

# The Art of Darkness

JS: I think evil, like charity, begins at home. We know not what evil we do partly because “the family romance” that has invented us disguises our motives and makes us, in our own eyes, nearly indecipherable and therefore unaccountable. Poets try to decipher us. In the well-known words of the all-too-human Philip Larkin: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do.” Larkin’s editorial conclusion is wistfully cautionary (it’s worth noting and—one imagines—celebrating the fact that Larkin had no children):

Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don’t have any kids yourself.

As a corrective to this spidery spleen, I recall that in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow tells us “all of Europe went into the making of Kurtz,” that he had splendid parents and lovely career possibilities, and that he still became one of the most impressively fucked-up figures in Western literature, nearly the epitome of evil. Where does evil come from? When and why may one not put the word “evil” in quotation marks? Is there a distinction between absolute and circumstantial evil? Even Hitler and Stalin were babies bouncing on parental knees before they began handing on misery to man. I am not overly-fond of the word “evil.” It is too Christian. Pagans had no understanding of it, did they?

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RB: I find the origins of evil mysterious. Does it begin at home? Perhaps. In the case of Kurtz—a sort of Raskolnikov with a pith helmet—what interests me is not his family history so much as his innate abilities. Marlow is unable to say “which was the greatest” of Kurtz’s many talents and ends by describing him as a “universal genius.” Surely it is no accident that in Genesis, Evil and Knowledge are eaten in the same apple; or that in Sophocles, Oedipus is not only the Breaker of Taboos but also the Unriddler of the Sphinx; or that in Goethe, Faust trades away his immortal soul to solve the mysteries of the universe. Certainly I believe that evil—without the quotation marks—is real. How frequently it flourishes (I deliberately use the Baudelairean metaphor) among the most active and curious minds. When Blake said Milton was of “the devil’s party” was he speaking of himself—or of all those who dare to think what is forbidden?

JS: That the pedigreed imagination and the initiatives of evil are “kissing cousins” plays havoc with any hope for human beings or for the Humanities, largely conceived. I like to think—to hope—that the imagination is robustly antithetical to evil machinations. But perhaps we should see them as collaborative, conspiring partners. Artists and intellectuals are particularly good at dreaming up more and more baleful mischief. Bring out the Instruments of Torture. That means: bring out the Human Beings. What if—*horrible dictu*—We are Satan? After all, is there any rougher beast on the planet than what John Gray (in *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*) calls *homo sapiens*?

RB: Eve, Oedipus, Faust, Raskolnikov and Kurtz are all over-reachers, whose desire for knowledge, especially the esoteric and proscribed kind, is so intense that they will sacrifice everything in pursuing it. Literature gives us numerous examples of such characters, and their creators are among the greatest writers—from Dante, Shakespeare, Blake, Byron and Baudelaire to Dostoyevsky, Wilde, Proust, Conrad and Kafka. All these authors explored the hidden places of the human psyche, often lingering in its deepest and darkest recesses. Can *homo* be truly *sapiens* if he is not—at least a little—*rapiens*?

JS: As John Gardner wrote in *Grendel* (referring to man-animals), “No wolf was ever so cruel to other wolves.” I once mentioned that line to him and he said, “Writers are even worse.” I think he meant that writers and other artists can be terribly cruel in their imaginations, but also hard work for those around them. Perhaps all the time spent imagining scenes of evil (as Victor Frankenstein does) contaminates or poisons one’s soul. Yet Mary Shelley was, unlike her husband, a real sweetheart. Percy used his genius to write lyric poetry about Love and the Imagination and treated Mary—and many others—as hired help. Both Shelleys explore the hidden places you mention (two versions of Prometheus) but, oddly enough, the darker imagination (Mary’s) does nothing to pollute its author’s moral sensibility. And for all Percy’s soaring lyrics about Love Unbound, he was often a complete bastard. What, if anything, can we conclude, or wildly surmise?

RB: Whether the Promethean fires are banked low or high, whether the Vulture of the Caucasus feeds ill or well, artists’ moral sensibilities are bound neither by the darkness of their vision nor the extremity of their experience. You observed elsewhere that we must judge works of art case by case, and I think that applies to artists as well. Having said that, I am nevertheless struck by how much sympathy for the Devil there is among writers. Perhaps this—what to call it?—aesthetic Satanism is simply a romantic and/or modernist conceit. Then again, all of Greek tragedy, much of the Bible, and a great deal of Western literature from the Renaissance to the French Revolution is attracted to Evil and its sinister machinations.

Oscar Wilde famously wrote in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.

Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

We have two separate questions before us. What do we make of the evil of Kurtz when we think of him as a man—not a character? And what do we make of the evil of Kurtz when we think of him as a character—not a man?

JS: So long as literature stylizes evil (how could it not?) it also largely neutralizes its content. But if one were to come across a Kurtz “in real life” I suspect one would be alarmed, if not appalled, if not frightened half to death. Aesthetic Satanism is a kind of literary thought-experiment: a way of experimenting with evil, trying it on for size. Actual Satanism is no doubt far less appealing. Raging Caliban is a delight on stage, whether he is raging against seeing or not seeing his face in various glasses. If we were to meet Caliban in a dark alley or on a dark island, I suspect he would be rather less delightful. Perhaps we absorb evil in art partly to inoculate us against the real thing? Or is there something more baleful about aesthetic Satanism that I am missing?

We still have not discussed, moreover, what evil is. Doesn’t it require some kind of (Christian?) metaphysics to get off the ground? When a dog pees on the kitchen floor, we say “bad dog, bad dog.” We don’t say “evil dog, evil dog.” When Mrs. Goebbels poisons all six of her children in Hitler’s bunker in Berlin, we say she is “evil.” Why?

RB: Is Kurtz’s evil absolute or relative? What, precisely, are his crimes? He has demonstrated skill, courage and ingenuity in leading a small band of men on raids in hostile territory. That he pillages, fights for material gain and takes trophies of war makes him no different from Agamemnon, Caesar, Henry V, Napoleon or Okonkwo. Indeed, what separates Kurtz from these celebrated figures are not his actions but our morals and—rather interestingly—his own. Caesar says, “Veni, vidi, vici.” Kurtz says, “The horror! The horror!”

Remember that *virtue* comes from the Latin word for “man” (*vir, viris*), with all that implies regarding strength, courage and masculinity. It was in the European Middle Ages that *virtue*—an ideal that originally signified *virility*—was feminized and pietized into its opposite: chastity, grace, restraint. So Achilles was cast out

by Jesus, as the man of action became the man of passion—the man who “passively” (*patior, passus sum*) forbears, endures, suffers.

Does the concept of evil require (Christian) metaphysics? Certainly Christianity was the driving force in transforming virtue from an active to a passive mode of conduct. But for Nietzsche, it was Judaism rather than Christianity that led to the “slave revolt” against “noble morality.” The original opposition between Good and Bad was transposed into an opposition between Good and Evil, and in the process what had been esteemed (the noble, the powerful, the vigorous) was displaced by what had been reviled (the ignoble, the impotent, the feeble). The low became the high, the physically weak became the morally strong. As Nietzsche writes toward the end of the First Essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “The two *opposing* values ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘good and evil’ have been engaged in a fearful struggle on earth for thousands of years ... The symbol of this struggle, inscribed in letters legible across human history, is ‘Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome.’” Kurtz has a Roman temperament which is finally undone by a Judean—or if you prefer Christian—conscience.

JS: I think Conrad invented Kurtz partly to make us wonder where the line is between “bad” and “evil” and between “bad” and “mad.” Marlow’s perturbed ambivalence about Kurtz—which grows as he gets closer (in both senses) to Kurtz—suggests just how blurry moral matters can be. Indeed, Marlow ends up backing Kurtz over the Manager. In his “choice of nightmares” he chooses Kurtz. The Manager is an inaesthetic Satan, a bureaucratic devil, a hollow man. It is the Manager who will end up in “real life” being a Himmler. At least Kurtz is remarkable and has some kind of genius clinging to his unspeakable rites and appetites. The Manager “originates nothing.”

One is reminded of Hannah Arendt’s comments at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Here is how she describes Eichmann’s final moments:

When the guards tied his ankles and knees, he asked them to loosen the bonds so that he could stand straight. “I don’t need that,” he said when the black hood was offered him. He was in complete

command of himself, nay, he was more: he was completely himself. Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. He began by stating emphatically that he was a *Gottgläubiger*, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded: "After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. *I shall not forget them*." In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in the funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick: he was "elated" and he forgot that this was his own funeral.

It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*.

Whatever gave Eichmann a feeling of elation, however momentary and clichéd, determined both his behavior and his beliefs. If the clichés were contradictory that did not trouble Eichmann so long as they inspired him. At least Kurtz does not traffic in clichés, unless one thinks of "The horror! The horror!" as the last words of a man hollowed out by his Judeo-Christian conscience. Is the "banality of evil"—and the evil of banality—what Absolute Evil has come to in the modern age: a democratization of Evil, what Alexander Pope predicted three-hundred years ago as "The Triumph of Dullness"?

RB: Nietzsche teaches us that morality is contingent, that Rome defines it one way and Judea another. Conrad shows us what that contingency looks like. Everyone knows Marlow's first words: "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." But do you remember his next utterance? "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen-hundred years ago ..." Conrad opens his novella by staging Nietzsche's "fearful struggle" blazoned across "human history" between Rome and Judea:

Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'y'e call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of

one of these craft the legionaries used—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been, too ... Imagine him here ... Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages ... Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes ...

“Or trader even ... to mend his fortunes.” Kurtz is a cross between the legionary and the decent citizen, and seen from one perspective (that of Rome) he is a perfectly upstanding individual. But seen from another (that of Judea) he is just the opposite:

They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale ... The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

As for Conrad's bureaucratic *Hollow Men*—the Chief Accountant, the Manager and the Brick Maker—they are indeed examples of the banality of evil, men who originate nothing but keep the machinery of destruction oiled and operating. Eichmann dies unrepentant, persuaded to the last that he has done his duty and behaved as a good German. Kurtz, on the other hand, ends his days in horror and ignominy: “The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.”

You ask if Absolute Evil has been reduced to banality in our time. But hasn't evil always been banal? The executioners of the Inquisition were just as humanly inhuman as the guards at Dachau. They grumbled about the low pay, became bored with the routines of brutalization, and went home after a hard day of applying rack and thumbscrew to play with their children and fuck their wives. It is not simply the torturer's horse that scratches its innocent behind. The not-so innocent torturer scratches his as well. Could anything be more banal?

JS: It's worth noting that in Conrad's darkest novel about his darkest character he rarely uses the word "evil." Rather, he embeds or suggests it in its epithetical cousin, as we see here:

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.

The adjective "flabby" has always given me pause. Kurtz's—and the Manager's—moral flabbiness is what makes them particularly unappealing. Perhaps, as you imply, there has always been something flaccid and shapeless about d/evils. The torturer is guilty of imaginative sloth in giving no mind to the exquisite pain of his victims. Has "evil" all along been a species of sloth? Edmund Burke's famous line comes to mind: "All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing."

RB: In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the narrator, having considered various explanations for why people commit evil, ends by proposing the following: "Let's rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is. —That, in fact, we fall towards it *naturally*, that is, *not against our natures*." In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says a harder thing still: "To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more: this is a hard saying but an ancient, mighty, human, all-too-human principle to which even the apes subscribe."

The emphasis falls differently in these two accounts. For Rushdie evil is inertial: it is our natural condition and rather than resist it (flabby devils that we are), we passively submit to its sinister attractions; whereas for Nietzsche, evil is kinetic: it appeals to our primitive instincts (red-eyed devils that we are), and we actively seek out its dark festival of violence and cruelty.

Flabby devil or red-eyed devil? Here is what T. S. Eliot writes in his essay, "Baudelaire": "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least, we exist."



JS: It's hard not to recall in this context a famous moment from *Wuthering Heights*, when Heathcliff describes his red-eyed relish in tormenting the Lintons: "I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the increase of pain."

No wonder Bataille could get a chapter out of Emily Brontë in *Literature and Evil*. He writes: "I believe that the Evil—an acute form of Evil—which [literature] expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality.'" Heathcliff's "moral teething" is perhaps that hypermorality, as are the "unspeakable rites" of Kurtz. That we must imagine those rites makes the reader pleasurably complicit in them—Kurtz's semblance, his brother, his flowering evil twin.

RB: In the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Conrad observes that literature depends on "an impression conveyed through the senses," which means that the writer's task is "to make you hear, to make you feel ... before all, to make you *see*." Certainly if we apprehend with Kurtz's eyes and ears—if our hearts beat with his in the darkness—then at some level we become complicit in his evil. But it is no accident that both *Wuthering Heights* and *Heart of Darkness* give us, in Lockwood and Marlow, framing devices that mitigate any immediacy of impression. In effect, Brontë and Conrad make us readers "see" our own "seeing"—which is to say, they make us conscious of our complicity—and this manipulation of sympathy and distance is crucial to any moral understanding of these novels.

Bataille asserts that "Hypermorality is the basis of that challenge to morality which is fundamental to *Wuthering Heights*." Conrad writes a novel that contemplates in the figure of Kurtz a genuine "hypermorality," a Nietzschean *jenseits* that seeks to stand above or beyond morality, thereby enabling the "transvaluation of all values." But I think only a lapsed Catholic like Bataille—obsessed with Sade, Satanism and human sacrifice—would re-imagine Emily Brontë as the mustachioed German philosopher, unblinkingly staring into the abyss and discovering there

the outer limits of morality. Heathcliff is simply one of Byron's dark avengers, with all the Sympathy for the Devil that implies. But neither he nor Brontë philosophizes with a hammer.

JS: The manipulation of sympathy and distance you mention and the question of the author's and the reader's complicity in the "evil" of the literary text are precisely what emerges from any discussion of the value of Blake's observation that "Milton is of the devil's party without knowing it." I defend Blake's reading to students and then show that Milton knows and advertises his "complicity" with evil (epically, heroically and finally ironically) in ways that make him ultimately *not* of the devil's party. *That* is how Milton transvalues the values he inherits from both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the classical tradition (Homer, Virgil). He transumes—as Bloom would say—the hell out of his predecessors. He hammers away until Satan's "Evil, be thou my Good" is made into a transparently ludicrous piece of rhetorical buffoonery. To read Satan's braying in hell as a Promethean, titanic affirmation of rebellion and individualism (the Romantic reading) is to be deaf (or blind) to Milton's subtle evocation of pride, temptation and sin in his epic performance. *Paradise Lost* invites us to repeat the Fall (including Milton's fall into the sin of poetic pride) over and over. That it does so cannily and cunningly suggests that Milton knows what he's about.

RB: Certainly, as Stanley Fish has argued, Milton wants the reader to be "surprised by sin"—to fall as fully as Adam and Eve—and like Brontë and Conrad he manipulates sympathy and distance to show how seductive the Devil can be. I also agree that *Paradise Lost* radically rewrites the epic tradition and, incidentally, does so in ways that perfectly correspond to Nietzsche's Rome vs. Judea formulation. What, according to Milton, would have been the most heroic act of all time? It would have consisted in Eve's *not* eating the apple, in Eve's doing *nothing*. To substitute inaction for action, forbearance for achievement, is fundamentally to reconceive what it means to be a hero. Imagine an Achilles who permits himself to be slain by Hektor and then, breathing his last, says "Forgive him Father, for he knows not what he does." Milton

has not merely rewritten Homer and Virgil. He has Christianized them and the entire literary tradition they represent.

I am less convinced, however, that Milton delivers us to a hypermorality that stands beyond good and evil. By getting the reader to identify with Adam and Eve he reminds us that we are all fallen—that sin is our natural condition—but he does not treat ethical values as relative or contingent. To the contrary, Milton is as much a moral absolutist as Kant.

Conrad, on the other hand, gives us something different, a Satan who genuinely transcends moral values: “There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.” Marlow brings us closer to Kurtz than Lockwood does to Heathcliff. In a state of existential vertigo, Marlow begins to lose his own moral footing, and as he floats free of the earth so does the reader. This is also the case with Kurtz’s descent into the abyss. As Marlow remarks: “His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines.” But Marlow’s gaze is not merely sympathetic—it is empathetic—and in following Kurtz into the depths, he carries the reader with him: “Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness.” In the end, Conrad’s darkness, like Joyce’s snow, is general: it falls through the universe upon all the living and the dead.

And yet, if I am right—if Conrad’s novel really does contemplate a hypermorality—then what do we make of its conclusion? If the universe is nothing more than a bottomless abyss of darkly beating hearts, why does Marlow lie to the Intended? Why not tell her the truth? Kurtz’s last words were not the cherished name of his beloved, but “The horror! The horror!”

JS: I suppose you could argue that Conrad teases himself (and the reader) with the hypermorality of a heartfelt darkness and

then pulls back and retrenches himself in the “white lie” to the Intended. Marlow needs to keep women in an unreal, illusory, fairytale world. That he lies to her at all, knowing how much lies are like biting into mortality (Eve’s eating death in the form of an apple) suggests an asymptotic approach to the “higher” morality associated with the devilish Kurtz. The novelist giveth, and the novelist taketh away. In living through Kurtz’s “extremity,” Marlow pushes the reader into the same position, and we begin to contemplate the possibility that all facts are, as Michael Levenson claims, “value-laden.” And those values, like customs and conventions, can change.

Underneath the house where I write to you are remnants of the Roman wall that those first soldiers erected after they invaded Britain, cheerfully building straight roads and easily foisting their values—and their language—on the locals. And then Judea cast out Rome, using those straight roads to spread the word. Where does this leave us?

RB: A Roman wall and Christian cathedral. Call it the Archaeology of Morals. And yet you began the dialogue by asking if it possible to liberate “evil” from its quotation marks, to speak of it not as archaeological or genealogical but as absolute. Inevitably, a few pages later, Adolph Eichmann made his appearance.

Perhaps the time has come to confront Caliban not as a fictional creation but as an historical reality. So let me now re-ask the question that has hovered over this dialogue from the outset. Were the perpetrators of the Holocaust contingently evil, circumstantially evil, relatively evil—however we wish to describe it—or were they Evil, full stop?

JS: I think “the horror” is the strong implication that when Kurtz writes, in his post-script, “Exterminate all the brutes,” he is referring *at once* to the savages in the Congo *and* the savages from Belgium who are exploiting them. What follows from that grim ambiguity is the fact that *all* “evil” is circumstantial, including Nazi evil. A chicken farmer in Germany in 1932, down on his luck, poor, with no national pride or personal pride, can in 1942 be devising more and more efficient ways to exterminate

European Jewry. That is not pure evil. It is contingent, circumstantial, historically-specific evil. In the “right” situation, the sweetest, Rousseau-incubated creatures on the planet might turn into Hobbesian monsters. I think “pure evil” is a simplification—and reification—of contingent evil. Do you disagree?

RB: If there is such a thing as pure evil, then the Death Camps are certainly an example of it. Dante merely imagined Hell. The Nazis built it. A number of years ago I read a newspaper article describing an indescribable crime. A man picked up a woman hitchhiker, raped her, cut off her hands and feet with an ax and then threw her bloody remains in a ditch by the freeway. The poor woman lived. To say that this crime is “contingently” or “historically” or “circumstantially” evil seems to miss the mark. The Holocaust is that crime raised to the power of six million.

When it comes to morals, I am not a Kantian, which is to say not a moral rigorist. Indeed according to the Prussian philosopher’s categorical imperative, a Christian concealing Jews during World War II would be morally obliged to tell the truth if questioned by the Nazis. Why? Because moral actions must be guided by principles that could serve as “universal law,” and as Kant points out, one “can by no means will a universal law of lying.” On the other hand, the philosopher also enjoins us to act in such a way that we “treat humanity ... never simply as a means, but always as an end.” Kant would therefore condemn the Nazis for exterminating the Jews (treating them as a means) and condemn the Christian for lying about the Jews (to save them from being treated as a means). There is a lovely, mad logic to it all, but at the end of the day it makes more sense in theory than in practice.

Having said that, I can’t agree with you about chicken farmer—and *Reichsführer*—Himmler. There were plenty of people in the great Depression who were down on their luck, had no personal or national pride and (lest we forget) were terminally awkward around women. But they didn’t murder six million people because they were having a bad life. Can we really say that Himmler’s evil is “circumstantial?” Isn’t it an example of the purest, most unvarnished evil that has ever existed?

JS: I think “pure evil” must be a theological term if it is to make sense, at least to me. It is a form of evil that has eternal consequences for those who commit it. That is to say, pure evil must be different in *kind*, not just *degree*, from circumstantial evil. Or it is a kind of rhetorical trump card used to make the case of the Nazis seem uniquely evil. But I think “pure evil” is actually a higher degree of “circumstantial evil,” so egregiously high that it seems different in kind and therefore “unvarnished.” But all evil is necessarily varnished by a hugely complicated set of historical and biographical forces. This is not to excuse or exonerate its perpetrators in any way. It is rather to deliver them over to historians, sociologists, psychologists and legal tribunals—not to theologians (or Prussians) who would condemn them to one Hell or another.

RB: Since neither of us believes in God, neither of us believes in sin. The evil we are discussing does not depend on burning bushes or smoking tablets. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether that evil is historically circumscribed. Anti-Semitism was rife throughout Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. But the Danes heroically resisted the persecution of the Jews, as did many Christians in Norway, Holland, France and, yes, Germany. Beckett risked his life fighting the Nazis and was later decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*. Picasso, when asked by a German officer if he was responsible for *Guernica*, responded “No, you are!” And after Hitler became *Reichskanzler* in 1933, Schoenberg, in a highly public act, reconverted to Judaism. People had choices and some chose good, while others chose evil.

But—you will press me—are we talking about circumstantial evil or pure evil? I suppose one way to answer this question is to ask how universalizable are the choices that the Holocaust presented. The mass murder of women and children, medical experiments including forced castrations and hysterectomies, the showers, the ovens, the piles of shoes, the mountains of hair, the emaciated rag-bodies bulldozed into mass graves. Would Nietzsche’s aristocratic warrior have sanctioned such crimes? Would Achilles, Caesar, Okonkwo? Would Kurtz?

JS: Ours is becoming a terminological debate that must pale before the horror of the atrocities you mention. What finally hangs

on determining if mass murder is an example of “pure” or “circumstantial” evil? I like to be precise about language and categories—as you do—but there’s something a bit caviling (or scholastic, perhaps) about the distinction we are disagreeing about. I suppose I want to pin down not so much the *what* regarding evil but the *why*. Why were many Germans in the 1930s capable of mass murder (or turning a blind eye to it)? If I could go back in history and kill one man, it would be Himmler. He strikes me as particularly cold, bureaucratic, fatuous and repellent. Goebbels is a close second. But when it comes to understanding *why* people turn out to be so balefully hideous, I run up against a wall that not even the most assiduous historian or psychoanalyst can help me surmount.

RB: I think our disagreement is more substantive than you do. Insofar as certain crimes are condemned by virtually all cultures and ethical systems, they constitute “universally sanctioned” prohibitions. Viewed from this perspective, the Nazi atrocities are not contingently or historically evil, but evil in all times and all places. Still, as you point out, that leaves us to grapple with the fact that in the 1940s many Germans either participated in, or were complicitous with, mass murder.

In 1996, Daniel Goldhagen published a book entitled *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which argued that ordinary Germans took part in the Holocaust because they were profoundly anti-Semitic. The book generated a critical firestorm and was roundly condemned by historians as Germanophobic. I have not waded into the deep waters of Holocaust studies, but even if we acknowledge that there are factual errors and questionable analyses in the book, its central thesis cannot be easily dismissed. Of course, it is no surprise that Goldhagen’s commonsensical argument has proven anathema to many professional historians, who have blamed the Holocaust on everything from a bad economy (war reparations and hyperinflation) to the collapse of democracy (the end of the Weimar Republic), the conspiracy of a few Nazis (Reinhard Heydrich and the Wannsee conference) and (my personal favorite) the rise of anti-communism.

But if we assume that Goldhagen is right, then we may begin to make sense out of not only the Holocaust but any number

of other atrocities in human history. What makes it possible for humans to commit horrific crimes—crimes that are universally condemned—is the simple belief that certain people are not fully human. Christians are fed to lions, Africans are impressed into slavery and Jews are sent to the ovens, because they are regarded as subhuman. And if they are subhuman, then we may treat them—to speak the language of Kant—not as ends but as means. They become vehicles for providing cheap labor, for harvesting the gold in their teeth and the hair on their head, even for entertaining a coliseum of bored Romans with a taste for spectacle and blood sport.

JS: Did all of Europe go into the making of the Holocaust? It seems to me that our dialogue may have come full circle. Larkin writes that “Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf.” This is to generalize the problem of evil and to suggest that Hobbes and not Rousseau understood what human beings are really all about—that there’s a little bit of “the horror” in all of us. For complicated reasons, bored Romans and excited Germans pushed their rapaciousness to lethal extremes. I think I take a much dimmer view of human beings than you do. Since the Holocaust, there have been arguably over thirty genocides, including Bangladesh (1971), East Timor (1975–1999), Cambodia (1975–1979), Guatemala (1981–1983), Bosnia (1992–1995), Rwanda (1994), Darfur and Sudan (2004 – present). There will be more.

When we are not being nice to each other and going to the theatre and cinema, we are at each other’s throats, passing on our misery. Why? Because our mums and dads fucked us up, as they were fucked up in their turn? We are the evil we decry. Wipe the planet clean of humans and let the hopping, humping rabbits inherit the earth.

RB: There is much to be said for your Swiftian assessment of humanity, but I think matters are more complicated. You cite Birkin’s nihilistic pronouncement from *Women in Love*, where he gleefully imagines the destruction of all mankind, “a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, and a hare sitting up.” And yet, by the end of the novel Birkin and Ursula have fallen in love and



are planning a trip to Verona, where they will sit in the amphitheatre and “find Romeo and Juliet.” From nihilist to sentimentalist in a few hundred pages. All it took was a little star-equilibrium love. Of course, their idyll is interrupted by the arrival of Gerald’s frozen corpse, and Lawrence’s dark tango of *erōs* and *thanatos* continues. The Dance of Life capers with the Dance of Death in an endless round of creation and destruction.

What makes it all happen? Our parents? Our genes? Our stars? Ourselves? Do we drink in the life force and death drive with our mother’s milk? Is that the Forbidden Knowledge that Eve first tastes and that Faust, Raskolnikov and Kurtz all pursue in their different ways? You said earlier that it is the historian, sociologist and psychologist who can best help us understand the problem of evil. What about the poet? Here is a passage from Paul Celan’s “Death Fugue,” which rewrites Genesis, Goethe’s *Faust*, the Song of Solomon and the Holocaust as a single event, a mad orgy of birth, love and death:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
 we drink you at noon and in the morning we drink you in the  
 evening  
 we drink and drink  
 a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with snakes  
 he calls out play more sweetly death death is a master from  
 Germany  
 he calls out play more darkly the violins then you will rise as  
 smoke in  
 the air  
 then you will have a grave in the clouds where you can spread  
 out ...

JS: That “grave in the clouds” is misery’s “coastal shelf,” deepening. Just as our horror becomes intolerable, “art may arrive,” Nietzsche says, “as a saving sorceress, expert at healing.” W. B. Yeats understood the “terrible beauty” of violence and the necessity to fabricate artifice even as Ireland’s “civil war” (oxymoron grimly accepted) was offering a premonition of yet another Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

A barricade of stone or of wood;  
 Some fourteen days of civil war;  
 Last night they trundled down the road  
 That dead young soldier in his blood:  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
 The heart's grown brutal from the fare;  
 More substance in our enmities  
 Than in our love; O honey-bees,  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

I take some little satisfaction in knowing that in a few million years, human beings—and their bloody, raging history of Calibanism—will have vanished from the planet, leaving it to the birds and the bees and the gently erect rabbits.

RB: Mankind is capable of extraordinary good, extraordinary evil and extraordinary beauty. Such is the human all-too-human condition, and I certainly prefer it to the innocent and—I might add—artless birds, bees and bunnies. Your green-dream of a *Menschenfrei* world strikes me as a nightmare of banality.

JS: “The mind of man is capable of anything because everything is in it—all the past as well as all the future.” That is Marlow’s dubious Gospel. It allows a glover’s son to become Shakespeare. And it also allows a farmer’s son to become a Jew-hating Nazi. There is neither rhyme nor reason to humanity or human behavior. The only way to make people “good” rather than “evil” is constantly to threaten them with punishment if they get out of line. Here are the hilarious and horrifying last lines of Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*: “‘She would of been a good woman,’ The Misfit said, ‘if there had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’”

RB: O’Connor is right. People behave not because they should, but because they must. Which is to say, the Flowers of Good are best cultivated not in broad daylight but in the shadow of the prison-house and the gallows.

But what of those other umbral blossoms, the Flowers of Evil? Baudelaire reminds us that the most exquisite beauty is often born out of vileness and depravity. We began our dialogue by wondering about the relation between ethics and aesthetics, a topic we have touched upon elsewhere. Both Conrad and Celan produced great art—gorgeous flowers—out of horrific suffering. Obviously their depiction of suffering in no way redeems—to use a Conradian word—the experiences of those who perished in the Congo or the Death Camps. But is there a sense in which their art, by imaginatively transmuting those experiences, redeems mankind? You say there is “neither rhyme nor reason to humanity.” But when we perfectly imperfect humans apply rhyme and reason to the horror that is our history—when we make art out of darkness—don’t we in some measure tip the balance back in our favor, bring a little light to the dark night of the soul?

JS: I am reminded of one of the most profound lines in *King Lear*: “The worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’” So long as we can articulate evil and despair, we are not yet at rock bottom, a place of darkness so complete that, like a black hole, neither light nor *logos* escape it. To return to our Conradian title, so long as there is an “art of darkness,” then evil, suffering and “The horror! The horror!” are comfortably locked up in the prison-house of Language. But Kurtz goes in for some “unspeakable rites.” What is beyond the pale of language, what is beyond even Conrad’s visually-redemptive art, are acts of evil that beggar expression, visions of depravity so horrible that they cut the tongue out of the artist so that the rape cannot be given voice. Is that why we are told there “can be no poetry after Auschwitz”?

RB: “No poetry after Auschwitz,” and yet we have Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Imre Kertész—to mention only these. Franz Kafka famously commented to Max Brod, there is “hope ... no end of hope—only not for us.” He was speaking of God, and although he died before the Holocaust he correctly predicted that there would be no messianic deliverance for the Jews of Europe. Of his three sisters, two perished in the Lodz ghetto, and the third and youngest, Ottla, was executed at Auschwitz. She

arose as “smoke in the air” and made her “grave in the clouds.” Do Celan’s words—his art—help mitigate the darkness that Ottla and so many others suffered? They did not help Celan, who committed suicide in 1970. But what of us? Is there hope for us?

Perhaps as we conclude this dialogue we can agree that evil—at least some kinds—cannot be fathomed. But it can be articulated—however tentatively, however imperfectly. Is that enough?

JS: Enough for what? To satisfy our aesthetic sense? To supply some sort of secular “redemption”? But one could argue that articulating evil, even artistically (particularly artistically?) only adds to the sum of evil in the world by giving it another mode of being—just as pity, Nietzsche observed, only adds to the sum of suffering in the world.

Finally, I don’t believe in “evil” except as a metaphysical or religious construct designed to pedigree what is truly “bad” and give it eternal consequences. Perhaps there is a reason why Conrad never calls Kurtz “evil.” I feel more and more uncomfortable using the word “evil” when what I am really referring to are forms of human depravity that require far more terminological subtlety and complexity, the kind that artists so richly supply: the “black milk” of lyric suggestiveness that flows, as Conrad would have it, into “the heart of an impenetrable darkness.” I don’t think art redeems anything, least of all “evil,” but I do think it keeps us off the streets—or out of the jungle—and, while we are either creating it or consuming it, makes it slightly less likely that we will exterminate the brutes, whoever they happen to be.

RB: If our goal is merely something that will “keep us off the streets,” then I should think bowling alleys and skating rinks would serve just as well as art.

As for our terminological debate, humans need a vocabulary for talking about the nasty things we do to each other. “Black milk” and “heart of darkness” are evocative metaphors that enable us to make emotional and ethical sense (rhyme and reason) out of horrific experiences. But when we are confronted with real-world choices, when we have to decide whether Eichmann should live

or die, we require terms that are more conceptually precise than “dark heart” or “black milk.”

JS: Courts of law do not pass judgments based on “evil” behavior. I think the word “evil” is avoided in jurisprudence—even in the Nuremberg trials—because it smuggles a kind of meta-physical vocabulary into the courtroom, when more conventional and secular terms such as “right” and “wrong” are sufficient to deprive the Nazi of his life. I would rather leave it to artists and poets to supply us with image after horrifying image of the accelerating grimace of our disastrous twentieth century.

The most recent grimace (pushing us along into the twenty-first century) may be Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, an updating of Conrad’s art of darkness in a post-apocalyptic America on the verge of becoming a place where my blessedly randy rabbits will, in a thousand years or two, inherit the earth. If only evolution would stop *there*—before the rabbits start to lust after the warren in the next field. But, alas, one day a miserable rabbit will grow into John Updike, another into Joseph Stalin, and the whole mammalian process will eternally return until Larkin’s coastal shelf has deepened into something even oubliettes fear.

RB: Eichmann and the Nuremberg defendants were not charged with “evil” but with crimes against humanity. But “crimes against humanity” is a hell of a lot broader and vaguer than “larceny,” “burglary” or “murder,” and such a charge necessarily raises the question of what evil is and how we adjudicate and punish it. I might add that transcripts for both the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials show that the word “evil” was repeatedly used by prosecuting attorneys and presiding judges. Despite popular cynicism, there *is* a connection between ethics and secular law, and that connection goes to the heart of whether “evil” by definition involves Judeo-Christian metaphysics.

Every culture stigmatizes certain kinds of behavior with a severity that transcends what is simply “bad,” and the word we use to describe such behavior is “evil.” The Judeo-Christian history that stands behind the word neither determines nor defines its semantic content. Which is to say, evil is not necessarily a religious

category. But even as a non-religious category, evil need not be a relative term. All cultures prohibit murder. Notions of right and wrong differ from place to place and time to time, but certain forms of criminality are universally condemned.

I wonder if our disagreement finally comes down to a debate between nature and culture. To what degree does the latter—where we locate things like art—insulate us against the former? I detect in your argument a certain Rousseauian nostalgia, a belief that human competition and struggle (criticized in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*) inevitably lead to the rapacity and criminality Conrad describes. If the bunnies could remain bunnies and the noble savages could remain nobly savage, then all would be well. You would happily sacrifice the Updikes in order to be spared the Stalins. I myself am a Hobbesian who feels that our best protection against the heart of darkness is civilization, with its discontents and imperfections, as well as its consolations. Presumably McCarthy and Conrad agree?

JS: I think McCarthy and Conrad would agree that human beings are capable of absolutely anything under certain circumstances. At the heart of the art of darkness is the unfathomable “The horror! The horror!”—a doublet that says less about the “evil” of Kurtz and more about language’s expressive limits. But before we reach those limits, Conrad certainly gives us a banquet of nightmares that shows just how abominable human beings can be when teased by a whiff of ivory.

RB: As Michael Levenson says, “Vague terms still signify.” If we cannot name evil—if we cannot identify it—then we cannot oppose it. “Evil” is imprecise, but I think we need it just as we need other vague terms, such as Good, Beauty and Art.

We are suspicious of such words, because they are value-laden and therefore demand that we make judgments. Marlow says of Kurtz’s final pronouncement, “he had summed up—he had judged.” I agree that “The horror! The horror!” is unfathomable, devoid of meaning. In other words, in the end Kurtz does *not* judge but takes refuge in a cliché. But for Conrad, we the reader—Kurtz’s *semblable* and *frère*—we *must* judge. Otherwise it would be, to quote Marlow’s last words, “too dark—too dark altogether.”