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The Evil of Goodness

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Panel: Literature of Evil

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The Evil of Goodness

Ages ago people who had knowledge of herbs and superstition were burned to death, tortured to death or thrown into deep rivers with heavy stones around their bodies, so that they drowned to death. The hysterical fellow human being, in his quest to fight evil in the name of God, caused mayhem far and wide. We might not believe in witches anymore, but a lot of us do certainly still tend to believe in God. That’s why we’re not haunted by witches nowadays, but by the demons we now call “Muslim fundamentalists,” who are jailed, tortured and humiliated with female blood, because they’re not considered as real human beings; they’re turned into symbols of our deepest and greatest fears.

To me it seems there is no greater evil than that which is done in the name of goodness. I prefer by far the charlatan who may eventually be publicly revealed to be a liar than someone who understands the art of elevated lying and gives meaning to meaningless things, like prophets, poets and fiction writers. Most people are not sceptical enough to pierce the illusion of elevating words; they have no interest in understanding them simply because they want to be absorbed. But beware of elevating words, for they can blind and deceive the individual. The German scholar Victor Klemperer, who collected for years all the terminology that was used during the interbellum in Germany and published it after WWII (1947) in his massive Lingua Tertii Imperii (The Language of the Third Reich), wrote: “Words can be like small pieces of arsenic; they are swallowed unnoticed and so they seem to have no effect, but after a while the poison is there. When someone says long enough ‘fanatic’ instead of ‘heroic’ and ‘virtuous,’ he will eventually really come to believe that a fanatic is a virtuous hero and that one can’t be a hero without being a fanatic.”

Yet people love to twist reality anyway. We do it all the time, simply because words cast a spell on our perception of reality. For instance we use words like “anti-Semitic” or “anti-American” instead of “critic,” “protection” instead of “occupation,” “problem” instead of “refugee,” “Enlightenment” instead of “assimilation.” And “backwardness” instead of “Islam,” “terrorist” instead of “freedom fighter,” “peacemaker” instead of “bully of the world,” “Katrina” instead of “Godzilla.” But I digress, since I don’t want to talk about politics, propaganda or raging natural phenomenons. I want to talk about why I became the devil myself. It all has to do with literature, of course, because I have never hit anyone, never committed a crime, never even have I ever ordered anyone to do so, let alone would I kill someone. Actually, I’m just a sissy. I used to have a tail but it’s been cut off by fellow human beings who thought it was scary. And as you all might have noticed, I don’t have horns either. Bulls and rams have horns, humans never have horns—don’t let anyone fool you.

Let me start with the fable of a teacher called Parson Weems. At the age of ten, he taught his pupils, little George Washington was given an axe by his father, perhaps to play Indian, perhaps to scare the hell out of the slaves who took care of the cherry trees in the gardens, perhaps to get used to the feeling of power that came with the possession of a weapon… No one really knows why a father must give his ten-year-old son an axe, but in fables even more peculiar things occur. Anyhow, little George was not in the mood for playing Indian, nor was he in for scaring the hell out of the slaves, but the axe certainly gave him a feeling of power, no way he could deny that. He went to a cherry
tree in the beautifully laid-out garden and started to chop like a madman—woodchips jumped to all sides because of the chopping. In the background two cherry-picking slaves pretended to hear no evil see no evil—it didn’t even come up in their minds to interfere with that spoiled little brat. They knew white folks were messing around all the time anyway.

There rushes the enraged father towards little George. Has his son gone mad or something? “George, what are you doing?” He towers over his son like a giant.

Little George hides the axe behind his back quickly. Oops, he’s caught red-handed. He cannot possibly blame somebody else—the slaves are too far and what’s more his father has seen him ranting and raging against the tree with his own eyes. Little George has no choice, since there’s only one thing to do.

“I’m sorry, father,” he says, “it’s my own fault. I don’t know what had gotten into me, but I promise I will never do it again.”

Little George’s father is instantly moved by the honesty of his son and grants him clemency on-site.

A forgiving father who knows how to praise intentions in order to uphold vulnerable souls, how wonderful! Anyone who didn't know any better would believe in such a sweet lie. With this fable the teacher Parson Weems showed to his pupils the very early presence of George Washington’s virtue. Isn’t it great of little George to admit his wrongdoing instantly and to promise to do it never again? If you’re just as virtuous as little George then you might become a president like him, was Weems’ lesson. One could ask what tricks Weems himself had been playing if he had only managed to become a teacher. But one shouldn’t ask such a question, since the story was about the didactic value of his fable and not about the meaninglessness of Weems’ very own life. One could also ask why little George had been ranting and raging against that cherry tree, but again one shouldn’t ask such a question, since the fable was about honesty and not about the complexity and arbitrariness of human conduct. It’s a fable, indisputably, meant to raise children into sound creatures. There in the foreground we see the teacher Weems himself, with the benign look of someone who seeks only morality, and there he pushes a crimson curtain aside as if he’s showing us a play in the theater, a play about the life of the boy who’s going to be the first president of the United States. Therefore the title of the painting is *Parson Weems’ Fable*, painted by Grant Wood. And if you look closely enough you can see the irony dripping down from the painting.

Where all life dies eternity is only reserved for art, and so it happened that on a little mopish weekday, while visiting Wood’s exposition in the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, my eye fell on this delightful painting. It was as if I had plunged down into my own childhood, the painting a diving board into memory. Don’t ask me how, but there I was in the magical time when I was a nine-year-old, a time when I had a naïve, yet solid as a rock, belief in everything—a time when fathers were elevated high above, a time when I still believed in the holiness of grown-ups and mothers of course couldn’t possibly know the need of going to the restroom to take a decent shit.

It was a Saturday morning in January when it happened. It had been snowing all night, there was a thick layer of untouched snow on everything. The past was not relevant, it was a day to start all over with a clean slate, to do good and noble things. The house was
still fast asleep, but I got up early, because I wanted to surprise good ol’ dad by removing the snow from his car, so that he wouldn’t have to do it himself, so that he only had to get in and drive away to wherever he needed to go to; I didn’t even need to go with him.

First I removed the snow with my mittens, but when they were soaking wet from the melted snow I continued with my bare hands. I didn’t think of the cold, I only thought of my good ol’ dad’s happy face when he would see what I had done for him. When I had finally removed all the snow I noticed a thin layer of ice on the surface of the glass. That has to be removed also, of course, I realised, untiring. I wanted to be good so badly. But to remove icy snow from glass with bare hands was impracticable even with the firm nails that I had—I came to realise that soon enough. Yet I didn’t give up, naturally—the spirit of a child contains more endurance than an ox sometimes. And so I grabbed a piece of broken tile and went on scratching diligently with it. My heart jubilated when I noticed that the ice loosened from the glass bit by bit. But it was very hard—it took me hours, good ol’ dad could come out any minute now. So I only scratched the windscreen, which was the most important part anyway.

There he came out, good ol’ dad, his eyes shut to thin stripes against the cutting sunlight that was reflected by the snow. I, the son, showed good ol’ dad the noble deeds I did for him. “Look, dad, have I done well or have I done well? And look, dad, I have done all this with this. Am I smart or am I smart?” I, the son, had the piece of broken tile in my hand and I held it in the air as proud as a child can be.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, says the Bible, and in my case that is certainly true. In my child-like naïvety I didn’t notice the many scratches I had caused on the windscreen, because I had been more preoccupied with gaining good ol’ dad’s happiness than with anything else. But good ol’ dad noticed the scratches in the wink of an eye, since he had the ability to look straight through good intentions. The noble gesture that I had in mind disappeared like snow in the sun. Like little George I had no choice, there was only one thing to do—and so I ran away. It was the only thing I could do and there I went, like the wind. I never returned. My life wasn’t a fable of forgiving fathers and other comforting lies. In my world there ruled the tyrannical god of Abraham, an unpredictable and punishing god. I didn’t live in a play with a fancy curtain that you can close or shove aside whenever you like. At the end of the ride there was no assuring moral to elevate the soul, that grumbling whore. No, no and no once more, the devil always hides in the details, good intentions mean nothing. To hell with your theater, your moral and your comfort!

One might ask what makes me so certain that I’m the devil. Well, I’m not. I’m not certain of anything. If you thought you could catch me that easy then you’re wrong. But I do have certain characteristics. First, my good ol’ dad says I am, society says the same, everybody says I am the devil. Second, I’m the most beautiful creature my good ol’ dad has ever created. Third, I’m the loneliest. Fourth, I have by far a better understanding of the world. Fifth, I tend to speak with different and contradicting tongues, which can be a little confusing sometimes, indeed. Last but not least, I am a writer. I can lie to you by evoking possible realities and you will say that it is the higher truth; I can tell you the horrible truth and you will say that I’m just a liar who knows his way with words; I can renounce everything you believe in and you will hate me; I can sing to you elevating words of eternal love, which we all know is an eternal lie, and you will love me again. In the end you’ll wish I had never existed, and that’s exactly how I wish to be remembered.