

# On the representation of evil in modern literature

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In a society such as our own (I am thinking particularly of Western European society) that sees little need for postulating the existence of God and no longer lives by specifically religious rules and rituals, it would seem that human intention and action could be quite adequately explicated in the language of ethics rather than theology: the opposite of good, consequently, is not evil, it is bad, that is to say, bad in the sense of being wrong morally, of willing and acting in ways that are in opposition to an accepted moral standard. The fact that it may be difficult to establish widely accepted moral standards does not invalidate the principle. When the word evil is used—and, of course, it is used—its semantic content is vague, or, if clear, then reductive, by which I mean that, more often than not, it acts merely as a kind of intensifier—so that, when one wants to express extreme outrage at an action of gross immorality, the word one reaches for is the word evil; but there would be no qualitative difference between a wrong action or intention and an evil action or intention. Given the nature of the relationship between art and its cultural context it would not be unreasonable to expect the literature of our own era to reflect this situation and, indeed, it would be surprising if it did not. We should expect the representation of evil in modern literature to take on an extremely etiolated and reductive form. But does it?

There is a good deal of evidence that this might be so. On the surface it would seem that few contemporary writers are interested in, or even aware of, the lost paradise of transcendental metaphysics; their concern is the imaginative reconstruction of the conditions of human life in poetry and prose that is no more than an attempt at rendering, in as truthful a way as is possible, the texture of felt experience in a self-contained universe, a universe which not only excludes the supernatural but also seems seldom to include any perception of evil. For these writers the ethical categories of right and wrong—if morality is invoked at all—are deemed perfectly adequate to their task. There is simply no need to talk of good and evil in this disenchanting universe. This view pervades not only the work of those whose philosophical position is avowedly non-religious, it has penetrated deeply into the Christian Church too. There are many Christian thinkers for whom the concept of evil has very little theological content, especially when it is related to a supernaturalist view of creation. In pursuit of this

theme one could consult Daniel Murphy's book, *Christianity and Modern Literature* published in 1997. It is not a comprehensive survey, but it does try to identify the major themes of modern religious literature and these, according to Murphy, are: faith and doubt; law and love; immanence and transcendence; humility and repentance; sin and grace—all themes, to be sure, at the heart of the Christian gospel, but there is a notable absence of evil; goodness, by implication is there, but not evil. From this it might be deduced that it is not only the secular artist that has fallen out with the concept but the religious writer as well.

At first sight this assessment might seem to be contradicted by Thomas Woodman in his book: *Faithful Fictions. The Catholic Novel in British Literature* for this study has an entire chapter called 'Good and Evil. The Providential Plot' and begins with a quotation from Piers Paul Read to the effect that Catholic writers see 'a drama of good and evil that others do not see' (Woodman, p.111). Now it is true that some of the writers who come under his scrutiny are prepared to use the vocabulary of good and evil and to incorporate into their fictions elements of the inexplicable—even the supernatural, but I am not convinced that there is any real profundity in their treatment of the subject with the exception, possibly, of G.K Chesterton and Muriel Spark. I shall return to Chesterton later. For the moment Muriel Spark stands out in her extraordinary novel of 1984, *The Other Problem*. This is a parodic version of the Book of Job which offers an exploration into the problem of evil: an attempt at the creation of a fictional theodicy and it succeeds, where others fail, in its sheer intellectual grasp of the complexities of the problem. But even Woodman acknowledges that the answers that most of his writers propose for the problem of evil are 'prefabricated and trite rather than genuinely exploratory' (Woodman, p.118). It is simply the case that the novelists who really engage us in this group, and who may be counted as major literary figures, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, are more interested in those religious themes identified by Daniel Murphy: faith and doubt, sin and grace, law and love, than by issues of good and evil. We may conclude from all this that it is as though evil had lost its hold on the imaginations of modern writers however religious they might otherwise appear to be; it would seem that it can no longer be taken as a serious subject for drama, poetry or fiction—unless we are looking in the wrong place or for the wrong thing. After all, the secularisation of society, the disenchantment, to use the language of social anthropology, of the modern universe is a relatively recent phenomenon. Are we so easily rid of a concept that has haunted the human imagination for thousands of years?

It is argued that the rejection of a metaphysics of transcendence, of any religious interpretation of the world, has led to the rejection of the

category of evil as a valid and convincing means of interpreting that world. If this is so, we have to ask what language is appropriate for describing the horrors of the last century: the genocides, the Holocaust, the purges of Stalin and Pol Pot. Are the ethical categories of right and wrong sufficiently weighty, thick enough, to give an adequate account of them? Or do we invoke that word evil? Or do we simply remain silent? I do not want to engage with the complex subject of Holocaust literature here; I know too little about it to speak with any kind of authority and it may be that Ruth Scurr is correct when she asserts that 'Holocaust fiction stands alone...who is authorised to tell their stories?' (*The Times*, 6.03.02). And who is authorised to give a critical evaluation of their stories? But I shall say this. It seems to me that when I read the works of someone like Primo Levi I am struck forcibly by a kind of paradox: an ethical vocabulary that is bending beneath the weight of having to convey the quality of the experience that was the annihilation of six million Jews. His works express a restless preoccupation with the question of why reason, that quintessentially human capacity, seemed unable to provide him with the answers to which the Holocaust gave rise; in other words with the nature of evil. It may be that Holocaust literature is unique, but it may also be that the culture from which the Holocaust came is connected to our own culture much more closely than we like to believe and that if art truly reflects and embodies that culture we shall find that evil is embedded in our literature far more deeply than we at first supposed, though, perhaps, portrayed in ways that are not immediately obvious.

This would come as no surprise to Paul Oppenheimer, Professor of Comparative Medieval Literature and English at the City University of New York. His recent book, *Evil and the Demonic. A New Theory of Monstrous Behaviour*, concludes with assertion, 'The word 'evil' is returning to common use. Along with its return . . . is an insistent conviction that it means definite sorts of things' (Oppenheimer, p.175). The book is an attempt to construct a theory of evil without reference to religion, the supernatural or any transcendental categories; a strictly secular theory, but one which he regards as absolutely necessary. 'Why resort to the term evil at all' he writes in defence of his thesis in the preface, 'rather than to some other term such as "criminal", "bad" or "sociopathic"?' (p.ix). For him it refers to a unique type of human behaviour for which these categories will not be adequate. '...its distinctive quality is scarcely open to doubt', and, 'What can be asserted is that, fashionable dismissals to the contrary, non-religious, physical, and mental evil certainly exists' (p. 1).

What follows is a long, detailed argument that presents evidence from cases both factual and imaginary. His focus is not primarily modern literature—in fact it is the art of film—but the whole argument is pertinent

to our task. I have little doubt that we would agree with him in many of his postulations and we may also be sympathetic to his problems: a certain philosophical evasiveness, for it is an evasiveness that has its theological counterpart when this subject is addressed: '...no claim', he says, 'will be made to have solved the final problem of evil, of establishing its first causes, which on their deepest levels remain mysteries' (p.1). An evasion? Perhaps, but before we rush to judgement, we should consider how frequently theological discussions try to escape from the paradoxes with similar tactics. His dilemma is not far removed from that of Christian theologians as they confront a mystery which, as he says, 'reaches beyond the mundane and ordinarily comprehensible' (p.3). And it may be a mystery, as he suggests, that is best approached in the language of art, the imagination, than by the hard edges of intellectual speculation. For all my disagreements with him about certain basic assumptions, I think we have here a significant contribution to the debate about the representation of evil in contemporary art, but I would not frame my argument for the presence of the concept in modern literature in the way that he would choose to do. If that is so, what would be my evidence for claiming that the theme of evil retains its potency; its hold on the imagination of modern writers and, perhaps more importantly, what kind of evil are we talking about? What kind of representation are we looking at? We could proceed down the following path.

Consider the words of the Archbishop of York, Dr. David Hope, in a sermon he preached recently to the members of the General Synod of the Church of England. He spoke about the extraordinary success of the books by J.K. Rowling—the Harry Potter series. He accounted for their success by drawing attention to the writer's ability to convey a sense of wonder and mystery and he detected a longing for this in the human being—a longing that is, at least in part, satisfied by the imaginative construction of the realm of the supernatural. Now it would be easy to argue that this is children's literature aimed at a particular stage of human development, a stage out of which we all eventually grow—and should grow. Harry Potter will be, and should be, left behind as we encounter life in all its messiness and disappointment, its dullness, its meanness and cruelty; when we see that our world is a world of hunger and brutality and that the evocation of the supernatural is only the attempt at escaping responsibilities. So, to read and enjoy the books of J.K.Rowling when one is an adult is to display arrested development, delayed adolescence. But can the success of these books be wholly explained in these terms? For there is also the phenomenon of the vast numbers of people who read fantasy literature; can one dismiss this as mere feeble-minded escapism and ignore its sociological significance? To say nothing of its theological significance?

And how is one to account for the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*? We theological and literary academics may sneer at these phenomena, but our colleagues in sociology and anthropology do not. I advert to these books because I want to make a point about evil and the representation of evil. Just as wonder and mystery are at the heart of much of the genre of fantasy literature, so too, are concepts of good and evil. The writers of fantasy fiction re-enchant our universe and reintroduce concepts which the writers of realistic fiction have seemed to shun. We can observe a kind of bouleversement here: the metaphysical takes priority over the ethical in this genre. These works of fantasy fiction rely upon the concept of evil as a basic component in the representation of their worlds. However it is not going to be on these grounds that I want to demonstrate the presence of evil in modern literature; though I do admire the work of Tolkien I have to admit I am no great admirer of most of the fantasy literature I have encountered. There are a number of reasons for this, but only one which concerns us here: the representation of evil. With the exception of a few writers like J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula le Guin, the depiction of evil, from the Judaeo-Christian perspective, must generally be regarded as naive and superficial. What one encounters in most of the stories is a narrative structure that depends heavily on a strongly dualistic interpretation of reality. The universe is presented in basically Manichaean terms: Darkness and Light; Good and Evil powers oppose one another in almost equal strength. Conflict between these forces is at the heart of these narratives, and the universe of these tales is one in which the conflict between good and evil is usually finely balanced and, often, never completely resolved. This should not surprise us of course; these pairings of good and evil, light and darkness, have frequently been basic to the narratives of a wide variety of forms of art in many cultures precisely because the extreme tension set up by dualistic structures and by the conflict that is generated by those structures, increases excitement. But there is another ingredient that must be taken into account: the ease with which Christians down the ages, despite the official teaching and formulations of the Church, have slid into and embraced forms of Manichaeism seems to suggest that dualistic explanations of evil respond to something deeply ingrained in our human nature. But what if one is convinced that dualistic explanations are incompatible with Christian faith?

This is the point at which I want to introduce, very briefly, the figure of G.K. Chesterton. In a recent study on Chesterton and the concept of evil, Mark Knight has demonstrated how strongly opposed to dualism Chesterton was and how he struggled in his fictions to represent what he believed to be orthodox Catholic teaching on the existence of evil, i.e. evil as 'absence', privation, non-being. His rejection of dualism—the easy way

to create narrative movement—led him into some of the most surreal fictional creations of the twentieth century. *The Man Who was Thursday* and *The Ball and the Cross* are forms, as Knight has shown, of modern grotesque and, in their own unusual way, both developments of the sensation literature of the nineteenth century and also early forms of twentieth century fantasy literature.

Fantasy literature relies for its success on the author's ability to create parallel universes or, to put the matter in another way, to re-enchant our own universe by the introduction of non-naturalistic elements. Is it only in these fantastically-changed, magical worlds that evil can be convincingly introduced into literature? Do we need to suspend our belief in the laws of physics and biology to reach by this different route what we, as Christians, believe to be a truth of ordinary, everyday life? Or can evil really be represented in convincing form in an art that has no commerce with fantasy? And which, moreover, does not need dualistic patterns to confront and express the problem of evil? It shall be my contention that we can, but where, exactly, shall we look, and what shall we looking for? The most obvious place is the place I am least capable of examining: Holocaust literature. I have already made this clear, but this is by no means the only place to begin; and my earlier reference to Primo Levi provides me with a convenient, if somewhat tenuous, link to the text which will be the subject of the remaining part of this paper. It is known that one of the authors whom Primo Levi most admired was the English novelist of Polish descent, Joseph Conrad, and it is to Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, that I now turn. And I hope that I shall be able to show that the scrutiny of this text will shed light, however indirectly, on that genre of writing, Holocaust literature, which I approach with such caution.

## II

The plot of *Heart of Darkness* could hardly be simpler: it is the story of an Englishman, known simply as Marlow, who is employed, in the late nineteenth century, by a Continental trading company with extensive commercial interests in the ivory trade in Africa to take command of a ship that will sail up a great African river to bring back one of its employees, Kurtz, who, the directors of the company claim, has lost control both of himself and the whole trading operation of which he has charge. The Continental trading company is clearly Belgian, the African country the Belgian Congo, and the river the Congo river. The story is carried in the first person by Marlow himself, though we should be wary of assuming him to be the mouthpiece of the author's own moral stance. However, in 1890 at the age of forty-seven Conrad himself went to the Belgian Congo to take command of a river steamer for a time. The history of the

occupation of the Belgian Congo is one of the most infamous in the colonial history of Africa. It had become the personal fiefdom of the Belgian king Leopold II in the second half of the nineteenth century and been plundered, with scant regard to the culture and needs of the indigenous population, for its natural wealth. The sufferings of its people in the terrible conflicts of the last hundred years have, in part, been the result of the stupidity and greed of the colonial powers in the nineteenth century.

Conrad witnessed this commercial exploitation of the country at first hand and what he saw there he translated into a novella, *Heart of Darkness*, published by a nice coincidence, in book form, exactly a century ago. If for this reason only, its depiction of a ruthlessly greedy colonial commercial rule and the mindless brutality of a civilisation that believed in its own moral and racial superiority, the novel must be seen as one of the crucial texts of modern literary history. I am aware that it is a controversial book and has even been condemned, notably by Chinua Achebe, as imperialist in its own moral stance, i.e. in its attitude to Africa. I disagree—despite the fact that the word ‘nigger’ is used as a description of the Africans and that the author seems to be both frightened and disgusted by certain aspects of African culture. It must be admitted, of course, that there is a deliberate association, in the text, of the continent of Africa with darkness and terror; an association that we twentieth century readers find uncomfortable; that, from time to time, the ‘narrative (seems to) carry the implication that Kurtz’s “evil” is signalled by his “going native”’ (Conrad, p.xxxiv). However, we must remember that the account of the journey is carried by that rhetorical device of the unreliable narrator. We cannot be sure—and we certainly should not assume that the moral position of Marlow is that of Conrad himself. There are shifting perspectives as the tale is told; we seem to be given no sure ground for moral judgement. And, in any case, would it not be sentimental to suggest that, by definition, the Africans must be less corrupt and barbarous than their colonisers? C.B.Cox has offered a perceptive analysis of the stylistic technique of the book (though I am not quite persuaded by the implications of his conclusions): ‘Imperialist corruption is anatomised in sharp, visual images, and a clear moral viewpoint is presented, a scheme of values preserved by Marlow in his devotion to the work ethic. In contrast, the wilderness is evoked in portentous, rhetorical language which creates an indefinitely metaphysical meaningfulness, an inner reality which threatens all moral significance. The tale represents an unresolved tension between the two’ (Cox, p.16).

It is important to make the point that Conrad does not stand in the great British tradition of moralistic fiction writers; he is as different as can be imagined from his almost exact contemporary Henry James and, from the evidence of this novel, I judge him to be more interested in what I risk

calling metaphysical questions. He almost admits as much when, in 1917, he supplied a preface to the story's republication in an edition that included the short story 'Youth' and another novella, *The End of the Tether*. Here he distanced himself from the moralistic tradition by saying that the writing of *Heart of Darkness* was, 'like another art altogether. That sombre tone had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air.' It is a novel which begins in darkness: 'The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore .... "And this also", said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth"' (p.48); and ends in darkness: 'I could not tell her. It would have been too dark too dark altogether....' These are the last words that Marlow utters. Significantly, he is not given the last words of the book. It ends in the author's own voice: 'The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness' (p.162). And we had thought, mistakenly, as Marlow's story ended, that we had left the darkness behind.

It is clear that this book is a crucial text in the history of colonial literature but, as I have already indicated, it is crucial also for reasons that are more closely related to our search for the representation of evil in modern literature. I have come to believe, in fact, that it is one of the key texts of our era, not merely for literature, but perhaps for the whole modern European sensibility. For Alastair Fowler, Conrad's quest fiction is a 'demythologized "romance of illusion"' and of : he writes that 'its disturbingly poised conclusion was one of Conrad's most valued legacies to modernism' (p.321). It stands behind not only T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, but also Kafka's nightmare visions and Graham Greene's travel writings and fictions. More recently it has been the inspiration for one of the few films that I should, unhesitatingly, describe as a work of genius, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. It parodies one of the major classics of the Western canon: the journey of Dante and Virgil through *Inferno* in the *Divine Comedy* and it addresses the concept of the superhuman in Nietzsche's philosophy.

When T.S.Eliot used the blunt words from *Heart of Darkness* 'Mistah Kurtz—He dead' as an epigraph for his poem of 1925, *The Hollow Men*, he identified precisely the centre of Conrad's novel. It is not to be found in the portrayal of the waste and futility of European commercial adventures in Africa, not the brutality of colonial regimes, not the senseless violence of African civilisation in the Congo. It is not to be found in the fascination of a seafarer's tale, or even the description of the mysterious darkness of an unknown continent. These are all vital elements of the narrative, but none of them is the centre, the cause of the fiction; at its dark heart is a void. This



centre is Mr Kurtz; but 'Mistah Kurtz—He Dead' and who is, or was, Kurtz?

The very first critic of the novel was Edward Garnett and in his review of 1902 he called it a psychological masterpiece. The essay is remarkable in its grasp of the scope of the novel, but it not surprising that we should hear the accents of the Edwardian gentleman in what he says of the picture of Kurtz: '... it implies the acutest analysis of the deterioration of the white man's *morale*, when he is let loose from European restraint, and planted down in the tropics as an "emissary of light" armed to the teeth, to make trade profits out of the "subject races"' (p.26). We should, however, note that he has placed both "emissary of light" and "subject races" in quotation marks. Garnett was no simple-minded imperialist even if he did interpret Kurtz's collapse as the failure of the civilised European to hold on to the moral restraints of his civilisation in the midst of a culture that did not live by them. Perhaps Garnett's reading was too literal; perhaps he failed to see the metaphorical reaches of the novel. Lionel Trilling, that most humane and cultivated of critics, on the other hand, was acutely aware of these depths and it is he who drew attention to the Nietzschean allusions in 1956. He remarked, 'Whether Joseph Conrad read either Blake or Nietzsche I do not know, but his *Heart of Darkness* follows in their line.... Consider that its protagonist, Kurtz, is a progressive and a liberal and that he is the highly respected representative of a society that would have us believe that it is benign, although it is in fact vicious.... It is one of the great points of Conrad's story that Marlow speaks of the life of the jungle not as being noble or charming or even free but as being base and sordid—and for *that* reason compelling.... It is to this devilish baseness that Kurtz has yielded himself, and yet Marlow... does not find it possible to suppose that Kurtz is anything but a hero of the spirit.... Is this not the essence of the modern belief about the nature of the artist, the man who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring this hell to the bland lies of the civilisation that has overlaid it?' (Cox, p.64). This brilliant modernist analysis almost convinces—because Conrad himself takes us right up to the point of pretending that this is the case. The extraordinary achievement of Conrad's ambiguous irony could so easily persuade us that this interpretation was the true one; but I think Trilling has missed two crucial elements of Conrad's text. The first is the location and function of the narrator in the story. As I have tried to maintain, the 'opinions' of Marlow, his moral stance, his judgements, are as questionable as those of any other character. Marlow may well have seen Kurtz as a hero of the spirit, but I am not at all sure that this should be our estimation. Consequently, we should form a judgement of Kurtz not on the basis of the narrator's opinions but on the basis of his descriptive observations. The

second element has to do with language itself and what this novel says about language, that is to say, what it can and cannot communicate. I see in its rhetorical tropes and metaphors the articulation of the belief that language has difficulty in laying hold upon and conveying the essence, the interior reality, of Kurtz's corruption. Trilling grasped the Nietzschean dimension of the story (a hero of the spirit) but failed to see what I think is there, the subversion of the Nietzschean ideal. The poignant closing scene of the novel, with all its lies and evasions, and the dreadful closing words, seem to suggest a far bleaker picture of human life. There are no heroes in this dark world. There is no coming back of the artist from the depths of hell. The hero will also be the demon; the heroic will become the demonic. 'The best lack all conviction; the worst are full of passionate intensity' to quote another of Conrad's exact contemporaries, W.B. Yeats, another writer with Nietzschean dimensions. In this sense he is a true modernist; his is not a heroic vision of the universe, the disintegration of Kurtz is a plunge into an abyss from which there can be no ascent.

And perhaps this is where *Heart of Darkness* impinges on Holocaust literature and the phenomenon of modern totalitarianism. I think it casts a cold eye not only on the brutal imperialism of the late nineteenth century, but on all tyranny, and exposes not only its demonic character but also its terrifying vacuity. If you would ask me if I think that Kurtz could be read as metaphor for Hitler or Stalin I would say Yes. In the 1880s Nietzsche had been composing the work in which he developed his theory, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; this was to be followed in 1886 by *Beyond Good and Evil*; revolutionary and incendiary writings that were beloved by many late romantic artists who saw in them a liberation from conventional constraints and morality. Like Nietzsche's superman, like the dictators of our own era, Kurtz has set himself above conventional morality; it has become not only inadequate, but irrelevant. He is the hero beyond good and evil. As James Guetti has noticed: 'Kurtz's crime or achievement....is not that he has managed things badly for the company or, more generally sinned in a uniquely horrifying way, but that by means of an act of vision he has cut himself off from the possibility of sin' (p. 71). 'You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you judge an ordinary man' says one of his admirers in the novel; and so say all followers of dictators of all ages, and Conrad's irony reveals both his understanding of and his contempt for this adulation. The corruption of Kurtz is not an expansion but a diminution, a shrinking, an emptying into the subhuman. Kurtz is shown to have become his own world in the way that all fanatical dictators become their own worlds. Conrad shows him believing in his own lie and few modern writers have managed to demonstrate this entry into the state of ultimate, deranged illusion with as much power and insight as Conrad does here. This is the final stage of the

severance of one's links with the rest of humanity—a state of damnation. And the oldest Christian expression of this situation is the myth of the fall of Satan. That is why I judge this book, *Heart of Darkness*, to be really about evil. When, near the end of the story, a colleague of Kurtz describes him in these words: 'He electrified large meetings. He had faith – don't you see he had faith?' I see in my mind's eye not only Hitler addressing huge gatherings, but Satan, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, addressing the rabble of the defeated angels in Pandemonium. But Conrad's concept of the corruption of the good is far darker than Milton's for when we reach Kurtz at the heart of the darkness there is nothing there. He is given no character. Even Marlow finds it difficult to think of him as anything other than a voice. He is beyond sin because he is beyond both intention and action and, being beyond sin, he cannot be human; he must be either a god or a devil. But since there are neither gods nor devils in Conrad's universe, he is nothing. Marlow has pursued Kurtz both literally and figuratively; he has made the journey into the heart of darkness and has found nothing there. There is no hero to be found, nothing to admire, nothing to be grasped or understood, there is only nothingness. But this induces fear of another kind altogether.

What Conrad has done is pose a metaphysical question: the question of evil, and has answered with a classical Christian definition—though without offering, it must be said, a corresponding Christian pattern of redemption. His representation of evil in *Heart of Darkness* is a representation of evil as the absence of good: *privatio boni*, non-being. It is true that Kurtz displays the results of goodness corrupted but the result of that corruption is not the acquisition of any quality, but loss, absence, impotence, nothingness. And it is the actual language of the novel that persuades us of this metaphysical insight. The most famous words of the novel are, of course, Kurtz's own: 'The horror! The horror!' This is the summation of his life. Marlow cannot understand it and shies away from its implications. '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 I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod, and in other such matters' (Conrad, p.149). Earlier in the story he struggles to convey the scene: 'Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?' (Conrad, p.75). And language seems to drift away from him, evading his grasp as he tries to use it to say something meaningful about what he has witnessed, for what he has witnessed is the void, sheer negativity, metaphysical absence. Reality, as Guetti comments, in this story, seems to exist only in the negative and one has no language to describe that which is not there. So Marlow, the narrator, is suspended

between the world of mind and language where words enable us to lay hold on reality and a world of essences which, somehow, have no existence and no words by which they can be grasped. 'But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it whispered to him things about himself which he did not know.... It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core ...' (Conrad, p.131). But Marlow has seen the effects of this absence and they terrify him. Where Kurtz, the man, should be, there is only hollowness, a darkness; but where Kurtz has been there is pain, ugliness and fear. Out of that emptiness has grown the horror of the scenes that the narrator has witnessed. The void has been terrible in its effects.

This is a problem of which we are painfully aware as we struggle with the problem of the paradox of evil—that is, if we are not dualists. We adopt the view that evil is best described as privation: darkness, shadow, absence, lacking in substantial being. However, we experience its effect as something alien, real and terrible and we find it difficult to reconcile it with our assertion that evil has no real existence; a theorising which, we maintain, is securely founded upon our doctrines of God and Creation. The value of reading Conrad's fictional account of evil in *Heart of Darkness* lies precisely in his power as an artist to realise a truth which we as theologians deal with much more abstractly. He has not started with an abstract principle and set out to flesh it out in a convincing narrative; his sensibility is not a religious sensibility yet he has grasped the religious paradox in all its existential difficulty and expounded, in ways that are concretely realised in the imagination, a remarkably orthodox account of the problem.

This monistic vision of the world is, on the whole, not one that is shared by the writers of fantasy fiction, but it is the one to which I subscribe, and I find its understanding of evil is explored with such subtlety and understanding by Conrad that, even if one rejects the bleak universe that is his in *Heart of Darkness*, one can see how his depiction of that universe helps us to grasp, with greater understanding, the complexity of our human condition. We can recognise in this novel a representation of a mystery that lies at the centre of our experience and, even if it does not bear comparison with the greatest literary works of our era, it is, nonetheless, one of the key works for our understanding of the era.

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# Samson Terroristes: A Theological Reflection on Suicidal Terrorism

Brian Wicker

*This paper is dedicated to the memory of Herbert McCabe OP, the best theologian I have ever met, whose work will remain exemplary for all who aspire to think theologically in the twenty-first century.*

George Bush's 'axis of evil' is presumably part of what this conference is about. Certainly, the intentional killing of the innocent, that is people who have done us no harm, must be one of the most blatant examples of evil anybody can think of. Dealing with this evil has, alas, become one of the pre-occupations of the present age. The last century saw enough of it, from Auschwitz and Hiroshima to Srebrenica and Omagh. But today we are confronted by what many see as a new form of this evil: namely *suicidal* terrorism. Yet even this is not so unambiguously evil that people cannot find religious justifications of it. Indeed the existence of a religious industry for justifying killing the innocent is, I take it, part of the evil that we are dealing with at this conference.

Many Muslims, and perhaps some Christians too, think of those who perpetrate suicidal murders as martyrs for the faith, specially blessed by the Almighty with a vocation to kill. Some even find arguments for it in the Qu'ran or in Islamic law<sup>1</sup>, or in the Old Testament. But before we rush in to condemn their arguments, we must remember some precedents. The most obvious is that of Samson.

## I

On the face of it, as we read the story in Judges 13-16, Samson appears simply as a suicidal terrorist hitman. Yet the narrator in Judges regards him as a specially blessed instrument of the divine purpose. So does the writer