Demons

Terry Eagleton

The demonic is mysterious because it appears to be without cause. It is an apparently unmotivated malignancy, which delights in destruction for its own sake. Or, as the saying goes, just for the hell of it. It is hard to know quite why Iago feels so resentful of Othello. The witches of *Macbeth* reap no obvious profit from driving the protagonist to his doom. This kind of wickedness seems to be autotelic, having its grounds, ends and causes in itself. It thus joins a privileged, somewhat underpopulated class of objects, which includes God and art. It is enigmatic because it is brutely itself, not because it has the inscrutability of something too deep to fathom. As St. Augustine remarks in the *Confessions* of his youthful debauchery, 'I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was foul, and I loved it'.[1]

For many commentators, the Holocaust would be the prime example of this phenomenon. Part of its horror lies in its apparent pointlessness. Even if you had wanted to rid the world of Jews, you could have found some less unspeakable way of doing it. As Stangl, the ex-commandant of Treblinka, was asked later: 'Considering that you were going to kill them all ... what was the point of the humiliations, the cruelties?' Or as Primo Levi inquires:

> 'Why go to the trouble of dragging them on to their trains, take them to die far away, after a senseless journey, die in Poland on the threshold of the gas chambers? In my convoy there were two dying ninety-year-old women, taken out of the Fossoli infirmary; one of them died en route, nursed in vain by her daughters. Would it not have been simpler, more "economical", to let them die, or perhaps kill them in their beds, instead of adding their agony to the collective agony of the transport? One is truly led to think that, in the Third Reich, the best choice, the choice imposed from above, was the one that entailed the greatest amount of affliction, the greatest amount of waste, of physical and moral suffering. The "enemy" must not only die, but must die in torment'.[2]

One might point out banally enough that the Nazis indeed had a reason for killing Jews, namely the fact that they were Jews. They were killed because of their ethnicity. The mystery is why were they killed on that account. Stalin and Mao were respectively responsible for the deaths of millions of Russians and Chinese, but not because they were Russian

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

or Chinese. Their deaths had some instrumental value in the eyes of the perpetrators. 'Wars are detestable', writes Levi, '(but) they are not gratuitous, their purpose is not to inflict suffering'. This, however, does not seem to be the case with the Holocaust. It is true that the extermination of Jewish people served among other things an ideological purpose. To unify the *Volk* by demonising their frightful Other is by no means peculiar to Nazism. But you do not need to slaughter six million men and women in order to create an ideological bogeyman. As Immanuel Wallerstein points out, racists usually want to keep their victims alive in order to oppress them; they derive no practical advantage from destroying them.[3] Slavoj Žižek draws attention to those aspects of the Holocaust which seem like obscene jokes or tauntings — bands playing while camp inmates marched to work, the '*Arbeit macht frei!*' slogan — and wonders whether the whole affair was not 'a cruel aesthetic joke accomplished just for the sake of it, and thus fitting the Kantian notion of "diabolical evil"'.[4]

Žižek is careful, however, to distinguish this case from the ideological propaganda which would see the Holocaust as a unique metaphysical mystery without analogue or explanation, an absolute ahistorical Evil beyond all comprehension. The Nazi camps are by no means the only example of this kind of evil, and part of the point of the present argument is that such evil is not in fact entirely beyond comprehension. 'Evil' means a particular kind of wickedness, one by which we distinguish the Final Solution from the Great Train Robbery. It does not mean 'without material cause'.

Stangl's own response to the question of why the Nazis felt a need for such cruelty is bluntly utilitarian: 'To condition those who were to be the material executors of the operation. To make it possible to do what they were doing'. As Levi comments on this response: 'before dying the victims must be degraded, so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt'.[5] But Stangl's response obviously begs the question, since why were they doing what they were doing in the first place? And even if the Nazis had a purpose, were not the means they used to achieve it madly excessive? Levi himself remarks that the years of Hitler were characterised by 'a widespread useless violence, as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of creating pain, occasionally having a purpose, yet always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself'.[6] His own language buckles under the strain of this enormity: this 'useless' violence had the 'sole purpose' of creating pain, yet 'occasionally (had) a purpose'; this purpose was 'redundant' but also 'disproportionate', which is not quite the same thing.

Yet the fundamental point surely stands. Logistically speaking, the Holocaust was counterproductive, tying down personnel, equipment and

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

resources which might well have been used for the German war effort. And the Nazis could have benefited militarily from the practical skills of some of those they murdered. Levi points out that the SS probably did not make a profit from selling human hair from the camps to textile manufacturers; 'the outrage motive prevailed over the profit motive'.[7] Perhaps, as Geoffrey Wheatcroft suggests, 'the most difficult truth of all is that the Shoah (Holocaust) was meaningless'.[8] Karl Jaspers, writing under the shadow of Nazism, speaks of 'the delight in meaningless activity, in torturing and being tortured, in destruction for its own sake, in the raging hatred against the world and man complete with the raging hatred against one's own despised existence'.[9] It it is as compact a summary of the demonic as one could find.

Perhaps the reason for the genocide was the Nazis' desire for racial purity. But why did they desire that? There are no rational grounds for it, as there are for wanting to poison someone in order to lay your hands on her money. But there are, so to speak, irrational reasons for it. To see evil as unmotivated is not necessarily to regard it as inexplicable. People who destroy just for the hell of it are not exactly doing that. They tear apart strangers because they fear that they pose a threat to their own fullness of being, which is a reason of a kind. The group which threatens to negate their being must be annihilated because they signify the irruption of chaos and non-sense into their own world. They are a sign of the hollowness at the heart of one's own identity. Annihiliating the other thus becomes the only way of convincing yourself that you exist. It allows you to forge an illusory identity from the act of fending off non-being. Only in the obscene enjoyment of dismembering others can you feel alive yourself. Evil is a self-undoing attempt to negate non-being by creating even more of the stuff around you.

This is why those in hell are said to revel in their own torment. The demonic are those lost souls who can find release from the anguish of non-being only by destroying others, but who in doing so deplete themselves even further. Charles Maturin's doomed Melmoth in *Melmoth the Wanderer* knows a torment which 'seeks its wild and hopeless mitigation in the sufferings of others' (vol.2, Ch. 10), but is at the same time savagely hostile to anyone who would ease his agony. The demonic is like a drunk so ravaged by alcohol that he can gain a spot of illusory vitality only by stepping up his intake, which then shatters him so atrociously that he needs to consume still more. Those caught in this spiralling circle are in the grip of the death drive. The death drive is a wily way of trying to stay alive, a source of obscene enjoyment to which we cling for dear life, and are thus incapable of dying for real.

Hell is about finality, not perpetuity — the inability to break out of the lethal circuit of Law and desire and scramble back to life. *Pace* Sartre, it is precisely not other people. It is the condition of those whose terrible

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

destiny is to be stuck with themselves for all eternity, like some bar-room bore. It has the absurdity of utter solitude, since nothing which could happen to me alone could make any sense. The damned cannot relinquish their anguish because it is bound up with their delight, cannot escape the cruel sadism of the Law because this is just what they desire. This is why they are in despair. They are under the power of death already, but since this yields them gratification they can always fool themselves that they are vibrantly alive. And the fact that they find pleasure in their self-destruction is what keeps them just this side of death. Disappointingly, Dante's hell is populated not with demoniacs but with a drearily predictable gang of traitors, lechers gluttons, heretics, hypocrites and the like. The usual suspects, in short.

The demonic, then, is the vampiric condition of the undead — the hellish state of those who cannot die because, like William Golding's Pincher Martin, they are really dead already but refuse to accept the fact. Evil may look alluring, and the devil may appear to have all the best tunes, but its brio is just tawdry melodrama. If virtue seems so unappetising, it is partly because of the mixture of prudence, sexual obsession, self-repression and self-righteousness to which the middle classes have reduced it. It is tedious for Fielding, but not for Chaucer. For Thomas Aquinas, evil is an incapacity for life, and one should not be fooled by its flaming energy or seductive panache. 'A thing', Aquinas argues, 'has as much good as it has being', and evil is a deficiency of being.[10] Which is not to say that evil is unreal, any more than thirst or darkness are. A being which is not determined by some other being, so Aquinas considered, has life in the highest degree, which is why God is infinite vitality. Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety* of 'the dreadful emptiness and contentlessness of evil'.[11] 'The demonic', he comments, 'is the boring'.[12] In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he portrays this as the condition of those who cling stubbornly to their despair and spit in the world's face for bringing them to this pass, those who refuse to be saved since it would relieve them of their delight in their rebellious rejection of the world.

Good, on the other hand, accepts and delights in being as such, not for any instrumental purpose. Once St Augustine turns from his unregeneracy, he speaks of those who worship God with no reward save the joy that they derive from it. One can understand, then, why the devil was once an angel. The devil is a parody of God, not just his antithesis. Good and evil are on unnervingly intimate terms, and both of them bear more than a passing resemblance to the aesthetic. Nothing is supposed to exist for its own solitary self-delight as much as art, mocking our pathetic struggling for achievement. 'O self-born mockers of man's enterprise!' as Yeats exclaims of some icons. Yet evil mocks at our achievements too.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera sees the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

angelic as a bland, 'shitless' discourse of wide-eyed idealism and high-sounding sentiment. The angelic is full of moralistic rhetoric and edifying kitsch, allergic to doubt or irony. The angelic for Kundera are those who troop merrily forward into the future shouting 'Long live life!', all grins and cheers, beaming and cart-wheeling. They do not seem to realise that an advance into the future is a step towards death. The angelic is a hygienic disavowal of the unacceptable: it is, as Kundera puts it, the septic tank which the Gulag uses to dispose of its garbage. In the sphere of the angelic, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme, which is why men who put other people out of work wax sentimental about their own families. The culture which today most exemplifies the angelic is surely the United States. The angelic has too glazed a smile and too ready a handshake to appreciate the seed of truth in Seneca's comment in his play *Thyestes* that 'Pain is real, and everything else is merely a moment of respite, irrelevant. Scars are the only parts of the body to trust'.

Kundera also sees the angelic as a sphere in which there is too much meaning rather than too little. The kingdom of the angels is one in which everything is instantly, oppressively meaningful, in which no shadow of ambiguity can be tolerated. It is the up-beat world of official ideology, in which language comes to assume an authoritarian over-ripeness and everything is drearily legible and transparent. Kundera is thinking here mostly of the neo-Stalinism with which he grew up. Yet this world in which everything is glaringly on view, flattened and two-dimensional, is also one awash with rumour and innuendo, tell-tale traces, whispered treacheries. Nothing is ever quite what it appears to be, and calls for a constant labour of decipherment.

Kundera tells the story in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* of a Czech being sick in the centre of Communist Prague. A fellow Czech wanders up, shakes his head and murmurs: 'I know just what you mean'. The joke here is that the second Czech reads as significant what is just a random event. Under Communism, even throwing up must assume some instant symbolic value. Nothing can happen by accident. The extreme version of this state of mind is paranoia, in which the most casual scraps of reality conceal a grand narrative. One can never be quite sure in Kundera's Soviet-run Czechoslovakia whether a meaning is intended or not — whether there is some fateful significance in the late arrival of your spouse, the boss's failure to say good morning, that car which has been behind your own for the last ten miles.

The opposite of this condition is the demonic, in which there is too little meaning rather than too much. If the angelic is too solemn about meaning, the demonic is too cynical. This, to be sure, can have its value. The demonic is the cackle of mocking laughter which deflates the pretensions of the angelic, puncturing its portentous world. It is the kind

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of amusement which springs from things being suddenly deprived of their familiar meanings, a sort of estrangement. It is the farcical subtext of *King Lear*, when Lear cannot throw off his lendings because his button gets stuck, or Gloucester pitches himself dramatically off an imaginary Dover cliff only to end up grovelling on the ground. We find this debunkery in the satyr play which accompanied the Greek performance of tragedy, as an essential deflation of tragic solemnity. In our own day, the demonic has reared its horned head once in the guise of post-structuralism, and has encountered the usual ambivalent response: Is it a bracingly sceptical questioning of suburban pieties or a metaphysical nihilism? It is never easy to distinguish the claim that no meaning is absolute from the suggestion that there is no meaning at all.

The demonic is a momentary respite from the tyrannical legibility of things, a realm of lost innocence which pre-dates our calamitous fall into meaning. Like most realms of lost innocence, it is never far from the graveyard, and Kundera associates it with the death drive. The devil in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* tells Ivan Karamazov that his role is to act as a kind of friction or negativity in God's creation, a cross-grained factor which keeps it in existence and prevents it from dying of sheer boredom. Otherwise, he comments, the place would be far too angelic — 'nothing but Hosannas', in fact. The devil describes himself to Ivan as 'the x in an indeterminate equation', the 'requisite negativity' in the universe without which order would break out and put an end to everything (Part 4, Book 11, Ch. 9). It is in something like these terms that Jacques Lacan characterises the Real, that cross-grained, out-of-joint factor within the symbolic order which keeps it in business; and since the hard-core of the Real is the obscene enjoyment of the death drive, its linkage with the demonic is an imaginative stroke on the novel's part. In the hell of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, torment is mixed with shameful pleasure, screechings of agony with groans of lust.

Angels can only see demons as cynics rather than sceptics; but though the demonic is the clown who debunks the high and mighty, there is an implacable malice about it as well. As the devil of *Doctor Faustus* tells us, its laughter is also a 'luciferian sardonic mood' a 'hellish merriment' of 'yelling, screeching, bawling, bleating, howling, piping ... the mocking, exulting laughter of the Pit'(p. 378). Hell is a combination of suffering and derision. Revolted by the over-stuffed meaning of the angelic, the demonic keels over into nihilism, levelling all values to an amorphous shit. The Satanic cry 'Evil, be thou my good!' at least preserves distinct moral categories in the act of inverting them, whereas the pure cynicism which Kundera has in mind does not. It cannot suppress a spasm of incredulous laughter at the gullibility of men and women, their pathetic eagerness to believe that their values are as solid

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

as flat-irons. For the demonic, value is just a sham, which is why it seeks to demolish it. The demonic are exasperated beyond endurance by the bland, shitless angels, feeling the incurable itch to unmask their high-mindedness as bogus. But in doing so they come to deride meaning and value as such. The Iagos of this world cannot bear the ponderous, overblown rhetoric of the Othellos. They suspect that behind this pompous facade lurks some utter vacuity, some unimaginably dreadful non-being, and their sadistic delight is to expose it for what it is. This, outside the senior ranks of fascist organisations, is an extremely rare moral condition, though as the Holocaust demonstrates it is a contagious one too, which can come in epidemics. There is very little of it in tragic art.

The demonic,then, is not so much opposed to value as unable to see the point of it, any more than a squirrel could grasp the point of algebraic topology. What it finds offensive is not this or that value, but the whole farcical business of value as such. This solves an apparent contradiction in the idea of evil, one which haunts both Sade and Baudelaire: evil needs value in order to to exist, but at the same time does not believe in it. Baudelairean Satanism must surely be ironic, since how can you derive a *frisson* of wickedness from transgressing moral codes which you know to be purely conventional anyway? The value which evil enjoys scandalising, however, is the belief in value of the boringly virtuous. It is infuriated by the delusion that anything could actually matter. As Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Laughter in the Dark* comments of one of its less savoury characters: 'Perhaps the only real thing about him was his innate conviction that everything that had ever been created in the domain of art, science, or sentiment, was only a more or less clever trick'. Goethe's Mephistopheles, a spirit that 'endlessly denies', believes that 'all that comes to birth / Is fit for overthrow, as nothing worth'(Part 1, Faust's Study (i)).

What drives the demonic to sardonic fury is the obscene repleteness of human existence, its smug belief in its own solidity. This is why the Satanic have a secret pact à la Baudelaire with the bohemian artists, who likewise scoff at the stolid pomposity of the bourgeoisie. In deflating a world which calibrates value on a scrupulously nuanced scale, the demonic collapses these unique identities into the eternal sameness of shit, and thus ironically ends up with pure identity. In destroying the unique aura of the angelic, it is stuck with an endless mechanical reproduction, of which Kundera's prototype is the sexual orgy. There is something uproariously comic about the supposed singularity of erotic love endlessly repeated in a wilderness of mirrors. Yet the sight of ungainly naked bodies crowded into a single space is also an image of the gas chamber. The unique is a fetish, to be sure, but a cynical exchangeability of objects is no alternative. If bodies are interchangeable for carnival, so are they for Nazism and Stalinism. We move on a hair-thin line between clowning and cynicism, too much

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

meaning and too little, debunking and annihilating, shitlike sameness and fetishised difference. In classically comic style, our biological nature reminds us of what we share in common, in contrast to the jealously fostered discriminations of culture; but identity is also a form of death. In hell everything is exactly, eternally the same. It is agonising not because of all those wickedly sharp toasting forks, but because it is intolerably boring. Hell is not a torture chamber but a perpetual cocktail party.

The problem, then, is how to tread a line between too much meaning and too little. It is a line we cross every time we open our mouths, since there is always both too much and too little sense in what we say. Freud saw non-meaning as lying at the root of meaning, yet meaning is also excessive, as the signifier comes to say more than we intend. We live suspended between an excess of meaning and a deficiency of it, both too angelic and too demonic, and these states are terrible twins. They are mirror images of each other in the sense that societies need the angelic to plug the gap of the demonic. In the sphere of the angelic or ideological, we affirm the uniqueness of each individual: 'I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman!', as Arthur Miller's hero exclaims in *Death of a Salesman*. Yet in the realm of the marketplace, these individuals are of a shitlike sameness, indifferently exchangeable: 'Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!' as his son Biff retorts.

The French have a certain proprietorial claim on the demonic. Trifling with others' feelings just for the deadly delight of the game is a preoccupation of Stendhal as well as of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and a Satanic snarling breaks out again later in the poetry of Baudelaire. There can be little doubt that the devil is a Parisian, though he has occasional German counterparts: Fritz von Moor in Schiller's *The Robbers* is a figure who deliberately opts for evil. Goetz, the powerfully complex protagonist of Sartre's *Lucifer and the Lord*, is a German general who espouses evil for its own sake before turning to an equally aestheticist cult of good. It is a full-blown metaphysical drama at the heart of late modernity, though the fact that it is backdated to the Thirty Years' war renders this rather more plausible. Goetz is a self-declared demoniac ('Don't you understand that Evil is my reason for living?...I do Evil for Evil's sake' (Act 1, sc. 2)), and decides to destroy a city just because everyone wants him to spare it. His use of violence is purely gratutious, in contrast with the strategic violence of the popular leader Nasti, which the play endorses. Evil is an elitist affair: one does it because of its difficulty, prizing it for its extreme rarity.

Goetz has a horror of being loved, rather like Graham Greene's Pinkie of *Brighton Rock* or Golding's Pincher Martin, whose response to God's offer of forgiveness is 'I shit on your love!' The demonic experiences love as a violent threat to its non-being, since it is an form of value and meaning, and Martin is finally pounded to pieces by the merciless 'black lightning'

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of God's love. It is this terrifying love which is the fire of hell. Like Goetz, Martin knows that the final, ecstatic freedom is that God will never forgive him against his will, so that he has his Creator completely in his power. Goetz prizes evil because it is the only thing which God has left humanity to create, having created all the good stuff himself. 'Man', he remarks, 'is made to destroy man in himself, and to open himself like a female to the huge dark body of the night'. The *Übermensch*, oddly, is also a eunuch, and the sexual coupling here also the pleasure of the death drive. Since God doesn't prevent his massacres, Goetz speculates, he must implicitly approve of them, and evil-doers are the instruments he hides hypocritically behind: 'Thank you, oh Lord, thank you very much. Thank you for the women violated, the childen impaled, the men decapitated' (Act I, sc. 3). Through him, Goetz believes, 'God is disgusted with himself', so perhaps the wicked are the instruments of divine masochism. Or perhaps God, being fullness of being itself, cannot grasp nothingness and thus is innocent. If God allows the innocent to suffer then he is in the hands of evil-doers, who must then be godlike themselves, so that evil is a monstrous form of good.

Politically speaking, a perverse joy in total wrecking is either the death cult of fascism, or the extreme brand of anarchism which marks Conrad's mad professor in *The Secret Agent*, who really wants to blow up time and matter themselves and start history again from scratch. His spiritual confrère is Souvarine, the haughty, puristic revolutionary of Zola's *Germinal*, who yearns to shake the whole world to pieces along with the despicable, politically compromised proletariat. There is a similar ultra-leftist absolutism about the Jesuitical Marxist Naphta of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, as we shall see later. The jaded Danton in Büchner's drama also dreams of a delicious annihiliation of matter, finding the world obscenely replete: 'Nothingness has killed itself, creation is its wound' (Act 3, sc. 7). Things are just flaws or irregularities in the pure perfection of nothingness, irksome blemishes on eternity. 'Better to take it easy *under* the earth', Danton remarks, 'than dash around on top getting corns'.

D.H. Lawrence's Birkin of *Women in Love*, who longs for humankind to pass away so that some less obnoxious product of the life-force may take its place, is another such exponent of the political death drive. Birkin is perversely attracted to the idea of ultimate dissolution and decay, symbolised in the novel by the African statuette. But the image of the moon in water which he tries to shatter with a stone inexorably reforms, just as tell-tale pieces of Stevie's blown-up body in *The Secret Agent* survive the explosion at Greenwich Observatory, the still point of the turning world. Matter is not so easily eradicated, and like some ghastly science-fiction slime will come seeping over the edges of the abyss in which one attempts to sink it without trace. If the New Jerusalem is to be built, it can only be with the chipped,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

crumbling bricks that we have to hand. Even so, nothing seems more ecstatically creative than the idea of total destruction, which makes rather more dramatic a difference to the world than fashioning a political state or a work of art. The politics of the death drive, from Georges Sorel and Patrick Pearse to W.B. Yeats and the apologists of fascism, sees violence as a purifying force, shocking a torpid suburban civilisation into new life like the bolts of electricity which the mad scientist sends through his monster.

Love struggles against death, but involves an ecstatic abandonment of the self which is death's mirror image.[17] Life, as Pasternak's Yury Zhivago writes tenderly in one of his poems, 'is only the dissolving / Of ourselves in all others / As though in gift to them'. Thomas Buddenbrook, at the end of Thomas Mann's novel, comes to realise in a moment of epiphany that 'death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamed of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably painful wandering, the correction of a grave mistake, the loosening of chains, the opening of doors — it put right again a lamentable mischance' (Part 10, Ch. 5). Life or *Eros* is the later Freud's term for that unspeakably painful wandering, which is no more than the crooked path taken by the ego in its hunt for the bliss of extinction. It is no wonder that we seek an exit from love, which in Plato's *Symposium* is a potentially tragic quest. Racine's Phèdre is literally dying of desire, and his Hippolytus speaks of love as the author of dreadful ruins and calamities. It is scarcely a surprise that the ego, after the painful labour of separating itself from the world, should be tempted by the easeful, fearful joy of deliquescing into it once more.

"Most terrible, although most gentle, to mankind' is how Dionysus is portrayed in *The Bacchae*. As with Christ's 'Come unto me all who labour and I will give you rest', the god in Euripides's play brings with him a compassionate release from toil and forgetfulness of self, not least for the poor. Since he is an indiscriminate force, the emancipation he promises has no respect for rank. For *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'the dread of losing the self and of abrogating together with the self the barrier between oneself and other life, the fear of death and destruction, is intimately associated with a promise of happiness which threatens civilisation in every moment'.[18] This Dionysian drive, which for Nietzsche is exactly what tragedy celebrates, pre-empts death by self-destruction so that at least our extinction comes to us in pleasurable if punitive form. Dionysus, as Nietzsche remarks in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is a horrible mixture of cruelty and sensuality. If the Dionysian is ecstasy and *jouissance*, it is also the obscene enjoyment of playing ball with bits of Pentheus's mangled body. Perhaps the finest Dionysian drama of the modern period is Kleist's *Penthesilia*, an extraordinary fusion of violence and eroticism, domination and subjection, tenderness and aggression, in which the Amazon heroine,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

who believes in kissing men with steel and hugging them to death, tears her lover Achilles apart with her teeth. It is scarcely a play suitable for family entertainment. Penthesilia speaks in one modern-day translation of a kiss and a bite being 'cheek by jowl', and regrets her savaging of Achilles as 'a slip of the tongue'.[19]

The Law is not in the least averse to our delight, so long as it is the delight we take in allowing its death-dealing force to shatter us erotically to pieces. It is tender for our pleasure and fulfilment, ordering us to reap morbid gratification from punishing ourselves; and the more guilt this self-odium breeds in us, the more we clamour for the Law to chastise us and so deepen our pleasure. Like all effective authorities, the Law good-heartedly encourages the participation of its subjects. In admirably paternalist spirit, it wishes us to take a hand in the business of torturing ourselves, work all by ourselves, make it appear that our self-undoing is our own doing, so that it may accomplish its ends all the more efficiently.

The martyr and the demoniac are occasionally hard to distinguish, since both are steadfast for death. Both see living in the shadow of death as the only authentic form of life. If Freud is to be credited, this is where we live anyway; but the martyr and the demoniac both make their destiny their decision, actively appropriate what we less saintly or sinful types, the moral middle classes so to speak, must simply endure as a fatality. Rilke has this distinction in mind when he contrasts *der eigne Tod*, meaning a death which somewhow grows out of your life and which you personally authenticate, with *der kleine Tod*, which is death as sheer biological event, arbitrarily cutting you off. It resembles the distinction we have seen in the theory of tragedy between immanence and accident. For the demoniac, death drains life of meaning, and is thus an empty kind of freedom; but one can also see it as putting meaning in perspective, which is the message of Calderon's *Life Is A Dream*. Once you come to see how fleeting and hollow achievement is, you can relinquish your neurotic grip on pomp and power, relish the present more intensively, and live the less deceived. By accepting one's finitude one can live provisionally, not fetishing or overvaluing existence and thus free from tragic despondency. What is tragic fact for Freud can become moral value.

Humanity is 'the only living thing that conceives of death', as the philosophical Big Daddy remarks in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Or, as Heidegger might put it with less of a southern twang, *Dasein* is the only mode of being which can put itself into question. To address the question of one's death is to make something come of nothing. The demonic is the living death of those who feed like vampires or scavengers on the ruin of others, those who long to be alive but can manage only this paltry parody of it; the opposite condition, which can look embarrassingly like it, is that of the martyr, who offers her death as a gift

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the living. Even if this is beyond our means, we can disarm death by rehearsing it here and now in the self-giving of life. This is the stance towards death ('we die every moment') that St. Paul recommends. For some, this rehearsal or pleasurable anticipation of death is known as tragedy. Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology* that 'Death ... is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength ... But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it'.[20] It is, to be sure, not always a simple matter to distinguish a morbid fetishism of death from this tenacious refusal to back down from the question of one's own finitude.

Perhaps the most distinguished piece of writing about *Eros* and *Thanatos* is Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*,[21] a novel all about that mingling of frost and fire which is what it feels like to be a fever patient. England's rather less magnificent version of it is Lawrence's *Women in Love*, though Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is also a relevant work. The novel's concerns can be summarised in the splendid Freudian slip of one of its characters, who demands that the *Erotica* be played at the graveside of a handsome young consumptive. Life itself, Mann's novel speculates, is perhaps no more than a 'fever of matter' (p. 275), and the fever of the consumptive has the hectic flush of a bogus vitality. Life may be a kind of sickness, a sort of feverish excitation of matter which is then neither quite matter nor spirit; if so, it can scarcely be tragic, but has the non-sadness of things 'which have to do with the body and only it' (p. 27). An invalid is all body, and thus an affront to the humanist affirmation of spirit.

Love is certainly a kind of disease, the most perverse, unstable and fatally error-prone of our instincts, and the sacred and profane aspects of it are as impossible to distinguish as matter and spirit. Conversely, disease in a certain psychosomatic reading of it may be love transformed, desire worn on the body as a decipherable symptom. The mountain air of the novel's Swiss sanitorium brings out consumption as well as curing it, being a *pharmakos* or homeopathic unity of health and poison; indeed, the doctor who runs the place, Behrens, may have even the illness himself. As an 'ailing physician' he is thus a *pharmakos* himself, like the wounded surgeon of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. As Mynheer Peeperkorn observes in Mann's novel, all substances are the vehicle of both life and death, all both medicinal and poisonous; indeed therapeutics and toxicology are to his mind one and the same. Hans Castorp, in an 'incestuous abomination', is innoculated with a serum prepared from his own blood. The clinic itself, which seems an aberration from the healthy flatlands below, is in fact a microcosm of their endemic sickness, as the novel ends with the carnage of the first world war. This is thus the other of Mann's great war novels. But if the clinic therefore has the typicality of a work of art, it also shares

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

something of its idle, privileged decadence, as a narcissistic enclosure in which emotions become dissolute and unstable, states of mind extravagantly intensified. And the clinic is just as evasive about death, the secret at its heart, as the militaristic rhetoric of the world below.

For all his awkwardly well-meaning averageness, the hero Hans Castorp has an early, orgasmic encounter with the death drive. For a precious moment, he tastes 'how it must feel to be finally relieved of the burden of a respectable life and made free of the infinite realms of shame'; and he shudders 'at the wild wave of sweetness which swept over him at the thought ... ' (p.81). The death instinct, at least, is resolutely anti-bourgeois, a form of politics in itself. Life and death, the novel reflects, are perhaps just different viewpoints on the same reality, as indeed are the organic and the psychoanalytic, the sacred and obscene, the subjective and objective or the intuitive and scientific. The frontiers between these forms of knowledge are as indeterminate as those between matter and spirit. Death is in one sense the very acme of objectivity, since it falls utterly beyond our experience, and in another sense the very kernel of subjectivity.

Humanity is suspended undecidably between the affirmation and negation of life, which is to say in this novel between the enlightened liberal humanism of Settembrini, with his Wellsian brand of progressivist rationalism, and the irrationalist death-cult of Naphta. Settembrini's vision is both generous and racist, cosmopolitan and Eurocentric; the communistic Napta's is politically radical in its scorn for bourgeois progressivism, but dismisses the creed from a neo-feudalist viewpoint and is violently in love with death. In his patrician pessimism, moral absolutism and contempt for Enlightenment, Naphta is a full-blooded modernist in Satanic revolt against the spirit of Settembrini's modernity. An exhausted liberal humanism must now yield ground to the inhuman, archaic, formalistic and occult. What is now obsolescent is progress itself, as the clinic, where hardly anyone seems to be cured, would suggest. If Settembrini's humanism affirms the ego and seeks to rationalise death, Naphta sacrifices the ego, finds as a Jesuit that his deepest delight lies in obedience, and thus incarnates the death drive. 'All his thoughts are voluptuous, and stand under the aegis of death' (p. 412), the oppressively normative Settembrini comments of him, and indeed Naphta ends by shooting himself. He is the spirit of tragedy as the traditionalists conceive it: ascetic, elitist, sacrificial, hierarchical, anti-rationalist, spiritually absolutist, hostile to modernity.

Both Naphta and Settembrini represent a kind of death in life, which is to say a deconstruction of the polarities they are meant to symbolise. Settembrini celebrates life yet is dying; Naphta believes in living life with all the absolutism, self-sacrifical zeal and formal rigour of death. Death in this novel is on the side of both ecstatic dissolution ('release,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

immensity, abandon, desire' (p. 496)), and rigid formalism. The same is true of Mann's *Death in Venice*, where the more you sublimate into pure form, the more of a prey to deathly dissolution you become. Art shields you from a knowledge of the abyss, but in doing so helps to tip you into it. The Apollonian seeks perfection, but since nothing is more purely unblemished than nothingness, it rejoins the very formless Dionysiac sublimity it is meant to ward off. The austerely self-disciplined Aschenbach is gripped by a 'monstrous sweetness', a Dionysian lust for death, disease and nothingness; and this is an occupational hazard of the artist, who has to approach the spirit by way of the flesh and so can always be seduced by it en route.

Naphta's Jesuitical ascetism issues logically if incongrously in an absolutist, dogmatic strain of socialism. He is that most perverse of figures, a Catholic Marxist, an oxymoronic type whom history throws up from time to time. But there is an alternative form of death-in-life which is to affirm the human non-hubristically, in the knowledge of its frailty and finitude. This tragic humanism, which represents Mann's own outlook, accepts the disruptiveness of death as Settembrini does not, but refuses to make a fetish of it à la Naphta. Settembrini preaches a version of death-in-life, but only so as to gather death into the life of reason and thus disarm it. For him, to see death as an independent power, ' to feel drawn to it, to feel sympathy with it, is without any doubt at all the most ghastly aberration to which man is drawn' (p. 200). With his repressive cult of health and *sanitas*, for which disease is akin to depravity, he views a perversity common to all men and women as unutterably scandalous. He does not see that deviancy would be not finding death unconsciously alluring. But Naphta's morbid embrace of death is equally unacceptable. 'The recklessness of death is in life, and it would not be life without it' (p. 496), as Hans Castorp comes to realise, but this shouldn't license a vulgar Nietzscheanism, as with those grotesquely desperate inmates of the clinic who dance themselves into eternity, draining the beaker of life recklessly to the final drop and dying '*in dulci jubilo*'.

To be human is to be ailing, as the bourgeois humanist is reluctant to acknowledge, but this ailment lies close to the sources of our achievement. Life and death are not at loggerheads: on the contrary, only by bowing to our mortality can we live fulfilledly. In his great epiphany in the Alpine snow, Hans Castorp encounters a form of sublimity from which he learns 'the fearful pleasure of playing with forces so great that to approach them nearly is destruction' (p. 477). One could find worse accounts of the disposition of the audience of a tragedy. At the heart of his moving utopian vision of love and comradeship lies an image of the Real, the ghastly cameo of the dismemberment of a child, the blood-

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

sacrifice which underpins civilisation. But perhaps, Hans reflects, the comradeship he has witnessed in his vision is as sweetly courteous as it is precisely because of a silent recognition of this horror. Hans clings fast to this revelation of the human as pitched between recklessness and reason, mystic community and windy individualism, and will henceforth refuse to let death have mastery over his thoughts. It is love, not reason, he recognises, which is stronger than death, and from that alone can come the sweetness of civilisation — but 'always in silent recognition of the blood-sacrifice' (p. 496). One must honour beauty and idealism, while knowing how much blood and suffering lie at their root. The hero of this great *Bildunsroman* has now matured, and will finally leave the sanitorium to fight on the plains below as a soldier, offering his life, however misguidedly in the historical circumstances, for the benefit of others.

This essay is an extract from the author's *Sweet Violence: A Study of Tragedy* (Basil Blackwell, forthcoming).

1 St Augustine, *Confessions* (London, 1963), p.62 [(translation amended)].
2 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 1988), p. 96.
3 Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Uses of Racism', *London Review of Books* vol. 22, no. 10 (May, 2000).
4 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London, 2001), pp. 63–4.
5 Levi, p. 101.
6 *ibid.*, p. 83.
7 *ibid.*, p. 100.
8 Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Horrors Beyond Tragedy', *Times Literary Supplement* (June 9, 2000).
9 Jaspers, p. 101.
10 Thomas Aquinas: *Selected Writings* (London, 1998), p. 567.
11 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1980), p. 133.
12 *ibid.*, p. 132.
13 For a valuable philosophical account, see Timo Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London, 1991).
14 Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders* (London, 1983), p. 81.
15 Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (London, 1930), p. 77n.
16 Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (London, 1993), pp. 110 & 112.
17 For an impressively wode-ranging study of this theme, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western culture* (London, 1998).
18 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1979), p. 33.
19 See the translation of the play by Martin Greenberg in *Heinrich von Kleist: Five Plays* (New Haven and London, 1988).
20 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), p. 19.
21 Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (Harmondsworth, 1962). All references to this text are given in parenthese after quotations.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01781.x Published online by Cambridge University Press