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The Encounter with the Evil and the Erasure of the Human: Psychoanalytic Meditations[1]

– a breath? a name? –
Paul Celan

Invasion

I hadn't woken up – it was about eight in the morning. I was still in bed, reaching for my phone, reading the first posts that flashed starkly across the screen. I wasn't surprised by what I saw – the previous days had been filled with tension, and something had seemed bound to happen at any moment.

The night before, I had met a friend at a bar and spent a few hours telling jokes, gossiping and drifting into talk of art and cinema. I needed it, and it helped: the suspense that had hovered in my thoughts all day seemed to vanish, at least for a while. I got home after midnight and fell asleep almost at once.

A few hours later, still not fully awake, I was scrolling through my phone. Headlines, images, single words flickered across the screen. A simple phrase began to form in my mind – something like, 'Well, okay, now it finally happened…' – as the feed blurred before my eyes, circling back again and again.

Suddenly, a numbness spread through me, head to toe, as if sleep had surged back from some hidden depth and was slowly taking hold from within. My thoughts, though blurred, grew heavier, colder. My eyes drifted shut. That numbness gradually took the shape of two memories, overlapping in my mind. I lay curled up in bed – powerless, motionless – unable to look away from the screen, I could no longer see, or to turn around and get up.

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For a moment I thought I heard the terrible howl of warplanes sweeping low over my building. The sound echoed through me, spreading like a fine shiver across the bed, then the room, the apartment, the block, the earth itself. I felt as if everything had shuddered – as though some unknown, terrible force had passed through it.

Later, I realized it was actually a memory from 25 years ago – real or imagined, I can no longer say. I was seven then, during Operation Allied Force in the Kosovo War, living with my family in a small town in northeastern Bulgaria. I don't recall whether I truly heard the planes or only saw them on television. What I do remember is the sound: from the sky, through the bottom of the world – deep down, somewhere, everywhere.

That piercing sound in my head made me colder, and for a moment, I felt dizzy. I tried to turn to one side, but my neck seemed stiff. I couldn't tell where my hands had gone, or whether my eyes were closed or open. All I heard was the howl of planes echoing in my skull, while my body continued to shake – along with the bed, the room, the earth – under their force. In psychopathology, such states are described as derealization and depersonalization: when the ground seems to slip away beneath one's feet, the world begins to dissolve before the eyes, and the self is pulled under with it.

Soon the sound of the warplanes faded, and in its place a scene began to unfold – a second memory had invaded my mind, from around the same time.

I am now in my grandparents' house, back in the countryside. It's evening, though I can't tell what time it is. The house is deserted, the lights are off, and it may be dark outside, but I don't know what day of the week it is, what season, or what year. My grandfather and I are watching the central news broadcast in the living room. I see the bright TV screen clearly, but I don't remember any words being spoken – if any were spoken at all. The image remains frozen in my mind, its glare straining my eyes. Back then we were still warned that TVs could damage your eyesight, and I remember always being told not to sit too close to the screen.

Something flashes on the screen. I hold my breath.

A human head fills the frame – a beardless man with short black hair, his face contorted in agony, lying on his back. Or perhaps someone is holding him down – I can't quite tell. I don't fully understand what's

happening. My grandfather doesn't seem to either. Then suddenly an axe swings down and severs the man's head. It rolls away. Was there blood? Beyond that little remains in the memory. I turn around, but now I seem to be alone in the house. My grandfather has vanished. A strange calm fills the space. Maybe all of this has gone unnoticed? Maybe nothing has happened. Am I dreaming? The memory ends here: as the words leave me, the house stands still, deserted and peaceful, and everything around me turns black. Very black.

There is no one at home.

I jumped abruptly out of bed. The clock reads 08:45. The date: 24 February 2022 – the day Russia invaded Ukraine.

* * *

Unlike the first memory – about which I can't say anything definite – the memory of the severed head is a real. It refers to actual events that took place in April 2000, when a recording of the execution of a Russian soldier by Chechen separatists during the Second Chechen War was broadcast unannounced, without editorial review, on the prime-time news bulletin of Bulgarian National Television at 20:00. The broadcast caused a national scandal and the editorial office was flooded with angry calls from hundreds of viewers. It is estimated that five million saw the report. In the days that followed, newspapers ran headlines like "Bulgarian National Television Has Cut Off Its Head!", and scrambled to uncover how it happened – who had approved the footage, who had allowed it to air, and what role the editors in chief, presenters, and the Television's director had played. Two journalists, including the presenter, lost their jobs, and the Television was forced to draft a new set of ethical guidelines for its programming.

I know all this from what I've read today – from the few surviving articles still accessible online that comment on the incident. This is objective knowledge: the factual setting of what happened, when, and how. But it is not knowledge of what was seen. It is not knowledge of what it meant to see it. Nor is it knowledge of my own experience. And it is not knowledge of how that experience – what I saw twenty-five years ago – can be formulated in terms of who I am today.

Today I realize that this memory of the broadcast was, for me, a personal encounter with evil. And that is why, no matter how many

books I've read on the philosophy of evil, no matter how many testimonies of victims and perpetrators I've reviewed, for me evil will always be tied to that moment – buried deep in the layers of my memory and its sudden invasion, which left behind a trembling sense of dizziness and numbness. The haunting noise in my head, the glare absorbed by my eyes, the stiffness of my limbs: these are the remains of an encounter that took place on that vast battlefield of the human we call memory.

So I would like to take that moment as a starting point for developing some ideas – ideas that, though perhaps recycled – have their subtle origin in that a personal encounter. They are attempts to formulate, through inner reflection, indirect communication, and repetition – the lived experience of that moment. They are also explorations within the realm of the psyche – of what happens to it in the presence of evil.

Although always painful, such an encounter is also necessary. Only through it can we begin to find the means to resist evil. It is an old maxim that evil cannot be negotiated with – it must be fought, pure and simple. And the familiar demand that war be fought justly (whatever that may mean) applies even more forcefully when it comes to evil, which, as we know, has the unique ability to turn even its most inveterate enemies into its allies.

Thinking and experience

The space of experience I inhabit – and the practice to which I try to remain faithful, psychoanalysis – grants thinking a special status, one that departs significantly from the modes of reflection and speculation traditionally found in philosophy. It is a mode that takes as its condition the singular human being, in their singular presence within the field of desire and the unconscious – that is, in their speech and lived experience. Thinking within the analytic situation is thus inseparable from a certain kind of experience: not the experience of categorizing or defining, but that of *falling away*, of the spontaneous intrusion into thought – and into speech – of some fragments, scraps, remnants or pieces of the subject's singular history. These are elements the subject herself neither fully recognizes nor possesses the tools to link together or make sense of – let alone transform into coherent and meaningful statements or definitions.

In sustaining this kind of intrusion – which Lacan calls *full speech*, though it can never be reduced to speech alone (it includes just as much the experience of silence, laughter, and tears) – the psychoanalyst and patient attempt together to give form to a knowledge that has, until then, remained unformulated. A knowledge the subject does not know she knows, and does not yet know what to do with.

To "formulate" here means to bring forth a word anchored in the subject's history – an *honest word*, a truly historical word, rooted in the truth of that singular history, as meaningful as it is often painful for the one who pronounces it and hears herself pronouncing it. This word remains bound to the history of the subject in a particular way: in the mode of a *question*. That is, it is a word that, rather than stating something, actually *asks* or *calls* for something. We might say it is a word the subject *encounters* in the course of her analysis. She discovers that she carries it within herself – invisibly, on her shoulders – and that she has carried it all along. To carry this word is to have a history, and to be the subject *of* that history.

Therefore, the attempt to formulate this kind of knowledge inevitably confronts the problem of how to frame the questions through which experience can not only be interpreted but also unfolded – rather than simply reduced to answers, meanings, categories, or interpretations.

Within this experience – which structures itself through what is known as free association and through the broader therapeutic interaction – the patient's thinking unfolds in a space of experience where she either succeeds or fails in linking two different registers: that of immediate sensation and that of symbolic meaning; the lived and the communicated; the unspeakable and the spoken; what is shown and what is said. The problem of formulation here is the problem of the status of the artifacts that emerge in analysis. These are things both spoken and unsaid; experiences that become words and yet resist being grasped as words; words that become experiences and yet resist being lived. They are, in some form and to some extent, communicated to the analyst – or they just remain lodged in the patient's throat, unable to move forward. Sometimes what is shared in analysis – through silence, through the interruption of speech or thought – is simply the brute fact that these artifacts of the unconscious are stuck. And so they are communicated, paradoxically, at the level of their own incommunicability.

These are the layers of formulated and unformulated human experience within which psychoanalysis situates thinking – thinking that is always also a form of experiencing or, more precisely, a form of dealing with experiences. It is the attempt to give form to something unformulated, even impossible to formulate, something that belongs to the deepest strata of the subject's experience and presents itself in the form of a question.

Put in more familiar philosophical terms, one could argue that the kind of knowledge psychoanalysis engages with has something of the structure of Platonic *anamnesis*: it situates thinking within the dense stream of reminiscences and associations, each with its own logic of meaning-making and temporal unfolding. These do not follow the linear path of rational deduction, but instead obey the logic of desire – which is also the logic of the unconscious.

If, on the other hand, we turn to the tradition of existential thought, we might feel tempted to see this form of thinking-recollection as closer to the act of repetition described by Kierkegaard – through which what has already existed is able to begin to exist anew, in the form of a "now": to become a situation of its own, to reveal its possibilities in the shape of a story, to open up a new horizon – to be formulated within the frame of the subject's experience, in terms of the questions that ground that experience and propel it toward its future.

There are – one can argue after Kierkegaard – such odd phenomena that can be known and communicated only indirectly – only through the necessary mediation of the inwardness of both the one who is trying to communicate them and the one who is receiving communication. This kind of communication does not transfer results – not ready-made truths or general conclusions; it is refracted through the inward being of those involved. It is a communication of way, of possibility – a manner of becoming. Not the delivery of a finished insight, but an opening, an appeal to enact a certain path. The only true gift this mode of communication can offer is precisely the possibility of a future – of a future enactment – by the subject.

I believe that thinking in psychoanalysis is deeply tied to this kind of internal, subjective, and singular knowledge. In psychoanalysis, all knowledge, communication, and formulation must take such a form, insofar as they do not address our knowledge of external reality – or the question of how the world is – but rather the conditions under which we ourselves can live with that reality, and bear it.

This is even more true, I believe, of knowledge about evil. Thinking about evil – and communicating that thinking – is only possible in this indirect, subjective mode. For to think about evil is, first of all, to think in experience, within a situation. And second, such thinking is not about evil *per se*, but about the encounter with evil. Evil in itself (if such a thing exists) hardly lends itself to the familiar operations of theoretical reduction, as it unsettles the very familiarity on which the act of reflection or speculation is founded, rendering every word, in a sense, superfluous.

Monstrum and mystery

The thought I want to develop here owes much to the observations shared by Tzvetan Todorov in books such as *Facing the Extreme* (1996) and *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien* (2000). Before offering my commentaries – or rather, to remain faithful to Todorov's own methodology, before entering into a critical dialogue with some of the ideas presented in these works and relating them to the psychoanalytic practice that guides me – I would like to begin with what may seem a trivial point, but one that is relevant to the specific mode of thinking experience I discussed earlier.

At one point in his autobiography *Devoirs et Délices: Une vie de passeur*, Todorov says:

> "Hannah Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a reportage, but she invested herself completely; she reconsidered – how painfully! – her whole identity. It is precisely this that allowed her to change our understanding of Evil."

The context of this statement concerns Todorov's critique of structuralism, which marked a turning point in his intellectual career – his shift away from the domains of language and poetics that occupied him in the 1960s and 1970s, and toward the ethical and political problematic that would shape his later work. In the same passage, Todorov goes on to say:

> "Knowledge progresses in precisely this way: unless it fully engages its author, it remains essentially scholastic. He who pursues the

> path of knowledge must rethink himself in the course of his work." (Todorov 2002).

Similar reflections appear at the beginning of *Nous et les autres*, where Todorov asks

> "How can you explore the human without taking sides?" – invoking Simone Weil's idea that the pursuit of knowledge brings us closer to truth only when we come to know what we love, and in no other case (Todorov 1989).

By a seemingly mysterious logic, what has been said about love can also be said about evil. Hannah Arendt's experience of the Eichmann trial – an attempt at testimony and at reporting "from the scene" – was also an act of exposure. Arendt herself admits this in a letter: her wish was, she wrote, "to expose herself" to the perpetrator (Eichmann), whose appearance and behaviour she would famously liken to that of a clown (Hill 2021, 156). Yet it was precisely through this exposure to the perpetrator's evil – an act that brought her public outrage, personal attacks, and a wave of rejection even among friends and colleagues, costing her cherished ties – that she was ultimately able to penetrate the depths of an experience so barren, so stripped of reasonable substance, that it could only be called desolate.

A similar experience – of being compelled to rethink one's own identity in the face of evil – shapes Todorov's *Facing the Extreme*. His careful analyses of life in the concentration camps are periodically interrupted by brief, italicized notes in brackets – feverish, intimate reflections that return to his own family and personal memories of life under totalitarianism in Bulgaria. These moments expose the strong existential dimension of his philosophical and ethical inquiry, tracing the pathways of totalitarian evil. It is this experience of exposure, Todorov argues, that plays a decisive role in shaping Arendt's conception of evil – showing us that there are realities in this world that cannot be grasped by consciousness in its usual, intentional manner. They demand another mode of access: one that involves the subject not as detached observer, but as someone at risk, someone who has been affected.

These are singular, unsettling reties – points in the world endowed with a kind of gravitational force, where the space and time of everyday

consciousness become distorted. We might call them *monstra* – the plural of the Latin *monstrum*. What is most terrifying about them, however, is that they make even fear itself feel unbearable.

In Latin the word *monstrum* literally means "that which reminds" or "that which warns." It was understood as a sign sent by the gods – a warning to humans that something wrongful, something terrible, had been allowed to occur. A *monstrum* is thus an omen, a message, whose deeper meaning remains elusive to reason. In fact, it might be said that it has no deeper meaning: its meaning lies only in what it shows (*monstrare*) – something horrifying, formless, and unnatural, something that compels the gaze to turn away. It is the repulsive, which consciousness encounters as an indecipherable cipher, indicating that in the very order of things something is out of order. And because it is out of order, it cannot be inscribed into that order anymore. It contradicts it – it suspends the law of order. It marks a failure – a void – in the very structure of the order itself and undermines its effectiveness.

This is the first step in outlining the monstrous rapture of evil.

Because of its exclusivity, the pure evil – as *monstrum* – can never appear to consciousness as evil, that is, in itself, in the form of pure content. It cannot appear as an object, not even as a problem to be addressed or resolved. It resists becoming a *noema* – the intentional object of thought – because the very act of intending it, of turning consciousness toward it, is itself destabilized. Evil calls into question the very structure of the consciousness that seeks to grasp it. In this sense, evil constitutes a rapture – or rupture – in the concrete, phenomenological sense: it cannot be grasped, because grasping presupposes the possibility of apprehending objects. But evil, in its extreme form, resists objectification. Need we recall here the sight of corpses piled on pyres, burning through the night – the billowing smoke and fog, the bright face of the flames, illuminating the dark skies and the stench of solidified human fat? And all of this rendered in language as "pieces," "units," "cargo," "material," "figures" – terms, provided by the bureaucratic lexicon of Höss, Eichmann and Stangl. This language, which pretends to categorize, quantify, and render manageable, does not succeed in objectifying evil; it only underscores its inassimilability. The bureaucratic effort to contain horror in neat, neutral terms only amplifies the void at the centre of what is being spoken.

As a limit experience, evil corrodes the intentional structure of consciousness insofar as it introduces a rupture in the underlying contents or meanings by which experience is ordered and represented, made intelligible to consciousness, and consciousness itself made capable of understanding that experience by constructing it in terms and categories. The fundamental characteristic of evil is to disorganize and disorient consciousness, bringing it to the point of its impossibility – where only the overwhelming fullness of an experience of absolute emptiness remains.

This may be superficially labelled as "terror" or "horror" but such terms cannot contain it. Though named, evil in this sense remains essentially nameless. It is doomed to remain so – to remain, to be constituted, in spite of its naming: it can neither be labeled nor integrated into the structure of consciousness, but remains always external to it.

This is why, in Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* series, we find inscriptions like "*Yo lo vi*" (I saw it), "*Esto es peor*" (This is worse), and "*No se puede mirar*" (One cannot look). These phrases circle around the *monstrum* of evil without being able to name it. They indicate a form of radical exposure – testimony not as mastery, but as passive endurance, as the inability to look away. Similar gestures appear in the drawings of *hibakusha* – survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their images do not represent evil, but rather trace it, gesture toward it as that which has been seen – and which marks every act of seeing thereafter. Evil returns in memories and nightmares, not as narrative, but as the eerie, pulsating presence of its "*Yo lo vi*."

Ultimately, this also means that evil cannot be phenomenalized, that it is, in a sense, anti-phenomenological. Not entirely, of course: there is, after all, an entire visibility of evil. That visibility, however, is always refracted at a single, unresolvable point – its fixed, irreducible *why*? (Goya, too, inscribes this question: *No se puede saber por qué* – inscribes this impossible question). This "why" does not lend itself to being intended, integrated, or symbolized by the consciousness.

Here evil here *stands* real – not even "appears" – simply as an X, devoid even of the definiteness of a radical "no," as something stripped of all determination. It has no face, so it does not show itself, but is instead facelessness itself. Consciousness does not so much comprehend it as collide with it – stabbing itself, wounding itself in

the face of this faceless X. The masterful quality of some of the great Holocaust films, such as Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* or László Nemes' *Son of Saul* – comes precisely from their capturing of the omnipresent gaze of this faceless X, which saturates every frame.

What remains from such an encounter – this piercing of the structure of consciousness – is not an insight, but a hole, a noise that no possibility can cover with understanding, and which, in turn, generates no understanding of its own possibility. Evil, in this sense, confronts us in a very specific way: *as a necessity for non-possibility*. It is the face of facelessness.

It is here that the deep connection between evil and death – understood as the possibility of impossibility – is revealed. Yet not every death presupposes the occurrence of evil, just as not every instance of evil culminates – at least formally – in death. Nevertheless, all evil is bound to suffering and all suffering anticipates death: it comes with the opening of a field in which death – the possibility of dying – is not only already implicitly present, but also gives itself in the closeness – and the closing – of a terrifying encounter. In this intimate link between evil and death, however, something deeper is also disclosed – something that pertains not merely to humans, but to the very relation between being and world.

Indeed, if evil has a privileged object or victim, it is this primordial ontological relation between being and world. And if death is, as Heidegger states, the possibility that cannot be outstripped (*unüberholbar*) – "the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything... of every way of existing" (Heidegger 1962, 307) – then evil stands as a necessity of non-possibility (or im-possibility, although there is certain difference between the two: non-possibility is the possibility of the pure "no", the possibility of the lack of any further possibility.). It is the necessity of the impossibility of any relation to the world or to beings within the world. Evil thus stands real in the rupture of the relation between Dasein and world. This *realization* of evil destabilizes the original ontological structure that connects Dasein and world in the openness of the meaning of being: for as being-in Dasein has always already found itself in the openness of a world – it is always already being-in-the-world.

Therefore, if expressions like "ontological evil" or "metaphysical crime" – used by Vladimir Jankélévitch to describe the unforgivable horror of the Holocaust (Jankélévitch 1996) – can be applied to the

standing of evil in the world, it is precisely because they name not only singular acts of violence or death, but the destruction of a fundamental ontological structure. Not simply the taking of life, nor merely the infliction of suffering, nor even the elimination of a being, but the effacement of the original existential of the "being-in-the-world" – an act of abandonment in which, on the one hand, the human being is left alone in the world – to be world-less – and on the other, the world itself is stripped of its worldliness, confronting the human being as brute reality.

To say that evil is a necessity is not to say that it cannot fail to happen, but rather that, in its happening, not only is all possibility abolished – but a non-possibility is paradoxically affirmed in the realization of a possibility of the lack of any further possibility. And this non-possibility is precisely the impossibility of relating to the world as the site of openness of the Dasein-and-the-world, or indeed of human possibility itself. To erase possibility (or the possibility of possibility) is one thing. But to realize a non-possibility – to reveal and establish the lack of any further possibility – is something else entirely. It is this radical realization of non-possibility that marks the rapture of evil: the destruction not only of what is, or what could be, but of the very space in which possibility could once have emerged. In it the world is gone.

Evil, then, shatters the pre-structures that sustain all understanding. It can stand only as the minimal form of a *white noise* in consciousness – a raw "pain", "revulsion" or "disgust", that come to cover nothing more than the presence of a nameless place, a place beyond the name, before which consciousness is struck dumb. Here consciousness is shattered – stands broken in front of standing evil – by the necessity of this evil, by the fact that evil is the non-possibility and impossibility made necessary.

But does this mean that evil is inexplicable? That there is nothing to say about it – except that nothing can be said? Todorov, for whom the paradigm of evil is shaped above all by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, firmly opposes such mystifying conclusions. In fact, he speaks clearly against them:

> "To declare crime incomprehensible... – he writes – is a position with very questionable premises, because it means denying the integrity of the human species: on the one hand, there should be monsters; on the other, normal people. And, in fact, this is what

we accuse the criminals of – they have eliminated from the human one of its varieties; they have decided that they can eliminate it." (Todorov 2002).

We will return to these words later. For now, let us complete the thought already developed: the fact that evil breaks consciousness, that it causes consciousness to stall or collapse, does not necessarily mean that evil cannot be known or understood. It only means that evil cannot be grasped within the conceptual framework of everyday consciousness, in its Cartesian elaboration, where the subject appears to itself in the clarity of object-relation and intentional grasp.

But consciousness can still do something in the face of evil. Paradoxically, it can bind itself to it; it can – through the experience of pain – expose itself to the effects of evil. In this exposure, in this becoming-passive of consciousness, it enters into something beyond mere reflection. It participates in what Gabriel Marcel would call a *mystery*, as opposed to a problem (cf. Marcel 1950). A mystery is not something placed before us to be solved. It involves us. It is a presence, but not the presence of something simply "there," available for objectification. Rather, it is the presence of something within which we ourselves are present. And in the grasp of this mystery, consciousness finds itself grasped – by something external to itself. Only by entering into this exteriority can consciousness arrive at its own interior depth.

Yet mystery is not merely a phenomenon of consciousness. Already implicated in it – and called radically into question – is the being of the one who is encompassed by the mystery. It cannot be resolved in any trivial sense, but only witnessed – and articulated as an appeal – through language and through the transformative effects of language.

Mystery, then, can be spoken – but not in the way "everyone speaks," not in the language of ordinary discourse. For that to happen, language, naming and signification themselves must undergo a certain exposure. They must cease to serve their habitual functions and instead become something else. Another way of speaking, another way of naming must be found. And that is what it means to speak of mystery. This lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication.

How, then, can one speak of mystery? Perhaps in the language of what Paul Celan – marked irreversibly by the evil of the Holocaust – called *Atemwende*, the breathturn. Referring to poetry, he asked:

> "Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed here, in this manner, some other thing is also set free?" (Celan 1995, 19).

What is set free in this other language – in the presence of mystery that has acquired the flesh of language – is an *honest word*: a singular understanding that can neither be communicated directly nor fully comprehended. Like great poetry – Celan's included – it is condemned to solitude.

I think of evil as oscillating between these two planes: on the one hand, the piercing *monstrum*, which evokes a rupture in the order of meaning – an impersonal X – that fixes the reality of a certain wound; and on the other hand, the solitude of mystery, in which the subject is drawn, existentially and ontologically, into that rupture. There, the subject is called to bear witness – not only to the event but to its impossibility – through the mobilized (im)possibility of her own language, her own breath.

How is evil?

There is, it seems to me, something profoundly psychoanalytic in Marcel's distinction between problem and mystery – particularly insofar as psychoanalysis engages with the work of capturing artifacts that belong to a monstrous order, or, in Lacanian terms, to the Real. Psychoanalysis concerns itself with the attempt to formulate these artifacts in relation to the subject's life history – a history not simply remembered but in the making, a history that happens to the subject in the very act of speaking. It is not a story from the past being retold, but a story still to come – a memory of the future.

This kind of formulation is at the core of the psychoanalytic process, which unfolds within the field of the unconscious, within the space of the analytic session. But to speak substantively here, to fix meaning too quickly, is to convert the unfolding into a problem, ascribing a stable noematic status to something that, in its essence, remains unformulated, ineffable.

The unconscious, as we know, is not a "thing" at all – it is a movement toward a Thing. And this Thing, toward which it moves, has a real, ineffable status. It can never be reached; it remains an open question. The unformed, in this sense, is the very refraction of expression – the

bending or breaking of speech through which something is announced by the subject, about the subject, yet unknown to the subject herself. It is something detached from consciousness, in the strict psychoanalytic sense, now returning – not only to consciousness, but to the very organization of the subject's personal history.

It seems to me, then, that the more appropriate question is not *what is evil?,* but *how is evil?* In what modality of engagement with the unknowable does the subject find himself, when he encounters what we call evil? The question *how is it?* might also be rephrased, within the framework we have already developed, as *where is evil?* – a question that directs us toward the conditions of possibility under which a space opens in reality for the intrusion of something ineffable – a space, or an envelope we here name evil.

Evil is not a substance – as St. Augustine reminds us. It is the place of a lack, or the lack as a place. Nor can it be said that evil is simply "nothing," as if it were mere absence. Yet neither it is the vague and elastic "presence of the absent," an expression that could apply to many things. Rather, evil is an active and necessary production of non-possibility or impossibility – not a single act of annihilation, but a sustained process, a maintenance of annihilation. Evil is the ongoing production and preservation of the not-having in the having.

A not-having – of what, though?

Repetition

I saw it. And yet I have asked myself many times – and continue to ask myself now: what did I see that night, in my grandparents' house, more than twenty years ago? And why do I keep returning to that memory? Why do I continue to think evil through it? Is it simply because, for me, it marks the site of one such "*Yo lo vi*" – I saw it – a moment of violent intrusion into consciousness? Or is it, conversely, that the memory itself holds me – that it seizes me and returns me, again and again, to a presence within a mystery, the mystery of evil. Does the memory draw me into that mystery here and now – saturating my experience of the present, bending and refracting it, undoing its unity of meaning through traumatic repetition? Does it envelop me in the very (im)possibility of appearance – of the *monstrum* – which I have, perhaps too easily, labelled as depersonalization and derealization?

The standing still of memory throws me into a place of revelation – not merely a revelation *for me* (as in the statement: "for me evil is… whatever it may be: horror…or terror…or pain…"), but something more radical: a revelation *within me*, a revelation of a part of me, and more than that still – it is a revelation that takes place in the world, *through me*.

Because I – my whole being, my whole thinking – reveal, in the numbness that overtakes me at the return of memory, something of the mystery of evil. I do not interpret it – I embody it. It speaks through me.

Todorov expresses something similar, though in a different register: in evil, he writes, "we perceive magnified what we have not seen, though we have felt in ourselves: these acts are not entirely alien to us… We feel that these situations, which go beyond the human, reveal a secret side of human nature…" (Todorov 2002). This revelation in which the monster of evil stands, takes place in the world through my own experience, through my exposure. I am exposed to evil, and this exposure – this suffering – is, as Levinas reminds us, "a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; it is an ordeal more passive than experience. It is precisely an evil" (Levinas 1988).

This exposure-vulnerability has become the repository of my memory. It is, in a very specific sense, the fullness of my inner time – of my history in the world. And thus, the revelation of evil does not cease. It continues, again and again, to unfold along the line of this inner time, to repeat itself – painfully, insistently – in the act of recollection which is nothing more than the collection of such raw scraps: intangible pains, unnameable shivers or bright flashes of the dark – in the dark. The transformation of past being into a future horizon – one that refracts and reconstitutes the present as the space of experience, as a place of fear, hope and waiting – is part of the dialectic of repetition that Kierkegaard describes.

More than twenty years after I sat frozen in front of that television screen, unable to understand what I was seeing, I felt its force return in a powerful *après-coup*. I was lying in bed, scrolling mechanically through my phone, the news of war had just broken and I barely registered the headlines or images – just as, two decades earlier, I had stared at the TV, uncomprehending.

Two encounters – and two screens, separated by twenty years. And yet they form a single line – an arrow piercing through my personal history. Numb in bed, staring at the screen without seeing it, I found

myself once again in the field of war – under the sound of warplanes – and face to face with the horror of faceless human suffering.

Reflecting, experiencing, repeating the question *Where is the evil?* – today I think I can answer, but only *in* and *through* the memory that bursts forth within the inner time of my consciousness, through its revelation and its sharing. For I – exposed to evil – have become the very body of that disclosure. I am the one who gives it voice; I am the one affected. It now rolls off my tongue, rolls off my breath – here.

Here I remember. I hold my breath. And then I begin to speak. Or rather: I begin to listen to what my memory, rising from the well of time, is trying to tell me.

* * *

I begin to speak of the darkness – a darkness that seems to shrink and compress reality, enveloping and suffocating the objects in the house. Tables, chairs, low stools – everything is sunken, as if in a fog. I can't make out their contours, the place is frozen and everything lies still in the dark. Except for the TV screen, which glows and bathes the room in a bright, white light, harsh to the eyes.

I cannot see what's on the screen. It is as if I see it and do not see it: the screen glows opposite me, but at that moment, it shows nothing – only its blinding glare.

I don't remember my grandfather. I know, vaguely, that he's there, he must be there – in the same room with me. And yet, he isn't. I cannot recall what he looks like; his image has been erased from my memory. The shards of recollection point me only toward the empty space, where my grandfather should be. Should be beside me, but he is not – not there, not anywhere.

Somehow, I feel alone – but not afraid. What does it mean to be alone? To have no one around you, yes – but also, perhaps more crucially, to be alone *with* that which is around you: with the fact that there is no one around you. To have nothing in between – just you and what surrounds you: you and the dark, you and the glow of the television. It is not: you *without* someone else, but you *together with* something else: in the presence of the emptiness, in the heart of lack. That otherness – I see it, too, though I cannot quite see it; I am exposed to it.

Exposed to what? To that which, at a certain point, the television begins to beam at me. It directs something toward me, it calls to me — with no warning, no mediation. Not through my grandfather, not through anyone else. It is something just for me. I feel its overwhelmingness gradually envelop me; what the screen emits reaches me and demands a response, but I cannot answer. Why not? Because I cannot see it.

I see a black-and-white image, a broadcast without sound. A picture, yes – but not a face on it. What strikes me is not, at first, what is shown, not even the act of decapitation. What strikes me is that this image reaches me by surprise, without resistance, without encountering any symbolic barrier in the world. It overwhelms me with an anonymity that nothing can deflect.

Who is the man I see? Why is his head being cut off? I must have been seven years old at that time – an age at which one can understand that what one sees is "wrong", "terrible" or "frightening". And yet I do not understand what I see; something prevents me. For instance: I don't see the face; a hand swings and cuts off a head – yes, a head – but the face is missing from it. I see the man – short black hair, a tortured expression – but I can't see his face. What I see is the dis-appearance of the face, the standing of an emptiness left behind where a face should have been. Anonymity.

I feel alone – alone in my incomprehension, as if I have fallen into a deep hole from which no one can rescue me. I wonder: can I see the blood on the screen? Probably not, but perhaps I can feel its invisible presence in the room: I see a severed head lying to the side, and something black – suddenly revealed – marks a trace of it. Perhaps it is a blood line. Perhaps, if I wait a moment longer, I will even begin to smell its scent. But I feel that if I scream – there is no one to hear me; if I wave my arms – there is no one to see it. I am in a no-man's-land, in a land without humans, land without a name. And if I cry – my tears will call no one. And if I faint – no one will come to pick me up. My words, sighs, gestures – they emerge from me only to dissolve into the glaring darkness of the room. There is nothing here to meet them – no barrier, no wall or mirror. Nothing for them to touch, to stop against, to echo back from. So, there is no resonance and no return. Reality does not answer me. It does not reverberate my word.

Who should come to me? Maybe my grandfather – he's in the room, I'm sure of it. And yet, somehow, I cannot turn to him, something

prevents me from calling for help. All I can see is that he is not there. His authority, his power, his wisdom – I am without them, I am alone, together with their absence, and that absence is revealed to me by the glow of the television.

What else do I see before me? The truth is that I don't know, I don't know *yet* – maybe in the next moment I will be able to understand what is happening to me, but not now. Now, I just don't understand. I am imprisoned in a kind of "not yet" – a time I cannot leave, not because I am incapable of understanding (as I've said, I'm old enough), but because there seems to be nothing to understand. And it is precisely this – "there is nothing" – that overwhelms me. It seems as though my entire world has shrunk to this one phrase: *there is nothing* – there is no one at home – and it has swallowed the objects in the room, together with my grandfather. It is boundless indeed, it consumes everything.

Who is the man on the screen? Short black hair, the face of a martyr. But what is his name? He has no name, just as he has no face. His face, disappearing from my sight, has taken his name with it; it has taken the very name "man" or "human" with it. But that means something else too: the world in which something like "man" or "human" exists is gone as well – my grandfather is gone, my things are gone.

Now that I think about it, it should not have been so dark outside. It was April, and by seven or eight in the evening, when the broadcast aired, it should have been just before sunset. But memory serves me that moment like a deep night hour – the deep night of namelessness, of anonymity, of a world from which the human being has dis-appeared, reduced to the fact of no name. The absence of a name defies all understanding; to understand, one must know the word – the name. If my grandfather were beside me, perhaps I could have turned to him and asked naïvely: *What is that man's name?* But he is not there. Anonymity has taken hold of him. And it has taken hold of me. So, I miss the name too. And now, a question can no longer be avoided: *Who am I?*

My name has just been taken from me, without warning, suddenly and seemingly forever. What I witness is not merely the taking of a man's life, but something exceptional: the taking of a name, its cancellation. And I see how, through its broadcast on television this cancellation has been made total. On the screen the name ceases to exist – not only for me, but for everyone. And because there is no name, I cannot call out – not to my grandfather and not to anyone. I cannot

refer to anything, nor can I anchor myself in language. The broadcast does not simply deliver the image of an event – it anonymizes me. I, too, am caught within the broadcasted totality, which encompasses me, and which I cannot encompass.

I hold my breath.

I do not see the beheading. What I see is that it is happening in my grandparents' home – somehow, at the heart of my childhood world – and that I am alone to face it. I see myself, I see a man without a head. And there is no one else with us. There is no third, no witness and no distance. No barrier between me and the nameless one. Nothing to mediate what I see, nothing to shield me from what I am exposed to. Here reality stands still – massive, inert, silent, heavy.

And in this moment, I feel again my absolute defencelessness: I do not know who has done this to me. It comes from nowhere, totally and without warning. Suddenly the night and the room and even the world dissolve in front of my eyes. And then, for another moment – a moment that perhaps lasts forever (as it said, trivially), being outside of time, beyond "before" and "after" – I can see it; I can be caught in something. And here something enters me, through my eyes. And there is no one to stop it. It grows. It spreads – through the room, with the glow of the television, it expands through the house, and even beyond the house. There are no barriers before it. Which also means – what a surprise! – That *everything is possible here*. Even the unthinkable is possible: that the anonymous, anonymizing event might enter the home – through the television screen – on a quiet April evening – and turn those who watch it into its accomplices in anonymity.

As I write this now, I am aware that my reflections are not particularly original. People often express outrage when horrific images are circulated in media, not necessarily because of the cruelty they witness, but because someone has violated their comfort. Horror has long been known to generate initial shock, to spark fascination and even the negative pleasure of the sublime. And also to invite consumption of images, of spectacle, until finally (and predictably) it leads to desensitization. Until there is nothing left to feel. But for me – then, and now, in this act of remembering, reflecting and repeating – things do not work that way.

What I see in my memory is not simply cruelty. It is the erasure of the basic barriers, obstacles and protections that make a world possible. Obstacles such as the face, or the name, or my grandfather standing

between them. These are not just people, words or relations: they are boundary positions – forms that structure reality, limit it, contain it, and give it shape. They are the conditions under which reality can become a world, filled with possibilities – or a world ordered by desire, which is always symbolically mediated And, what I see, above all, is the annihilation of those limits, leaving behind itself only limitlessness, which stands still as the only *real thing*. Here everything is possible and at the same time nothing is possible anymore.

I feel the ground shaking, just like when a plane flies over it, but without actually moving. Reality neither speaks nor responds to anything I might say: there are so many things I can see, glimpse or look at – and yet nothing I can listen to, nothing I can hear, nothing that might take my words and reflect them back to me. I feel that every possible word, be it spoken or unspoken, sinks into the void, like a stone dropped into a very, very deep well, without leaving even the faintest trace of sound. Finding myself within this totality of the real, I gradually lose the direction in which to look – until I realize that there is, in fact, nothing around me at all to look at. My world has been brought to a zero point of a space that no name – neither the name "I" nor the name "you" – can designate. This is what I see; this is what I saw, *yo lo vi*. And this is what repeats itself, again and again, through the memory that seized me that early morning in February 2022.

It turns out that finally I do understand the meaning of what I saw – but it dis-appears into something invisible, that stands before me, into something impossible to see. And this understanding occurs only "now", within a total "now" – for the encounter with evil is always such a total "now", a "now" that is the trace of something outside of time.

It turns out: this was my first encounter with evil.

Where is evil?

Travelling through the Kyiv region in April and May of 2022, just a few months after the war began, the Ukrainian photojournalist Serhii Korovayny captured with his camera a series of identical scenes: simple, monochrome garage doors and the fences of rural homes, all marked with the same inscriptions, scrawled in large white letters: "*Люди и дети*" (humans and children), "*Дети живут*" (children live),

"*Тут люди*" (humans here), "*Здесь люди живут*" (here humans live), "*Живут*" (they live). Korovayny recalls:

> "I saw these inscriptions on fences in almost every village the Russians occupied... As if those innocent people had to prove that they are humans, that they have the right to live and not to be killed, raped, abused. These words are begging the Russian occupiers to skip these houses, to find a base somewhere else. It didn't work most of the time." (Korovayny 2023, 124–125).

I would like to connect now what the photographer's camera captured with the memory I have recounted. It seems to me that something in both of these moments – both the inscriptions on the fences and the scene in my grandparents' home – speaks from the same place. And that common place, I believe, is the place of evil. It is evil's "where."

I will call this common place *the erasure of the human* – or, more precisely, the erasure of the possibility of the human. It is a kind of effacement that, in the experience of evil, presents itself as necessary as well as irresistible – *unüberholbar*, in Heidegger's sense. More broadly, it might be described as the installation of a necessity of the impossibility of the human – a force that ruptures the mutual belonging between the human being and the world, and in doing so, strips the world of its worldliness. To put it simply: evil arrives here with a new maxim – by necessity, the human is no longer possible in the world. The human, in the reality of evil, has become no longer possible. There is no longer place for it. It has been displaced from the world. And in its place, something else has entered: pure power has come, or the enjoyment – the enjoyment of power. But the boundary to that enjoyment – the human, the person, the named one – has been uprooted. And in that uprooting, reality itself has been radically transformed. It loses its original determination as a world. For by removing the human from the world, evil, in fact, removes the world from reality.

What do the photographer's stills of all those quiet village houses – many of them filled with the corpses of murdered civilians – actually tell us? Who writes on the fence of their home that humans and children live there? Who, if not humans, could possibly live in – or inhabit – this world and its places of intimacy, that we call homes,

Figure 1: Serhii Korovayny's© photograph "Humans and Children" (2022) published in: *Ukraine: A War Crime*, edited by Svetlana Bachevanova. © FotoEvidence 2023, 124–125.

enclosed by fences meant to protect? So why the human must be named explicitly? Why the obvious must be begged for?

In fact, all these inscriptions testify – paradoxically – to a fundamental absence: the absence of the human that has struck at the very core of the obviousness in which people ordinarily live their everyday lives, and from which they draw the meaning of their being in what they call their world – that tacit horizon that frames every project, every act of understanding, every possibility of being (and of being human as well). This w orld is the invisible, taken-for-granted background that renders meaningful even the most trivial human gestures of speech, action or doing. To say "people live here" or "children live here" is to insist, ontologically, on the human as the very limit, as the final barrier that must not, ought not, be crossed. The human – here figured in the image of the one who simply lives – is what interrupts power, what says "no further", what institutes a boundary. The world of the human – the culture and intimacy of human affairs – exists under the condition of such an *ought not*, of such a call, which – as Levinas says – finds its origin in the face of the other. For it is the human – the very being-human of the human being – that appears as the limit of the world, just as the world, as a whole, appears as the limit of the human. The world in which one lives, loves, and dies; the world in which one knows truth, experiences fear and pain – this world demands the presence of the human limit. And yet, Korovayny says, "they must prove that they are

human…". In the act of writing "humans... children... live," something already stands in front, and it is something monstrous: that what is most self-evident has already been erased from the structure of the world; that something essential has been forgotten, that something is radically absent. And thus, the world ceases to be a world – it becomes a brute reality. The words "humans... children... live" have lost their meaning – or perhaps they never had a meaning? Perhaps they are only vestiges of namelessness. So Korovayny adds, simply: "It didn't work most of the time."

In the reality that has established itself here, words no longer mean anything. They remain only as traces – raw scraps of a powerlessness that meets violence, and something else besides: a kind of indescribable pleasure, one that appears to serve an infinite Law, or a law of the Infinite. Yet this is a Law that – far from ordering reality, far from stipulating what is permitted and what is forbidden within it – operates instead by producing non-possibilities or impossibilities. It does not impose limits; it removes them. It erases boundaries, barriers, structures. Among the impossibilities it produces is the impossibility of language itself: words no longer function, they simply don't play. They no longer refer to anything, do not hold or carry meaning. This is not merely an empirical observation. On the contrary, the very act of writing "humans... children... live" already reveals that the erasure we are speaking of – the one that brings about the impossibility of words to the world – was already present, had already undermined the self-evidence of the worldliness of the world, and the place of the human being within it. What we see, then, is the brute fact of reality – an unworlded world, stripped of its horizon. A reality in which the obviousness of the human – of the name, of the person – has been effaced. It is a world no longer possible.

What is weeded out here is precisely the possibility of the human as the limit of desire – as the last obstacle or the point beyond which desire cannot go. To cross this limit is to enter another order: the dispositif of a throwing into the impossible, into the Real – that is, into a reality stripped of worldliness. This is a reality from which the very possibility of the human has been erased: the measure of the human, the openness of the human, the ontological breakthrough through which the human reorganizes reality and gives it the appearance of a world. All of this has dis-appeared – has been forcibly uprooted. And what remains, standing still before us – is a pure world without us, a

world for no one. But a world for no one is not possible, for every world is, by its structure, for someone – or, more precisely, for an "us", which inevitably means: for a set of differences, for a diversity of forms of life, for others. It is precisely this impossibility of the world – a world in which the totality of human differences and forms of life has been weeded out – that opens up the enjoyment of evil.

But does not the memory – which returned to me as a traumatic repetition – lead me back to that same absence of self-evidence? In both cases, something drops out: there is a dis-appearance, a weeding out, a collapse of what once held the world together. Everything has been made possible – and it is precisely this radical availability that signals a deeper impossibility. The eye-teasing glow of the television conveys this impossibility to me and betrays me to it. I am reminded of the words by David Rousset that Hannah Arendt chose as the epigraph to the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "Normal men do not know that everything is possible." These words can also be read another way: once everything has become possible, it means that something else is no longer possible. This is the very limit of possibility – the human as possibility. But the human possibility of the world always presupposes the position of an other, through whom desire is transmitted to the subject, so the life of the subject can take its shape.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also writes: "Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous" (Arendt 1973, 457). In an earlier and often-quoted letter to Karl Jaspers, she links this idea to Kant's notion of radical evil: "What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings, superfluous" (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 165). For Kant, so-called "radical" evil refers to a propensity to evil that is originally present in the nature of the human being – at the core of its ontological determination. It is located at its root (hence: it is radical). This evil does not merely corrupt one or another moral maxim; it attacks the very foundation of all moral maxims, destroying man's moral nature from within (Kant 2009, 41). Radical evil, as Kant names it – a "perversity of the human heart" – can abolish the very possibility of morality as such. But insofar as morality is what subjectivates being as human being, as determined not only by nature but also by freedom, then radical evil also appears to destroy the possibility of the

human form itself. For Kant, such an evil is unthinkable, mysterious, and yet irresistible. It is innate – and as such, universal. This means that its presence in the human being is grounded *a priori* and reveals what Kant calls "the subjective determining ground of the power of choice that precedes every deed, and is itself not yet a deed" (Kant 2009, 31). Put differently: the possibility of this evil belongs to the very order that precedes the human being – and within which the human being appears in reality as the bearer of a possibility for the opening of a world.

Laplace is credited with the remark that one does not need God to explain the structure of the universe. Evil seems to make a similar claim with respect to the human: the world no longer needs human being. Reality can exist – it must exist – without the human, which has been displaced from the world. And with that displacement, the world itself has become de-centered. The mutual belonging of human being and world is effaced by evil, which continuously confronts us with the necessity of a reality of non-possibilities and impossibilities in which the human – and the very possibility of the human – has already become impossible. In the words "humans… children… live", scrawled across fences in Ukraine, we see the incapacity of the human to function as a limit, as an obstacle. Therefore, the inscriptions are not protective declarations; they are references to a void.

In this sense, evil becomes the very ground of a total – and totalitarian – non-referentiality, in which any reference to the human, any limitation for the sake of the human, any commensurability with the human being as a singular presence, as the ontological centre of the openness of reality in its form of world, has been abolished, eradicated. When Todorov speaks of totalitarian regimes as removing from the human "one of its varieties" (or as "denying the individual as a value"), he is not far from this idea: to deprive a human being of even one of her possibilities for being human is, in effect, to eliminate the human altogether. For the essence of the human is irreducible to any givenness or objectivity, always presenting itself instead as existence and transcendence, as appeal and face, as a difference that calls forth another difference.

I wonder whether this is not precisely what my memory of encountering evil contains – whether this is not its defining trait. In the home to which I keep returning, I witness the dis-appearance of the face, the effacement of the name – and in their place, only

a void stands still: a space where nothing can be named, where language itself has been displaced, collapsing from its receptivity – its openness to meaning – into vulnerability, its capacity to house only the unnameable. This is the emptiness that comes when the human name is no longer needed in the world – when the world, as the world of the human, is stripped of its very name.

This residual emptiness seeps into my mind through the eye-teasing glow of the television, through the howl of the warplanes, through the sensation of numbness and startled uncertainty, through the strange and terrible calm of home. It is, in truth, a foreign body lodged deep in my psyche. I now realize I have been carrying it for more than twenty years. Yet it begins to act only "now", *après coup*. It cannot be integrated into a meaningful whole by consciousness; it cannot be formulated as meaning, as narrative. It stands still within me only as a cut, a pale white trace – a mark that, as Levinas writes, signifies without making appear, reveals nothing and does not point to anything. The trace "signifies outside of all intention of making a sign… the trace disturbs the world's order" (Levinas 2006, 41). It is the trace of something forever absent, or more precisely, the trace of an absence which, by intruding into time, has taken on the status of an eternity.

And yet the place of this trace is within me, its cut lies on my body. The absolute past to which it belongs – the eternity it never ceases to evoke – is a past from which my experience cannot release itself. It is a tangible mark, not only inscribed in memory, but felt in the flesh: in the nervous stillness of my limbs, in the rhythm of my breath: it is not a memory I have, but something I carry – a lived echo, woven into the fabric of my physical being, which resist every form of representation. W. R. Bion calls such raw, unprocessed scraps of experience that cannot be symbolized or integrated into consciousness *beta elements*. These are the elements that the infant, in the earliest stages of life, cannot think about – though they affect the baby profoundly at the level of sensory experience and biological need. To learn to think and metabolize them, the infant requires the presence of the mother, who functions as a container for these chaotic experiences, transforming them into something intelligible, into something thinkable – and returning them to the baby through her care, holding, and handling. This is what Bion calls the *alpha function*, the fundamental mechanism of human thought.

And yet, though my memories are now arranged in a kind of narrative, they continually bring me back to something that is utterly without support in this narrative: a *trace* that leads nowhere, pointing to nothing, an abyss of reality in which there is no place for a person, no place for the other. Though these memories are framed in concepts, images and ideas, they ultimately testify only to the possibility of experiencing the impossible: the disorientation and de-personalization of a body numbed between the sheets; the precarious flow of invading images and the absence of words to capture them, of names to fix them or footholds in language to secure them. The interweaving of several memories into a single sense of rupture and fragmentation, alongside the gaping holes in memory – the hole where my grandfather should be; the hole of that uncanny calm in the deserted home; the hole of darkness (though, in truth, it was likely not so dark) – all of these are shards, which, at least partially, resemble Bion's *beta elements*. And as such, they stand here for the impossible phenomenology of evil. Put differently, they are what evil has left – as a trace – in me.

But does that trace tell us anything more about its place?

"There's no one at home."

This is the phrase that repeatedly comes to mind when I think about what happened to me more than twenty years ago. Evil, it seems to me now, consists – strangely, subtly, and at the same time horrifyingly – in precisely this: an overwhelming simplicity in my story. It stands as a trace through which something like this phrase can be deciphered. It has presence rather than meaning. The phrase repeats compulsively, performing the work of the death drive. A kind of symbolization takes place, yet one that can never fully stabilize into connotation. It produces only anxiety and numbness in the body. The phrase is therefore – like so many traumatic signifiers – a hollow cipher: one is immersed in it, rather than able to pronounce it. Or if it can be pronounced at all, it merely points to a void – a void formed in experience and illuminated by the strangest possible beam: the sensation of fullness at the heart of emptiness. It says, of course, something about absence – not just the absence within me (a gap in my memory), but the absence on which my entire experience of the event – along with the possible words that could describe it – is built.

It is this repetition compulsion that brings me close to what Lacan calls the Real – the domain of the impossible *jouissance*, which, like Bion's *beta elements*, resists symbolization. And yet it constitutes an entire order: one into which the human being appears as a breakthrough, made possible by the desire of the Other, which is always already mediated through language, and therefore already caught in symbolization. It is a desire that operates on the threshold of language, at the border where subject and other, subject and world, are bound together through the Other's speech – a speech that gives shape to reality by creating a field of shared signification, of mutual belonging and of a common sense. This bond between subject and world, mediated by the Other's desire, is sustained through certain structural elements: prohibitions, obstacles, and mediating boundaries. Desire – as a symbolic relation – cannot function without them.

When I spoke of their effacement – of the effacement of the human as it appears in my memory – I meant precisely this: not only are there no longer any obstacles between me and the broadcasting screen; there are also no longer any boundaries between the screen and the world, and between the screen and myself. All that once mediated and thus sustained desire has been erased. That is why my words – spoken or unspoken, actual or possible – cannot leave me, cannot reach what is seen, cannot meet any resistance – or limitation – in the space of the room. There is nothing for them to strike against, no position of the Other to receive them, reflect them, or return them to me retroactively charged with meaning. There is no one at home, so no one can hear me. Just the room, empty except for the glowing television, that absorbs all speech like an absolute black body.

The phrase "There is no one at home" seems to belong to this black body and somehow hovers in its orbit. Such an absolute black body is, for Lacan, the Real: a deed prior to any possible symbolic deed, a duty that exceeds all possible duties, much like what Kant described as the innate character of radical evil – something present in the world both *through* the human being and *with* the human being, yet structurally preceding human subjectivity. In my memory, the Real does not appear, it does not reveal itself. It simply stands still, lodged in the frozen hiatus between one appearance (me) and another (the screen), in the space opened between them.

It is this order of the Real that returns us to the classical question of the origin of evil: *unde malum?* Is evil produced at the structural

and transindividual level, or does it arise within the individual, as an intrapsychic phenomenon? Is the place of evil located in the human soul, or in the very structure of signification within which that soul is formed?

Be that as it may, for me, evil seems to stand rather *between* these two – in the envelope, which is the very *place of the human*. But what does this intermediary "place of the human" mean? It refers to the space in which the human takes shape – the *Heimat*, the homeland or home of the human being. Every person is born into, raised within, and belongs to this field of desire, this *Heimat*, that overlays the plane of the Real. Evil thus stands in relation to a kind of primordial *disposition-in* or *disposition-toward* – a fundamental orientation that defines the human subject and through which a world of possibilities is revealed is disclosed in the realm of everyday life, with all of its symbolic knowledge.

This is the space – and fundamental possibility – of all kinds of enveloping, of folding and unfolding. It takes in the womb, the bed, the room, the family system, the school class, the workplace, the community, the nation. All such human envelopes constitute the *Heimat* of the human, within which the breakthrough of the subject occurs and is shaped as a history, in the lines of which symbolic desire – as the true bearer of possibility – is permanently contested by the unsymbolizable abyss of the Real, which is the field of impossibility, non-possibility, and necessity. The symbolic appears, evolves and takes shape; the Real stands still, insists, and repeats. And when the layers upon which the human and their *Heimat* are structured – the imaginary (what I saw) and the symbolic (the logic of what I saw) – are displaced, a slit opens between them. That slit is the Real.

This is the evil of pure desolation, which the phrase "There is no one at home" can only barely signify – an experience of distortion in which language is stripped of all support and yields to the intrusion of impossible *jouissance*. Desire is left without limit, unmoored; no prohibition remains to regulate it – there is only the brute fact of reality, pure chaos – the mud made of blood and earth – enveloping the faceless and the nameless. My grandfather is gone. The Law is nullified, and the world – as in psychosis – is overrun by unimaginable scraps: intangible glare, alien sensations, drifting through the air, bringing dizziness and disorientation. I feel the suffocating breath of its presence pulling me beyond myself, into a strange suspension: a

fullness that hovers, still and weightless, in the dark. The television continues to emit its rays, calmly casting the home into a dreamlike paralysis that passes entirely unnoticed.

The Law of the Real is a pure Law of sovereignty – that is, a Law beyond all laws, one that surpasses and abrogates all orders of symbolization. Eichmann's pure "inability to think" (Arendt) – his incapacity to think from the position of the other, that is to remain within the field of the Symbolic – is bound to his zealous devotion to the Kantian moral imperative: an excess of duty that mirrors, as Lacan suggests in *Kant with Sade* (Lacan 2006), the excess of sadistic *jouissance*. It is the law of *jouissance*: it annihilates all boundaries, negates every obstacle, even the final one – the limit of the human itself, symbolically sustained by signifiers like "humans... children... live."

It is no coincidence that evil is never without some admixture of *jouissance*, even when meticulously veiled – as in Eichmann's cold satisfaction at having completed his workday schedule. This enjoyment is the delight of liminal necessity, uniting all that is possible with its opposite: the necessity of impossibility, of non-possibility elevated to the status of an unmediated Law. This Law is defined only by the strict formalism of systematizing and magnifying of what Levinas calls "useless suffering": the radical vulnerability that gestures toward the end of all ends. Here lies the final *mischief* of evil: a *mischief* (from the French "*chever*" – to end) that seeks to uproot the *worldliness* of the world, bringing to an end the very possibilities that once constituted it. Indeed, one is often is one struck by how evil, in its pure and simple form, stands in front as something utterly unnecessary, something disproportionate, gratuitous – a surplus of extravagance, of *jouissance*: going beyond what is necessary, beyond what is expedient, beyond that rational measure that relates means to ends.

Evil, then, is not a cosmic horror or demonic force. It operates within what is most enclosed – often in the realm of intimacy. The mischiefs of evil take root deep within the human *Heimat* – and that is why every evil has its own home.

This is the evil that renders human beings – and with them, all human difference, all kinds of human obstacles – superfluous. It can emerge in the smallest acts or omissions; it does not require monstrous scale. Devoid of prejudice, indifferent to measure, evil has no regard for quantity, so long as it preserves its unique status as a quality that

disqualifies all qualities. Thus, a single act of cruelty is enough to evoke a world in which the very possibility of the human has become void.

Returning to my memory, I am struck by how peaceful, how quiet, almost dreamlike my grandparents' house appears. Outwardly, nothing suggested that a rupture was imminent. Perhaps this is simply my mind's defence against the horror of decapitation – a form of affect isolation, or conversion of fear into calm. But even if so, this would explain only my response, not the structure of the event itself. And here, before my mind's eye, stands the empty house, suffused with calm, as though sleep were slowly descending over its eyes – just as it was over mine in that February morning, when the memory returned.

When Todorov, in *Facing the Extreme*, insists on the need to think evil within the context of everyday human practices, he observes that evil does not originate in anything supernatural, but rather in the ordinary – in the vices that populate the life of the humans and ground the truth of the human condition. This truth, often summed up in the well-known dictum "nothing human is indifferent to me," can, though meant to affirm solidarity, also be twisted to justify every form of mischief. I'm speaking here of vices such as cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, treachery, misanthropy and the like – not the grand crimes of evil masterminds, but the everyday moral failings that Judith Shklar identifies as corrosive to political and social life (Shklar 1984).

Evil can thus be seen as the work not only of ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations – those who, as Todorov recalls Germaine Tillion's observation, can become executioners without even noticing what was happening to them (Todorov 1996, 131) – but also of ordinary people placed in quite ordinary situations. Yet the very notion of the "ordinary" must always be understood in relation to a particular social and symbolic context. What is considered ordinary in one historical moment may appear exceptional in another, and vice versa. The category is never neutral. Indeed, it provides the very breeding ground in which one of the most persistent gestures of evil takes root: the presentation of itself as "normal" (which doubles the psychological desensitization to images of horror and pain, as Susan Sontag observes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*), through which it erases difference – the possibility of distinguishing between ordinary and extraordinary, proper and improper, right and wrong. In this way, evil secures the conditions for its own self-normalization, relying precisely on the routines of ordinary everyday life to conceal itself.

Here evil stands precisely between the ordinary and the extraordinary: it is their shared envelope, effacing all symbolic obstacles and thus opening the endless – mischievous – possibility of the lack of any further possibility. In doing so it undermines the *Heimat* of the human through its *total-ization* and *real-ization* by the invasion of the Real.

"There is no one at home" does not name the symbolization of reality into a world of desire, but rather the realization of the symbol itself – its collapse, its destruction as a reference – within a reality of the nameless, all-consuming foray that nullifies all relation to the world.

Radical evil, as Kant intuited, resides in the very form in which human being is constituted ontologically: in the very possibility of the human, as it unfolds within its *Heimat*. Evil, in this sense, is both the beginning and the end of the human: the final point at which the human exceeds itself, and in doing so, encounters its own lack of any further possibility ahead. This undoing of the primordial bond between human existence and the world is not something foreign to the human form; it is deeply rooted in it, providing both its drive and its law. It shares the very mode by which being becomes human: the mode of transcendence. The place of evil is thus precisely within the *Heimat*, within the human envelope, where humanity lives out its multiplicity of possibilities by constantly transcending them toward the inhuman – in culture, practice, and daily life, in ordinary vices and virtues alike.

Thus, all evil originates in the realm of the everyday: in the time and space where the human being is at once established and exceeded through the rationalities of a desire, which keep the drive of the Real pulsing behind them. The place of evil is rooted in the openness and indeterminacy of everyday life – of the discreet ruptures of the rules, in tiny treacheries, in cruelties that at first sight pass unnoticed, but prove unstoppable. These are the seeds of corruption that populate what Todorov calls "the unfinished garden of the human".

This is why the phrase "There is no one at home" remains closely tied to the structure of everyday human life. It cannot be separated from the deep, primal fears – of abandonment, of loneliness, treachery – that have haunted human beings since childhood. The phrase speaks: no one is waiting for me. No one wants me. No one hopes for me. I am nowhere, and nothing is going to happen here. I am caught in a point of absolute indeterminacy, beyond good and evil. In fact, it says

something still more unsettling: there is no longer such a "me" as a point of reference.

The phrase also says: there is no one here to protect me, no one to shelter me, no one to forbid – to forbid the television from broadcasting, to forbid the head from being cut off, to forbid the invasion of the Real. "Home" has become first boundless, then empty – a ghostly envelope, a womb filled with some unknown, heavy matter. I can smell its desolation in the intangible stream of the empty room, which carries me the possibility of a world rendered no longer possible. The phrase gathers together – in the negative – the entire structure of human form: its ontological grounding, its belonging in a home and its ultimate displacement into a nowhere, in the moment when emptiness itself has become home.

What is most striking, however, is the ease with which all this happens – how simple, automatic, and ordinary the transition from radical to banal evil can be. It shows that the "banal evil" which brought Arendt so much misunderstanding, consists precisely in the fact that the erasure of the human and the destruction of the worldliness of the world can proceed entirely unnoticed. Evil becomes virtually invisible: its absoluteness expresses itself, paradoxically, through the absolute relativization of its manifestations. In this light, the "banality" of evil is no longer reducible to the claim that mindless, unthinking individuals – mediocre bureaucrats like Eichmann – may become perpetrators of monstrous crimes. Rather, it lies in the fact that such crimes – massacres like those in Srebrenica, Bucha, or Gaza – can be minimized, compared, relativized, and almost instantly absorbed with such ease through electronic devices of all kind. Increasingly, what defines contemporary evil is not the horror or paralysis once provoked by the atrocities of the twentieth century, but the casual shrug of response: "What about...?" or "So what?"

If radical evil is the unspeakable and unnameable, then banal evil is technologically reproducible, affectively flattened, made relatable, even shareable – until it becomes unnoticed. It is no longer met with the question, "How is this possible?" but with a shrug. In both its self-normalization and its relativization, evil relies on the same logic of invisibility: it endures not by being hidden, but by becoming unnoticed. This is the unhindered evil of our times – evil undisturbed by symbolic resistance of any kind. It no longer encounters obstacles, barriers, or laws. And this evil – fully transparent, as Baudrillard would say, yet

no less ferocious – transmits not horror, but *jouissance*: the insensible thrill of the end of all ends. The two faces of contemporary evil: first enjoyment, then oblivion.

The ferocity of media discourse, saturated with graphic images of suffering and death, absorbed without protest by desensitized social media viewers, attests to this loosening of all constraints: the totalization of experience, the destruction of difference, the effacement of possibilities – accompanied by the proliferation of enjoyment. Arendt seems to have anticipated this when, in a letter to Scholem, she observed that evil "can lay to waste the entire world, like a fungus growing rampant on the surface" (Arendt and Scholem 2017, 209).

The house, therefore, has remained empty. Perhaps it has always been empty. And no one noticed until it was too late. In other words, the world – as world – may come to an end, without anyone realizing that it has ended. But as the poet Czesław Miłosz famously wrote: "There will be no other end of the world."

Crossing the Bloodline

In *Being and Time*, the idea of the loss of worldliness – of the world collapsing into brute, de-worlded reality, stripped of possibilities and filled with impossible *jouissance* – is absent. Yet the word "evil" does appear occasionally in the text, most often in connection with its "ontological clarification," or with its relation to fear, death, and guilt. Heidegger repeatedly returns – always to in order to dismiss – to the conventional notion of fear as the expectation of some oncoming evil (*malum futurum*) (Heidegger 1962, 391).

But can we find a more accurate definition of this *malum futurum*? What could it mean to speak of an evil yet to come? Six years after the publication of *Being and Time*, in April 1933 Heidegger was appointed Rector of the University of Freiburg. Earlier that same year, in January, Hitler was named Chancellor of the Weimar Republic. A month later, following the Reichstag fire, President Hindenburg signed under pressure the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State, initiating the formal dismantling of civil rights in Germany. In March, the first concentration camp, Dachau, opened its gates. From March 1933 until February 1934, Heidegger would remain a member of the Nazi Party.

In May, upon taking office as rector, he delivered his address, *The Self-Assertion of the German University*. Written in the style of his philosophical works of the period, the speech transposes ontological language into a political register. Heidegger declares: "The beginning has invaded our future. There it stands as the distant command to us to catch up with its greatness." The development of the university – and of science more broadly – is, he insists, bound to this command of the beginning, oriented toward the realization of a new spiritual world. Then continues: "If we will the essence of science understood as the questioning, uncovered standing one's ground in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of what is, then this will to essence will create for our people its world of innermost and most extreme danger... For spirit is not empty cleverness... spirit is the primordially attuned, knowing resoluteness toward the essence of Being. And the spiritual world of a people is... the power that most deeply preserves the people's earth- and blood-bound strengths as the power that most deeply arouses and most profoundly shakes the people's existence" (Heidegger 1990, 9). Here the ontological structures of Being, so carefully elaborated in *Being and Time*, give way to the "earth- and blood-bound strengths" as the true ontological basis of the "spiritual world" of the future, a world to be accomplished in the state of "innermost and most extreme danger." It is blood and earth – *Blut und Boden* – and not Being, that carry the power to assert and to project the future, to bind "the beginning" to that formless Real capable of absorbing every symbol, every name and face..

Why are people so unsettled at the sight of blood? Why do some faint when they see it escaping the body, even from the smallest cut? Is it not because blood discloses a terrible secret – the inside of the human – that which should remain forever sealed, invisible, untouchable, and which now breaks forth into appearance, flowing out? Blood, in this sense, is not simply a substance, but the phenomenal eruption of the hidden, of what must never appear. It is the exposure of the human interior as an excess, as *jouissance*. Through blood, the secret of the human being pours out, threatening to obliterate everything human in them. Blood does not become water, the proverb says – and indeed, one of the most enduring traces at any crime scene is blood. It is the absolute mark of the Real within the human world: the point at which the human is insistently drowned in its own substance and thus de-realized. This is why evil clings to blood in all its dimensions: its flow,

its viscosity, its warmth, its odor. Blood, as the final trace of the Real, is what evil seeks desperately.

And yet – what is it in blood that fascinates, that holds the gaze, that compels attention even in horror? Perhaps it is that in approaching blood, in crossing the bloodline, one confronts the threshold of all possibility. One feels the vertigo of standing at the edge of the thinkable – at the very limit of the human – where all interiority collapses into pure exposure. Blood opens the sensation of encountering and possessing the totality – the impossibility – of possibility itself, rendered superfluous.

In that same year, 1934, Emmanuel Levinas published his *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, in which he identified the essential possibility of what he called an "elemental Evil" – the very form of evil embodied by Nazism. Nazism, Levinas writes, is a primitive philosophy, in which the biological, with all its implications of inevitability, "becomes more than an object of spiritual life. It becomes its heart." This heart, he continues, is animated by "the mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals it makes to heredity and to the past…" (Levinas 1990, 69).

Two traces of blood thus emerge – in Heidegger and in Levinas. Blood as the true beginning of the spiritual world, the grounding force of belonging and rootedness, and blood as the expression of the end, brought to the spirit by an elemental and primitive evil.

And there are two fates as well. Heidegger would soon withdraw from public life, spending the war years writing in seclusion. Among his notes – later collected in the so called *Black Notebooks*, we find this one: "The question of the role of world-Judaism is not a racial question, but a metaphysical one, a question that concerns the kind of human existence which in an utterly unrestrained way can undertake as a world historical 'task' the uprooting of all beings from Being" (Heidegger 2017, 191). A chilling passage. Here Heidegger projects onto the Jews precisely what the Nazi regime would bring into being: a world reduced to brute reality, animated by the *jouissance* of blood.

Levinas' fate is also well known. He survived the war in a prisoner-of-war camp – a circumstance that saved him from deportation to the death camps. His wife and daughter were hidden in a monastery with the help of Maurice Blanchot. His mother-in-law was deported, his father and brothers, all remained in Lithuania, were murdered by the

SS. Levinas will write on the tragedy of Holocaust in number of his works. In *Proper Names*, he reflects:

> "Over a quarter of a century ago, our lives were interrupted, and doubtless history itself. There was no longer any measure to contain monstrosities. When one has that tumour in the memory; twenty years can do nothing to change it" (Levinas 1996, 120).

For more than twenty years, I too lived with the memory of what I saw on the television. And it was only after those twenty years that I came to recognize – *in* and *through* the memory – my own encounter with evil. I have spoken at length of that encounter in these pages, and I have tried to shape a space – however unwieldy – for reflecting on something of the mystery of evil. To that end, I have turned to philosophical categories, to conceptual tools – some drawn from Heidegger, others from Levinas.

But in the end – why did I do it? Was I unaware of what I was doing? Was I really so blind to the contradiction – even the cynicism – of using Heidegger's concepts of "possibility", "openness" and "worldliness" to think about evil? Could I really speak of the face, the name, the trace, the appeal – terms central to Levinas' philosophy – in the same breath?

What was I really thinking, as I thought about evil? Perhaps I was thinking only of abstractions – of theories and concepts – and not of names, not of faces or fates. Not even, it seems, of my own memories, despite my insistence on them. Within these memories – and all the analysis that followed – I continue not to see the blood in the room.

In my own facing the extreme, I seem to have followed the same line of fragmentation and depersonalization, that Todorov identifies as lying at the origin of evil in *Facing the Exreme*. And worse still: I do not even see the trace of this blood on my though.

But now I know: I have already crossed the bloodline.

Without ever noticing, without knowing how – evil has made me cross it, almost silently, and with such conceptual ardor. This was the last obstacle – the last barrier to fall.

Isn't this what I called "the fullness of emptiness" – the foray of *jouissance*? That which arrived with "the strangest possible beam": the thrill of an ultimate gesture, that exceeds all limitations, moral grounds and principles… in the name of what? In the name of the nameless – the penetration, almost physical and erotic, into the fresh, sound body of evil, into its act of passionate consummation. Penetrated

by the radical deed, that precedes all deeds, thought itself now dares to penetrate the mystery of evil.

For the last time, I hold my breath.

Epilogue: For a Humanism of the Future

As I was finishing this text, I came across a recent interview with Bill Gates, summarized under the headline: "Within 10 years, AI will replace many doctors and teachers – humans won't be needed 'for most things'." The human is no longer the measure of the world, no longer its limit, no longer a symbolic barrier. In the face of rising techno-fascism, of block chain infrastructures, of AI and large language models that – at least according to one of the architects of our digital age – may render humans unnecessary "for most things," the question of evil returns in an unfamiliar, spectral form.

What can we do in the face of this new, unexpected, and still-emerging evil? Tzvetan Todorov places his hope in memory: memory, he tells us, is the most powerful weapon against evil. But how we are to remember today, when memory itself has been digitized, integrated into an entire system of technological apparatuses, governed by algorithms and stored on USB drives and remote servers?

Having conquered the heavens, plumbed the oceans, mastered matter and code, human being – that wondrous, beautifully terrible creature whom the ancient poet called *pantoporos* and *aporos*, *hypsipolis* and *apolis* – now stands, at the height of its glory, as small as it has ever been. Smaller still: increasingly unnecessary and superfluous – at least, "for most things."

And yet, I believe Todorov is right. Humanism – whether grounded in memory or in something else – remains our only weapon against evil, even now, even in an age when the human itself is quietly giving way to the posthuman.

If any humanism is still possible, I believe that it must draw not only of memory, but also on desire – desire not surrendered to *jouissance*. Desire that is not betrayed to impossibility or non-possibility, but rather held as the ultimate possibility *of* the human and *for* the human, *of* the world and *for* the world.

But does this not return us, tacitly and insistently, to the classical foundations of morality, where what we desire – what we aim

toward – is always the good? Not the sublime Good in which all ends are resolved, nor the rigid duty of the Kantian-Sadean fantasy, but the simple, everyday good: the good that helps, that forgives, that loves and hopes; the good that goes to work and does not tire. The good that is present in the smallest acts. The good that always says: "There is someone at home." The good that is the most humble, and therefore the most powerful instrument of desire: to be here – for the other. To be – for the sake of the other. To be – at the very boundary where the other appeals to you.

I believe this daily good is the ground of every human desire as the desire for the Other. In this simple good, even the fiercest evil will ultimately break. Its ghostly totality will fracture under the weight of a single human heart – under the presence of a single honest word. Greater than evil, this word carries within itself the final possibility of the human.

"The world is gone – writes Celan – I must carry you."

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