gorgias* 451e: "you have heard, I suppose, people at parties singing the well-known song where they count up the best things: asserting that the greatest good is health, the next beauty (*kalon*), and the third, according to the author of the song, wealth honestly come by?" (trans. W. Hamilton). The phrase *kalos kagathos* did not always refer to a sublime ethical quality but had a concrete social meaning, denoting the high-born, occasionally in a derogatory context (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 8.48.6; Plato, *Republic* 9.569a). The phrase retained a strong physical connotation throughout Archaic lyric poetry up to the Classical period and beyond (cf. Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 145).

In post-Homeric sources *dikē* and (at least since Herodotus) *dikaíosunē* gain prominence as normative terms of commendation, which influences the valence of the established terms of greatest normative force, i.e. *kalon* and,



by extension, *aischron*. *Kalon* becomes assimilated to (though not identified with) *agathon* and, at times, *dikaion*, and, concomitantly, *aischron* becomes assimilated to *kakon*. Since *agathon* and *dikaion* lacked an aesthetic component, this assimilation resulted in a more marked distinction between the ethical and aesthetic uses of *kalon* and *aischron* (cf. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 475ff; Adkins 1960, 189). To be sure, *aischron* is still used in the older, Homeric meaning, denoting primarily failure and the shame thereby incurred, while intention and adherence to social norms is largely inconsequential (cf. Aeschylus, *Persians* 444ff; *Prometheus Bound* 959; *Libation Bearers* 345ff, 493ff). The Homeric meaning of *aretē* and *kalon* persists (cf. Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 6.9, 10.91), and at times *aischron* trumps *dikaion*, but this is arguably by now a usage contested by *dikē* and its cognates as the strongest term of condemnation (Sophocles, *Electra* 558ff; Euripides, *Orestes* 194, cf. Adkins 1960, 156, 185).

However, even when *dikē* and its cognates have become established as very strong, perhaps supreme terms of approval (and their negative counterparts as terms of reproach), they did not quite supplant *kalon* and *aischron* in this role. Rather, these two groups of terms are assimilated, as is seen in another scholion, this time cited by Aristotle: “justice is noblest (*kalliston*), and health is best, but the heart’s desire is the pleasantest (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a, trans. H. Rackham). This is also the case in Plato, who persistently argues that what is *agathon* is *kalon* and what is *kakon* is *aischron* (Barney 2010), and for Aristotle, who defines the *kalon* as the ultimate goal for ethical agency. Moreover, despite shifts in their meaning the affinity of the physical and ethical semantic components of these terms was never obliterated. Indeed, the Greeks were aware of this and self-consciously invoked physical qualities in their assessment of ethical standing. In the *Parmenides* 127b Plato refers to Parmenides of Elea as “beautiful and noble to look at” (*kalon de kagathon tēn opsin*). Beauty was notoriously a necessary condition of happiness for Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b3-4; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1123a34ff). Physical appearance could also be invoked as an argument in forensic oratory (cf. Lysias, *For Mantitheus* 19; Demosthenes, *Against Pantaenetos* 52).

It can be concluded that *aischron* comprises roughly the same semantic components as *kalon*, albeit with reversed valence. However, strictly speaking, *to kalon* and *to aischron* are not exact opposites, which is especially visible in the language of the Homeric epics. Moreover, although their semantic fields tend to converge in lyric and tragedy, as late as in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. Aristotle could argue that *to kalon* has various opposites. In the case of living beings (or a picture thereof) the equivalent of *ou kalon* is *aischron*, but in the case of



a house the equivalent of *ou kalon* is *mochthēron* (*Topics* 1.15, 106a20-22). On this basis Aristotle concluded that *to kalon* is homonymous. However, as Lear and Kraut argued, the homonymy of *to kalon* did not prevent Aristotle (or Plato) to invoke its different uses in arguments from analogy. Indeed, the two opposites of *to kalon* do not so much indicate that *to kalon* has a markedly different meaning from either *to aischron* (or *to mochthēron*), but that it can be applied in contexts where *to aischron* cannot: “[*k*]alon and *aischron* are contrary predicates of actions, whereas *agathos* and *mochthēros* are predicates of virtuous and vicious people, and *aretē* and *mochthēria* are applied to states of character. But the two terms do not seem to introduce radically different features of actions or people” (Irwin 2010, 383; cf. *Topics* 1.15, 135a12-14).

Nevertheless, the fact that an *ou kalos* house is *mochthēros* rather than *aischros* does reveal something about the meaning of the latter term. Since *kalon* means both “orderly and fitting” and “beautiful,” an *ou kalon* living being or house may be either disorderly, ugly, or both. Yet the use of different terms of negation in these two cases indicates that in each a different property is negated. It is more likely that in the case of an artefact with a clear functional purpose such as a house the property that is negated is its usefulness rather than its outward appearance. This is corroborated by the general meaning of the term *mochthēros*, which may be used of things, particularly man-made ones, being in a state of dereliction (cf. e.g. Aristophanes, *Knights* 316 of an ox; Plato, *Menexenus* 91e of clothes or shoes; Demosthenes, *Against Phormion* 8 of trade).<sup>22</sup> However, if *mochthēros* is the negation of the functional component of the meaning of *to kalon*, this suggests that *aischron* corresponds more closely to the aesthetic component. This is not to say that *aischron* always means ugly—that this is not the case has been amply demonstrated by the passages analyzed above. It does imply, however, that if an aesthetic component is inherent in the meaning of *to kalon* as the strongest Greek term of approval, this component is even more prominent in the meaning of *aischron*, the strongest Greek term of disapproval. As with *kalon*, the functional and aesthetic meanings of *aischron* are never clearly separated. When an action or agent is qualified as *kalon*, it is commended as both orderly and fitting as well as aesthetically pleasing. The same obtains, with reversed valence, when an action or agent is qualified as *aischron*. However, in the latter case it is plausible to expect the aesthetic component to be more conspicuous.

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<sup>22</sup> However, the case is not as clear-cut as scholars would perhaps like it to be, since *mochthēros* may at times be used of negative physical qualities (e.g. Andocides, *On the mysteries* 100), thus approximating the meaning of *aischros* as “ugly.”



### Greek popular ethics and modern moral philosophy

*Kalon* and *aischron*, the strongest Greek terms of approval and reproach referring to actions and agents, cover a complex semantic field, which contains a functional, aesthetic, and ethical component. *Kalon* refers primarily to order and appropriateness to a given purpose; this quality has its outward manifestation in physical beauty or seemliness; and, taken together these two features merit social approval. Accordingly, *aischron* refers primarily to disorder and inappropriateness to a given purpose; this quality has its outward manifestation in physical ugliness and unseemliness; and, taken together these two features merit social reproach. Crucially, *kalon* and *aischron* are standardly used in their various meanings side-by-side in the span of a single passage without indication that their meaning has shifted substantially. Indeed, their functional, aesthetic and ethical components are intimately intertwined, reciprocally coloring their respective meanings. It is now time to draw some conclusions from these results.

*Aischron* satisfies the fundamental requirement for a narrow concept of evil, namely it constitutes the strongest negative evaluative term referring to actions and agents. It is further required for it to refer to a distinct moral domain. This would seem to be corroborated by the ethical semantic component of *kalon* and *aischron*. However, as was argued above this component is never self-standing but rather co-depends on the remaining two semantic components, the functional and aesthetic one. It is this nexus that weakens the case for *aischron* being the Greek equivalent of a modern narrow concept of evil.

The functional semantic component implies that *kalon* and *aischron* do not refer to distinct properties but rather different degrees of a thing's possessing a single property, since order and disorder are opposite ends of a single scale. From this follows that the qualities denoted by *kalon* and *aischron* are commensurable, which is not ordinarily the case for evil and goodness.<sup>23</sup> In particular, an action or agential trait may be *aischron* in a given context but *kalon* in another. Moreover, the functional semantic component refers more accurately to what modern moral theories denote by the term badness, although it extends widely beyond this to strictly non-moral uses. In particular, contrariwise to the concept of evil, badness may qualify both actions and agents as well as inanimate objects and natural states. This is also true of *aischron*, which is commonly used of negatively valued physical traits with no apparent ethical relevance.

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<sup>23</sup> But it may be true for badness and goodness, cf. The essential inseparability of goodness and badness in Plato's *Theaetetus* 176bd.



The aesthetic semantic component poses perhaps an even greater difficulty for reading *aischron* as a narrow concept of evil for no less than two reasons. Firstly, in its aesthetic meaning *kalon* and *aischron* refer to that which is perceptibly attractive or repulsive. The benchmark of being qualified as aesthetically *kalon* or *aischron* is a sensation of joy or pleasure, misery or suffering. A modern narrow concept of evil, however, being a kind of moral wrongness, is ordinarily taken to consist in a breach of a moral norm. As such it is at least compatible with the presence of a sensation of joy or pleasure, particularly on affective theories of evil. Moreover, the sensation involved in the *kalon* and *aischron* is non-discursive: it is an immediate psychosomatic response to a sensory stimulus.<sup>24</sup> The concept of a moral norm needs not preclude the presence of a non-discursive sensation concomitant to the enactment or breach of a moral norm. However, the presence of a non-discursive sensation cannot be the reason for determining whether the norm has been enacted or breached. If it were so, the norm would cease to be the paramount reason for moral agency that is capable of trumping all possible non-moral incentives. Given these two reasons, the aesthetic component of *kalon* and *aischron* appears as a particularly striking feature of Greek ethical thought which distances it from modern moral philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

The functional and aesthetic semantic components of *aischron* are serious obstacles for reading this concept as an equivalent for a modern narrow concept of evil. The *aischron* is not a strictly moral property but an indication of disorderliness manifested in physical ugliness that is inherently reproachable. Given that *aischron* was the strongest negative evaluative term used of actions and agents it may thus be argued that popular Greek ethical thought lacked such a narrow concept of evil altogether. Indeed, it has been often argued that the conceptual categories of modern moral philosophy are inherently maladapted to the normative outlook of ancient Greek ethics. A fundamental reason for this might be that while the former is crucially

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting, however, that for the Greeks, more so than in modern approaches, aesthetic sensations retain a greater amenability to rational analysis, as seen in Plato's *Philebus*.

<sup>25</sup> As Kosman remarks: "Think of the fact that for Plato and Aristotle alike the moral sphere is governed by a principle so clearly cousin-german to the beautiful. And when we recall that it has a foundation, shared by the *kalon* and the beautiful alike, in the faces of the young and fair, we will recognize this principle as specifically erotic—rooted in what we are attracted to. We may then find ourselves inclined to think that the moral theories of Aristotle and Plato alike are essentially informed by their allegiance to a notion of the good rooted in what we are attracted to rather than to a notion of the good rooted in a concept of the right" (Kosman 2010, 356).



concerned with developing a scheme for determining the moral value of single acts, the latter focuses on the valuation of the ethical agent as considered in a broad psychological, social, and biological context.<sup>26</sup> It is this broad notion of the ethical agent that the semantically complex terms *kalon* and *aischron* are specifically suited to characterize. While they do refer to ethical traits narrowly conceived, they concomitantly signal functional and aesthetic features that, albeit less straightforwardly moral, are equally relevant to the valuation of the agent's broad ethical condition. A *kalos* agent, rather than being narrowly moral, is better taken as a mentally and physically skilled, beautiful individual, the object of their community's praise. The *aischros* agent, as a negative counterpart, encompasses an equally broad semantic spectrum. From this distinctly Greek perspective, the preoccupation with sharp evaluative distinctions, which modern moral philosophy excels at, gives way to concern for the agent as enmeshed in the contingencies of life:

It is hard for a man to become truly *agathos*, four-square in hands and feet and mind, wrought blameless. Nor does the saying of Pittacus seem to me to be well said, though it was uttered by a wise man. He says it is hard to be *esthlos*. Only a god could have this privilege. For a man it is impossible not to be *kakos* if irresistible disaster overtakes him. For when he fares well, *eu prattein*, every man is *agathos*, but *kakos* when he fares badly, *kakos*. Accordingly, I will not seek for what is impossible and throw my share in life fruitlessly away on the vain hope of finding a man without blame, among those of us who enjoy the fruit of the broad earth; but if I find him I will tell you. I praise and make my friends anyone who does nothing *aischron* of his own free will, *hekon*; but against necessity even the gods do not fight" (Simonides, Bergk 5, cited in: Adkins 1960, 165; cf. Wolf 1988).

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<sup>26</sup> "The Greeks, as is shown by the writings of the elegiac poets, and even earlier by Homer, were wont to lay much more emphasis on the characteristics of the approved type of man and his excellence, the *agathos* and his *arete*, than on those of his individual actions" (Adkins 1960, 179-180, cf. 70ff). This central feature of "eudaimonism" has been discussed by numerous authors. Cf. Bayertz 2005; Swanton 2003; Audi 1995; Nussbaum 1995, 1993; Annas 1992; Broadie 1991; Williams 1985; Foot 1878; Anscombe 1958. It could be argued that the formality of *kalon* and *aischron* is also correlated with the particularism of Greek ethical thought, namely that what is appropriate to do cannot be precisely determined beforehand, but depends on the person's assessment of a given situation and his or her individual character (cf. Zingano 2013; MacDowell 2009, 1998). The aesthetic component of *kalon* and *aischron* may indeed entrench the particularist reading of Greek ethical thought, in that it emphasizes the subjective aspect of ethical valuation.



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**Krzysztof Mech\***

## ***The Master and Margarita:* Satan, Savior from Evil**

### Abstract

The countless interpretations of *The Master and Margarita* emphasize the most disturbing thought for the readers. This is an amazingly simple and moving truth: from the clutches of the Soviet Empire which destroys the Master only Satan can release him. The Master's saviour is the spirit of evil. In this article I would like to show Bulgakov's rich and ambiguous topography of evil, then to expand view of the topography of good.

### Keywords

*Master and Margarita*, Good, Evil, Godsend

I have returned once again to the great book *The Master and Margarita* to learn that my fascination with Mikhail Bulgakov will not easily go away. My previous reading of the work was developed in a dissertation that tracked the storyline of extraordinary events witnessed by the residents of Moscow. The arrival of Woland, and his entourage, at the capital of the Soviet Empire

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had caused supernatural events to drop down as if from out of a sleeve, triggering a provocative question: what does this all mean? Supernatural powers have become part of the life of Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz—the editor of a literary monthly and the literary association of Moscow Massolit’s chairman of the board—who was not accustomed to seeing unusual phenomena (необыкновенным явлениям [...] не привык). The following characters of the novel, after having met Woland, are irrevocably called on to explain the meaning of the extraordinary events they had witnessed. I would like to just add that the strategies of coping with the supernatural present in Mikhail Afanasyevich’s novel have been questioned by Margarita’s true, faithful and eternal love for her Master, a love greater than all theories and intellectual constructs combined.

My return to this literary work, which is not only great but also especial, in order to think about the problem of evil this time, is therefore an involuntary proof of an unflagging infatuation which I am willing to admit to, and which I would like to share with the readers. Paraphrasing the words of master Bulgakov, I want to call out loudly again: Follow me, reader, follow me and I will show you the “leaven of the truth” about Bulgakov’s vision of evil. Let us put into motion the hermeneutic circle by moving between the whole and fragments of the work so as to gain impetus—and momentum is necessarily needed here—so that the textual world will show us the entire richness of Bulgakov’s topography of evil.

By putting the hermeneutic circle into motion, I am going to evoke a widespread belief regarding the whole work. The countless interpretations of *The Master and Margarita* emphasize the most disturbing thoughts of the readers. This is an amazingly simple and moving truth: the clutches of the Soviet Empire had been destroying the Master by means of literary mediocrities, informers, and other appropriate services, from which only Satan, named in the novel as Woland, can free him. The Master’s savior is the Lord of Darkness, the spirit of evil. The evil that saves! Bulgakov himself leads us to this intriguing non-obviousness, placing the satanic words from Goethe’s *Faust* into the motto of his book: “That power I serve which wills forever evil yet does forever good.”

It is amazing that the Prince of Darkness and his entourage come to help the Master, and not the good and omnipotent God. Let us stop and examine his assistants. “The satanic company [...] small, mixed and simple-minded (общество, [...] небольшое, смешанное и бесхитростное)”, consists of a cat-Behemoth: giant like a hog, black as soot or a raven, a trickster entertaining Woland, and also the demon-page whom the narrator calls the great-



est jester that there has ever been; then Koroviev-Fagot: a mocking Magus and wizard, the self-proclaimed 'Woland's translator,' who is also a funny scoffing regent of the church choir and a knight with a dark unsmiling face. The rude Azazello belongs to Woland's entourage as well: the perfect, sometimes brutal executioner of Woland's commands, a demon of the waterless desert and a murderer-demon too. Finally, Hella: a beautiful witch and vampire, furthermore, she is most often naked and promiscuous, Woland's servant with a scar on her neck.

In order to consider—I am not afraid to say so—the widely used interpretation of the novel that treats evil as a power that ultimately does good, one must ask the question: what are Bulgakov's powers of evil and what is the infirmity, if you can say so, of good? Before we take this particular idea of substituting good for evil, and their confusion, we will take a closer look at the powers of evil. Let us try first to introduce Bulgakov's rich and ambiguous topography of evil, so as to expand our view on the topography of good. The powers of evil remain in multiple dependencies; they struggle with each other creating a dynamic area, which is governed by a specific logic. The space of good creates a completely different logic. Only by clarifying these two areas will we be able to ask the question about what happens when good meets evil.

The first step is related to the question 'where does the evil reside in the novel?' Let us add that by pointing to the subsequent "places" inhabited by evil we will inevitably be led to an answer to the question: what is the power of evil that has rooted itself in such a place?

### **Evil Has Many Names**

I would like to point out three areas related to the dwelling of evil. The first is the evil of a communist totalitarian system; I would like to define the second one as the area of the evil of human weaknesses. The third area has its own specific address. From a certain Wednesday, which is also the Wednesday of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the spring month Nisan, evil inhabits Moscow flat No. 50 at 302a Sadovaya Street.

1) Let us start with systemic evil. The novel of Bulgakov is penetrated by omnipresent fear, whose source is the kingdom of evil—the communist Leviathan. An internally coherent system that takes its own logic of horror is revealed before us here; a system from which there is no escape. Evil, which penetrates the Soviet State, manifests itself throughout its state services and agencies, militia, secret agents, prosecutors, informers, and unquestioning



supporters. The communist system, its totalitarian oppressiveness, brutally penetrates all aspects of human life, leaving no sphere neutral, free of threats, safe, and providing relief. The constant threat of search, arrest, disappearance, deportation, but also death dispensed by the punishing hand of proletarian “justice,” is present. The events in Moscow are shrouded by an atmosphere of omnipresent fear of negative possibilities. Anyone can be accused because anyone is a potential rebel against authority. It is a constant threat of danger too real to forget, lurking behind every knock on a door or ring of a bell, in each face of passersby. Bulgakov excellently, although for his own security in a veiled way, reveals the atmosphere of terror prevailing in the Soviet Empire in the late twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. Mass arrests in the thirties intensify the atmosphere of widespread fear. The search by militia at Bulgakov’s house, the confiscation of the diary he was writing, the arrest of his erudite friends, the travel ban from going abroad, the loss of jobs, or the constant uncertainty of tomorrow are only a part of the rich range of measures which the totalitarian state used against him and his friends.

Let us take a closer look at those fragments of the work that indirectly reveal the ominous effect of the structure of collective horror, a systemic evil that squeezes into the tiniest recesses of human life. Here is the first meeting of Margarita with Azazello: Margarita, sitting on a bench and looking at a funeral procession with the body of Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz, is approached by a stranger. Responding to his comment that he was sent to her “on a certain case,” she replies with the question: “Have you come to arrest me?” In the unpublished version of the book, the appalled Margarita asks: “Are you from the GPU?” (Государственное Политическое Управление при НКВД РСФСР, ГПУ НКВД РСФСР—State Political Administration of the NKVD; it is a political militia before which every citizen of the Soviet Empire trembled). Another fragment, which is the opposite of the story above, is also worth mentioning. When, after Satan’s retreat, Margarita returns with her recovered Master to the basement of a house in one of the alleys near Arbat, an intruder appears looking for Aloysius Mogarych, a snitch informing the state on the Master in order to take his flat. When responding to the question of the uninvited guest: “Aloysius—are you there, Aloysius?,” Margarita lies: “Aloysius [...] was arrested yesterday” and then asks: “Who wants him? What’s your name?” The terrified intruder disappears immediately.

In *The Master and Margarita*, disappearances and arrests, often unsubstantiated, are bread and butter. The curse of disappearing tenants vexes subsequent owners of the ill-fated flat No. 50 at 302a Sadovaya Street. At the



beginning, the first tenant taken by a “polite militiaman” disappears from the flat of a jeweler called de Fougère, Anna Frantzevna; after two days, the second tenant, named Belomut, does not come back. Subsequently, the following people disappear: citizen Belomut’s wife, then Anna Frantzevna, the owner of the apartment, and finally her trusted servant Anfisa. The flat is searched for diamonds and sealed.

There are more arrests in the novel. Let us recall the character Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi, the chairman of the tenants’ association, arrested not for bribery (he accepted a bribe from Koroviev), but for possessing dollars. Bulgakov burned a fragment of his book concerning the interrogation of Bosoi for fear of repression after the arrest of a family friend and playwright, Nikolai Erdman. The description of the arrest was replaced with Bose’s dream, which was used, in a metaphorized form, to describe the scene of interrogation of black-market money changers. It should be added that Timothy Kondratievich Kvastsov was also detained. His voice was used by Koroviev to denounce the chairman of the block committee.

The arrest replaces the witness’s summons for interrogation. All those who could in any way be responsible for the scandalous performance at the Variétés theater were arrested. Stepan Bogdanovich Likhodeyev, the director of the Variétés theater, while returning from Yalta after sending him to go to the devil by Azazello, is arrested by the militia at the airport. Another detainee was Kitaitsev, the director of the programs department of the Theatrical Commission, who “swore by all the saints” that he did not know anything about Likhodeyev’s relationships with Woland. The militia also came for Prokhor Petrovich, the chairman of the Entertainments Commission. The financial director of the Variétés—Grigory Danilovich Rimsky was also arrested. He fled to Leningrad after being nearly killed and sent to the after-life by Hela—a corpse with dark spots on her chest—and by the theater administrator Ivan Savvelich Varenukha, who was transformed into a vampire scout. The financial director was found by the militia in Leningrad, arrested and questioned, and then escorted in a guarded wagon to Moscow. The militia also arrested Varenukha. Nikolai Ivanovich, the tenant of the house where Margarita lived, did not escape arrest as well. He was a man with a face resembling a pig and came to Satan’s rout in the role of a hog. Even the meticulous “modest and calm” chief accountant of the Variétés theater, Vassily Stepanovich Lastochkin, was arrested because he brought an income from the box office to the Commission for Theatrical Spectacles and Light Entertainment. Finally, Anna, called the Plague, was arrested; she spilt the sunflower oil on which Berlioz slipped, who was run-over by a tram.



The only person called for interrogation at the headquarters of the NKVD at Lubianka, in a matter of great emergency as you may imagine, was a high ranking official, an honorary guest at Woland's performance, the chairman of the Moscow Theaters Acoustics Commission, Arkady Apollonich Sempleyarov. Everybody not arrested after meeting the satanic entourage was forcibly placed into the psychiatric clinic of Professor Stravinsky. Let us add that the forcible displacement of people, who were problematic for the Soviet authorities, into psychiatric hospitals was an often-used practice. Such methods were used both in the times of Bulgakov and after World War Two.

The evil of the communist monster shows its menacing face as a universal snitching system. The symbolic figure who represents this system of spying is Baron Meigel, whose is tasked with invigilating foreigners. Another shady character is Aloysius Mogarych. All we know about Mogarych is that he befriends the Master only to report on him (that he holds, among other things, illegal literature). After Master arrest Mogarych finally takes over his flat. The character of the block committee chairman named Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi, whom Woland calls a "sly rogue," is also worth recalling. The duties of people performing such a function were to follow residents and report on them to relevant services.

Systemic evil is also revealed as the overwhelming power of communist ideology that permeates the entire novel. This irreligious ideology has its followers and promoters. Above all, it has its own guards which were mentioned before as the institutions and functions related to culture: the directorate of the Variétés theater, the Moscow Theaters Acoustics Commission, the Commission for Theatrical Spectacles and Light Entertainment. They constitute an ideological sieve which serves to filter out contents that do not meet the politically correct ideological requirements. According to the ideological sieve, there is no magic—everything must be explained through the action of natural forces. During Woland's group's magic show at the Variétés theater, ideological purity had been guarded by the announcer George Bengalsky who had demanded the demystification of the magic used during the performance. The playbill mentions the total unveiling of magic; Ivan Savvelich Varenukha also expected its unmasking when claiming that the magic show "is a very smart move. All the fun is in showing how it is done—how the mysteries are unmasked."

Let us recall the beginning of the novel, the conversation between the poet Bezdomny and Berlioz, the editor of the literary monthly and also the chairman of Massolit, one of the largest literary associations of Moscow. The conversation about the anti-religious poem about Jesus written by Bez-



domny has the style of propaganda instruction; it is about how to describe the character of Jesus. Bezdomny "painted" Jesus "in very black colors," but unfortunately, he showed him as existing, contrary to the prevailing propaganda view that the character of Jesus is a "mere invention, pure myth."

Finally, the key motif of the novel: an overwhelming ideological machine destroys the Master. Here is a brief description of the path of destruction. The oppressive sequence of events leading to the destruction of the Master begins with the refusal to publish his entire work. The publication of only a fragment of his book evokes the fury of the supporters of anti-religious propaganda. The writer Mstislav Lavrovich demands a merciless crackdown on pilatism and its hack writer. The critic Ariman calls the Master an "enemy under the editor's wing," who "had tried to drag into print an apologia for Jesus Christ." The Master mentions that it is nothing compared to what the critic Latunsky wrote in the article "A Militant Old Believer." This article was followed by more attacks on the Master, reinforcing his fear of being arrested. Then, a mental illness has appeared and a terrifying fear of the tentacles of an agile and cold octopus that creeps straight into the heart of the Master. This is the symbol of the loop of the system of evil, entwining and tightening its grip around the Master, which ultimately dooms him. The loops of evil are: attacks in the press, denunciations, the arrest of the Master, his three-month deferment to prison, kicking him to the curb and then his homelessness in January and the frostbite of the toes of his left foot; finally, mental illness and a stay in the psychiatric clinic of Professor Stravinsky. The typical methods of censorship and destruction used by the Soviet system against writers, whose creative work did not fit into its ideological scheme, were applied to the Master.

2) I call the second type of evil the evil of defect. *The Master and Margarita* can be read as a symphony on human weaknesses, written for many voices. Moscow is a spoiled city. A particular comment on this issue is captured by Woland's words spoken in the Variétés theater: "Well, now, replied the magician reflectively. They're people like any others. They're over-fond of money, but then they always were [...] Humankind loves money, no matter if it's made of leather, paper, bronze, or gold. They're thoughtless, of course [...] but then they sometimes feel compassion too [...] they're ordinary people (the Muscovites—KM), in fact they remind me very much of their predecessors, except that the housing shortage has soured them [...]" In this way, Bulgakov took the liberty of using a veiled criticism of the housing situation in Moscow at that time; some families often lived in one flat, and shared a kitchen and bathroom. Let us draw only one conclusion from



this subtle assessment of human nature. The residents of Moscow were depraved beyond the norm.

Bulgakov leads us through the events in Moscow, from one place to another, never forgetting to describe human frailties. There are so many examples that I shall mention only some of them without a detailed description. Here they are: 1) the greed of the audience of the Variétés theater, 2) the coquettish lewdness of the lady encountered in her flat by Bezdomny during his pursuit of Woland, 3) the quarrelsomeness of the neighbors in one of the Moscow tenement houses. The tenants were overheard by Margarita during her flight over the city, 4) the thievery, adventurism and gossiping of Anna the Plague, 5) the drunkenness of a lover of bodily pleasures—Likhodeyev, the director of the theater, a man about whom it is said in theatrical circles that he is not a “bouquet of violets,” 6) the belligerence of Prokhor Petrovic, the chairman of the Entertainments Commission (the institution of censorship is hidden under this name), all too often evoking the powers of hell, and who also has an affair with his secretary; additionally a liar (doing nothing, he explained to Koroviev that he was busy and could not see him), 7) the ignorance of the poet Bezdomny, 8) the union of Massolit writers is a union whose members allocate various types of benefits to themselves, a group of people focused on entertainment and the struggle for privileges, 9) the cunning and slyness of Maximilian Andreyevich Poplavsky, Berlioz’s uncle employed at the planning office, 10) the boorishness and monstrous stinginess of the Varétés theater barman, Andrei Fokich Sokov, 11) the nepotism and affection for women of the chairman of the Moscow Theaters Acoustics Commission, Arkady Apollonich Sempleyarov, 12) Ivan Savyelich Varenukha’s, a surly and arrogant wriggler, tendency to lie. It is impossible to forget about the most severe defect manifested, not in Moscow, but in Jerusalem; the defect that has reached Pilate and that he will never forget—cowardice. Let us recall Judas who betrays Yeshua Ha-Notsri, and also Niza the desired woman of Judas Iscariot who betrayed him. Finally, I would like to mention the shady figure of Arthanius.

3) It is time to turn to the demonic powers of evil, which—as Anna says—are located at flat No. 50 on the fourth floor in the house at 302a Sadovaya Street. What do we know about the evil forces that prevail in Moscow? We know that they move freely in time and space, have insight into human consciousness, and have knowledge about the recesses of the human soul. They are immortal forces that cannot be killed or arrested; they bring the power to influence the human world with them, affecting the fate of individual protagonists, causing large-scale damage. The presence of the



demonic forces in Moscow is “really a terrible thing! Besides four gutted buildings and hundreds of people driven out of their minds, several people had been killed.” Woland and his entourage uphold complete freedom of unlimited action in Moscow. Their powers are greater than the power of the communist state and its services. The powers of the state system of evil do not compare to the Dark Lord and his band. Let us recall only the unsuccessful attempts of the state’s services to arrest the entire gang, to kill Koroviev and Behemoth or the repeated attempts to capture Woland.

### **Fighting within the Area of Evil-What Happens to the Bad?**

We are primarily interested in the dynamics of mutual relations in the area of evil outlined above. Let us start with the relationship that connects systemic evil with the evil of human frailties. An organized system of evil preys on human frailty, it accuses and enslaves through fear. Józef Tischner in his *Philosophy of Drama* showed that authorities in the totalitarian state accuse and condemn using fear and deceit. Accusation does not exclude anyone; everyone is in danger because everyone is a potential rebel. At the same time, systemic evil tempts and lures. It is an invitation to participate in power and lures with the benefits connected with it, but it also absorbs those who succumb to it by making them its one of own tools. That is why systemic evil is founded in human weaknesses. What would the ominous power of the Communist Leviathan be without a whole crowd of beneficiaries of the system, agents or informers who succumb to its sinister charm? The literary critic attacking the Master, the man who reports on him, or another person who comes to arrest him—all these people are drawn in by systemic evil, becoming messengers of the kingdom of evil; people are like the cold tentacles of the octopus that the Master had dreamed about, as emerging from the system of evil that entwines the poor wretch.

What does the third power bring to the world of evil powers? The answer is found in one word—war; this is a war of evil with evil. The demonic powers of Woland and his entourage clash with both the powers of the totalitarian state and the evil of individual human frailties, and more accurately they strike at a horrendous alliance; the alliance of the organized system of evil that accuses and lures with the evil of those who let themselves be drawn into the system, succumbing to fear and temptation. It has been emphasized many times before that the demonic powers of Woland’s band dispense justice in the hearts of those for whom systemic evil prevailed the most. The penalty remains roughly in proportion to the fault, the bigger



the fault the greater the punishment. Baron Meigel was killed directly by the hands of Asasello at the great Satan's Rout; the Lord of Darkness calls him an "eavesdropper and spy," a man who is "spying and eavesdropping as much as he could." Woland is, I am not afraid to say so, like a god of justice who punishes human weaknesses. The Prince of Darkness does not lead to temptation (this systemic evil threatens and also tempts), but punishes according to the logic of justice founded on the dependence between the extent of guilt and the severity of the punishment.

The demonic powers clash with the kingdom of evil not only by dispensing justice to its human tentacles. Evil forces, by destroying the order created by the totalitarian power, reveal its weakness. The powers of the kingdom of evil, which for good reason arouse fear among people, are completely powerless against the Mage's group. Further attempts to crack down on Woland's band do not end in success, but in a fire, which arouses a smile on the reader's face. It is worth mentioning that fires and destruction have a symbolic nature in the novel; fire is a symbol of purification (that is how the fire in the Master's flat should be understood), or it is a symbol of punishment (for this reason the house of Griboyedov, which is the seat of Massolit, is burned); fire also destroys the store which exchanges foreign currency. Flames also engulfed the flat No. 50 at 302 Sadovaya Street, which previously became the place of Woland's residence.

The actions of Woland and his entourage, revealing the impotence of the totalitarian power, simultaneously strike at the ideological order of the state founded on an irreligious vision of the world. The ideological interpretation is founded on a naturalistic paradigm according to which supernatural, extraordinary powers that could violate the natural order of the world is questioned. Everything that happens in the world has natural causes. The point is that the presence of Woland and his entourage in the capital of a totalitarian state, among the people subordinated to the communist system, is a brazen challenge to the belief that there are no things and events in conflict with the materialistic understanding of the world.

We cannot ignore the fact that the demonic powers of evil save the ingenious Master from the oppressive hands of the totalitarian monster; the system took his own name away from him, brought a sea of sufferings to him, and ultimately pushed him into schizophrenia. When the Prince of Darkness brings back Margarita to her beloved Master and he finally appears in the infamous apartment number 50, Woland comments his condition using only one sentence, important for these analyses: "they fixed him good (erо хорошо отделали)." The power of the Lord of the Darkness is confirmed by



Margarita's words, which she uttered after she has recaptured the Master, that is when her Beloved was sleeping in their tiny apartment in a small room and she read a manuscript of the Master's work: "Nothing vanished, the all-powerful Woland really was all-powerful and Margarita was able to leaf through the manuscript to her heart's content, till dawn if she wanted to, stare at it, kiss it and re-read the words."

Could Woland, the Lord of the Darkness, be a god of justice who does not do good involuntarily (like Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*), but in accordance with the rules of justice, no matter how it is interpreted? The thesis suggested by the question is not completely unreasonable. At least one premise supports it. Let us recall it now! One of the tentacles of the systemic octopus is the literary critic with the nonaccidental name Ariman, who calls the Master an "enemy under the editor's wing," mentioned above. There is nothing accidental in Bulgakov's novel. Does it not reveal to us a composite of religious and philosophical ideas, which Mircea Eliade calls "the Manichaeism tendency" (Eliade 1984, 257), when considering it as an integral part of European spirituality? The name Ariman refers to dualistic Gnosticism that recognizes the world as a place of struggle between the powers of good and the forces of evil. Ariman, the supreme deity of darkness, appears in Mazdeism. In the religion that Mani preached, the Prince of Darkness, the god of evil, bears the name Ariman who from the beginning co-existed, without being mixed, with the good god of light. The battle between good and evil begins when desire is born. Ariman, the ruler of darkness, seeing how wonderful the light is, had the desire to have it. The powers of darkness from below forced their way up, beginning the cosmic mingling of good and evil. From that moment on, two gods would fight for world domination. The pessimistic vision of the world included humans ruled by the Prince of Darkness, and is connected with the hope that the particles of light imprisoned in the material world would eventually be released and return to the Father of Light. The powers of darkness would be separated again by an impassable limit from the Light. Let us add, in passing, that from the days of Irenaeus, Christianity fought with the dualism of Hellenistic Gnosticism by proclaiming the existence of the only one omnipotent God as the creator of heaven and earth.

In the novel *The Master and Margarita* the critic Ariman is not a god of evil but he is "on duty", serving the systemic powers of evil. Could it be that Woland and his entourage were at god's service, if not to the god of good then at least to the god of justice?



## The Name of Good

The answer to the question above has a preliminary condition. We must first ask where, in the novel by Bulgakov, good resides and what it ultimately is.

1. Where does good reside? The first answer is as follows: good, overwhelmed by systemic evil, seems to be absent. Good resides in heaven. This is not a joke. The good God is like *deus otiosus* (passive god—Latin). In the history of religious studies, a concept emerged that announces, in some religions, the existence of the idea of a uranic god who has become withdrawn and does not interfere in the affairs of this world. Bulgakov's good and omnipotent God is like the heavenly *deus otiosus*, the absent creator of the world and legislator who is not an object of worship and who is invoked only when the greatest misfortunes and catastrophes happen. The absence of a good God in Moscow is so radical that it is confirmed by silence. The motif of the absent God is explicitly voiced, not in Moscow, but in Jerusalem during the execution of Yeshua Ha-Notsri. Matthew the Levite demands from the omnipotent God the shortening of the suffering of Yeshua by sending immediate death to him. A lack of response provokes Levite's protest directed at the silent weak God:

'I curse you. God!' In a hoarse voice he shouted that God was unjust and that he would believe in him no more. 'You are deaf!' roared Matthew. 'If you were not deaf you would have heard me and killed him in the instant! [...]' He shouted that his faith was ruined, that there were other gods and better ones. No other god would have allowed a man like Yeshua to be scorched to death on a pole. 'No, I was wrong!' screamed the Levite, now quite hoarse. 'You are a God of evil! Or have your eyes been blinded by the smoke of sacrifices from the temple and have your ears grown deaf to everything but the trumpet-calls of the priests? You are not an almighty God! You are an evil God! I curse you. God of robbers, their patron and protector!'

The first manifestation of goodness is therefore its weakness and absence. But what about the second?

2) Here is the second answer: the good is called Yeshua Ha-Notsri. He is a man "who had never done anyone the least harm in his life;" moreover, he claims that there are no bad people. Additionally, it is worth comparing the declaration of Yeshua, that all people are good, with the words of Jesus from *The Gospel According to Mark*. Jesus, after hearing the words "Good Teacher" addressed to him, answers: "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone" (Mk, 10, 17-18). Let us go back to Yeshua Ha-Notsri. The thing is that "a philosopher proclaiming peace," as Pilate called him, when nailed to the cross on Mount Golgotha, gives a special testimony to



mercy when, just before his death, he asks for water for his companion of torture, Dismas: "Yeshua turned aside from the sponge. He tried to make his voice sound kind and persuasive, but failed and could only croak huskily. 'Give him a drink too'". Let us say this firmly. One should not equate Yeshua Ha-Notsri with the Jesus of the New Testament. Yeshua is not a divine Logos, a Messiah, incarnate God, etc. [...] Bulgakov's Yeshua is cleansed from the tiniest traces of divinity, stripped of the aura of holiness. There is no denying that he is an *example* of mercy. It reminds us of Józef Tischner interpretation of Pelagianism. In his interpretation of the Pelagian doctrine, humans finds in themselves the ability to free themselves from the clutches of evil. The only thing that they need is a good example. Such an example of mercy is Bulgakov's Yeshua, a man who did no harm to any other person.

The example of mercy finds its followers in the novel. Mercy comes to the fore during the performance at the Variétés theater. After Behemoth cut off the head of the announcer, George Bengalsky, a voice comes from the theater hall, it becomes an initiation of the acts of mercy:

'For God's sake stop torturing him!' a woman's voice from a box suddenly rang out above the turmoil and the magician turned towards the sound. 'Well, ladies and gentlemen, shall we forgive him?' asked Faggot, turning to the audience. 'Yes, forgive him, forgive him!' The cries came at first from a few individual voices, mostly women, then merged into a chorus with the men. 'What is your command, messire?' Faggot asked the masked professor. 'Well, now,' replied the magician reflectively. 'They're people like any others. They're over-fond of money, but then they always were [...] Human-kind loves money, no matter if it's made of leather, paper, bronze or gold. They're thoughtless, of course [...] but then they sometimes feel compassion too [...] they're ordinary people, in fact they remind me very much of their predecessors, except that the housing shortage has soured them [...]' And he shouted the order: 'Put back his head.'

Margarita gives testimony to mercy twice. For the first time, when she does not demand, as a reward for being present at Satan's rout, the return of her Master. Margarita demands that the kerchief with a navy-blue border should not be delivered to a certain Frida every day. The unfortunate woman suffocated her child with this kerchief in the forest, pushing it into its mouth. Not only the deed of Margarita is important for our deliberations, but also Woland's reaction:

'So there only remains one thing—to find yourself some rags and use them to block up all the cracks in my bedroom.' 'What do you mean, messire?' said Margarita, puzzled. 'I quite agree, messire,' interrupted the cat. 'Rags—that's it!' And the cat banged its



paw on the table in exasperation.' 'I was speaking of compassion,' explained Woland, the gaze of his fiery eye fixed on Margarita. 'Sometimes it creeps in through the narrowest cracks. That is why I suggested using rags to block them up [...]'

Margarita's second act of mercy is connected with Pilate, chained to a rock and tormented by insomnia for hundreds of years because of his cowardice, who repeats that he cannot find any peace. Let us recall the conversation of Margarita and Woland:

'Twenty-four thousand moons in penance for one moon long ago, isn't that too much?' asked Margarita. 'Are you going to repeat the business with Frieda again?' said Woland. 'But you needn't distress yourself, Margarita. All will be as it should; that is how the world is made.' 'Let him go!' Margarita suddenly shouted in a piercing voice, as she had shouted when she was a witch.

Good shows itself in acts of mercy. It is solely the work of human beings. However, it should not escape our attention that, in the novel by Bulgakov, mercy which "will sometimes come into the heart of man" is not a gift of a good God. Silence is God's weakness. It is fulfilled as the absence of divine mercy. God does not save from evil. God's mercy is missing not only in the world; it is not even in the "heart of man". The silence of God means the absence of the gift of grace, which is to do good. The human ability to do good can only be strengthened by the "power" of a good example.

### **Goodness (Mercy) and Demonic Evil in Relation with Each Other**

So, what is the relationship between good, which is mercy, with demonic evil? Here is the powerless mercy which lacks the force needed to actively oppose evil—it is unable to fight against evil; at the same time it acts in accordance with the order of good that never compels to but appeals to freedom, it gives a good example. In the face of such goodness, the demonic powers of Woland remain in a relationship that is not so much that of hostility but rather that of a respectful dislike. Mercy and the demonic forces of justice apply the principle of not getting in the way. Woland does not fight against mercy, but he clogs up the cracks with rags so that mercy does not get into the places where the demonic powers of justice rule. Where there is room for mercy, there is no room for justice.

By contrasting the mercy of Yeshua Ha-Notsri and his followers with the justice of the Prince of Darkness and his entourage, we involuntarily recall Hellenistic Gnosticism, this time in the version of the anti-Semite, Marcion.



Marcion's dualism is founded on the opposition of the Old Testament God Yahweh, the creator of the world and also the God of Law and Justice, and the evangelical good God of the New Testament who is love. The good God sends his Son the Redeemer. Yahweh, deprived of mercy, avenges himself on God's Son by handing Him over to the persecutors. Humankind, which was redeemed by the Son, still continues to be oppressed, under the rule of the Creator God of the Old Testament.

The difference is however fundamental. Woland does not attack mercy. In the novel by Bulgakov, the demonic powers of justice and the weakness of mercy coexist separately in their own worlds, they do not exceed the boundary that delimits the jurisdiction of each party. The conversation between the Lord of Darkness and Matthew the Levite—the messenger of Light, is a kind of confirmation of such an interpretation of their mutual relations. During this conversation, the fate of Margarita and her beloved Master is settled:

Then something made Woland turn his attention to a round tower behind him on the roof. From its walls appeared a grim, ragged, mud-spattered man with a beard, dressed in a chiton and home-made sandals.

'Ha!' exclaimed Woland, with a sneer at the approaching figure. 'You are the last person I expected to see here. What brings you here, of all people?'

'I have come to see you, the spirit of evil and the lord of the shadows' the man replied with a hostile glare at Woland.

'Well, tax-gatherer, if you've come to see me, why don't you wish me well?'

'Because I have no wish to see you well' said the man impudently.

'Then I am afraid you will have to reconcile yourself to my good health' retorted Woland, his mouth twisted into a grin.

'As soon as you appeared on this roof you made yourself ridiculous. It was your tone of voice. You spoke your words as though you denied the very existence of the shadows or of evil. Think, now: where would your good be if there were no evil and what would the world look like without shadow? Shadows are thrown by people and things. There's the shadow of my sword, for instance. But shadows are also cast by trees and living things. Do you want to strip the whole globe by removing every tree and every creature to satisfy your fantasy of a bare world? You're stupid.'

'I won't argue with you, old sophist', replied Matthew the Levite.

'You are incapable of arguing with me for the reason I have just mentioned—you are too stupid' answered Woland.

The powerless mercy that appeals to freedom seems helpless before the powerful forces of the systemic leviathan, yet it is not threatened by the demonic powers of justice. It must be said, with surprise, that Woland's attitude towards the Kingdom of Light is amazingly passive. The demonic forces



do not only not attack the area under the jurisdiction of mercy, but what is more, Woland permits acts of mercy. This was the case in the Variétés theater; it was also the case when mercy “has rooted” itself in Margarita’s soul. As if that was not enough, in the extremely unfriendly conversation between Woland and Matthew the Levite, the point is not for one side to defeat the other, but only to acquire mutual recognition. Levite’s stupidity consists in proclaiming that it is possible to have light without darkness.

The war takes place between Woland and the communist system of evil. It must be noted, however, that the demonic powers of Woland do not violate the foundations of the organized system of evil. Woland wins the battle, but he does not win the war. The destruction of an organized system of governance, which was performed by the Magus and his entourage, was limited in scope. As the narrator says: “Years passed and people began to forget about Woland, Koroviev and the rest. Many things changed in the lives of those who had suffered at the hands of Woland and his associates, and these changes [were—KM] minor.” These relevant fragments of the novel show, properly and unfortunately, that everything has returned to the systemic standard. The totalitarian system has done a lot to make it happen. Few traces of transformation for the better (e.g. Varenuška does not lie talking over the phone. He also gains immense popularity and widespread recognition because of his kindness) have little importance.

And yet there is still hope. The dominion of systemic evil is not the last chapter of the human story. The above observation suggests that the novel by Bulgakov has a trace of deformed messianic hope; moreover, only in a rudimentary formulation that does not make a clear and explicit idea. But it is true. I think that hope in the times of an evil system’s reign is only an aberration in relation to the “natural” order of this world; it is an order that governs itself with the logic of mercy. Here are the words of hope that Woland directs towards Margarita: “Everything will be as it should be, that is how the world is made (Все будет правильно, на этом построен мир).”

While writing this text, apart from the original text, I used the English translation of Michael Glenn (Published by Collins and Harvill Press, London 1967) and four available translations in Polish by: a) Irena Lewandowska and Witold Dąbrowski, b) Andrzej Drawicz, c) Leokadia Anna Przebinda, Grzegorz Przebinda and Igor Przebinda, d) Barbara Dohnalik. Quoting the excerpts from the book, I used Michael Glenn’s translation. I made changes, based on my own accountability, where necessary.



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Kimberly Young\*

## Ivan Karamazov's Euclidean Mind: the 'Fact' of Human Suffering and Evil

### Abstract

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky addresses the problem of how to reconcile God's goodness with the evil in the world by comparing the metaphysical implications of Ivan Karamazov's and the Elder Zosima's Euclidean and non-Euclidean epistemologies. For Ivan, the moral opposites of good and evil cannot be reconciled, just as two parallel lines cannot meet (Euclid's fifth postulate). For Zosima, the symbol of the crucifix represents a meeting of the parallel lines and the moral opposites.

### Keywords

Dostoevsky, Evil, Suffering, Euclidean Reasoning, the Crucifix

The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Solzhenitsyn [1973] 2018, 75

Vladimir Kantor argues that Fyodor Dostoevsky, like Saint Augustine of Hippo, believed that the individual, not God, is to blame for the evil in the world (2011, 14). Although Dostoevsky places moral responsibility upon individuals for their capacity to perpetrate evil, via Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky challenges the moral goodness of a God that would allow the suffering of children. In a letter to his friend Apollon Maikov, Dos-

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toevsky wrote, "The main question which will run through all the parts of the novel is the question that has tormented me either consciously or unconsciously all my life—the existence of God" ([1870] 1987, 331)<sup>1</sup>. Through Ivan Karamazov, Dostoevsky tests the idea that if God exists, God's essence is flawed (Kaladiouk 2006, 424). Indeed, in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky deploys all of his creative power and offers a monumental *pro et contra* to the question of God's existence and the problem of evil, framing this exploration through epistemologies associated with Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries.

Ivan Karamazov is the champion of a Euclidean worldview. Ivan reasons that if God created the world, he did so according to Euclidean geometry. According to Euclidean geometry the two parallel lines cannot meet, even in eternity. This serves Ivan's argument that the moral opposites of good and evil cannot be united. The suffering of even one child must prevent eternal harmony (the parallel lines from meeting). In a letter to N. A. Lyubimov Dostoevsky wrote of Ivan Karamazov, "My hero chooses an argument that, *in my opinion*, is irrefutable—the senselessness of children's suffering—and from it reaches the conclusion that all historical reality is an absurdity" ([1879] 1987, 465; emphasis original). Indeed, Ivan concludes that, God is not good, and people are not good (they ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), and that all reality is an absurdity and an "offensive comedy" of suffering unto death (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 235). Believing there to be no answer to the why of evil (according to his Euclidean reasoning), Ivan answers: why not? If there is no immortality (an eternal harmony which would justify suffering and evil), then 'everything is permitted.'

I argue that an understanding of Dostoevsky's engagement with Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry can provide Dostoevsky readers with a greater insight into Dostoevsky's understanding of good and evil through the intersections he explores between spatial and moral perspectives of reality in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed, although Dostoevsky does not provide an answer to the why of evil and suffering, he exposes the limitations of Ivan's moral imagination. Ivan Karamazov can find no adequate theodicy to the why of evil and suffering because he adheres to the Euclidean presupposition of a three-dimensional spatial reality in which the parallel lines (good and evil) can never meet. On the other hand, the Elder Zosima believes in a multiverse of interpenetrating spatial realities akin to those

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<sup>1</sup> Although Dostoevsky was referring to the unwritten novel, *The Life of a Great Sinner*, he transferred many of the ideas and themes of his intended novel to *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as *Demons*.



proffered by non-Euclidean geometry. For Zosima, the only way to alleviate the inevitability of suffering and evil in the world is through individual moral responsibility represented by the symbol of the crucifix (the heroic individual suspended between the moral opposites). I argue that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a non-Euclidean epistemology upholds the primacy of individual freedom, moral responsibility and the possible reconciliation of the moral opposites, while a Euclidean epistemology becomes aligned with limitation, lack of moral responsibility and evil.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, Ivan Karamazov is one among Dostoevsky's ideologically driven characters who "stress[es] the idea of the limited and defective nature of human beings, man's inability to bear the burden of freedom, his negative drive toward self-limitation and self-destruction—toward an end" (1981, 281). For Bakhtin, it is Dostoevsky's demonic characters who are possessed by evil impetuses that adhere to a finalising (and therefore limiting) approach to reality. Indeed, this impetus is made explicit by Ivan's devil who expresses a desire to embody a finite and definitive (Euclidean) form, rather than remain an  $x$  in an indeterminate (non-Euclidean) equation. Steven Cassedy has argued that characters who attempt to embody an absolute or finalised self "free of the presupposition that moral absolutes exist" fail to do so because they are "mere fleshy being" (2005, 130-150). Characters such as the underground man (*Notes from Underground*), Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*), Stavrogin and Kirillov (*Demons*) along with Ivan Karamazov, are driven by a desire to go beyond or collapse good and evil by embodying super human forms; attempting to escape limitation and contingency via a psychological leap. For Yuri Corrigan, the attempt to escape the self through cerebral activity or the need to colonise the thoughts and ideas of the other, "serve as a foundation for Dostoevsky's developing psychology of evil" (2019, 229). Corrigan argues that "rational thought is most often complicit in the phenomenon of evil as the confabulator of ideological disguises for the fear of inwardness" (2019, 241). Such is the case with Ivan Karamazov who admits to his younger brother Alyosha, that by sticking to the rational 'facts' of Euclidean geometry, he is alleviated of the burden of attempting to understand the metaphysical implications of a non-Euclidean geometry.

Indeed, in a conversation with his younger brother Alyosha Karamazov, Ivan employs the language and motifs of Euclidean geometry as the framework for his argument against "reasoning from another world" which would justify the evil and suffering on earth (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 238). Throughout the novel, Ivan maintains his epistemological position as a 'Eu-



clidean' because the homogeneity of Euclidean space serves Ivan's argument against the possibility of non-Euclidean spatial realities and their attendant ontological and metaphysical implications (the parallel lines would meet/good and evil could be reconciled). Euclidean space is two or three-dimensional and consists of plane surfaces where curvature everywhere is less than zero. On plane surfaces, parallel lines cannot meet (Ravindran 2007, 26-27). Non-Euclidean geometry differs from Euclidean geometry only where the fifth postulate (the parallel postulate) is concerned. In curved spaces (elliptical, spherical or hyperbolic) the parallel postulate is violated, and parallel lines can intersect in such spaces, or, to put it more accurately, the very notion of parallel lines ceases to exist (Torretti 1978, 104-105)<sup>2</sup>. János Bolyai and Nikolai Lobachevsky were the first mathematicians to independently explicate a non-Euclidean variant to Euclid's universally accepted axioms, but it was Carl Fredrich Gauss, a friend of Bolyai's father, who first propounded (though never published) non-Euclidean postulates (Torretti 1978, 50). Gauss was reluctant to explicate a non-Euclidean geometry given that he believed that human understanding was unable to comprehend the essence of space stating, "I am ever more convinced that the necessity of our geometry cannot be proved, at least not *by*, and not *for*, our HUMAN understanding. Maybe in another life we shall attain insights into the essence of space which are now beyond our reach" (Gauss qtd. in Torretti 1978, 55; emphasis original). Dostoevsky would also come to view the metaphysical implications of a non-Euclidean geometry in a similar light.

Dostoevsky first encountered Bolyai-Lobachevskian geometry when he read Hermann von Helmholtz's article, 'The Origin and Meaning of Geometrical Axioms' in which Helmholtz engages with Bernhard Riemann's analytical geometry (Riemann was a student of Gauss) (Brookes 2013, 24).

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<sup>2</sup> Roberto Torretti wrote,

We usually assume that space has three dimensions and, if this turns out to be wrong, space will have four, five or another integral number of dimensions. By contrast, empirically verifiable hypotheses concerning the metric relations of space are necessarily imprecise, and they can hold only within a certain range of experimental error. Thus, the statement that space is Euclidean, that is, that its curvature is everywhere exactly zero, is not admissible as a scientific conjecture [...] This conclusion, unstated by Riemann but clearly implied by his remarks, has considerable importance, for the geometry of a manifold is non-Euclidean—either spherical or BL [Bolyai-Lobachevskian]—once its constant curvature deviates ever so slightly from zero [...] [this anticipates] Einstein's theory of gravitation, of a four-dimensional space-time manifold, whose curvature changes from point to point at the macro-physical level (1978, 104-105).



In his article, Helmholtz rejects the unchallenged instrumentality of Euclidean geometry as the only model for conceptualising space. Helmholtz argues that, “geometrical axioms must vary according to the kind of space inhabited” (1876, 305). By way of example, Helmholtz imagines how a surface/plane-dwelling being (as opposed to a sphere-dwelling being) would determine what the shortest or straightest line between two points would be. For the surface/plane-dweller this line would be straight or geodetic, for the sphere dweller, an arc of a great circle. The surface/plane-dweller would understand the concept of infinite parallel lines extended over their two-dimensions; the sphere-dweller would know nothing of parallel lines because any two straight lines of a certain length, would eventually cut, at least at one point if not two (Helmholtz 1876, 305). Helmholtz imagines multiple and distinct spatial realities (he also refers to elliptical or pseudo-spherical space) and considers the significance of how those who inhabit these spaces would conceive of their worlds. The notion that the term ‘parallel lines’ would not occur to the sphere-dweller indicates a qualitative ontological difference in how they would view their world compared to that of the surface/plane-dweller. Alexander Brookes argues that Dostoevsky “subsumed the philosophical implications of non-Euclidean geometry into his ontological beliefs concerning the existence of God and the structure and nature and laws of space in the universe” (2013, 24). Like Helmholtz, Dostoevsky identified that a non-Euclidean geometry could have profound significance on how people perceive space and reality.

Throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov adheres to a Euclidean reasoning. By sticking to empirical fact within an enclosed space-time manifold, Ivan would elide the contradictions and paradoxes of divine or metaphysical concepts by limiting his horizons of meaning to the finite, flattened planes of (a literal and symbolic) Euclidean space. Ivan argues that within a purely Euclidean space, any theodicy or justification for suffering and evil must be logically absurd to a mind created to understand the concept of three dimensions only. Dostoevsky believed that Ivan’s argument against God was irrefutable. In the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha in the chapters ‘The Brothers Get Acquainted’ and ‘Rebellion,’ Ivan establishes a position of reasoning grounded in the axioms of Euclidean geometry which, from the outset, dismisses theodicies on logical grounds. Robert Wharton suggests that Ivan rejects four familiar theodicies: that “sufferings are just retribution for ‘the sins of the fathers,’” that suffering is justified by the future punishment of oppressors, that suffering is the inevitable consequence of our knowledge of good and evil and the price of our moral



freedom and finally, that all suffering will one day be redeemed in a future, eternal harmony (1977, 570-571). Not one of these theodicies can account for or justify the suffering of innocent children, and if they can, Ivan does not want eternal harmony at such a price. For Ivan “the problem of theodicy is in practice insoluble to the human (“Euclidean”) mind” (Kantor 2011, 17). He cannot understand the why of evil and suffering, arguing that he was not created with a mind to do so. Ivan says to Alyosha:

There are some philosophers and geometers who doubt that the whole universe and the whole of being is created purely in accordance with Euclidean geometry and even dream that two parallel lines could meet in eternity, which is impossible according to Euclidean geometry. If I cannot understand even that, then it is not for me to understand about God. I humbly confess that I do not have the ability to resolve such questions, I have a Euclidean mind, an earthly mind, and therefore it is not for us to resolve things that are not of this world. And I advise you never to think about it, Alyosha my friend, and most especially about whether God exists or not. All such questions are completely unsuitable to a mind created with a concept of only three dimensions (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 235).

Ivan reasons that if he cannot understand how non-Euclidean geometers could proffer that two parallel lines could meet in eternity, it is not for him to understand God; likening the impossibility of evil and good being reconciled with the inconceivability of two parallel lines meeting in eternity. Ivan’s need for a theology of immanent justice undergirds his Euclidean argument against “reasoning from another world,” reasoning which is incomprehensible to the “human heart here on earth” (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 238). Ivan argues that if the world is created according to three dimensions only justice, not forgiveness, must be the law of the world.

Ivan uses the spatial image of the parallel lines as a metaphor to indicate the incompatibility of God’s love and mercy with the world God created: a world in which children are tortured as a prerequisite for eternal harmony is not a world created by a good God. Ivan declares, “[l]et the parallel lines even meet before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet, and still will not accept it” (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 236). Ivan drives this point home by cataloguing a series of historical anecdotes of the suffering of children beginning with the image of Turkish soldiers impaling infants before their mother’s eyes, to the last example of a young house-serf torn apart by dogs in front of his mother for accidentally injuring his master’s (the General’s) favourite dog. In the *Notebooks* for the novel, Dostoevsky explicitly connects the impossibility of the mother forgiving the General with the Euclidean axiom that parallel lines cannot meet (Dostoevsky [1879] 1971, 72).



Ivan was to ask Alyosha, "Can you accept the fact that the parallel lines will meet? Can you understand how a mother can embrace the general and forgive him?" (ibidem). Ivan even goes so far as to assert that the mother has no right to forgive the General, even if the child themselves did. No one can forgive the General on the child's behalf, not even Christ. Ivan wants retribution here and now on earth and not "somewhere and sometime in infinity" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 244). Just as Ivan anticipates that he would not accept the non-Euclidean meeting of the parallel lines even if he were to see it, Ivan cannot accept the suffering of children even if he were to witness the redemption of suffering in some future, eternal realm.

Ivan wants to believe that God exists and that his essence is good and that his Euclidean reasoning is limited, yet, for Ivan, suffering is an insurmountable 'fact' and one that undermines any notion that God is good. Ivan confesses to Alyosha that he desires that the "offensive comedy" of human suffering would disappear "like a pitiful mirage, a vile concoction of man's Euclidean mind" (235). He wants to believe that at the world's finale something will be revealed to allay all anguish, redeem humanity and which will justify everything that has happened, but he cannot believe because he cannot accept the 'fact' of the suffering of children. Ivan admits to Alyosha, "I don't understand anything [...] and I no longer want to understand anything. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I wanted to understand something, I would immediately have to betray the fact, but I've made up my mind to stick to the fact..." (243). By sticking to the fact, (what is empirically observable) Ivan confronts Alyosha with an irrefutable argument by which he rejects the world God created. Because Ivan is convinced that no adequate theodicy exists, he removes God from the conceptual place he occupies as Sovereign and collapses theodicy into moral permissibility. Indeed, although Ivan attempts to establish an apodictic argument against God based on the suffering of the world, his own Euclidean ontology allows suffering to be permissible, according to the laws of determinism. Ivan says to Alyosha, "I know that there is suffering, that none are to blame, that everything flows and finds its level" (244). Yet, under the aegis of determinism, no one is responsible for that suffering, "and that, to his [Ivan's] mind, would amount to the betrayal of the suffering of the individual, or in his words, to being 'false to the fact'" as Anna Schur Kaladiouk points out (2006, 428).

Indeed, Ivan can no more accept human suffering as a prerequisite for a future eternal harmony, than he can accept the moral implications of determinism (Kaladiouk 2006, 428). Hence, Ivan's doctrine, 'everything is



permitted,' is a lie.<sup>3</sup> Despite proffering a doctrine of moral relativism, Ivan cannot logically dismiss the real dichotomy and distinctions that exist between good and evil. The fact that Ivan does not ground his doctrine in causality or the laws of determinism points to his lingering concern with morality. For, "[k]nowledge of morality, of good and evil, presupposes the presence of alternative possibilities for action in a given situation—means capacity for conceptualization of alternative ideals, towards which behavior can be devoted" (Peterson 1999, 305). Indeed, it is clear that Ivan has formulated a hierarchy of moral values based on real distinctions he makes between good and evil. Ivan identifies evil as a real force and one that resides within each person, telling Alyosha that, "[t]here is, of course, a beast hidden in every man, a beast of rage, a beast of sensual inflammability at the cries of the tormented victim, an unrestrained beast let off the chain" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 241-242). He knows that there are people who are "possessed by an aesthetic that makes art of terror and pain" (Peterson 1999, 309), those who find beauty in the ideal of Sodom, as his elder brother, Dmitri Karamazov, points out. Yet, despite acknowledging human capacity for evil, Ivan also tells Alyosha that he believes that none are to blame and are therefore not responsible. Evil is a problem which Ivan lays squarely at God's feet.

In lieu of an answer to the why of suffering, Ivan collapses the moral valuation with which he rejects the world God created, into moral relativism declaring 'everything is permitted.' Ivan's doctrine, 'everything is permitted,' is a butchered version of the Apostle's Paul admonition to the Corinthians, that "[e]verything is permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial" (1 Cor. 6:12, 10:23 NIV). By appropriating the first part of Paul's admonition only, Ivan abandons the caveat "not all things are beneficial," Paul's warning against the abuse of moral freedom under the aegis of God's grace. Paul's admonition occurs in two separate places in his first letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 10:23, the context of Paul's admonition concerns the freedom of the believer to eat and drink whatever they want (hitherto forbidden in Jewish law) so long as they are not seeking their own good alone, but that of others. Paul indicates that each person should listen to the inner-

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<sup>3</sup> After the encounter with his devil, Ivan is reduced to a fevered, unconscious state and Alyosha intimates that if Ivan wakes, he must choose to believe in an ideal which holds the Good and truth above the rational fact of suffering or else be left with the moral nihilism which has caused his psychological collapse. Alyosha says, that "He [Ivan] will either rise into the light of truth, or [...] perish in hatred, taking revenge on himself and everyone for having served something he does not believe in" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 655; ellipsis original).



workings of their own conscience, for the free working of conscience is the believer's freedom. The other context of Paul's admonition appears in 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul's disquisition on sexual immorality. In this excerpt from his letter to the Corinthians, Paul argues that the body is holy and a member of the body of Christ (the Church) and therefore should not be used for sexual promiscuity. Once again, Paul draws attention to the believer's freedom and moral agency with the caution that although God's forgiveness and grace frees us from sin, not every action is beneficial for our spiritual development. Paul uses the example of sexual union with a prostitute as an example in which moral permissibility is not beneficial for the spiritual health of the believer. Considering the biblical origin of Ivan's butchered doctrine of moral permissibility, by abandoning Paul's caveat in the formulation of his doctrine, Ivan proffers a credo of moral promiscuity; it can be wed to any ideology to serve as a justification for any action/crime.

In the interview between Ivan and his devil, the devil traces the ideological formulation of Ivan's doctrine to a poem which Ivan wrote as a young man called 'Geological Cataclysm'. In the poem, Ivan proffers that in the future a new phase of human evolution would begin with the death of the idea of God. Ivan maintains that if the idea of God is destroyed, humankind's former love of God would be replaced by a love of humankind. Ivan says, "Once mankind has renounced God, one and all (and I believe that this period, analogous to geological periods, will come), then the entire old-world view will fall of itself" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 648). Ivan likens the collapse of the old-worldview to a geologic, tectonic restructuring that displaces the old moral topography (the idea of God and immortality). In place of God, mankind would rise up and be exalted with the "spirit of divine, titanic pride, and the man-god will appear" (649). In the vein of Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*) and Kirillov (*Demons*), Ivan asserts that for the person who is capable of stepping over the idea of God and immortality, as well as their conscience, everything is permitted; for such a person has become the man-god. Ivan concludes that "[t]here is no law for God! Where God stands—there is the place of God. Where I stand, there at once will be the foremost place [...] 'everything is permitted'" (ibidem). Ivan assumes that God is unlimited and unbounded in his power and therefore beyond morality. Like Kirillov, Ivan believes that if there is a God then God's will is the highest, but if there is no God then Ivan's will is the highest. Based on this belief, Ivan would destroy the idea of God in order to reify his self-will as the highest and become the man-god, to whom everything is permitted. Ellis Sandoz argues that "in the dreamworld of the superman, everything prohibited in the real world is



permitted, and the lie in the soul can be both believed and disbelieved simultaneously [...] the lie being that the 'I,' the reified self-will is the sum total of existentially relevant being *even if* the 'Thou' is real" (1964, 366). The idea that the individual, reified 'I' can surmount the idea of a *causa sui* God can only be sustained as a fantasy, a lie or a delusion. Where God as the highest thought transcends time and space and the individual, time and space are the limits of Ivan's Euclidean man-god. Hence, it is only in the dreamworld of the man-god that the reified 'I' is the sum total of meaning and being.

Dostoevsky maintained that the fullest expression of the 'I' was paradoxically to overcome the 'I,' not through nihilistic self-destruction, but through love for others and the whole of creation. Theosis (divine union) via the kenotic model of Christ, forms the basis of the Elder Zosima's non-Euclidean response to Ivan's Euclideanism. After the death of his first wife, Maria Dmitrievna, Dostoevsky wrote:

To love a person *as one's own self* according to the commandment of Christ is impossible. The law of individuality on earth is the constraint, 'I' is the stumbling block. Christ alone was able to do this, but Christ was eternal, an eternal ideal toward which man strives and the laws of nature should strive. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ, as the *idea of man incarnate*, it became as clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual should attain precisely the point (at the very end of his development, at the very point of reaching the goal) where man might find, recognise, and with all the strength of his nature be convinced that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I*, to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly (Dostoevsky [1864] 1973, 39).

Dostoevsky believed that the reified and isolated self-will, relentless in its desire to contain and control, was the enemy of the moral life. The *I* becomes the boundary and limit of its world and thus space (symbolically speaking) becomes closed and homogenous (Euclidean). To overcome the isolation and separation which characterises the reified will (ego), an emptying of the will (kenosis) is necessary, an action which Dostoevsky believed Christ was able to perform. In her article 'Dostoevsky and the Kenotic Tradition' Margaret Ziolkowski points out that

[t]he notion of kenosis is based on a statement made about the incarnation of Christ by Paul in Philippians 2: 6-8: 'His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself (*ekenosen*) to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross' (Jerusalem Bible) (2001, 32-33).



Where Ivan's man-god would transcend good and evil by relativising or collapsing the distinction between the two, the God-man Christ unites the moral opposites on the cross.

Indeed, Alyosha says to Ivan that Christ is the one being who has the right to forgive everything, "forgive all *and for all*, because he himself gave his innocent blood for all and for everything" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 246; emphasis original). Christ, ostensibly innocent, took upon himself humanity's evil ("he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree"—1 Peter 2:24 ESV). By embodying both good and evil and voluntarily suffering at the centre point of the moral opposites, Christ nailed to the cross (the crucifix) represents a bridge between the moral opposites (Jung [1954] 1995, 76). For Carl Jung, the crucifix is a symbol of great psychological importance to the individual who would seek to integrate the darker aspects of their psyche (the shadow) into their consciousness, rather than deny its existence (as Ivan denies his devil). Jung asks:

How can absolute evil be connected and identified with absolute good? It seems to be impossible. When Christ withstood Satan's temptation, that was the fatal moment when the shadow was cut off. Yet it had to be cut off in order to enable man to become morally conscious. If the moral opposites could be united at all, they would be suspended all together and there could be no morality at all. That is certainly not what synthesis aims at. In such a case of irreconcilability the opposites are united by a neutral or ambivalent bridge, a symbol expressing either side in such a way that they can function together [...] the *Crucifixus* is the symbol uniting the absolute moral opposites" (ibidem).

The cross represents a meeting of the parallel lines (good and evil) and is a symbol of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which is the source of revelation that destroys and redeems (we put to death the evil within us when, imitating Christ, we are crucified with him) (Peterson 1999, 299). Although the revelation of the cross/tree represents the destruction of humanity's unconscious, prelapsarian state of being, we could not have become self-conscious as moral agents without such knowledge. To eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is to become like God and when we bear the burden of the cross (our dual nature) voluntarily, we, like Christ fixed to the cross the "archetypal individual, crucified, suspended and tormented, manifest for all eternity [our] identity with God" (Peterson 1999, 297).

The burden placed on the postlapsarian individual (a burden which Ivan's Grand Inquisitor alleviates by taking away the freedom of the people over which he rules) is the consciousness of evil and suffering; a suffering



which cannot be alleviated by the mental leap of Ivan's man-god, but through accepting contingency. Suffering is the valley of the shadow of death, the knowledge of our contingency unto death, but we need not fear it as evil ("Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" Ps. 23:4 KJV). Indeed, philosopher Iris Murdoch contends that "[a] proper understanding of contingency apprehends chance and its horrors, not as fate, but as an aspect of death, of the frailty and unreality of the ego and the emptiness of worldly desires" (1992, 107). For Jung, suffering is the "torture of having to endure the world in all its reality. This is the cross he has to bear, and he himself is a cross. The whole world is God's suffering, and every individual man who wants to get anywhere near his own wholeness knows that this is the way of the cross" ([1958] 1995, 59). The way of the cross is to willingly bear the burden of our dual nature, along with the certainty of suffering and death; it is also to lay down our will following the kenotic model of Christ. If, however, we cannot bear the consciousness of evil and suffering in the world, the cross as a symbol of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, can destroy us. If the Tree of Life (which is also the cross) is not planted in our soul when evil and suffering inevitably confront us, we are yet nailed to a cross by affliction (there were two crosses either side of Christ's); quivering "like a butterfly pinned alive to a tray" (Weil [1950] 1998, 54-55).

For philosopher Simone Weil, if the individual can remain oriented towards love when the nail of suffering and affliction is (inevitably) driven through their soul, they will find themselves "nailed to the very centre of the universe [...] "[i]n a dimension which is not spatial, and which is not time, a totally other dimension, the nail has pierced through the whole of creation, through the dense screen which separates the soul from God" ([1950] 1998, 55). When the point of intersection of the nail of affliction in the soul, is also the point of intersection between the two branches of the cross, the soul experiences, like Christ, the multi-dimensional unity of all love, suffering and good and evil which extends beyond a purely Euclidean space, across all times and spaces (ibidem). Indeed, for Zosima, to the soul which is oriented towards Christ in love, "all things are good and splendid, because all is truth" (Dostoevsky [1880] 1990, 295). Zosima maintains that through Christ, union between God, mankind and all creation was made possible and that all creation grow in goodness through contact with the infinite and divine worlds of God.

Zosima's non-Euclidean response to Ivan's Euclidean reasoning is ultimately couched in the union of the moral opposites via love (theosis). Zosima is able to perceive



an undifferentiated unity that extends laterally without exception, connecting each individual to all other manifestations of existence. Included are not only all other people but vegetable life and inanimate objects (rocks and soil) as well. The union also extends vertically to join all forms of existence to God (Anderson 1986, 120).

Zosima's epistemology is non-Euclidean insofar as he senses that there is a higher world/space and reality beyond three-dimensional space and linear time which can be analogised as the multiple spatial realities proffered by non-Euclidean geometry. Although Dostoevsky acknowledges that evil is insoluble to the Euclidean mind and that the suffering of children is an 'irrefutable' fact of existence, via Zosima, Dostoevsky offers the reader of *The Brothers Karamazov* a non-Euclidean spatial and moral perspective of reality that offsets the senselessness of the suffering and evil in the world.

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Virgil W. Brower\*

## Hyde within the Boundaries of Mere Jekyll: Strange Cases of Evil in Kant & Stevenson

### Abstract

This essay experiments with Kant's writings on rational religion distilled through the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as canonical confrontations with primal problems of evil. It suggests boundaries between Stevenson's characters and their occupations comparable to the those conflicted in the Kantian university, namely, law, medicine, theology, and philosophy (which makes a short anticipatory appearance in his earlier text on rational religion). With various faculties it investigates diffuse comprehensions—respectively, legal crime, biogenetic transmission, and original sin—of key ethical modes: will, inheritance, incorporation, freedom, duty, obligation, love, living, and killing to conclude on the possible logic of evil (or evils of logic) collateral and possibly innate to Kant's comprehension of radical evil.

### Keywords

Reason, Religion, Morality, Freedom, Hermeneutics

### Mixed Reasonings

The *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) might be read alongside Kant as a critical engagement with evil and religion within the limits of reason. The *Case* supplements Kant. It is a complex *Streit* to comprehend the “enigma” of “original evil” (Stevenson 2015, 117, 128). On his way to developing “a *radical* innate evil in human nature” in *Die Religion innerhalb der*

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*Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), Kant suggests other radical originals (natural/physical and comparative self-love) (1995, 80). All “are original, for they belong to the possibility of human nature,” but only humanity’s propensity to respect the moral law is rooted in practical reason (75-76). This discloses a fundamental flaw in non-rational religious constructions and conceptions of original sin. This gives religion a bad name, “for religion is a purely rational affair” or ought to be, upon reasonable correction (287).

Many of Stevenson’s characters find themselves in positions that Kant finds conditioned and debilitated by mistaken theological hermeneutics which rational readers of scripture *ought* to correct:

Scriptures express this incomprehensibility in a historical narrative [...] by projecting evil at the beginning of the world [...] The absolutely *first* beginning of all evil is thereby *represented as incomprehensible* to us [...] the human being [...] is represented as having lapsed into it only *through temptation*, hence not as corrupt *fundamentally* (89).

The incomprehensibility of original evil is expressed by Jekyll to his lawyer: “You do not understand my position,” which is delivered with “incoherency” (Stevenson 2015, 35). The “lawyer’s mind [struggles to comprehend] *a reason* for his friend’s strange preference or *bondage*” (21-22; italics added). It all turns on Jekyll’s “temptation” to ill propensities (126).

Boundaries abound<sup>1</sup> in the *Strange Case*. It breaches several. “Hyde broke out of all bounds” (41). Four boundaries evince the separation of the Kantian higher university faculties. These are first outlined in a footnote to Kant’s discussion of rational religion and radical evil which he more fully develops five years later in *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798). In its preface, Kant emphasizes the categorial importance of disciplinary boundaries and the dangerous mistake of mixing them. He confesses:

As a *teacher of youth* [...] in my academic lectures—I never have and never could have *mixed* any evaluation of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity into my lectures [...] I have always censured and warned against the *mistake of straying beyond the boundaries* of the science at hand or *mixing* one science with another [...] (Kant 1995, 240-241; Kant’s italics of “teacher of youth,” other italics added).

These Kantian ambitions and prohibitions are applicable to the *Strange Case* on at least four counts.

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<sup>1</sup> “A close observer might have gathered” (Stevenson 2015, 34) that *binding* is at the heart of the enigmas of evil and Hyde as it is in Freud’s development of the death drive (1961, 41-42, 75-77).



(1) Much of Stevenson's works can edify as YA lit accessible to youth. He writes poetry for children urging kindness, moderation, and non-cruelty.<sup>2</sup> There is a school boyish deontology in "The Whole Duty of Children" inculcating a Kantian obligation to truth against the immorality of lying (Stevenson 1914, 9). But his fiction exceeds the bounds of any target audience of ages,<sup>3</sup> as if "appointed to teach the people" whom Professor Kant claims, "cannot think out their own religious belief *by themselves*, but can only have it handed down to them" (1995, 241). Read as mystery, horror, thriller, science-fiction (or mixtures of all), Stevenson endeavors to teach young readers while addressing a broader public.

(2) The problem of evil radically belongs to the literary arts and obliquely invites consideration within strange tales of fiction. Kant cannot begin his treatise on rational religion and evil without engaging literature.<sup>4</sup> Immediately invoking the gospel of John, he begins: "That 'the world lieth in evil' is a complaint [...] as old as the older art of poetic fiction [*Dichtkunst*]; indeed, just as old as that oldest of all fictions [*Dichtungen*] [...]" (Kant 1995, 69; 1974, 20). Such fictions are indissociable from "the religion of the priests" (1995, 69). Readers might tremble at a hybrid even more radical than Jekyll's demon skulking about the novel: a *homiletic horror* (or *sci-fi sermon*).<sup>5</sup> This make of monster might be more horrific than Hyde and eerier than imps in bottles. Kant claims from the lectern that his core university textbook (by Baumgarten)<sup>6</sup> is "not suitable for the public" (240-241). But

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<sup>2</sup> "Happy hearts and happy faces, / Happy play in grassy places / That was how, in ancient ages, / Children grew to kings and sages. / But the unkind and the unruly, / And the sort who eat unduly, / They must never hope for glory / Theirs is quite a different story!" (Stevenson 1914, 49; "Good and Bad Children"). Even as addressing children the poet laments a goodness to be lost as they age to adulthood: "if I were not so tall ['grown-up'], I should live for good and all" (111; "The Flower"). These verse's insensitivity to geographical and racial difference (tinged with just enough white supremacy still suitable to its assumed Anglican readership) also smacks of Kantian anthropology. Cf. the former's "Foreign Children" (51-52) with the latter's "National Characters" (Kant 2007, 52, 58-62). Stevenson writes of a "monstrous hybrid—whether good or evil," not when describing Jekyll and Hyde, but when pondering the "hotch-potch of races" in the American south (which he predicts will "turn out English, or thereabout") (Stevenson 2009, 97).

<sup>3</sup> "What age is a book? ...Books happen off age's shore" (Cixous and Jeannet 2013, 40).

<sup>4</sup> See also Derrida 2002, 23, 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> For each Christmas murder in Stevenson's catalogue there is a supplemental Christmas sermon.

<sup>6</sup> Although, even Kant's more generalized and accessible *Anthropology* remains determined and shaped by the fictitious fancy of Baumgarten's *Ästhetik*. See Mersch 2015, 78-81.



this would not be the case for Stevenson's fiction, which seems as palatable proclaimed from the pulpit (as cautionary tale) as heard around the campfire (as ghost story or murder mystery).

(3) Like Kant, Stevenson self-censures himself from developing overt theological or religious valuations. One might read both the *Case* (itself) and Jekyll's self-experimentation (narrated within it) as earnest endeavors to maintain dispassionate and rational integrity indicative of a de-theologized Kantian lecture.

(4) Lastly, *the mistake of mixing* is so crucial to *Jekyll and Hyde* that this Kantian syntagma—*The Mistake of Straying Beyond the Boundaries of Mixing One Science with Another*—could easily serve as suitable subtitle.

### Kant University & The Stevenson School of Business

The Kantian university is divided into four core faculties. It is "not a bad idea" to think it "*like a factory* [apportioned] by a division of labor [...] *to create doctors*" (247). It perhaps manufactures *Dr. Jekylls* rather than *Mr. Hydes*. The order of the university follows the Kantian order of reason. The primary concern is "*eternal well-being*" followed by secondary "*civil*" and tertiary "*physical well-being*" (248). The ranks "assigned to the higher faculties [are] *theology*, first, *law*, second, and *medicine*, third [...] in accordance with reason" (250). There are "two ranks: *three higher* faculties and *one lower* faculty." A faculty is "considered higher only if its teachings [...] interest the government itself, while the faculty whose function is only to look after the interests of science is called lower [...]" which is philosophy (248).

As covert governmental agents, Kant calls the well-learned products of the higher faculties, "*businesspeople*" (248). Business is not restricted to economics or the law of the market. It also the driving force of medicine and theology. For Kant, a police force has less to do with law than with medicine. He likens the faculty of medicine and its practitioners to "a police force" serving the public's convenience and safety: "the medical police" (254-255). The three higher faculties are therefore instruments of command. "For the government does not teach, but it commands [...]" (248).

The business of governmental command at work in the higher faculties is not far removed from several of Stevenson's authorial employments of the term, "business," which often anticipates death or ending life. They are practiced both for the sake of higher duty respecting law as well as baser self-interests of murderers. There is the necessary evil of executing criminals by



due processes of jurisprudence in *Weir of Hermiston* (1994). The judge, "Hanging Hermiston," jokes to his wife: "It seems a rather *sore kind of business* that I should be all day in Court haanging Raadicals" (Stevenson 2018, 146, 144; italics added). Under the pretense of last-minute Christmas shopping, the eponymous and strangely motivated murderer, *Markeim* (1885), says to his mark: "Enough fooling. *To business*. Show me something else." The dealer stoops to procure another item as Markeim "*bounded* from behind upon his victim. The long, skewerlike dagger flashed and fell. The dealer struggled [...] and then tumbled on the floor in a heap" (Stevenson 2018, 125; italics added).

The lucrative business of death-dealing is a primal scene for Stevenson and a persistent leitmotif. More troublesome to Kantian ethics (if there is such a thing) would be an alleged duty to kill and the tactical business of finding an optimal opportunity to do so in *Treasure Island* (1883):

'But,' asked Dick, 'when do we lay 'em athwart, what are we to do with 'em anyhow?' 'There's the man for me!' cried [Long John Silver], admiringly. 'That's what I call *business* [...] *Dooty is dooty*, mates. I give my vote—death [...] I don't want any of these *sea-lawyers* in the cabin a-coming home' [...] (Stevenson 2013, 71; italics added).

A perverse deontology is thought alongside a certain anomy or *ad hoc* maritime law.<sup>7</sup> This maximizes a diabolical duty to kill troublesome "lawyers" or any non-selves<sup>8</sup> inhibiting one's self-interest whilst at sea. There's "the *business* thus rendered *necessary*" of procuring corpses in *The Body Snatcher* (1884), conducted by "the policy [...] to ask no questions" and a threefold "*duty* [...] to take what[ever corpse] was brought, to pay the price, and to avert the eye from any evidence of crime" (Stevenson 2018, 78; italics added). The business of body snatchers and dooty of pirates, as such, would develop from a misbegotten incorporation of over-particularized self-love into maxims guiding their choices and actions, the very possibility of which Kant finds rooted in radical evil.

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Kant's concern with *res nullius*—whatever is "*washed up on shore*, whether human beings or things"—and the danger any pirate's law of the sea poses to freedom, possession, and right in the *Rechtslehre* (1996, 404-405, 417, 420-421). See also Foucault 2008, 56.

<sup>8</sup> These are considered "honest" and "faithful" from the perspectives of those marked for murder (Stevenson 2013, 91, 77).



Kant's lower faculty<sup>9</sup> is thereby "free to evaluate everything" especially the three higher faculties and, by consequence, the governmental power for which they stand and serve (Kant 1995, 249). This exceptional freedom of the philosophy faculty already invites scrutiny of evil in which it would seem to be entangled by way of its very freedom. Radical evil is enrooted in the (supposed) freedom Kant presumes at the core of any rational decision: one's "free power of choice [*freien Willkür*]" (1995, 89; 1974, 55). It is as if philosophy's signature duty to conceive and critique evil (or anything) is itself conditional on its own inextirpable complicity in a kind of rational evil beyond the scope of Kant's architectonic yet would also seem congenital to any scholastic freedom.

The present study follows Kant's implied division of scientific labor and compares the respective objects of study (or specialized case studies) of each faculty with Stevenson's characters. These are usually some articulation of the Hyde phenomenon to which they would be disciplinarily attuned. Each Kantian science is followed by its object then posited as it might correlate to the *Case*. But the philosopher and the writer are their own idiomatic animals. Any one-to-one correlation would be contrived and doomed to reductivism and failure. Yet it imagines an intertextual juxtaposition, read and thought together.

### ~ *Dramatis Impersonae* ~

#### Kantian Faculties

Law (inheritance)

Crime

Medicine (physical evil)

Disease (tapeworm)

Transmission (poison)

Unease (civic unrest)

Theology (original sin)

Eden (Cain)

#### Stevenson Characters

Utterson, the lawyer (contract law)

Hyde (forgery, fraud, theft)<sup>10</sup>

1. Dr. Lanyon, the anatomist

Hyde (parasite, addiction)

2. Maw, the chemist

Hyde (drug, salt, powder)

3. Police

Hyde (nuisance, murder or manslaughter)

"Silent symbols" of the *Strange Case*<sup>11</sup>

Hyde (cane, death-dealer)

<sup>9</sup> Without a lower faculty "of this kind, the truth would not come to light" (Kant 1995, 249).

<sup>10</sup> The characters of Hyde and Jekyll draw inspiration from the double life of William Brodie, respectable deacon, civic official, cabinetmaker, and (by consequence) accomplished locksmith by day, gambler and (by consequence) cat burglar or housebreaker by night. He was convicted for thievery and publicly hanged on 1 October 1778.

<sup>11</sup> Considering "The Book as One of Its Own Characters" in Cixous 2011, 125-159.



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Philosophy	Jekyll, the transcendental (freedom, reason)
Moral Evil <sub>1</sub> (frailty)	Jekyll (regret, repentance, resistance)
Moral Evil <sub>2</sub> (impurity)	Hyde (mixture)
Moral Evil <sub>3</sub> (depravity)	Hyde (possibility of the diabolical)
Radical Evil (incomprehensible)	[J/H-hybrid] (enigma)

This last J/H hybrid is speculative and perhaps only discernable indirectly (if it is discernible at all). It is arguably as incomprehensible as it is unthinkable, as enigmatic as it is unwritable and remains unwritten by Stevenson as such. But only the unwritable is worth writing.

### Faculty of Law

At the beginning of the *Case* is a lawyer concerned with a last will in testament.<sup>12</sup> The novel immediately lawyers-up as if guilty from the start. *Inheritance* is the singular springboard of the story. This is also the case for young David Balfour in Stevenson's novel, *Kidnapped* (1886) published the same year as *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Already one detects a Stevensonian *Streit* between law, medicine, and theology. This lawyer, Utterson, is "a man of no scientific passions" compared to his friend, the medical Dr. Lanyon (Stevenson 2015, 19). Instead of studying theology, "a volume of some dry divinity" which was "his custom" on Sunday, Utterson instead studies "Jekyll's Will," bequeathing Jekyll's estate to Hyde (15-16). Theology is displaced from the start by contract law in the very character of Utterson, Esq. The legal document "offended" him. The will "swelled his indignation" (17). It seems a transgression of obligation, responsibility, and freedom in the eyes of the law. "This document had long been the lawyer's eyesore" (16). Upon inheritance, Hyde would be "free from any burthen or obligation beyond the payment of a few small sums" to Jekyll's staff (16).

Utterson's indignation arises perhaps from an unfair imbalance between this obliged small payment and the vast atonement presumed by Kant's legal theology. For Kant's rational boundaries demand critique of colloquial accounts of evil as fundamentally flawed (especially in the quest to attribute an *origin* to it). "Whatever the nature [...] of the origin of moral evil in the

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<sup>12</sup> Kant performs as Utterson when suggesting that Jesus or the "teacher of the Gospel [...] left his last will behind him by word of mouth (as in a testament)" (1995, 156-157).



human being, of all the ways of representing its [...] propagation [...] the most inappropriate is surely to imagine it as having come to us by way of *inheritance* from our first parents" (Kant 1995, 86).

This lends too much credit to evil and diverts attention away from the moral and rational agency of freedom. Enframed by religious limits, theology as such becomes anything but moral. Instead, it strands itself in amoral ways of thinking (perhaps even immoral). Seduced away from confronting the more troublesome human propensity to perform evil acts, its gaze instead becomes fixed and "only consider[s] the actual evil of given actions according to evil's inner possibility" (86).

The law's fixation on crime is but a juridical reiteration of this theological diversion. The fixation on Edenic transgression simply becomes legalized: "the legal consequence of our accession to an *inheritance* bequeathed to us by these first parents but weighted down by a serious crime [...] We must therefore make payment (atone) and, at the end, shall still be evicted (by death) from this possession" (86). This Kantian move from inherited crime [debt/guilt, *Schuld*] to due recompense [atonement] as mortal eviction [death and suffering as punishments] maps out the sequential structure of the *Case's* overall narrative and the downfall of Jekyll.

Kant's suspicions of a tacit flawed theological diversion burrowed within a collaterally contaminated understanding of law (with regards to evil) are confirmed in Utterson's rationalization of Jekyll's plight through a vast theodicy of divine judgment:

Poor Harry Jekyll [...] He was wild when he was young; a long while ago [...] but *in the law of God, there is no statute of limitations [...] the ghost of some old sin [...] punishment coming, pede claudo*, years after memory has forgotten and *self-love* condoned the fault (Stevenson 2015, 30-31).<sup>13</sup>

The law's preoccupation only begins with inheritance and obligation. Inheritance grows into crime and crime culminates in murder: "The Carew Murder Case," perhaps Hyde's only legitimate crime in the eyes of the law (evidentiary support for which remains somewhat speculative, hearsay, or circumstantial).

But well before the murder, Utterson already associates inheritance with the propensity to murder benefactors. The "danger" is "if this Hyde suspects the existence of the will, he may grow impatient to inherit" (31-32). Already

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<sup>13</sup> The reduction of old sin to a "subjective principle of self-love" and "the law of self-love" aligns with Kant's critique, though differentiated between "*mechanical*" and "physical which involves comparison" with others (1995, 83, 75).



there seems a congenital defect in the law itself, as if one does not know or consider crime (even murder) until or before the law (of inheritance) functions as its prior condition of possibility. Like the apostle,<sup>14</sup> the lawyer is “conscious of some touch of that terror of the law” (45). The possibility of the law’s ethical complicity in its own transgression terrorizes the estate lawyer of Sunday testaments.

### Citadel of Medicine

Before the beginning of the *Case* readers receive bad news, a solemn medical prognosis delivered in a poetic dedication: “It’s ill...”<sup>15</sup> It immediately exposes readers to infirmity—immunity compromised—as if the first word on evil could only be uttered from a contagion site or fever den and rushed to the clinic for diagnosis. Outside the work, proper, epigraph plays *exergue* (perhaps a prayer). If these are Stevenson’s words (which does not go without saying), then they come from the pen of one who suffered a lifelong battle with tuberculosis. This ill-fed false start, “*It’s ill...*,” already infects the encasement from which it remains external.

For better or worse, *it* becomes evil. The word, “ill,” is moralized and incorporated—as is often the case in common idiom—within the story as a metonym (or stand-in) for *evil*, itself evoking *bad* or *wrong* deeds by connotation. Jekyll “was humbled to the dust by the many *ill* things he had done” (Stevenson 2015, 31). Like Kant, he traces this immorality back to religion with his own articulation of a radical *evill*. His experiment “severed in [him] those provinces of *good and ill* which divide and compound man’s dual nature [...] that hard law of life, which *lies at the root of religion*” (122; italics added). Whatever it is, ill evinces some valence falling short of goodness.

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<sup>14</sup> This is a Pauline paradox from the epistle to the Romans. “I did not know sin before the law.” Paul is evoked by both Kant and Stevenson on this point. Kant cites Paul directly as precedent to radical evil innate to humanity. “What I would, that I do not do!” (1995, 77). Jekyll cryptically paraphrases Paul, testifying to “the perennial war among my members” (Stevenson 2015, 123). Cf. Rom. 7:23.

<sup>15</sup> “*It’s ill to loose the bands that God decreed / to bind; / Still will we be the children of the heather and the wind; / Far away from home, O it’s still for you and me / That broom is blowing bonnie in the north countrie*” (Stevenson 2015, unenumerated cover page). It’s anticipating a binding discomfort of those of *us* (“we”) who *will* (when *still*) someday discover ourselves the descendants of *heather* and *wind* (plants and weather, botany and physics) upon a revelation decreed by some deity. Whatever *it* is, it’s estranged and unhomely—*far from home*—*unheimlich*. “*Still*” outside the *Case* “*we*” seem already infected by its grave condition.



Still only on the eve of evil—before beginning—these opening words from the *Case's* exergue, "*It's ill...*" invoke an enthymematic disjunction that is so often presumed in agential moralities positing evil only in opposition to an exclusive or exclusionary good (healthier, firmer, or cured of its ills).

Similarly, Kant's lectures on the philosophy of religion (1783-1786) posit "the *ill* of the world" (1995, 412). He explains "universal physicotheology" from the perspective of a "sick person" infected by teleology eventually attaining "health" (404). In trying "to justify the supremely perfect God against all the *ill and evil* found in the world," Kant suggests a makeshift theodicy: "*Ill* is only a special arrangement *for leading the human being toward happiness*" (451, 413; italics added).

Utterson tables "Jekyll's Will" and rushes to consult Dr. Lanyon<sup>16</sup> at "the citadel of medicine" (Stevenson 2015, 17). The medical anatomy of Lanyon "differed by some point of science" with Jekyll's philosophy whose "own tastes<sup>17</sup> [are] rather chemical than anatomical" (19, 51). A transcendental physiology becomes the pathway through which Jekyll unwittingly confronts radical evil via mistaken mixture, impurity, and self-modification.

Medicine, for Kant, is prone to its own religiofied misdiagnosis of the genetic transmission of an evil ill by way of parasitic defect.

The Faculty of Medicine would represent the inherited evil somewhat as it represents the tapeworm, concerning which *certain natural scientists* are actually of the opinion that, since it is not otherwise found either in an *element outside us* nor (of this same kind) in any other animal, it must already have been present in our first parents (Kant 1995, 86, fn.).

The problem is a stubborn refusal to consider the complex incorporation of an external element. Kant would perhaps critically allege Jekyll (as a doctor of natural science) to be complicit in perpetuating this medical mistake in the latter's belief to have discovered an "extraneous evil" (Stevenson 2015, 124). Despite the misdiagnosis of a tapeworm as inborn parasite, the possibility of a congenital necessity inborn to any living organism is yet worth considering with regard to the condition of Hyde and the enigma of evil

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<sup>16</sup> Lanyon's character revives Dr. Livesey from *Treasure Island* and anticipates K, the "extramural teacher of anatomy," Dr. Macfarlane, and "the Doctor" Fettes who "studied medicine in the schools of Edinburgh" in *The Body Snatcher* (Stevenson 2018, 73, 77). The "point of science" distilling Jekyll from Lanyon might represent the threshold between physiology and anatomy, suggested in Agamben (1998, 186-188).

<sup>17</sup> Jekyll's taste for the chemical ought to be noted as a key motif in the story (which would endow a distinguished Maw Faculty of Chemistry).



inasmuch as it seems an innate ill of any maw—even prior to proper buccality<sup>18</sup> by unicellular pseudopods<sup>19</sup>—to ever engulf an external element (such as Jekyll's miraculous salt). This mistaken medical microbiology anticipates the sinful Edenic eating of forbidden macrobiotics.

Stevenson is a great chemist of mixtures. Gradually the *Case* confronts the moral evils which Kant finds comprehensible only through practical reason. Jekyll's ordeal with evil is called a "murderous mixture" (27). Kant indicts the flawed religious conception of original sin as presumptive of a purity beyond mixture: "a corruption that lies in all human beings and cannot be overcome except through the idea of a moral good in its *absolute purity* [...]" and we only need to be assiduous in keeping it free from *impure mixture* [...]" (1995, 122). Kant all but diagnoses Jekyll's condition as an impure moral mixture. Jekyll cannot replicate the proportions of his secret salts and powders as Hyde becomes uncontrollable, unpredictable, and beyond expectations. "But in connection with the *mixture of good and evil* in [humanity's] predisposition, with the proportion of which he [is] not acquainted, he himself does not know what effect he might expect from it." (301; italics added). The grand reveal of the *Case* is an involuntary and deadly acquiescence to impurity by an inexplicable efficacy of an impure chemical concoction. "I am now persuaded that my first supply was impure [...] it was that unknown impurity which lent efficacy to the draught [potion]" (Stevenson 2015, 157).

One of Stevenson's many lessons is that any separable moral disjunction would be a mistaken miracle. If Hyde is "wholly evil," it cannot be part of a composite whole composed of an evil part purified from good any more than a good part purified from evil (131). Jekyll's great moral discovery is necessary contamination. The evils of indemnification by separation render purification morally impossible. As chemist, Jekyll belongs amongst the 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of disjunctive valuation and religiosity (e.g., Hegel 1985, 102-106; Kierkegaard 1987, 166-169) and even more recent pharmacologists (Derrida 1981, 63-171; Stiegler 2013) that further the Kantian critiques.

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<sup>18</sup> A genealogy of orality discovers: "*La buccalité est plus primitive que oralité*" (Nancy 1979, 162).

<sup>19</sup> As "the capacities for feeding and for digesting are prior to the organs in each case" (Heidegger 1995, 224).



## Faculty of Dry Divinity

In the beginning Stevenson creates a *Case* for theological concerns written through “silent symbols” (Stevenson 2015, 1). He clues readers’ attention to this possibility in the first paragraph of the story. Kant and Stevenson both resist overt theologizing. But it persists at play in its very absence (verging on indirect communication the likes of Kierkegaard). Readers of Stevenson’s works are often blessed with lawyers, judges, physicians, surgeons, anatomists, dissectors, and med students, which easily outnumber the small circle of elected or confessed godfolk (as Kantian clerical businesspeople). Any theoretical theologian—properly ordained—remains absent as an unwritten character in the *Case*. Yet some unholy ghost hovers throughout and haunts<sup>20</sup> all its others (which Kant’s critique of theology’s two subordinate higher faculties arguably forewrote and overtly forewarned). Jekyll believes his experimentation has a “spiritual side” (148). This is no less espoused by the spirit-seeking philosopher of reason, more respectful of the “*spirit* [Geiste]” of the moral law than its mere “*letter* [Buchstaben]” (Kant 1995, 78; 1974, 36).

A mere mistake<sup>21</sup> made by “Maw,” the “chemist,” is further mistaken by Jekyll as a scientific or thermodynamic miracle (Stevenson 2015, 84-85). His “scientific discoveries had begun to suggest the most naked possibility of such a miracle” (124). It’s as if the possibility of mistaking a mistake for a miracle is, itself, the miracle. The unknown chemical impurity is merely epiphenomenal. The real miracle is the that Jekyll believes the miracle (cf. Deleuze 1991, 76). If there is a miracle to be found in the *Case*, it is—or would be—nothing less than a possibilization of the impossible separation of the human propensity to goodness from radical evil (Jekyll purified from Hyde, though not necessarily vice versa), purely believed possible because of the potion of unknown impurity.

*Jekyll and Hyde* is a tale of “original evil,” “the first breath,” “the first creature,” and “temptation” (Stevenson 2015, 128, 126). It bears all the signature marks of a creation story, as much as one might “read Satan’s signature upon a face” which Utterson fantasizes on the yet unseen face of Hyde prior to catching a glimpse (28). This mark is but one of several gestures to Cain

<sup>20</sup> The lawyer is “haunted” by the “figure” of Hyde, that “figure to whom power was given,” by inheritance upon Jekyll’s demise at “the dead hour.” The lawyer “must rise and do *its* bidding” (Stevenson 2015, 21; italics added). Once again, the referent of ‘it’ is ambiguous. Hyde, it, and death are all intertwined as they haunt.

<sup>21</sup> Such a “mistake once made may vitiate the entire work” that follows (Lukàcs 1980, 33).



(Qayin). The first chapter of the *Case* strangely coagulates with the opening 'chapter' of the Hebrew Bible, invoking both Cain and Satan<sup>22</sup> by name.<sup>23</sup> Utterson confesses a heretical identification with fallen fraternity in his personal propensity for social tolerance (fragrant of laissez-faire political liberalism). "I incline to Cain's heresy [...] I let my brother go to the devil in his own way" (2). It is as if no "lawyer" worthy of the name could be ever truly disinclined from Cain. Here, the lawyer's own secret alter-Hyde is conjured in the name of the proto-murderer, betraying the law's own innate exceptional state of uncanny Cainhood.

An unwritten confessor emerges beyond the text. The writer all but divinizes the reader. Astute readers might hear, here, the author's own secret confession. In "A Christmas Sermon" (1888), Stephenson reveals his only begotten Uttersonship as he reutters the lawyer's heresy. This sermon is an ethical exercise pondering the limits of eudaimonism, conflicting duties (rivaling that of Kant's faculties), and the possibility of unavoidable (perhaps radical) "evil" beyond extirpation:

In his own life, then, a man is not to expect happiness, only to profit by it gladly when it shall arise; he is *on duty* here; he *knows not how or why, and does not need to know* [...] and must not ask. Somehow or other, though he does not know what goodness is, he must try to be good; somehow or other, though he cannot tell what will do it, he must try to give happiness to others. And no doubt there comes in here a *frequent clash of duties*. How far is he to make his neighbor happy? *How far must he respect* that smiling face, so easy to cloud, so hard to brighten again? And how far, on the other side, is he *bound to be his brother's keeper* and the prophet of *his own morality*? *How far must he resent evil*? (Stevenson 2009, 312; italics added)

True to his namesake this preacher performs great marvels by silent *semeia*.<sup>24</sup> It's no wonder this discourse is delivered at Christmastime. It becomes difficult to distinguish creator from creation, Stephenson from Utterson, as if performing a silent incarnation—slouching toward Bethle-

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<sup>22</sup> Though generic devilry runs throughout the *Case*, it thrice invokes Satan: while describing Hyde, in the first chapter, "with [...] sneering coolness—frightened too [...] but carrying it off [...] really like Satan" and again in the second as signature (Stevenson 2015, 8, 28). Later, Lanyon reports Jekyll describing Hyde as "a prodigy to stagger the unbelief of Satan" (117). It seems that Jekyll believes Satan would have more trouble disbelieving in Hyde than disbelieving in god (which is itself unbelievable).

<sup>23</sup> It does so as it struggles with something unnamable. Enfield, trying to describe Hyde, "really can name nothing" (13).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Acts 6:8. The death deed is ever encased in any work signed by the son of Stephen, the gospel's protomartyr (Acts 7:59).



hem—miraculized only through writing. Saint Stephenson, the homilist, cites Cain's question<sup>25</sup> at the colloquial commemoration of christology (thereby commencing that terrible trend toward the eventual execution of Stephen) so that he may further ask the reading congregation: How far must unknown and unknowable non-evil (if there is such a thing) respect others within the "bound[s]" of mere good or duties? How far must happiness, goodness, respect, duty, and morality (ever subjective, as one's "own") be from Cain and/or evil? How far is one's neighbor from becoming the next Abel? Oneself from becoming the next Cain? Or Hyde? How far can the creator of the *Case* really be from the struggler of *Der Streit*? Evil from the next religion? Or reason?

Beyond flawed religious hermeneutics of original sin by stereotypical interpretations of scripture, the core crime within Genesis would be "The Abel Murder Case," misinterpreted (by Kantian rational standards) as subsidiary to a presumed original sin.<sup>26</sup> But beyond murder (or any other deeds<sup>27</sup> of physical necessity, none of which should be simply reduced to synonymy or equivalency), Cain's question of keepership conjures the possibility of *the human invention of death*. One of Kant's key objectives for rational religion is to attribute the agential responsibility of evil at human feet rather than nature (*phusis*, *Ananke*, or necessity). "Nothing is...morally (i.e., imputably) evil but that which is our own deed" (Kant 1995, 78-79). "Hence the ground of evil cannot lie [...] in any natural impulses" (70). We should "always be satisfied that *nature is not to blame* for it (if the character is evil) [...]" (71; italics added). But literary hermeneutics could offer a compelling case that such groundwork is as applicable to human mortality as to Kantian evil. The Genesis narrative attributes the primal death of human being neither to god nor the serpent (nor Satan) but binds it to the deed dealt by mere Cain alone.

Near the beginning is the deed. To call it 'murder' almost names too little, nearly nothing or a mere trifle by comparison, inasmuch as even "human being is [...] but a trifle" for Kant "in the face of the omnipotence of nature" (305). Kant insinuates that theological misinterpretation over-fixates on the strange injunction against eating forbidden fruit; alimentation, phagation,

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 4:9.

<sup>26</sup> It requires no small amount of flawed theology and religious diversion for the murder of Abel to be weighed any less overt in the Biblical narrative than the primal deed is in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Hyde's alleged murder of Carew is referred to as "the deed" (Stevenson 2015, 42).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kant's criterial categorization of the "propensity of evil" to "a deed" (1995, 79).



incorporation, or introjection of some botanical which, as plucked, adopts a maxim by necessity to (a) *end vegetal life*. This is perhaps already an Edenic deed of (b) *killing* but still less than Cainitic (c) *murder*. Beyond any criterial boundaries set by reason between these three deeds (a-c), is it not through some participation in death that radical problems of evil begin revealing themselves? A malicious metonymy of *dead* and *deed* become indissociable by literary condensation as Stevenson twice tries to write the unwritable as “d–d” in *The Body Snatcher*. (2018, 86-87).

The cane is all that is the *Case*. Cane is the instrument of its murder (the conditions, provocation, or details of which readers learn nearly nothing). Hyde’s cane<sup>28</sup> performs an intertextual repetition of Long John Silver’s “crutch,” “that uncouth missile” of “stunning violence” which deals “The First Blow” toward murder on Skeleton Island (Stevenson 2013, 90). Half of Hyde’s heavy walking stick is introduced into evidence as murder weapon, *ad baculum*. Hyde “had in his hand a heavy cane” (Stevenson 2015, 41). Cain too murders by hand. Only in discovering his deed does the word, “hand,” appear in the Bible.<sup>29</sup> Remember the haunting name of the pirate, *Israel Hands*, to whom, after murdering O’Brien—as if by revelation—it “appears as if killing [...] were a waste of time” (Stevenson 2013, 162).

Hyde carries Cain’s propensity in his hands before his hand carries the cane. The *Case* condenses Cain and cane into a Hyde hybrid. Hyde barely tries to hide his cane after the deed, *post festum*. Utterson locates the cane hardly hiding in Hyde’s home as the reader discerns the Cain hardly Hyding in the *Case*’s cane.

## Transcendental Philosophy

The med-school dropout in *The Body Snatcher*, Fettes, confesses to his accomplice, “*I was an ass till I knew you.*” “*You are a philosopher [...]* you’ll *make a man out of me*” (Stevenson 2018, 87; italics added). Stevenson’s image of the philosopher seems capable of optimal humanity, reason, and morality (or the authentic existence of the rational animal as *Dasein* by ontological distinction from bestial asininity). Philosophy is not mentioned in the *Case*. But in true Kantian fashion, twice Jekyll distinguishes his worldview

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Macfarlane “tapping the [dead] body with his cane” in *The Body Snatcher* (Stevenson 2018, 81).

<sup>29</sup> Reading “כַּף־יָדָאֵךְ” in Genesis 4:11 akin to “from/by your hand” (but which likely exceeds the boundaries of mere anatomical description) as, e.g., in Oduyoye 1984, 17.



from law and medicine as *transcendental*.<sup>30</sup> The “direction of [his] scientific studies [...] led wholly towards the mystic and the transcendental” (123). He believes he discovers and practices “transcendental medicine” (117).

The “mysterious ‘It’ in our holy”<sup>31</sup> “*It’s ill...*” wouldn’t properly exist to logic and is an ontological enigma.<sup>32</sup> Syntax performs an ambiguous ontology of the logical principle of identity. “It’s” apostrophe dots an unstated *i*: first letter of an ‘is’ (that typographically is not). It’s beyond being and already performs the core ontological crisis of the *Case*. Jekyll demands readers to think of an ‘it’ before his impossible confession: “Think of it—I did not even exist.”<sup>33</sup> (133; italics added). This impossible statement comes from the mouth(s) of ‘one’ called “it” (and “that”) by his/its own butler: “*that thing* was not my master [...] *it* was never Dr Jekyll” (88).

At one extreme, evil embodies a capacity to invert the presumed moral order of reason (as that which ordinales Kant’s faculties). But there are several evils (or gradations of evil) to appreciate. There are at least three lesser evils at play in “a propensity to genuine evil, i.e., moral evil”: the “[a] general weakness [...] or *frailty* of human nature; [b] *second* the propensity to adulterate moral incentives with immoral ones [...] i.e., *impurity*, [c] *third* the propensity to adopt evil maxims, i.e., *depravity* of human nature” (Kant 1995, 77). Within the latter festers the possibility of the “*diabolical*” or “*perversity*”: the “disposition [...] to incorporate evil *qua evil* for incentive into one’s maxim” (84). One might recognize similar gradations in the *Case* as [a] Jekyll’s mere human frailty, [b] the impure salt the makes the Hyde

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<sup>30</sup> “Kant defines ‘transcendental philosophy’ as a philosophy that does *not* go beyond the sphere of the finite in its use of categories but that exhibits the source of what can perhaps become transcendent” (Hegel 1990, 221). Jekyll’s mention of mysticism perhaps renders his philosophy more transcendentalist than transcendental. On this point and in response to an anonymous peer reviewer’s concern with my preoccupation “on how Stevenson’s text might be read through Kant, rather than proving, or successfully suggesting, that Stevenson had Kant in mind,” I ought to clarify that I do not assume nor wish to imply that Stevenson has Kant in mind. My reading attempts indifference to such autobiographical facticity (if such a thing is possible) and would follow a kind of Barthesian imperative that allies itself with Kant’s own biblical hermeneutics: a rational or philosophical reader “must treat the text *only* [...] without venturing to search for what the sacred authors themselves might have meant by it” (1995, 288).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the critique of Saint Stirner in Marx and Engels (1998, 134).

<sup>32</sup> Readers can no more identify the referent of “it” while suffering “*It’s ill...*” than while weathering “it’s raining” (Heidegger 1984, 23).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Poe’s *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*: “I say to you that I am dead” (2017, 384).



metamorphosis possible still “somehow entwined with humanity itself” (80) and [c] the J/H hybrid that discovers diabolical possibility (though Jekyll insists that the drug itself is not “diabolical” (Stevenson 2015, 131).

Most importantly, radical evil discloses itself as a necessary subjective human condition. “[W]e may presuppose evil is subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best” (Kant 1995, 80). If a propensity to invert the moral law,

does lie in human nature, then there is in the human being a natural propensity to evil; and this propensity itself is morally evil, since it must ultimately be sought in the free power of choice, and hence imputable. This evil is *radical*, since it corrupts the ground of all maxims; as natural propensity, it is also not to be *extirpated* through human forces, for this cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted. Yet it must be possible to *overcome* this evil, for it is found in the human being acting freely (83).

To conceptualize radical evil Kant addresses the mistake of disjunctive moral logic (itself collateral damage of deeper flawed theology).

At the basis of the conflict [...] there lies a disjunctive proposition: *The human being is* (by nature) *either morally good or morally evil*. It will readily occur to anyone to ask, however, [...] whether some might not claim that [1] the human being is by nature neither of the two, others, that [humanity] is [2] both at once [...] good in some parts and evil in others (71).

Kant answers both objections in the negative. Neither is possible in the eyes of duty. To “indifferentists” who ask the former (or adopt its affirmation) [1]: within the reasonable boundaries, human disposition to the moral law is “never indifferent (neither good nor evil)” (73). To “syncretists” who pose the latter or affirm it [2]: “*Nor* can a human being be morally good in some parts, and at the same time evil in others” (73). A principle of universalizability demands that any duty to the moral law incorporated into one’s maxim, thereby, generalizes one’s duty from which it follows that any particular part disinclined toward the good would be (or becomes) “contradictory.” Jekyll draws close to a syncretic morality when he suggests, “all human beings [...] are commingled out of good *and* evil” (Stevenson 2015, 130).

Kant’s latter response to syncretism seems fragrant of the logical fallacy of composition or perhaps a moralized inversion of the fallacy of division. Inversion or ‘reversability’ are ever entangled in the problem of evil: the “reversal of incentives” (Kant 1995, 83). It relies on an unstated principle of identity to reduce a flawed proposition to contradiction, *reductio ad absurdum*. Reason finds itself engulfed in a dilemma of fuzzy logic not dissimilar to



Jekyll's inseparability from Hyde. Practical and moral reason seem strangely prone to incorporating a particularized (or hypothetical) duty into logical principles in order to universalize logical duty. From there, Kant logically syncretizes the two nonrational amoralities in question to become, himself, particularly indifferent to indifference (by which he then denies syncretism). This vertiginous exercise in moral logic might be a wicked performance of the innate contradictory logic of radical evil (or even the innate evil of any radical logic).

At the naïve or idealist stage during which disjunction still holds (i.e., when there seems separable J and H parts of the JH hybrid, by which J is a whole with a propensity toward good and H is "wholly evil"), Jekyll offers Lanyon a disjunctive choice to learn the secret of disjunctive separation. The decision is not forced upon Lanyon. It's up to Lanyon to decide if he wants to learn. Jekyll's deceptively simple disjunctive offer to Lanyon is: "*Either, you shall be left as you were before, and neither richer nor wiser [...] Or, if you shall so prefer to choose, a new province of knowledge and new avenues of fame and power [...]*" (Stevenson 2015, 116; italics added). In this offer,<sup>34</sup> Jekyll perhaps performs a transcendental deduction of radical<sup>35</sup> evil to "the exercise of the power of choice" so crucial to Kant: "the first really good thing that a human being can do is to extricate himself from *an evil* which is to be sought not in his inclinations but in his perverted maxims and hence *in freedom itself*" (1995, 76, 102, fn.).

The Faculty of Dry Divinity might claim this is but a logical re-articulation (both formally and informally fallacious by logical standards) of the Edenic choice, with Jekyll playing serpentine and Lanyon, protohuman. Jekyll momentarily flirts with indifferentist theology near the close of the story in holding firm in his belief that that "the drug" through which his entire self-experiment in moral separation is made possible "was neither diabolical nor divine" (Stevenson 2015, 131). Only after Kant might one appreciate that such alleged theological indifference is not equivalent to moral indifference, which is supposed to be a human impossibility. As a bad theologian or transcendental mystic, Jekyll falls short of Kant's rational standards and cannot yet comprehend his confrontation with radical evil of which he seems to remain incognizant to the end.

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<sup>34</sup> But Jekyll is perhaps leading the witness to affirm Jekyll's own denial by loading terms to be decided, *ad misericordiam* (e.g., either quotidian ignorance of non-wisdom or powerful fame of wise knowledge).

<sup>35</sup> Lanyon's "life was *shaken to its roots*" after what Jekyll "told" him (Stevenson 2015, 118; italics added).



Lanyon somehow decides to learn the secret of Jekyll's provincial tree of new knowledge and witnesses a possibilization of the impossible separation of evil from good. This alleged choice is also worth considering as miraculous. Taken to ill-learning, this revelation to Jekyll ushers in his torment, despair, and hastened death. (The body count of the *Case* is not limited to mere Carew, alone.)

At this separable stage of Jekyll's "metamorphosis" (still processing), perhaps Lanyon more correctly witnesses the separation of a 'wholly evil' from Kantian radical evil—which, in turn, conditions the possibility of all subsequent human propensities to moral evils—within the limits of mere disjunctive reason, alone (116). Only at this point can Jekyll still believe "Hyde, alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil" (130). Likewise, this is also the point at which Jekyll lastly maintains his identity, whereby he and Hyde might be considered "divided." But he also creeps closer to a point at which identity is soon lost. "This too was myself [...] the *divided* countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine [...] it yet remained to be seen if I had lost my identity" (130). In the end, the principle of identity falls and "suffer[s] the pangs of dissolution," through which principles such as 'Hyde is Hyde' and 'Jekyll is Jekyll' both no longer hold true: "the last calamity which has now befallen, and which has finally severed me from my own face and nature [...] This, then, is the last time [...] that Henry Jekyll can think his own thoughts" (157).

By the time of Jekyll's posthumous confession to Lanyon, the distinct sides of these two presumed purified identities become indistinguishable and beyond any agential control. Perhaps only then does some unnamable monstrous Jyde or Hylle hybrid write of an incomprehensible indifference.

Jekyll (who was *composite*) [...] [but] *now* with a greedy gusto, *projected and shared* in the pleasures and adventures of Hyde; but *Hyde was indifferent to Jekyll, or but remembered him* as [...] bandit remembers the cavern in which he conceals himself [...] *Jekyll had more than a father's interest; Hyde had more than a son's indifference* (140-141; italics added).

Oedipality aside, radical evil will have always been "more than [...] indifference," terrifying as the lifeless indifference of cold necessity would be. This discloses the kernel of self-love at the core of radical evil. For Kant, even the best human being "is evil only because he reverses the moral order [and] incorporates the moral law into [its] maxims together, with the law of self-love [and] makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law" (1995, 83). Even in Hyde's alleged



indifference (which would no longer be humanly possible), Jekyll still admires Hyde's alleged "love" for him (which is merely for the sake of Hyde's own self-love and self-preservation). This mixture of self-love with an impure love for other non-selves emerges as a primal perversion of morality ever conditioned by fear. "But his love for me is wonderful [...] I know he fears my power to cut him off by suicide. I find it in my heart to pity him" (Stevenson 2015, 156).

Murderer maybe, but Hyde isn't the real monster of the story. It is worth considering that such alleged indifference could only come about (be thought or conceived) from a non-living—certainly nonhuman—impossible perspective of radical evil, itself. This is perhaps the secret god haunting the *Case*, imperceptible to law, medicine, theology, or even transcendental philosophy. Stevenson is at his best as he tries *to write the worst*,<sup>36</sup> in attempting to articulate an incomprehensible "something" exposed to thinking radical evil. Both radical evil and any possible comprehension of it are likely not thinkable or writable at all, beyond the limits of mere comprehensibility. Lanyon concedes, "*I cannot bring my mind to set on paper*" Jekyll's secret (118). Jekyll writes that it is "useless"<sup>37</sup> to continue trying to give "description" of it (156). The *Case* tries to think the unthinkable as it writes the unwritable: some "d-d"<sup>38</sup> thing that ever Hydies humanity. In style, Kant is not far behind. The very thought Jekyll thinks in identifying indifference in Hyde initiates the dissolution of his own identity (and Hyde's too) as metamorphosis culminates. Perhaps only an impossible hybrid comingling syncretism and indifference (that yet endeavors a moral propensity to good) makes possible the dissolution of all into something that somehow begins comprehending the incomprehensibility of radical evil [...] which, in doing so, instantly disappears.<sup>39</sup> Radical wills of such radical thinkers might only ever possibly be thought, read, or received "in case of [one's own] disappearance or unexplained absence" (16).

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<sup>36</sup> "The movement [of Jekyll's ordeal] was thus *wholly toward the worse*" (Stevenson 2015, 132). Stevenson belongs among those writers who "dared to write the worst" (Cixous 1993, 63).

<sup>37</sup> Jekyll's confessed *uselessness* would also be indicative of the strange freedom of philosophy put to "some use" by its faculty. Cf. Ramsey 1990, 1, 94; Russell 2001, 89-91; Derrida 2002, 21.

<sup>38</sup> *The Body Snatcher*, Stevenson 2018, 86-87.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. how Mr. Arrow "disappeared entirely" from the *Hispaniola* (Stevenson 2013, 62) or the "sudden disappearance" of the Italian physicist, Ettore Majorana, for (or after) whom "disappearance is the only way in which the real can preemptorily be affirmed" (Agamben 2018, 2, 43).



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**Miłosz Puczydłowski\***

## **The Ontology of Evil and Its Anthropological Moment of Freedom in Pär Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* and Plotinus' *Enneads* (I.VII-VIII)**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical reading of a famous novel by Pär Lagerkvist entitled *The Dwarf*. The novel's protagonist is to be found as the embodiment of evil. His diaries explore his own identity. Hence the paper shall employ the Dwarf's confessions to describe the ontology of evil. That will be then compared to the classical metaphysics of good and evil based on Plotinus' *Enneads*. The ideas of evil's homogeneity, impenetrability, infertility and absurdity are studied. In the conclusion, the utmost importance of human freedom is indicated in these works of both Lagerkvist and Plotinus.

### **Keywords**

Ontology, Evil, Freedom, Lagerkvist, Plotinus

### **Introduction**

In 1944 the renowned Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist, later a Literary Nobel Prize Winner in 1951, published a short novel titled *Dvärgen* (*The Dwarf*, an English translation by Alexandra Dick was issued in 1945). The book consists of a diary jotted down by a dwarf serving his master at a Renaissance Italian court. The fictional character of Prince has been presumably based on the historical figure of Ludovico Sforza (Mjöberg 1951, 168). He and his fellows go through numerous trials: love, betrayal, war, conspiracy, murder,

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suicide, siege, and finally a plague of pests. Although the Dwarf always stands behind the ruler's acts and decisions, the influential role he plays in the novel's plot is not obvious to the others. Yet, it goes without saying that he is the true embodiment of evil that lurks in the murky abyss of the Prince's soul. All the calamities that afflict both the castle and the entire country have their source in the Dwarf's deeds and speech. In his private writings, the protagonist sheds some light on his nature and how he construes the world. By going deep into the Dwarf's values and motivations one can find the genuine identity of evil. The diarist's remarks seem to be particularly fertile ground for a philosophical reading due to their dedication to the issue of existence, meaning, and true perception of reality. In this paper I want to reconstruct the theory that lies behind the Dwarf's stature. I will try to find what his philosophical position is. In other words, my aim is to paint a picture of the ontology of evil based on Lagerkvist's prose.<sup>1</sup>

This philosophical reading must find its counterpart and polemist in the classical tradition of the metaphysics of good and bad. When exploring it I want to compare Lagerkvist's ontology of evil with the ideas of goodness and bad in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. Plotinus (204/5-270 C.E.) was an influential philosopher of antiquity. His famous *Enneads* consist of six books presenting a Neoplatonic vision of the universe with its central point, namely: goodness. One of its most frequently discussed passages is Chapter VIII of The First Book. There the idea of rational dealing with evil is coined and the theodicean debate commences. The ontologies of Plato and Lagerkvist's Dwarf seem to be radically opposite models and there emerges an inevitable conflict between different views on the fundamental structure of reality. My aim, however, is not to give a decisive argument for one side of the struggle or the other. Instead of tilting the balance of consideration in someone's favor, I would rather attempt to point at the importance of human freedom in facing evil. In my opinion both Lagerkvist's protagonist and Plotinus imply it, despite being less than eager to admit it.

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of evil was obviously discussed in many of Lagerkvist's novels and short stories. Some examples are *Bödeln* (1933) (in English: *The Hangman*), *Barabbas* (1950), *Mariamne* (1967). In this paper however I will solely dwell upon *The Dwarf*, because it employs a complex ontology of evil. Therefore it provokes to ask some philosophical questions. Moreover, I have no ambition to track down the issue of evil in Lagerkvist's early poetry (e.g.: some moving poems of *Ångest* (1916) with their poignant depiction of fear). Yet, I am aware that many of dialogues in the novel repeat poetic phrases that come directly from Lagerkvist's poetry (Szewczyk-Haake 2017, 255-257).



This consideration of evil will pinpoint four aspects of it: (1) homogeneity, (2) impenetrability, (3) infertility, and (4) absurdity. Then I will move to its special moment: (5) freedom. The next few sections shall follow that order.

### **1. Homogeneity**

At the very beginning of his self-portrait the protagonist claims boldly: "I am a dwarf and nothing but a dwarf" (Lagerkvist 1973, 4). The intention of saying that is to cast away all the auxiliary roles that the Prince and his court have ascribed to the protagonist. Although it is often believed that he is a servant, "a buffoon" held at the castle to tell jokes and play tricks for the enjoyment of the rest, the Dwarf is fully aware of his genuine identity. What is more, all attempts to engage him in playing some tricky roles are futile. It is the Dwarf himself that radically transforms the tasks given to him. By following them to their unforeseen ends, he makes others fall into a state of anxiety and then into terror. One can easily recognize this in a scene where the Prince's family wants him to play with the Prince's daughter Angelica, and the Dwarf manifests his animosity towards that by secretly killing the girl's beloved pet. It is also the case of the carnival arrangement in Mantua. Although the Prince compels the Dwarf to play a dwarflike bishop, to celebrate a dwarf holy mass and to give a communion to the other dwarfs, in his sermon the protagonist shocks his audience. With his words he converts an innocent jest to a fearsome eruption of evil that truly intimidates all the spectators. People are prone to misconstrue his real nature. They judge the Dwarf after their own forms of being. Contrary to that the protagonist says: "they all play, all pretend something. Only I despise this pretending. Only I am" (Lagerkvist 1973, 13).<sup>2</sup> Usually it is believed that the Dwarf's identity consists of the many innocuous parts he plays in courtly life. Yet, in fact, his real nature is truly homogenous. The Dwarf's actions are not harmless pranks, but rather different manifestations of a steady drive towards destruction. To the fear and confusion of the Prince's family, the drive is the only thing that really exists.

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<sup>2</sup> One can also pay attention to a first-person narrative form and the very first words of the diary. The Dwarf starts his confessions with a bold claim: „Jag är [...]". It has been often interpreted as a typical self oriented egotism of a modern age man that distinguishes him/her from a collective existence of his/her Middle Ages precursors (Lewan 1995, 256). One needs to remember that in a modern epistemology of Descartes ego is the first thing that a true existence can be ascribed to.



The protagonist confirms his internal consistency by saying: "I who am always the same, who am quite inalterable" (Lagerkvist 1973, 33) and then "I am ever myself, always the same, I live one life alone. I have no other being inside me" (18). He is constantly surprised by the human feature of combining opposite feelings, desires and needs. How is it to simultaneously love and detest the very same person? How can a human being both reach the heights of knowledge by means of reason and concurrently stumble into the pitfalls of uncurbed pride or blind instincts? With these ambiguities the Dwarf is completely unfamiliar, and he grows uneasy. He finds it "incomprehensible." He realizes the existence of such ambiguity in a human world, but its comprehension lies far beyond his scope. To the homogenous embodiment of evil there is no place for a nuanced variety of values. Words and deeds are all of one nature. One can find here an anthropological difference that separates a human being from a dark reality of beings constantly permeated with evil. What I want to demonstrate in the very last section of this paper, is that this opacity of humans is the sole hindrance evil cannot break through. Hence in the ambiguousness of the human will is to be found the last hope for the opposition of evil.

As already said above, the Dwarf is a creature consistent in his values and intentions. Therefore, one cannot extract different parts of his identity without saying they always finally converge in the homogeneous nature of evil. This however does not mean that evil is not participating in some greater and larger entities. Evil is not divisible, but it can indeed divide other things by sneaking into their core. The Dwarf as the embodiment of evil often plays a role of an inner voice, a hidden face, a latent facet of the complicated novel's characters. This type of relation is emphasized in the diarist's depiction of the Prince. The protagonist confides that he "follows him [the Prince] constantly, like a shadow" (5). And it is even the Prince himself who rhetorically acknowledges this before going to war, announcing that he is taking his servant with him: "Can a prince be without<sup>3</sup> his dwarf?" (43) The Dwarf must endure harassment and abuses cast upon him by the Prince's subjects. Nevertheless, he is fully aware that all the insults and calumnies had been originally aimed at the Prince. The fact he has been attacked in place of his master makes him proud of being a vital part of the Prince. The Dwarf says: "It proves that I am a part of him and occasionally represent his noble person. Even the ignorant mob understands that the master's dwarf is really

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<sup>3</sup> The original Swedish word *undvara* says even more than the English translation: *be without*. The Prince is concerned not only about his being or existence, but he also means the ability to manage on his own. According to that, one can not follow one's plans and intentions without having an evil aspect on one's side.



the master himself" (11). The Dwarf has no minor parts (in Swedish: *delar*) in himself. Yet he is able to take part and compete with other substantial elements in different complex entities.

To understand correctly the Dwarf's ontological status, one must not forget that his part of participating in the greater and more complex beings is an indissoluble one. Not one of the figures depicted in the novel (with one exception) can get rid of him or control him. The exception is obviously the Renaissance scientist and savant Maestro Bernardo.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, he must also pay a high price for his resistance to the Dwarf. His immunity to evil is tantamount to insensitivity to goodness. The Maestro's stoic moral philosophy anticipates the modern science that both discovers penicillin and invents the atomic bomb. It disengages the fruits of its toil from the metaphysics of good and bad. Bernardo studies his fascinating inventions and the corpse of a convicted Francesco *sine ira et studio* meticulously. Others, however, have no power to completely rid themselves of the Dwarf. This pertains even to the Prince. After he discovers the Dwarf's malicious role in the plight of his family and country, the Prince shackles his servant in the dungeon and tortures him. The Dwarf, however, has no doubts about the Prince's future: "If I know anything of my lord, he cannot spare his dwarf for long. I muse on this in my dungeon and am of good cheer. I reflect on the day when they will come and loosen my chains, because he has sent for me again" (134). The human being must always succumb to the fearsome power of the Dwarf. The protagonist points to the fact that people try to separate evil from themselves. They believe its source should be found outside their own beings. They even try to repulse, jail, and punish it. Nevertheless, according to the Dwarf, it is a gross misunderstanding and an ontological mistake: "I have noticed that sometimes I frighten people; what they really fear is themselves. They think it is I who scare them, but it is the dwarf within them" (18). One cannot expel the imminent element of evil that persistently resides in the depths of every soul. The Dwarf often accentuates that he is an independent and homogenous creature.<sup>5</sup> This however cannot be said about the others. The protagonist discloses the true ontological structure of their beings: "they are afraid because they do not know that they have another being inside them" (18).

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<sup>4</sup> Mjöberg says that Bernardo's character has been inspired by the Italian philosopher and scientist Leonardo da Vinci (Mjöberg 1951, 168).

<sup>5</sup> I disagree with the point made by Rikard Schönström in his essay on the sight of evil (in Danish: *Det ondes blik i Pär Lagerkvists Dvärgen*) (Schönström 2003, 221). My ontological polemic finds its support in a more literature oriented study by a Polish scholar Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake (2017, 265).



Now, having depicted the internal uniformity of the Dwarf's stature, let me move forward to the picture that Plotinus' *Enneads* give on the nature of good and bad in the world. One can find some intriguing affinities and also striking discrepancies between the two ontological views found in Lagerkvist and Plotinus.

In the first of his six *Enneads* Plotinus explores the problem of the existence of evil in the world. In his dedication to the Platonic mode of doing philosophy, Plotinus points out that "those enquiring whence Evil enters into beings, or rather into a certain order of beings, would be making the best beginning if they established, first of all, what precisely Evil is, what constitutes its Nature" (Plotinus 1956, 66). In other words, in order to give a viable explanation of evil's presence and operation in reality, one needs first to say what evil actually is. This however must be done by having recourse to a definition of "good." For that reason Plotinus continues by saying: "If the solution is that the one act of knowing covers contraries, and that as Evil is the contrary to Good the one act would grasp Good and Evil together, then to know Evil there must be first a clear perception and understanding of Good" (66). Why is it so? Plotinus believes that „the nobler existences precede the baser" (66). To him it is self-evident that the good has priority over the bad.

Let us then have a look at the nature of the good. What sounds chiefly interesting in this investigation is that Plotinus says that an entity can "be made up of parts." Nevertheless, even then its "appropriate, natural and complete act" (64) must express that which is the best part of the entity, since then it is the good that has an overwhelming power over the entity, no matter how scant and meager the good part of being is. Due to the ontological structure of reality the best part of an entity is always constitutive for the whole. Plotinus does not stop here. He draws from this claim the ultimate conclusion. The good part of a being will always prevail. Any entity that consists of a good and bad part will be eventually dominated and possessed by the good. To Plotinus the good is the highest Intellectual-Principle that "possesses all [...] and what It possesses is still Itself, nor does any particular of all within It stand apart" (67). If so, if there is nothing particular, nothing separated or heterogenous to an entity, then "every such particular is the whole" (67). One can conclude that good is the force that does not let any particular part of an entity stand out.<sup>6</sup> With no particularity within an entity, the homogeneity has been saved. Now, it seems to be clear why Plotinus

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<sup>6</sup> In Second *Ennead* Plotinus says that "the Good, the Principle, is simplex" (II.IX.1). The Greek expression is there: ἀπλῆ φύσις—"of a simple nature" that may be understood an undividable one.



says that good is virtually the only part of the being itself. Here the famous theodicean debate commences. Plotinus comes to the conclusion that “evil cannot have place among Beings or in the Beyond-Being” (67).<sup>7</sup> His final statement is a precise antipode to the Dwarf’s confession. Plotinus and Lagerkvist’s Dwarf start their investigations from the idea of the homogeneity of a being. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that both of them at last impose homogeneity not only on a singular entity, but on the entire reality. The former says that good is the only thing that really is; the latter claims there is nothing real but evil in the world.

## 2. Impenetrability

In the next step I want to explore the problem of limited access to evil’s core. In fact it poses an alarming question as to whether all the ontological investigations on evil have not lost their credibility. The Dwarf presents his nature as an impenetrable phenomenon. Having agreed upon that with the protagonist, one needs to admit that a philosophical speculation on evil has a very narrow scope.

When reading the novel one can become perplexed by the fact that all the characters, but one, have their proper names.<sup>8</sup> For the most part their meanings introduce some knowledge of a person. One is informed about the later Princess’s religious fervency by her Latin derived name *Teodora*. The Prince’s animalistic name *Leone* is a symbol of his sovereignty and power. *Angelica* makes us think about her serene, angelic nature. *Fiammetta* represents the sparkle of sexual desire and her craving for power. Nevertheless, the Dwarf has no proper name given in the book. Having comprehended the Biblical act of giving names to objects as a distribution of power and knowledge, one must acknowledge that there is no power and no knowledge accessible to humans in the case of evil. Towards the end of his diary, the Dwarf makes it clear when he says ironically: “Power over me! What does it matter if I sit here in the dungeon? What good does it do if they clap me in irons? I still belong to the castle just as much as before!” (Lagerkvist 1973, 127). Although he was sentenced to life imprisonment, there is no chance to get rid of him. In point of fact nobody can penetrate his nature. Hence nei-

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<sup>7</sup> I have considered and analyzed Plotinus’ train of thoughts more extensively in: Pucydłowski 2019, 27-46.

<sup>8</sup> I am very thankful to my brilliant student Agnieszka Kocik PhD. She pinpointed that issue in a stimulating discussion during a seminar on evil at the Pedagogical University in Krakow.



ther judicial control nor custody of him is possible. The Dwarf admits it is even better that people in fact do not know what they are coping with. There is too much terror in it. He says: "Who knows anything about the dwarf soul, the most enclosed of all, where their fate is determined? Who can guess my true identity? It is well for them that they cannot, for if they did they would be terrified" (82).

What is then the Dwarf's understanding of knowledge? His idea of perceiving and recognizing objects in the world should be found as very different from the classical tradition of European metaphysics. The protagonist declares: "It is difficult to understand those whom one does not hate, for then one is unarmed, one has nothing with which to penetrate into their being" (7). It is hatred that lets us keep the object of cognition at bay. Perceiving reality is a brutal struggle. To know something means to attack and hurt it. Therefore, evil assails people, but not vice versa. People do not have enough potential for hatred to fight back against evil. The Dwarf is also skeptical towards human attempts to reach the sky and gain universal, cosmic insight. He wonders about the scholars embarking on their astrological venture: "Who knows anything about the stars? Who can read their secret? Can these men? They believe that they can commune with the universe, and rejoice when they receive sapient replies. They spread out their star-maps and read the heavens like a book." Nevertheless, the Dwarf has doubts about it. He understands that their reading is a pure solipsism that gives no real grasp of the matter: "they are the authors of the book, and the stars continue on their shadowy ways and have no inkling of its contents" (9). In comparison to astrology his idea of perceiving reality is earthbound, humble and strictly limited. "I too read in the book of the night, but I cannot interpret it. My wisdom shows me not only the writing, but also that it cannot be interpreted" (9). The knowledge is very limited. Enquiring brings more questions than answers. Evil is impenetrable. However, the Dwarf is apparently the only one who can know evil. It is because solely the protagonist is able to hate not only others, but also himself. He exclaims: "But I hate myself too. I eat my own splenetic flesh. I drink my own poisoned blood. Every day I perform my solitary communion as the grim high priest of my people" (17).

Another thing that the Dwarf can easily get through to are bad inclinations in humans. The protagonist well knows his path to the heart of temptation that afflicts the Prince's soul. First of all, "A dwarf always knows more about everything than his master" (11). That means that the Prince's servant can disclose to his master not only the vices, sins and betrayals of others, but he also brings out the ruler's dormant but menacing desire for destruction.



Having murdered the Prince's closest friend, the Dwarf says about his lord: "I can guess his desires before they have been uttered, perhaps before he has formulated them to himself, and thus I perform his most inaudible commands, as though I were a part of himself" (86). Although evil is impenetrable to the others, it can certainly penetrate their souls with ease.

Having presented the Dwarf's idea of cognition and penetration, it is worthwhile to compare it now with the view on knowing held by Plotinus. The dissimilarity is striking. Plotinus says: "All knowing comes by likeness" (1956, 66)<sup>9</sup>. This is an entirely different way of proceeding. In the Dwarf's eyes the recognition of any object is viable if and only if the object is heterogenic to the subject of cognition. Since knowing is a struggle, there must be some hostility between active knowing and passive being known. This hostility is based upon an ontological dissimilarity. That rule, however, is not applied in Plotinus' philosophy. According to the ancient philosopher one can get anything from another only due to the former's recognition of their likeness. This recognition is anchored in the act of love and affirmation of the other.

Now a paradoxical affinity between Lagerkvist's Dwarf and Plotinus emerges. They both claim evil is impenetrable. The former links knowledge to control and hatred. He claims that due to the lack of knowledge there is no control over evil at all. The latter understands knowledge as an act of assimilation and love. For that reason, evil has no "Ideal-Forms" and Plotinus asks triumphantly: "who could imagine Evil to be an Ideal-Form, seeing that it manifests itself as the very absence of Good?" (66). This statement has some profound ethical consequences. Not only must the nature of a bad deed be found illusionary, but also the deed itself, called vice, turns out to be a mirage in the end.<sup>10</sup> To Plotinus there is nothing there in the cleft of evil that stands between people. He would even say that there is apparently no murder, rape or violence. A rhetorical question is asked: "But what approach have we to the knowing of Good and Evil? And first of the Evil of soul: Virtue, we may know by the Intellectual-Principle and by means of the philosophic habit; but Vice?" (74). What baffles us when reading Plotinus is that evil has no carnal, literal or painful manifestations in the world. Instead of experiencing it with the senses, one can only abstract it in metaphysical speculation. Ploti-

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<sup>9</sup> For more details of what role likeness plays in the process of knowing and the theory of representation in Plotinus see: Schroeder 1996, 336-355.

<sup>10</sup> Dominic J. O'Meara underscores in his *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* that "moral evil is secondary and dependent on metaphysical evil, which is primary" (1995, 84).



nus says: "this thing which is nowhere can be seized only by abstraction" (1956, 74). Contrary to that, Lagerkvist burdens his reader with a picture of the brutality and tangibility of evil. Although the Dwarf finds no pleasure in base rejoicing over the carnal nature of war and fighting, one gets a detailed but dispassionate account on illness, death and torture in his diary.

Nevertheless, Plotinus does not exclude the cognition of evil. Though it is unsubstantial and of an illusionary nature, one can turn to that. This however results in falling into the shadows, into unenlightenment. It is a choice of distracting one's cognitive powers. According to Plotinus: "The Soul that breaks away from this source of its reality to the non-perfect and non-primal [...] becomes wholly indeterminate, sees darkness. Looking to what repels vision, as we look when we are said to see darkness, it has taken Matter into itself" (69). As I will try to demonstrate in the last section, even to Plotinus there is still a danger in exchanging the light of knowledge of goodness for the darkness of evil.

### 3. Infertility

The metaphysical tradition often pays much attention to the origin of a being taken into consideration. The classics asked about the descent of matter, the human soul, good, evil, gods and even the entire world. The Dwarf's diary is tinged with philosophical reasoning of this kind. He finds his lineage to be a very important issue and he deals with that. It is also distinctive to him in comparison to the people at the court. However the problem of the Dwarf's genealogy is twofold. What matters is not only his ancestors, but also the offspring he could never bear. The Dwarf is sterile. Yet this is not exclusive to him alone. He says: "We dwarfs beget no young, we are sterile by virtue of our own nature." One can guess that infertility must be found a great disadvantage and a flaw to the dwarf race. The protagonist, however, is not troubled with that imperfection. What is more, he finds it one among the greatest proof for the superiority of dwarfs over other humans. "We have nothing to do with the perpetuation of life; we do not even desire it" (Lagerkvist 1973, 58). Sexual contact, pregnancy and birth, due to their carnal nature, are always found repulsive to the Dwarf. In point of fact he believes that there are people who work for dwarfs with services as a base as giving birth. In opposition to people, he says about dwarfs, "we have no need to be fertile, for the human race itself produces its own dwarfs, of that one may be sure. We let ourselves be born of these haughty creatures, with the same pangs as they. Our race is perpetuated through them, and thus and thus only can we enter



this world. That is the inner reason for our sterility" (58). The Dwarf is not ashamed of his illiterate peasant mother who, as he recalls, "turned away from me in disgust when she saw what she had borne, and not understanding that I was of an ancient race." There is no filial respect and gratitude to her, since she sold her dwarf baby and "was paid twenty scudi for me and with them she bought three cubits of cloth and a watchdog for her sheep" (9). The protagonist finds her a useful instrument of transmitting life and bringing about a new dwarf personage in the world. Yet he is not thankful. As I will demonstrate in the next section, to the protagonist life has no value at all. Begetting offspring is devoid of any metaphysical depth. Contrary to popular belief, to the Dwarf it is in no way a multiplying of God's creation. One needs also to point out that evil embodied in the figure of the Dwarf is not independent in its coming into the world. It is not substantial in a metaphysical sense. There is no power for it to be born or created. The Dwarf must wait for a whim of fate, for a genetic mutation that accidentally gives him a chance to exist. However, this unsubstantiality does him no harm, because he is firm in believing that the human race will perpetually need dwarfs and will constantly give birth to them.

The very same problem is discussed by Plotinus in the first of his six *Enneads*. It seems that Plotinus and Lagerkvist's Dwarf agree on the fact of evil's infertility and unsubstantiality. Nevertheless, their valuations of that are extremely different. The protagonist of Lagerkvist's prose is proud of his absence from the disgraceful process of giving birth. Although he is aware of his lack of independence in coming to the world, he accepts the human role of procreation. A metaphysical reading of that may say that living at someone's else cost is not an imperfection. An entity that can employ some other beings to sustain its existence would prove its highest merit. The conclusion is that the entity supersedes the other beings by the act of enslaving them. It makes them its servants. In the case of the Dwarf, it is particularly interesting. Though he is treated by humans as their varlet, in his opinion it is the human race that has been enslaved by dwarfs.

To Plotinus everything looks very different. The good is superior to the bad for "the Good is that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other" (Plotinus 1956, 67). To be sufficient to itself means to have the ultimate power to generate itself with no need for external resources. A metaphorical depiction of evil given by Plotinus confirms its total unsubstantiality: "Some conception of it would be reached by thinking of measurelessness as opposed to measure, of the unbounded



against bound, the unshaped against a principle of shape, the ever-needy against the self-sufficing: think of the ever-undefined, the never at rest, the all-accepting but never sated, utter dearth" (68). According to Plotinus evil is comparable to a parasite. It lives and feeds on a being of the other nature. It will never survive without its host. Unfortunately, the coexistence of evil and its carrier is not a peaceful symbiosis that contributes to the reciprocal benefit of the two involved. It is not even a reasonable exploitation that means to deprive the host of energy, but to keep it alive. This relationship is always the annihilation of the host in the irreversible evil's drive to destruction. Plotinus gives here a philosophical account: "the negation of Good, unmingled Lack, this Matter-Kind makes over to its own likeness whatsoever comes in touch with it" (69). That phenomenon of making over to one's own likeness is a negative counterpart to the Hegelian term of *die Aufhebung*. Everything is sublated, but simultaneously, contrary to Hegel, nothing has been preserved. Evil aims relentlessly at its own extinction.

#### 4. Absurdity

Having read Lagerkvist's novel extensively I can come to the final passage. The coda is the theme of life's meaning and absurdity. The Dwarf realizes how much his human fellows appreciate all their businesses, efforts and life's fuss. As a remark on that he says: "Everything has a meaning of its own, all that happens and preoccupies mankind. But life itself can have no meaning. Otherwise it would not be. Such is my belief" (Lagerkvist 1973, 26). The Dwarf's conclusion shocks the reader. The lack of meaning is, to employ the idiom of Leibniz, a sufficient reason. Things can go on only because they have no sense at all. Their existence is pointless and for the very same reason it is real. The Dwarf mocks all the lofty metaphysical systems. Leibniz and Hegel have been turned upside down. The only asset of life is its futility: "What would life be like if it were not futile? Futility is the foundation upon which it rests. On what other foundation could it have been based which would have held and never given way? [...] Futility is inaccessible, indestructible, immovable. It is a true foundation" (35). The symmetry between the Dwarf and Plotinus is striking. The protagonist of Lagerkvist's novel employs the terms that in *Enneads* were earmarked for the good. Plotinus said about it: "That only can be named the Good to which all is bound and itself to none. [...] It must be unmoved, while all circles around it, as a circumference around a centre from which all the radii proceed" (Plotinus 2001, I.VII.1). Plotinus compares the good to the sun and makes it a central



point of his metaphysical panorama. The Dwarf, however, finds not the good, but rather the futility in the Archimedean point of reality. If so, the final of his consideration of life is very pessimistic: "Life! What is the point of it? What is its meaning, its use? Why does it go on, so gloomy and so absolutely empty?" (Lagerkvist 1973, 123). One is reminded here of the famous Hobbesian phrase: "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

To the Dwarf there is no important reason to keep all the people around him alive. He asks with passion: "Why should they exist? Why should they revel and laugh and love and overrun the earth? Why should these lying dissemblers and braggarts exist, these lustful shameless creatures whose virtues are even viler than their sins?" (89). Obviously, he finds no satisfying answer to that question. Hence murder is a viable option. Moreover, death is the only thing that people actually deserve. The Dwarf's rule says that the sufficient reason for their existence is their redundancy. Therefore, the natural fulfillment of their lives is to let them perish with no hope for eternal existence. This is the hex he repeats as he brews his poisoned beverage: "For after my drink they forget all the beauty and wonder of life and a mist enfolds everything and their eyes fail and darkness falls. I turn down their torches and extinguish them so that it is dark. I assemble them with their unseeing eyes at my somber communion feast where they have drunk my poisoned blood, that which my heart drinks daily, but which for them spells death" (89).

## **5. Freedom**

On one hand the picture painted by the Dwarf in his diary is terrifying and depressing. On the other, the metaphysical vision of Plotinus has an uplifting and calming effect on the reader. He elevates his reader and calms him down. Moreover, it virtually cuts out the poignant problem of evil. It seems that both the Dwarf and Plotinus assert their metaphysical conclusions with an inviolable certainty. The penetrating analysis of the principles of reality finds respectively the good or evil primordial overwhelming power that triumphs over an individual human being. Nevertheless my question is: do Lagerkvist and Plotinus leave any space for the moment of freedom in their complex and complete systems? I dare to say, yes.

I have already adumbrated the Dwarf's awkwardness and embarrassment as he faces a human soul's ambiguity. The incongruence of man is a puzzle. The protagonist has no insight into love, friendship, sexual desire, childlike joy of life, music, dance, poetry or science. Those phenomena re-



main vague in their descriptions. Sometimes he tries to reinterpret them, for example the Dwarf finds some of Maestro Bernardo's investigations useful at war. Therefore he appreciates Bernardo's art. Nevertheless the protagonist has no real understanding of what Maestro's wisdom is. His comprehension is rather superficial. It falls prey to the Dwarf's own mistrust and prejudices. Although upon being awoken from a nightmare he declares "reality is the only thing that matters" (41) his understanding of reality is very shallow. One reason for that is the Dwarf's ontological simplicity, referred to above as homogeneity. A tangled nexus of human passions, affections and desires is too complex for the Dwarf's simple ontological nature.<sup>11</sup> When he claims boldly that „human beings are too feeble and exalted to shape their own destiny" (127), one must agree. This, however, does not mean they are fully steered by the Dwarf's evil in themselves. The inconsistency of human nature is the last bastion of opposition, and it is quite an invincible one.

There is however another danger that emerges out of Plotinus' metaphysics. A perfect ontological system permeated with the ever victorious power of the good leaves no space for human misery. A tragic individual fate must succumb to the overwhelming strength of the good. One needs to capitulate. To embrace Plotinus' metaphysics is to find suffering and vice an illusion. This happens contrary to the most intimate feelings of every human being. In my opinion, however, there is still much that depends upon human freedom. The very act of accepting the metaphysics of the good is a clear manifestation of freedom.<sup>12</sup> One is free to find the central point of reality either in good or in evil. Plotinus confirms it by saying: "Now as, going upward from virtue, we come to the Beautiful and to the Good, so, going downward from Vice, we reach Essential Evil" (1956, 76). He also points out

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<sup>11</sup> A very similar conclusion is drawn by a famous death of God theologian Gabriel Vahanian in his analysis of two Lagerkvist's novels: *The Dwarf* and *Barabbas*. Although he declares: "it seems wrong to attribute to Lagerkvist a dualistic apprehension of the world and life" Vahanian then says that we cannot "assume that Lagerkvist's analysis leans towards a monistic understanding of reality. [...] The darkness that pervades so many of Lagerkvist's novels is, thus, always dark enough to let the reader catch a glimpse of the light on the other side of human existence" (Vahanian 1964, 196-197).

<sup>12</sup> A vital distinction has to be made here. An act of accepting or rejecting the metaphysics of Plotinus is a clear manifestation of human freedom. This however is not tantamount to the freedom Plotinus meant. For that reason my point is rather to say that modern philosophy can decide whether it embraces or not the metaphysics of good, than to mean Plotinus himself offers such choice. In other words: Plotinus implies, but does not admit it. The issue of discrepancy between post-Kantian and Plotinus' idea of autonomy and freedom has been commented by Pauliina Remes in her *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'* (Remes 2007, 190).



what kind of consequences each of the choices has: “from Vice as the starting-point we come to vision of Evil, as far as such vision is possible, and we become evil to the extent of our participation in it. We are become dwellers in the Place of Unlikeness, where, fallen from all our resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud” (76). To dwell in the world of the Dwarf or that of Plotinus is a matter of individual choice. No force can compel one to make a particular choice. Philosophy and literature sketch only the horizon of events and fate that would follow an individual will.

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Maciej Michalski\*

**Literature of Absence and the Experience of Evil  
(*Container* by Marek Bieńczyk, *Is Not* by Mariusz  
Szczygieł, and *Things I Didn't Throw Out*  
by Marcin Wicha)**

Abstract

The article discusses the way in which literature can address evil, understood as the experience of absence and loss. The problem concerns artistic writing in general, as was stressed by Maurice Blanchot; but it also appears particularly in a collection of texts about absence, such as *Container* by Marek Bieńczyk, *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł, and *Things I Didn't Throw Out* by Marcin Wicha. At the same time, they are an attempt to fill the void through literary restitution of that which is lost.

Keywords

Literature, Evil, Loss, Absence, Marek Bieńczyk, Mariusz Szczygieł, Marcin Wicha

The relationship of literature and evil (and perhaps even their strong connection—as will be discussed later) raises a number of questions and doubts. It may seem that by juxtaposing these two areas and notions, we arrive at a somewhat inadequate, vividly asymmetrical juxtaposition in which evil—an ethically important category—is juxtaposed with an area of

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artistic, perhaps merely ludic and reckless, activity. For this very reason, we approach this issue asymmetrically—not in terms of literature and evil, but rather of literature towards evil.

One can regard evil, after Gabriel Marcel, not as a problem, and therefore something to be solved, but as a mystery (Mukoid 1993, 113), or assume after Lev Shestov that one cannot ask the question about the source of evil, as “there are questions whose significance lies precisely in the fact that they do not admit of answers because answers kill them” (Shestov 1928-1937/1966, 230). But would not such an attitude be a form of silent escape from a vital issue? All in all, evil remains something that we must inevitably face, and somehow resolve our affairs with it—as is the case in the texts discussed below.

What is at stake when literature is confronted with evil? If evil is a problem, can literature be an attempt to solve it? Can literature problematize evil or in some way disarm evil, tame it intellectually, and even fight it? Or on the contrary: is this perhaps a trivialization of evil accomplished with words, through fictionalization and artistic means? Does literature attempt to capture that which is lost and cannot be regained, fighting with the destructiveness of evil or does literature take its side? Can literature stand adequately against evil at all (especially when we consider the concept of evil ontologically)? Perhaps it can, if writing texts—creation!—is a way of establishing a certain physical aspect of existence, then literature will always take the side of Being and of Good.

It is difficult to arrive at any definite answers to these questions, and the status of literature in this area seems strongly ambivalent. It seems that this ambivalence is best conveyed in some reflections by Maurice Blanchot, as interpreted by Marek Zaleski.

For Blanchot, writing itself remains related to the ultimate form of loss, which is death. Death, or nothingness, in this approach turns out to be the hermeneutic circle of literature. Writing not only has its source in the experience of loss, but also, paradoxically, finds its positive fulfilment in negativity: “Being, as revealed in the work of art—brought to the point of speaking—remains beyond all possibility, just like death which cannot be tamed despite all suicidal rhetoric, as it is not I who dies, but invariably «one» dies. Hence writing is realized in the experience of inexpressibility, in the ascertainment of a failure, which is the inevitable result of attempts at making a literary presentation, like the ultimate failure of communicating the reality of death. [...] death also constitutes the *telos* of the literary text, or at least it is the space in which each act of writing is inevitably realized, but in which also—vitality—it is carried out” (Zaleski 2005, 202).



This in fact becomes a cruel task for the writer:

"The writer is 'nothingness working in nothingness,' while death and nothingness are 'the hope of language,'" Blanchot writes, "[...] after all, language itself appears in the place of reality, it substitutes for what is vividly absent: if reality, although it seems obvious, was an unproblematic presence to us, language and literature would be redundant. Writing is founded on the sense of void, on the nothingness which undermines our existence, writing articulates the absence which is expressed most vividly in death. It constitutes [...] the incarnation of nothingness. And just like death, it is furnished with the power of negativity: it annihilates what it depicts [...] Writing, all literature, begins with the internalization of the knowledge of the end that awaits us, together with the awareness of the emptiness and insignificance that life is lined with" (202-203).

This, however, is to no avail, as:

Language is unable to save what passes and disappears. According to Blanchot, it even hastens the disappearance of what it names and disowns from being [...] Language, then, takes the place of what "is". Language denies being! It not only deprives the existing objects of their ontological reality, but also does not have the ability to retrieve the meaning of what is lost in the well of the past. It does not have the power to save what it holds as the object of representation, what it changes into an image or a metaphor. As it builds its patterns, which are supposed to refer to reality, becoming reality's articulation, it takes the place of what it refers to, substituting itself for that presence and pushing it into oblivion [...] To speak about something, to name something, is to blur it, obliterating the object of our representation [...] What is more, in order for language not to tell untruth, the loss has to be real, hence what is articulated is already non-present and lost, while all articulation only brings about the absence of what it refers to. The non-presence, then, is multiplied (203-204).

So language, according to Blanchot, is endowed with cunning ambivalence: the power of annihilation and the appearance of restoration. What appears in language, replaces reality [...]. Things disappear from reality to reappear in text. Writing brings literature to life, but removes the world to nothingness (Zaleski 2005, 205-206).

All in all:

Writing, then, is a furnishing of emptiness and a disappearing. It is a paradoxical action, as it takes negative fulfilment as its positive aim: it is supposed to utter "nothing," to express emptiness, articulate absence; it fulfils itself as action that presents nothing (205).



Clearly, then, literature takes an ambivalent stance in relation to evil. It can be treated as a form of struggle with evil, through actualization of what is lost, through restoring it to existence. Perhaps that is why Bataille writes about literature as a kingdom of the impossible, “the kingdom of insatiability” (Bataille 1992, 41). Perhaps literature deprives evil of its metaphysical quality, that is its beyond-physicality, reducing everything to imaginary particulars. Following this nominalistic perspective, perhaps the right to talk about evil should be granted only to literature and art, as domains of the particular, since all discourse is hypostasizing. Literature cannot name or define evil, but it can speak of its manifestations and effects—it can write about it through negative poetics. And perhaps, paradoxically, it is only in literature that metaphysical evil can be captured—since the status of literature and language is beyond-physical.

From a different perspective, one can adopt the view suggested by Józef Tischner, inspired by the Aristotelean concept of mimesis as the probable, and by implication better given that it is oriented towards good, imitation of reality. Tischner proposes the recognition of art (and literature) as something that offers a better, improved, and most of all axiologically harmonious version of reality (Tischner, 1990, 98). In this view, art would indicate how much better the world could be—which at the same time explains the fictional character of artistic actions and justifies that character ethically.

On the other hand, as Blanchot indicates, literature is nihilistic; it attempts to replace reality with words, memories, and illusions. This way, it becomes yet another form of deception—different from the Platonic vision. It lures with the promise of restoring to existence, of filling an absence; it gives false comfort, and in addition, alienates us from reality.

### Literature of Absence

How does this ambivalence reveal itself in works that clearly deal with absence and loss? I would like to elaborate on this issue by analyzing some recently published texts which explicitly problematize it: *Things I Didn't Throw Out* by Marcin Wicha, *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł, and *Container* by Marek Bieńczyk.

I will allow myself to describe them as literature of absence, consisting in a peculiar poetics of loss.

*Things I Didn't Throw Out* and *Container* are stories of mourning, in which the authors describe the experiences of the loss of a mother. Bieńczyk's essay is, moreover, an attempt to create a theory of the poetics of loss, a form



of methodological reflection, mainly in the context of Roland Barthes' "Mourning Diary." *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł takes a somewhat different form: it is a kind of writing—or even a documentary or research project which aims to formulate different narratives of loss, of the "is not," as the author calls it, which is experienced by his characters. This piece is all the more important in my discussion, which is mainly concerned with death, because Szczygieł's texts, while describing different kinds of loss, turn out to be in many ways similar to the other two works in terms of thought and poetics. And, in my opinion, most of all, all these works refer to the issue of evil in a substantial way, as I shall discuss in due course.

### **The Condition of a Mourner**

Unarguably, the texts discussed here are self-referential and autobiographical projects, a form of personal struggle with the emptiness that one is surrounded by, but also with one's own transience and death. Szczygieł's narrator writes about his motivation to write *Is Not*: "After the age of forty I discovered that I'm not immortal. And I had to do something about it" (Szczygieł 2018, 255). And even if writing was not a way of taming the sense of one's immortality that declines with age, then perhaps it was a stage of development and maturing: "You become mature only when you lose what you really love" (195).

It is therefore worth outlining on the basis of these texts a brief characterization of the condition of a mourning (and, it seems, deficient) subject. I will only briefly mention three issues: compulsiveness, expressed mainly in the need to tell a story, desire for impossible presence, and paralysis, which leads to the suspension of one's experience of time.

### **Compulsiveness**

The insistence on circling around the issue of loss and absence already implies some sort of obsession, perhaps characteristic of every creative process. But writing about loss seems to stem from a peculiar compulsive need which is reflected in the insistence of style and reasoning. The narrators, especially in the writing of Wicha and Bieńczyk, circle around different issues, objects, situations and images, but eventually always return to what is lost—to the mother. This constant return, as well as the obsession with certain images and associations is particularly vivid in *Container* (for instance in the almost refrain-like re-appearances of a chapter entitled "May-flies" or of the exclamation "olé").



Absence and loss are events that suck-in and anchor, and are difficult to escape from. They become a source of the compulsive need to tell stories, to record, to orderly arrange. Bieńczyk wonders why Barthes was able to write only an hour or two after his mother's death, and explains this by referring to a physiological writing reflex, which is at the same time subject to self-control (Bieńczyk 2018, 107-108). It can also be a manifestation of a subconscious feeling of guilt connected, for example, with the thought, still during the lifetime of the deceased, that "it would be good" if a given person passed away (Pilecka 2016, 150).

### **The Desire for an Impossible Presence**

The compulsive need to record things may arise from an unsatisfied desire for presence. Mourning involves an imperative of remembrance, of doing justice to the deceased through memory, of honoring commitments and recounting what is left (Ricoeur 2006, 117-118). The task is not easy: "I used to think that we remember people as long as we can describe them. Now I think it's the other way round: they're with us until we can do it. It is only dead people that we own, reduced to some image or a few sentences. [...] But I can't remember it all. Until I can describe them, they're still a little bit alive" (Wicha 2017, 5).

The texts which are discussed here, not only the mourning essays by Bieńczyk and Wicha, seem to play a similar role, inducing the narrators in a sense to negate the present while keeping the past alive. At the same time they project a future in which the emptiness left by the deceased will be accommodated.

### **Paralysis**

The experience of absence can be compared to a kind of paralysis—of will, emotions, cognitive powers, perspective. Like every other experience, it can also have a stigmatizing, defining and formatting character, shaping our way of seeing things (Bieńczyk 2018, 100). These features seem typical of the process of mourning (Freud 1917/1950, 153; Pilecka 2016, 151).

However, it also grants a peculiar peace: "Barthes states directly: mourning is the only space in life free from neurosis: nothing bad can happen, I have disposed of the worst part of me [...]" (Bieńczyk 2018, 248). Indeed, it would be hard to find any distinctly emotional tone, fierce confessions or dramatic expression in these texts. However, this does not imply a lack



of emotion. Barthes points to the resemblance between the mourner and the lover: both are separated from the world, outside of time, almost like the sick (70).

The experience of absence is also paralyzing with respect to the experience of time: "The past of such a mourner, whatever lies behind, is also his future: there was nothing because nothing is meant to be" (151). This state disturbs the narrator to such a degree that they are unable to determine when their mother died (104). Time loses its clarity and gains a peculiar heaviness at the same time: "Of this very time, the time that I call deadness, Barthes states that it is 'compacted, beyond meanings, with no way out' and that it is the time of 'genuine mourning' from which no word can be released, no narrative, no talking" (202).

This paralysis has an almost physiological character. Wicha, following Bieńczyk (118), mentions a laryngeal spasm: the remembrance of his mother is followed by the following remark: "There should be a special punctuation mark. A graphic equivalent of laryngeal spasm. A comma is no use. A comma is a wedge to catch your breath, but we need a typographical knot, even a bump or a stumble" (Wicha 2017, 14).

## **Poetics of Loss**

This state of the deficient subject influences the form of the texts, which in turn contributes to the peculiar poetics of loss. It is the poetics of meandering, periphrasis, oscillations, focus and detachment, of chattering as well as non-naming and silence. It is characterized by paradoxes that are revealed in various forms. The following features can be distinguished: the sense of inexpressibility, compulsive metonymy, oscillating between the trivial and the serious, and fragmentation accompanied by a certain dispersion, and dissolving of the object of loss in a novel. These artistic phenomena have an extensive history and some, for example inexpressibility and fragmentation, have been studied intensely, but for the purposes of the present considerations there is no need to invoke these discussions.

## **Inexpressibility**

Paradoxically, the experience of writing about loss derives most of all from the need to speak and the sense of the deficiency of words, the inexpressibility which is vividly present in Bieńczyk's work, as well as Szczygieł's. When it becomes necessary to refer to death and dying (evil?), the authors do it



without naming the event of death directly: “*It* balances on the verge of audibility and silence, visibility and invisibility, speaking and non-speaking,” “Speaking about it, say it” (Bieńczyk 2018, 164); “*It* has begun. Do you understand? *It* has begun. Do you understand? *It*” (Wicha 2017, 175). As Szczygieł explains: “Maybe it is only about saving one’s own mood, but maybe something more. Maybe it is about our constant, favorite activity—something that in fact is the main content of human life—putting off thinking about ‘is not’” (Szczygieł 2018, 242).

There is, however, another aspect to this. Bieńczyk writes: it is not a matter of expressing the unspeakable, but rather of “how not to express the speakable, how to squeeze out speaking. Until nothing is left, a specter of a word, her [the mother’s] name, a subtle disturbance in the smooth wave of silence” (Bieńczyk 2018, 87).

Just as Bieńczyk interprets Celan’s speech as meaning that only poetry is possible after the genocide at Auschwitz, perhaps the poetics of loss and absence also consists in slipping into the literary, and more specifically in balancing between literature of fact and artistic means. However, the crucial dilemma is whether to write at all: “Writing and death [...] This word which brings my failure, this silence with which I fail a bit less. It’s impossible either way. He [the narrator] would like to stay silent, but has to write. He would like to write, but has to stay silent” (about Barthes, Bieńczyk 2018, 208); “It is impossible to speak about it, but it’s also impossible to stay silent” (230).

### Compulsive Metonymy

An almost compulsive metonymy seems to be the only solution for the problem that it is impossible to remain silent when things need to be said. This literature is in constant transition, circling around, and adhering to deficiencies, complementary filling the void with whatever is at hand—hence the chattering, long-winded mulling over details.

Even titles can reflect this inadequacy: this is clearly the case with *Container*, and to a lesser degree with *Things I Didn’t Throw Out*, as it is only to a small extent a book about things.

Metonymy also applies to speaking about oneself—the motivation to write is perhaps to express one’s own state rather than to recall what is lost. Bieńczyk notices that two profound figures of existence were important for Barthes: his mother and writing (209), and the same applies to the narrator



of *Container*. Perhaps then the theme of these books is not as much absence, but rather those who are metonymic towards absence, those who remain and who experience loss.

An interesting aspect expressed by metonymy is the focusing on things or objects. It can be regarded as a form of escape from emotions, from reminiscing over what or who is missed. But things also guarantee a certain ontological anchorage: they exist as unchanging and tangible beings. Their presence can offer a sense of security through the illusion that they fill a void. After all, a person's absence is also purely physical; it is a non-occupation of space. At the same time, things that are metonymical actualize absence, adhering to what or who is missing: "When dreaming of things we go back to childhood. Inaccessible objects allow us to concentrate sadness in one shape. To describe what we miss" (Wicha, 2017, 74, see also 20, 30).

One form of discourse about things within the poetics of loss is enumeration, a peculiar kind of melancholic collecting, for example as in the list of a mother's favorite books (51), or Eve's life drawn up in the form of a spreadsheet (Szczygieł 2018, 49 and next), or the list of what is missing in a beautiful but lost villa (226 and next).

Perhaps, as the narrator of *Is Not* suggests, our death brings relief to objects (246). This may be the reason for focusing attention, in the books discussed here, on the things themselves, freed at last from servitude and their purely contextual role towards people.

Also, things and telling stories about them can temporarily fill a void: "An adopted object can for a short time take the place of 'is not'" (251).

## Oscillating

The discourse about things reflects another feature of the literature of loss: the intertwining of triviality with seriousness, and at times with the sense of fear; the connection of the macro and micro perspectives. This connection reveals how dramatic the experience of emptiness is—one does not know how to talk about it, how to deal with its coming to (non)being, and all this is revealed through the oscillation of registers and perspectives.

A good example is a story by Szczygieł about Eve's account of her life, typed into an Excel spreadsheet, with all her achievements, failures and fears, and provided with dates. Such an enumeration could be considered a bizarre and incomprehensible way of outlining one's life, but for the fact that it concerns a story which is difficult to describe in other, more conventional ways—a difficult and unhappy childhood and a life filled with strug-



gling with the past for the sake of a decent present. In the context of such an outline, death should be recorded in the cell designated for achievements (49 and next).

The intertwining of the trivial and the serious is vividly shown in *Is Not*, in a fragment describing the ongoing war in Ukraine (158-159). Here the protagonist also explains that it is impossible to speak about everything, and oscillation between seriousness and triviality appears to be a reaction to inexpressibility.

## Fragmentation

"Mourning, and moreover, worry, are essentially partial. That is, if they finally induce a person to speak, they bring pieces of an unspeakable whole" (Bieńczyk 2018, 63). And further: "[...] The Book is not meant to create a Whole, but to break it into pieces, even very small ones [...]" (173). The texts discussed here are often divided into small parts; there are no lengthy arguments. The stories are usually very brief, interrupted with digressions, repetitions and returns (especially in Bieńczyk). There is no clear coherence to the text, and continuity or sequencing are present only locally. Therefore, fragmentation does not offer a promise of completeness, but instead is a symptom of deficiency, defect, and loss.

Narratives about loss seem to lose their own completeness. They are fragmented into short pieces, as if creating or sustaining a longer narrative was impossible, as if the stories needed to begin over and over again. *Is Not* includes repetitive fragments with empty spaces (i.e. Szczygieł 2018, 123, 153 and following), so the narrative is torn apart, discontinuous, and random enumerations occur (i.e. 168). This is also how Wicha ends his book, with coincidental yet dramatic enumeration of mourning instructions and advice, concluded with a trivial "That is all" (Wicha 2017, 181).

Tracing signs of fragmentation furthermore, it can be noticed that we are dealing with yet another paradox: although the main theme is what is lost, it becomes dispersed. Its fragmentation and lack of coherence make the lost object elusive, incomplete, blurred, only partly tangible: "Mother dissolves in the book like red in white [...] she loses her concrete form, granting her features to other figures [...]" (Bieńczyk 2018, 171). As a result, writing resembles "grasping, groping, fondling of emptiness" (283).

With all the sense of the inadequacy of the poetics of loss in the face of emptiness, it is still impossible not to speak about it. This is aptly expressed by Hanna Krall, quoted by Szczygieł: "Everything needs to have its form, its



rhythm, Mr. Mariusz. Especially absence" (Szczzygieł 2018, 309),<sup>1</sup> "while dying and death [...] ask [...] directly: how does one write? What is [writing], what should writing be?" (Bieńczyk 2018, 111). An echo of Blanchot's discussion of literature as "furnishing emptiness" is present here.

### Literature of Absence Towards Evil

However, one may wonder whether it is appropriate to discuss these texts in the context of evil. Not all the stories in them about absence and emptiness involve evil. This is particularly evident in the pieces by Szczzygieł, who also mentions "is-nots" caused by wars, political changes or actions resulting directly from human beings. Sometimes absence can be fortunate, as in the case of the story about a transsexual, Karol, who after gender confirmation surgery has been liberated from different undesirable emotions caused mainly by identity problems. One of the characters in *Is Not* states: "Emptiness also has value of its own, equal to what may fill it" (Szczzygieł 2018, 315). Another character, an Albanian painter, reminisces about the hard times of Communism: "I wasn't an artist anymore, only a sack carrier. Because I had been convicted, to them I did not really exist. There was no me. Ah, no one bothered me, and I felt really free. I could paint without being checked up on, like a real painter. Then I felt the sense of truly living [...]" (202). A disturbing issue is revealed here: absence (perhaps as well as death and evil) can become tempting. In this brooding on and experiencing of loss, at times one can sense a perverse satisfaction.

In the texts discussed here, the sense of loss and regret experienced by the subject is, however, dominantly negative. The already discussed condition of the "deficient subject" torn between the compulsive need for presence and the paralysis of will and emotions, expressed in the poetics of loss characterized by clear deficiencies (!) in the area of comprehensive, precise and explicit expression; the metonymic subject oscillating between extremely different emotions and perspectives, indicates that what we encounter here is suffering induced by evil. It can be argued, by following Tischner, that death is a misfortune (governed by necessity and the laws of nature), rather than an evil (dependent on will and freedom) (Tischner 1990, 151). If we accept this, death and mourning cannot be directly associ-

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<sup>1</sup> Bieńczyk mentioned this during a meeting with readers, stating that he would have felt no need to write about loss had it not been for the emergence of an idea for the form, and in a formal compulsion there is also an existential compulsion (Gdynia, Konsulat Kultury, 30.08.2019).



ated with evil, just like each absence and loss. One can ask whether absence is the source of evil, or if true evil lies at the source of this absence? Maybe this uncertainty is the reason why the word evil is never used in these texts, and why there is very little defiance towards losing things, but instead one can only—only!—deal with the effects of absence.

Death is something natural, and therefore a misfortune, but it generates absence and its consequences give birth to emptiness, annihilating or paralyzing some emotional areas and experiences. And it is the field of the latter that makes it irrelevant whether the absence is a human fault (as moral evil), or stems from natural causes (as in the case of physical evil)—we experience it as something harmful to us. It becomes corrupting to the human will, and in this sense the metaphysical understanding of evil can be related to human actions. Death and other deficiencies turn out to be a kind of black hole which sucks one in, weakens one's will and perception, and perhaps also the ability to do good.

Finally, the experience of death leaves behind a painful emptiness which implies a deep deficiency in reality. It points to its imperfections, its faultiness, and it cannot be explained by Leibniz's theodicy. Death becomes a proof that there is something wrong with the world. Passing away into non-being is a prelude to the nothingness which awaits us. Each loss, even a small one, prefigures our death, and in a broader sense the experience of deficiencies in reality itself, its imperfection and perhaps evil, which is the undesired yet inseparable reverse of reality.

The same conclusions are drawn by Barthes who "proposes a metaphysical thesis: what appears after the death of a loved one is filled with absence. Thus absence is what constitutes reality, from which stems existence between reality and [...] absence itself, in the posthumous world in which it is impossible to reach the hard bottom and start over again. Death, suddenly actualized in a dead body lying in the next room, makes 'everything creak'" (Jaksender 2010, 85). The experience of loss is perhaps also a sign of a moral intuition suggesting that the world ought to be built differently. Mourning is perhaps a state of an acute sensitivity to evil, the most appropriate and desirable state, however, which passes as life is governed by its own rules and dulls our moral sensitivity. Melancholy as nostalgia for that which is not lost can perhaps stem from the same source (see: Bieńczyk 2018, 151)? The mourner, as Bieńczyk writes, sensing their own fragility, notices that everything that surrounds them is vulnerable to the unreliable influence of time, "As if death had opened their senses, induced them to love more, to feel compassion and empathy more deeply" (249).



The depiction of absence as evil refers of course to Augustine of Hippo's concept that "Evil has no nature, it is not anything, it is not physical, it is not part of the world. It is not because it does not exist on its own, it is not a really existing principle [...] evil is a choice of direction; it is turning one's back, and consequently a fall [...] from what is richer in being, towards that which is poorer. In his opinion, the lack of something (*deficare*) is not nothingness yet, but it certainly moves towards it" (Drwiega 2018, 16). Lack is evil here, including deficiency in health, as well as death, which constitutes the lack of biological life (Kowalczyk 1987, 114).<sup>2</sup>

It needs to be mentioned that the Augustinian intuition is retained in French, as Barbara Skarga remarks: "the word *le mal* covers a variety of notions—first of all, it is misfortune, but also harm, illness, pain and suffering. What's more, *mal* also contains negation, *maladresse*, *malaise*, *malheur*, *malhonnete* etc. As if in this very language, so closely related to Latin, a conviction remained that evil is negation, lack" (1993, 5).

Among the authors discussed here, Bieńczyk refers to Augustine directly, and in particular he recalls the experiences connected with the death of his mother, as well as the question "*unde malum?*" which is vital for the author of the *Confessions* (Bieńczyk 2018, 180 and following). Perhaps, then, the Augustinian concept of evil arose as an expression of emptiness, as a reaction to the death of his mother—Bieńczyk's considerations seem to suggest this line of thought, and the chronology of the life and work of the Bishop of Hippo makes it probable.

Other works discussed here also seem in line with the Augustinian concept. It can be assumed indirectly that all representations of the experience of absence that result in suffering hold evil as their source—this indirectly suggests that the similarities are not coincidental, and perhaps supports the Augustinian intuition. Perhaps it is possible to speak of evil only indirectly, and only through its effects, or the way we experience them. But absence, and death as the most painful absence, sometimes give birth to objections to reality. This is aptly depicted in a dialogue between Wicha and his mother: "Where's Piotr?—asks his mother.—He's dead.—But in a moment like this he should be here—she says. She still does not accept easy excuses. She still refuses to accept the workings of the higher power. If he really wanted, he would come. Death is no excuse" (Wicha 2017, 162). One can have the impression that these words—again in the metonymic mode—are spoken

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<sup>2</sup> The origins of this reasoning are much older; they appear in Assyrian-Babylon mythology (Gołaszewska 1994, 153).



by the narrator to themselves. A similar element can be found in Bieńczyk, who quotes the dramatic and at the same time naïve manifesto of Canetti: “The First commandment is [...] you will not die” (Canetti 2019, 21; Bieńczyk 2018, 262).

Loss, whose most painful form is the experience of another’s death, is an experience which is the more painful as it disturbs our sense of immortality: “the death of a loved one disrupts our defensive mechanism of negating reality, negating the possibility of death” (Pilecka 2016, 151).

At this point, one can trace references to another concept of evil, which Jean Nabert calls *injustifiable*—that which cannot be justified (see: Mukoid 1993, 69-71, 93 and next). This idea seems to be reflected in what the authors discussed here are saying—though not directly. The experience of loss, and of death in particular, turns out to be impossible to justify, and perhaps even impossible to forgive. Importantly, this does not mean that it cannot be explained—after all, it is obvious that biological processes, and even political ones, are inevitable—what belongs to the natural world, from the moral and experiential perspective provides “suffering that seems to stand witness indisputably and irrevocably against the existence of such events, which deeply wound our sensitivity” and lead us to the intellectual judgement that “this event shouldn’t have happened, there’s no explanation for it” (Mukoid 1993, 94).

As a reaction to this experience, narratives about loss emerge, and even if they are fragmentary, they offer an illusory sense of control, of working out these experiences, while at the same time they reveal the yawning gap between the sphere of experiences and emotions on the one hand, and that of words and literature on the other. Perhaps this is why Bieńczyk refers to Adorno’s question about the possibility of poetry after the genocide at Auschwitz, which may also explain certain similarities to the Lyotardian view of the sublime. Perhaps writing about absence is an attempt to “privatize” it, to subject it to control, just as in psychoanalytical therapy telling stories offers (the illusion of?) moving forward. In this view, literature of loss would stem from the sense of helplessness in the face of that which we are unable to control.

## Conclusions

In literature of absence we are presented with depictions of the experience of loss as well as attempts to counter the instances of coming to non-being through literary restitution (perhaps retroactive) of what is lost. In their texts, the authors reveal, or expose, to what extent that which is absent de-



termines our presence, how much lack and emptiness influence what is, and who we are. Or: how evil, seen as a lack, or as absence, turns out to be complementary to what exists. In this sense, the works are not only about the experience of loss and deficiency, but about our reality, imperfect and flawed by absence and evil. After all, mourning indicates indirectly that the world is not perfect, since we are doomed to such suffering.

Literature, in the light of the above, appears to be a performative gesture of Human Will encountered with evil, lack, and emptiness. In this view, the literary work can be regarded as a gesture, an action or statement, and not just a creation. This is how some of the authorial declarations can be seen. Bieńczyk writes: “[...] words pretend to be a body, they want to feel its convulsions. This is a well-known writing trick. The lament of my mother’s body was unbelievable, the lament of writing is not to be believed” (2018, 121).

Perhaps at the same time, an adequate response to absence and evil would be perfect silence [...] In the almost compulsive need to make things present, the painful experience of evil as absence is expressed. This edifice surrounding emptiness makes it more visible, makes it scream. But is it possible to remain silent?

Does this imply that the “furnishing of emptiness” advocated by Blanchot—literature in general—is our reaction to the experience of evil, in whatever form, not only in relation to loss? We make a creative effort in order to save our positive perception of the reality that we are doomed to anyway. In this view, writing is a compulsion (87), a compulsion to save reality from the nothingness which we experience as hostile. Due to the inability to turn to the Absolute that could be a salvation from emptiness, the horror of experiencing absence is even more intense. This way, literature replaces religion in the struggle with evil and in the “saving” of reality from the inevitable and gradual annihilation of its different areas.

It can be hoped that this type of literary text addresses the problem of evil, names it and accentuates it, and at the same time without becoming “bad literature”—bad in the ethical sense, nihilistic and corrupting. Perhaps naming evil makes it somewhat less evil? Maybe here lies the power of literature. And its carefree, unbearable lightness in the struggle with evil—maybe a literature of absence is the way—without making claims but also without keeping silent.

Ricoeur expresses a similar view: “We can’t speak to others about their suffering. But perhaps, if we juxtapose it with our own, we can say: let it be [...] Perhaps here lies the ultimate answer to the problem of evil: to achieve



a point of renunciation (...) of desire to be spared from suffering, to renounce the infantile desire for immortality" (Ricoeur 1991, 48). This is what literature sometimes is: telling others that we need to accept the omnipresence of suffering and inevitable mortality. And "reflecting on evil"—it can be added: including literary reflection—"rather than explicating, [it] should seek to excuse, to exorcise despair, as Marcel states" (Mukoid 1993, 185). And if evil understood as *unjustifiable* "stands in opposition to philosophy as meaningful thought, directed to discovering meaning," what is left is literature—nihilistic and saving at the same time, whose ambivalence was so aptly described by Blanchot.

And secretly one may hope that one day what Canetti, and then Bieńczyk (Canetti 2019, 101; Bieńczyk 2018, 263), so forcefully declared, will come true: "Tell, tell stories, until no one dies."

Translated by Aleksandra Słyszewska

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