BETWEEN THE MONSTER AND THE SAINT

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Between The Monster And The Saint
REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

Richard Holloway

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For Mark

He curls himself up and protects his head
While he is kicked by heavy boots; on fire and running,
He burns with bright flames; a bulldozer sweeps him
into a claypit.
Her child. Embracing a teddy bear. Conceived in ecstasy.

I haven't yet learned to speak as I should, calmly.

Czesław Miłosz

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It will be obvious to anyone who reads this book, or glances at the bibliography, that I owe a great deal to many other writers. I am grateful to them all, but I would like, in particular, to mention six women without whose inspiration my book would never have been written: Hannah Arendt, Andrea Dworkin, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Gitta Sereny, Simone Weil and Virginia Woolf.

Where I have quoted from the Bible I have used the King James version.

Richard Holloway
Edinburgh 2008

Introduction

When I was nine I had a job as a message boy for a grocer's shop at the top of our street. It was a big store with a workforce of eight, both women and men. One morning when the shop was quiet an incident occurred which has stayed in my memory. There was a big store room at the back of the shop, with a long table in the middle, used for measuring and bagging, slicing and sorting. On the morning in question there was a conspiratorial buzz among the male members of the staff, who were all drifting towards the store room. I joined them, wondering what was up. It was obvious that, whatever was afoot, the ringleader was the oldest man on the staff, a self-important person who seemed to think himself a cut above the rest of us. When we had all gathered he hushed us to silence, and a few seconds later one of the women workers came into the room, presumably to pick up something for a customer. As soon as she entered, the door was closed, then locked, and the men surrounded her. The atmosphere, as I remember it, was jokey rather than menacing, and the woman giggled nervously as though she knew what was coming. Mr Self-Importance gave the signal and the men grabbed the woman and lifted her onto the table on her back. Though she struggled a bit, it seemed to me to be more of a lark than a lynching, and she didn't

call out for help. I didn't exactly know what was going on, but I played a significant part in what happened. Though she was being held down on her back on the table, her legs were still hanging over the side. Entering the fun, I took hold of her ankles and lifted her legs onto the table, provoking the congratulations of Mr Self-Importance for my assistance. He then shoved his hand under her skirt and groped her. And it was all over. They let her up, she adjusted her clothes, collected whatever it was she had come for, left the room and the men all went back to work. Nothing was said after the incident, and no reference was ever made to it. I stopped working there soon afterwards. Sometimes I would bump into Mr Self-Importance in the town, out with his family, and I used to wonder what went on in his mind about the incident. I also wondered what had got into me, why I did what I did, where it came from, what it was that took over in the store room in that long-gone grocer's shop in Mitchell Street, Alexandria.

I was an introspective little boy who lived mainly in the dreams and dreads of my imagination, prompted by my addiction to reading and movie-going. The fictions I was immersed in on page and screen all communicated a sense of the world as a dangerous and unpredictable place. There seemed to be three main characters abroad on the earth, and though the stories I devoured and the movies I watched played with them in different ways, there appeared to be a single story with variants, endlessly repeated. Sometimes it was obvious goodness threatened by obvious evil, but that was never a

particularly compelling story. In their different ways, the really evil and the truly good seemed to be pretty invulnerable to spiritual attack, which was why it was difficult to make them interesting, probably because they were already so defined and clear about themselves. The really interesting story was about those who were caught between the two invulnerabilities. This plot took many forms, but a favourite from the Hollywood movies of the time was the kid from a tough neighbourhood who was pulled between the craggy priest fighting to save him from a life of crime and the charismatic gang leader out to recruit him for the Mob. The stories and movies I preferred were like that. The real drama lay in the struggle of the character who was tugged between the monster and the saint. Already I could sense that the bad–good man or the good–bad man were more interesting than the definitely good or the certainly bad – probably because I knew intuitively that this was where life would place me. The troubling thing about that assault in the grocer's shop was that it had thrilled as well as appalled me, and had sent a premonitory shiver down my spine.

A few years later I began to immerse myself in one of the most intense descriptions of the human struggle our imagination has contrived: the redemption myth of Christianity. In this drama the moral extremity of the main protagonists is made absolute, as is the fate of the compromised character pulled between them. Perfect and eternal goodness battles with utter and determined evil for the soul of humanity. And sex is one of the battlegrounds. In that light, the incident in the grocer's

shop was a skirmish in a larger war. You do not have to believe in the truth of the doctrine to acknowledge that, like a great work of art, the Christian story captures the reality of our experience. Indeed, it could be argued that it was developed over the centuries precisely to account for the human condition. Nowadays we are more likely to argue over competing versions of the scientific exposition of human nature than over theological explanations, but the facts we are dealing with remain the same: our own experience of the mysterious complexity of being human. It is no accident that from the beginning of recorded history our fictions have been about our struggles with sex and violence, cruelty and greed, belonging and loss. These are still the themes of the films that crowd out the multiplexes and the books that race up the bestseller lists. Art – in which I include religion because, whatever else it is, it is certainly a work of the human imagination – holds a mirror before humanity, and what we see there should trouble us profoundly.

In the redemption song of Christianity the preacher always began by holding that same mirror up to humanity: this is who you are, he would proclaim; look at yourselves being pulled between your lower and your higher impulses, tugged between the monster and the saint. The old preachers avidly described the temporal consequences of our actions – relationships broken, lives destroyed, civilisations corrupted. They also stoked the fires of hell to scare us into repentance: if common sense couldn't get us to change our ways, then fear might. It was at the moment of complete abjection, when we had

recognised the truth about ourselves, that the redemption offer was made: amend your ways, turn from evil to good, from darkness to light, and God will save you. There have been many secular variants of that ancient song. The most dramatic in recent history was the British Government's campaign in the early days of the AIDS pandemic to alert vulnerable groups to the dangers of unprotected sex. The most striking version around today comes from the green movement, which warns us that our greedy indifference to the health of the planet is destroying our own habitat. For many it is already too late to mend our ways: judgement is coming upon us like a rising sea and a raging fire. It is the ancient song embroidered with new themes, the old story embellished with new characters; but the tragic figure at the centre remains the same: Adam, humanity, *us*.

This book is my version of that old redemption song – minus the expectation of supernatural rescue: if we can't redeem ourselves, then no one else is going to do it for us. I, too, am holding up a mirror for us to look into, and I am well aware of the ugliness that is reflected there. But ancient as well as modern wisdom acknowledges that if men and women are to change their ways they have to own the reality of their condition: as we say today, they must no longer be 'in denial'. This is a book about the human condition, so it is about a paradoxical being: a moral animal, an evolved creature which has become an object of interest to itself, a living bundle of drives and needs that is yet capable of reflection and pity.

The book is in three parts, each section a meditation on some aspect of that turbulent complexity. Part I

explores the ugly fact of human cruelty and the reality of evil. What is it about the human animal that turns it so hideously against its own kind? In wrestling with that question, I look at some heart-stopping examples of human cruelty, such as the practice of systematic torture. The daunting thing here is that torture has made a sophisticated reappearance in our own day. But we are not only cruel to each other, we are monstrously cruel to the other creatures with whom we share the planet. The insidious thing about cruelty to animals, especially those upon whom we depend for food, is that, though it is done to keep our supermarkets stocked with cheap food, it is largely hidden from us. No wonder some poets think the environmental crisis is the way the earth is purging itself of the humans who have so brutally distorted its rhythms and destroyed its balances.

Part II tries to figure out why humans are uniquely prone to this kind of unbalanced sadism and greed. Is it because our big brain is both a blessing and a curse? A blessing, because it has produced the extraordinary richness of human culture; a curse, because it has persuaded us of our uniqueness. In the face of death, our advanced consciousness finds it hard to believe in our own finitude and transience; with the consequence that we have accorded ourselves the status of masters of the whole created order. Nevertheless, we are uncertain about who we are, where we came from and where we are going: and it is from those uncertainties that our religious and intellectual responses to life have developed.

In Part III a faint but unconquerable note of hope

begins to be heard. While human history is a record of cruelty and folly, it is also one of breathtaking achievement in the way our imagination has represented and interpreted the world to us. Art on its own may not be redemptive, but it has the power to challenge and prompt us to gratitude; and gratitude, like pity, is an antidote to our endemic cruelty. But art is not the only redemptive possibility present in the world. The mystery of evil may be an enduring aspect of the human story; but so is the mystery of goodness: the saint is as strong a character in the human narrative as the monster. Like everything else we have invented, religion has been put to evil uses, to such an extent that certain secular thinkers identify it as the root of all evil. Without softening the valid elements of that accusation, the paradox of religion is that its myths and metaphors also provide us with some of the deepest insights into our own condition. Used modestly and understood properly, religion still has much to offer a humanity that is trying to save itself from itself.

Karl Marx famously observed that the philosophers have only interpreted the world, but the point was to change it. I agree with him about that, but change itself needs interpreting. Marx's name will be for ever associated with an attempt to change the world that became monstrous in its ruthlessness. Schemes for universal redemption, whether religious or political, invariably end in cruelty: to force through their programmes they have to drive against the knotted grain of human nature, and to do that they have to purge themselves of pity. Because cruelty is the human curse, and because it is

always amplified by the mob, the three sections of this book gradually build to a single theme that opposes group thinking and acting. I believe not only that we cannot live without pity, but that only pity can save us. Pity may only be weakness to the monster, but it is the only strength of the saint.

I
X FORCE

I
MONSTER

. . . evil is, not, as we thought,
deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith,
our dishonest mood of denial,
the concupiscence of the oppressor.

W.H. AUDEN

Of the many illuminations of art, an important one is the way it helps us realise that we are not alone in our struggles and confusions: others have been there too, and sometimes it helps to read about what they have been through. My boyhood experience in the back room of that grocer's shop left a stain on my memory. Events from his past prompted a more troubling remembrance in Blake Morrison, recalled in his book *As If*, which explored events surrounding the murder of little James Bulger in 1993. While he was away from home, covering the trial, he had bad dreams, one of which was different from the others:

> This isn't waking and remembering something bad from the day before. This is waking and remembering exactly the bad thing, even though it happened a quarter of a century before. Yesterday must have triggered it, and guilt I'd long forgotten. Dust, mice, mothballs, furniture polish, semen, bleach.

The dream takes him back to 1967 when he was fourteen, to a party at Lucy Kerrigan's, whose parents had gone out for the night:

> In the kitchen . . . I see Mick Turner snogging with Lucy, then breaking off to talk to his mate Pat Connolly about Burnley (the football team) as if the kiss hadn't happened or as if it had happened to someone else. Lucy stands there, beatific with a Babycham bottle. She and Mick kiss some more, by the cupboard under the stairs, then he opens the door and draws her inside . . . Mick comes out of the broom cupboard, adjusting his clothes, and nods at Pat, who takes his place . . . Two minutes later, Pat comes out. 'Go on, Blake, get in there,' he says . . . I close the door behind me, and inhale the smell of dust, mice, perfume, mothballs, cider, furniture polish, semen, bleach. Lucy is moaning against the coat-hooks. She stretches her arms out and draws me into her sourapple kiss.[1]

He kisses, fondles, gropes her, but decides not to go all the way. He leaves the cupboard; grabs a drink; someone else takes his place. Later, sick, sore, crying, Lucy tells her friends that seven boys had sex with her in the broom cupboard. There is indignation among her friends, but no charges are ever brought. Except now, twenty-five years later, against Blake Morrison by his own conscience. Where did that teenage gang-bang come from? What got into them? Morrison's memory is of an event that was far more serious than the one I remembered, but that ugly incident in the back room of a shop can be thought of as the first milestone on a road that stretches far into the moral distance; and we know from recent as well as ancient history what the far end of that road looks like. It reaches

from furtive groping to the organised and systematic raping of women, as men are taken over by a force that turns their victims into degraded objects.

Since women have been the main victims of this kind of degradation down the ages, it is no surprise that they have thought about it more searchingly than men. In exploring the forces that provoke such behaviour, I want to make use of the writings of five women, beginning with a remarkable essay by Simone Weil on *The Iliad*, which she calls the 'Poem of Force'. Through an investigation of the tragic vision of Homer, Weil says humans are at the mercy of an energy that plays with them the way a cat toys with a mouse. This is how she describes it:

> To define force – it is that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle *The Iliad* never wearies of showing us.[2]

I shall try later to say something about the origin of this X, but if we think of it as any compulsion that turns those who are subjected to it into things, then it is obvious that human sexuality is one of its most powerful modes, seen in its most brutally objectifying form in rape. There is no doubt that looking at women as sexual objects is a dominant aspect of male heterosexuality, and there are few men who have not experienced its disturbing power. It is hard to resist the impulse, which is why 'custody of the eyes' is such a strong theme in the attempts of

religion to restrain male sexuality; and it is why the covering or uncovering of the female body in public continues to agitate some religious authorities.

One of the most challenging studies of the force of male sexuality is Andrea Dworkin's book *Intercourse*. The epigraph to the book immediately captures the devastating honesty of the approach: 'He lost no time, got his belt undone, said: "I could go through you like butter."'[3] From the epigraph to the last page we are made to confront the implacable force of male sexuality, which Dworkin reduces to its basic essential as 'the fuck'. Significantly, she calls the first part of her book 'Intercourse in a Man-Made World'. She acknowledges that man himself is worried by the way he can be taken over by the force of sex and become the driven victim of his own desires; but she knows that woman has been the primary casualty of a world created partly to express and partly to control the male sexual urge. The system that established male domination was based not only on brute force, but on law and religious authority. Though the intention was to establish the authority of men over women, it was also aimed at preventing men from destroying their own privileges by over-indulgence. Implicit in the structures that define the man-made world is the recognition that the force of sexuality can dominate the dominators and threaten the balance of male control. The men who were party to the sexual molestation of that woman in the back room of a grocer's shop, and the boys who raped Lucy in the cupboard under the stairs in her own home, were all dominators who were themselves dominated by the imperious force

of sexuality. It is the oldest story in the book: the man, often a figure of authority in politics or religion, who is brought low because of his inability to control a sudden access of sexual desire which occurs in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong person.

Dworkin traces variations of this vicious circle throughout her book. One of the book's many riches is the depth of her reading of other texts. In Chapter 2, 'Skinless', she explores Kobo Abe's novel, *The Woman in the Dunes*, in which a man lost in sand dunes is trapped with a woman in a deep hole. He is kept prisoner to clear the sand and to have sex with the woman. The sand stands for the suffocating, enveloping quality his need for sex with a woman can have for a man. It also accounts for man's ancient ambivalence towards women, an ambivalence that can turn easily to hatred, which can itself become a perverted source of pleasure, as men use sex to humiliate and degrade women. When this happens, like the impersonal force of nature itself, men act without any sense of human sympathy. Dworkin writes,

> The sand in *The Woman in the Dunes* is life itself with its crushing disregard for personality or fairness or reason or the defences built up against its unceasing and formless flow: life here is precisely identical with sexuality, also crushing, formless, shapeless, merciless . . . Carried by life and sex towards death, the human experience is one of being pushed until crushed.[4]

The metaphor of engulfing, enfolding sand reaches into our deepest anxieties about the power sex has over us. It is the fragility of our own self-control in the face of

the implacable force of nature, as well as our ambivalence towards it, that is most disturbing to us. Part of us wants to surrender to its irresistible force, while something else in us is horrified by its indifference and tries to struggle against it, overcome it, order it.

Where does this X get its power from? Simone Weil offers us a clue in her analysis of violence, the other great force that reduces to a thing those who are subjected to it. Violence is the theme of *The Iliad*. She writes:

> It springs from the subjection of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in *The Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is.[5]

The word to note there is *matter*: 'It springs from the subjection of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to *matter*.' This is close to Dworkin's sand metaphor: 'the density of the endlessly moving, formless sand: which is life and its inevitable, massive, incomprehensible brutalities; which is sex, with . . . its omnipresent, incorrigible, massive demands'.[6] If we are to gain any useful insight into the human condition, we have to begin by acknowledging that we are all subordinate to the gravitational pull of a universe which is indifferent to the creatures who are subjected to its remorseless drives. We are thrown into an existence, the springs of which we are only just beginning to understand.

Current scientific thinking holds that our universe had a beginning: there was nothing; then, in an instant, there

was something. The initiating event is misleadingly called the Big Bang, which suggests an originating explosion, whereas the reality seems to have been an unbelievably rapid expansion, more like blowing up a balloon than setting off a firework. But where did it come from? The human mind is incapable of abandoning the search for causes, and since scientists cannot get behind that originating event, they offer a transitional myth, borrowed from mathematics, to fill the gap. Since there was no 'there' there before the Big Bang, they say that around fourteen billion years ago the universe sprang into existence out of a 'singularity'. Singularities are unknowns that defy the current understanding of physics: infinitely small, infinitely dense somethings from which everything has emerged. We are the far-flung residue of that originating mystery. While we cannot get behind the first breath of the expanding universe, or understand what force began to blow up the balloon, we do know quite a lot about what has happened since. We know that inanimate matter existed for billions of years before the animate emerged, but that at some point life was aroused in non-living matter by the operation upon it of forces we are still quite incapable of imagining. In 1953 Watson and Crick discovered DNA, a molecule that stores vast amounts of coded information – our genes – and replicates itself in order to make new cells loaded with the same information and self-replicating capability. This process is the miracle of life. The first gene is thought to have appeared more than three and a half billion years ago in the lifeless saline seas of the young planet earth. Scientists speculate that a combination of powerful natural

forces, such as sunlight, geothermal heat, radioactivity and lightning, provided the critical jolts of energy that made the chemical reactions possible. However we account for it, the seismic energy of that force still drives through us, as it drives through all earth's life forms, and it is imperiously indifferent to us and our values.

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.[7]

Schopenhauer went so far as to say nature waged war on humans, because it knew no morality except its own will to live and replicate itself.[8] It is at its most tyrannical in the reproductive drive, sex, where it can quench not only normal human sympathy, but rationality as well. But we probably see it at its most terrifying in battle. Here is Simone Weil again:

> Battles are fought and decided by men . . . who have undergone a transformation, who have dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum . . . however caused, this petrifactive quality of force, twofold always, is essential to its nature . . . Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.[9]

It is in the context of these remorseless energies that humanity has struggled to find space for order and kindness in its life. Inhibited by its highly evolved brain from

living an unselfconscious life entirely dominated by instinct, humanity had to hammer out a painful compromise with itself, whereby it traded the full blaze of instinctive expression for the gentle warmth of social good. This compromise is usually described as 'civilisation', and it is always precarious, because the uneasy bargain on which it is based is not one that all are able to make. The shorthand term for those who refuse the compromises of human sympathy is 'evil', which has been defined as humanity turning against itself.[10]

There are two fundamental theories about the origin of evil. The situational perspective claims that individuals turn against society because of early childhood experiences of violence that shamed and degraded them. Children who have absorbed trauma in their early years have to shut down emotionally to protect themselves. The move from victim to aggressor gives them back the self-respect they lost in their childhood, while their emotional frigidity anaesthetises them against any sympathy they might feel for their targets. In his study of violence J. Gilligan writes:

> The prison inmates I work with have told me repeatedly, when I asked them why they had assaulted someone, that it was because 'he disrespected me,' or 'he disrespected my visit' (meaning 'visitor'). The word disrespect is so central in the vocabulary, moral value system, and psychodynamics of these chronically violent men that they have abbreviated it into the slang term, 'he dis'ed me'.[11]

The other perspective on the formation of the evil character maintains that it cannot simply be the consequence

of childhood trauma, since most people who have suffered in childhood do not turn into monsters. People have free will. Those who choose evil are responsible for the choices they make, the paths they take. After all, people can choose *not* to commit evil. The issue is obviously more complex than a straightforward choice between these two theories. While it is true that those who have been traumatised when young are more likely to fall into a pattern of repetition of the aggression they suffered (just as those who have been loved are more likely to love others in later life), how individuals turn out depends on a number of unpredictable factors. A particularly potent one is whether they have been 'violently coached'; a more hopeful one is whether they were exposed to good experiences that annulled the humiliation they suffered and helped to restore their sense of identity. Those who turn out to be aggressors are likely to have had direct or indirect encouragement to be violent.

In her book, *A Human Being Died that Night*, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela describes her troubled reactions to the hours she spent interviewing Eugene de Kock, the chief Government assassin during South Africa's apartheid era. Labelled 'Prime Evil' by the media, de Kock was the commander of the Vlakplaas counter-insurgency group which executed dozens of opponents of the apartheid Government. He became prominent during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where he gave detailed information about the deaths of anti-apartheid activists. He was sentenced to 212 years in prison for crimes against humanity. Eugene de Kock's childhood was marked by emotional abuse at the hands

of a brutal, hard-drinking father, who also mistreated his wife. One way of accounting for de Kock's violent behaviour is to see it as revenge for his early sufferings. However, as with all obsessive behaviour, his constant aggressions failed to relieve the inner needs that drove them. This is an example of what Simone Weil described as the petrifactive quality of force: both those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone. It is comforting to think of de Kock and people like him as extreme cases, wounded animals ready to strike when the moment comes. What is disconcerting is the discovery that 'good' people with no trauma in their background are also capable of co-operating with and enjoying the spectacle of great cruelty. That is why it is worth noting a fuller definition of evil given by Philip Zimbardo: 'Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise, or destroy innocent others – *or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf* [my italics].'[12] Even if we believe in the supremacy of personal responsibility, it is obvious that the social context can easily override the morality of the individual. Zimbardo calls this phenomenon 'situational force', which is another way of saying 'going with the crowd', something most of us have been guilty of, even if it was only in weakly supporting the intolerant prejudices of those to whom we were beholden in some way. Zimbardo writes: 'A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts.'[13] This means that, while we may not ourselves have the

stomach for a life of violence, we can easily become complicit in violence done on our behalf. I shall explore this theme later, but I want to touch now on an even uglier side to humanity's addiction to violence.

It is no accident that critics and commentators frequently link sex and violence together as though they were a single phenomenon, *sexandviolence*. This is more than a recognition that they are both primal forces in nature, including human nature. It is to recognise that they are erotically charged, packed with the possibility of giving pleasure to participant and onlooker, described by Auden as 'the concupiscence of the oppressor'. Nietzsche was the psychologist who explored this gloomy area with the most penetrating insight. *On the Genealogy of Morals* considers where the urge to punish came from.

> To ask it again: to what extent can suffering balance debts or guilt? To the extent that to make suffer was in the highest degree pleasurable, to the extent that the injured party exchanged for the loss he had sustained, including the displeasure caused by the loss, an extraordinary counterbalancing pleasure: that of making suffer – a genuine festival . . . To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more: this is a hard saying but an ancient, mighty, human, all-too-human principle . . . Without cruelty there is no festival: thus the longest and most ancient part of human history teaches – and in punishment there is so much that is festive.[14]

The erotic possibilities of the theatre of public cruelty have been exploited by humanity for centuries, right

down to the reality TV shows of today. We have been geniuses at crafting set pieces of torture and execution, designed to entertain as well as deter the public. Before they were banned, seats at public executions were as keenly sought after as tickets for violent blockbuster films are in our own day. One of the most celebrated executions in history took place in Paris in 1757, witnessed by a large crowd, some in luxury seats provided for state officials and clergy. We know that Casanova was present, and several times had to turn away his eyes and stop his ears because the spectacle was so ghastly. Robert-François Damiens, a French soldier, had tried to assassinate King Louis XV by stabbing him as he got into his carriage at Versailles. Though his attempt failed, he was found guilty of *lèse-majesté* and parricide. The sentence was execution by a form of torture called the *amende honorable*. History has preserved an eye-witness account of what took place:

> On 2 March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned 'to make the *amende honorable* before the main door of the Church of Paris', where he was to be 'taken in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds'; then, 'in the said cart, to the Place de Grève, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body

consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds.'

Bouton, an officer of the watch, left us his account: 'The sulphur was lit, but the flame was so poor that only the top skin of the hand was burnt, and that only slightly. Then the executioner, his sleeves rolled up, took the steel pincers, which had been specially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts. Though a strong, sturdy fellow, this executioner found it so difficult to tear away the pieces of flesh that he set about the same spot two or three times, twisting the pincers as he did so, and what he took away formed at each part a wound about the size of a six-pound crown piece.

'After these tearings with the pincers, Damiens, who cried out profusely, though without swearing, raised his head and looked at himself; the same executioner dipped an iron spoon in the pot containing the boiling potion, which he poured liberally over each wound. Then the ropes that were to be harnessed to the horses were attached with cords to the patient's body; the horses were then harnessed and placed alongside the arms and legs, one at each limb . . . The horses tugged hard, each pulling straight on a limb, each horse held by an executioner. After a quarter of an hour, the same ceremony was repeated and finally, after several attempts, the direction of the horses had to be changed, thus: those at the arms were made to pull towards the head, those at the thighs towards the arms, which broke the arms at the joints. This was repeated several times without success. He raised his head and looked at himself. Two more horses had to be added to those harnessed to the thighs, which made six horses in all. Without success.

'Finally, the executioner, Samson, said to Monsieur Le Breton that there was no way or hope of succeeding, and told him to ask their Lordships if they wished to have the prisoner cut into pieces. Monsieur Le Breton, who had come down from town, ordered that renewed efforts be made, and this was done; but the horses gave up and one of those harnessed to the thighs fell to the ground. The confessors returned and spoke to him again. He said to them (I heard him): "Kiss me, gentlemen." The parish priest of St Paul's did not dare to, so Monsieur de Marsilly slipped under the rope holding the left arm and kissed him on the forehead. The executioners gathered round and Damiens told them not to swear, to carry out their task and that he did not think ill of them; he begged them to pray to God for him, and asked the parish priest in St Paul's to pray for him at his first mass.

'After two or three attempts, the executioner Samson and he who had used the pincers each drew out a knife from his pocket and cut the body at the thighs instead of severing the legs at the joints; the four horses gave a tug and carried off the two thighs after them, namely, that of the right side first, the other following; then the same was done to the arms, the shoulders, the arm-pits and the four limbs; the flesh had to be cut almost to the bone, the horses pulling hard carried off the right arm first and the other one afterwards.

'When the four limbs had been pulled away, the confessors came to speak to him; but his executioner told them that he was dead, though the truth was that I saw the man move, his lower jaw moving from side to side as if he were talking. One of the executioners even said shortly afterwards that when they had lifted the trunk to throw it on the stake, he was still alive. The four limbs were untied from the ropes and thrown on the stake set up in the enclosure in line with the scaffold, then the trunk

> and the rest were covered with logs and faggots, and fire was put to the straw mixed with this wood.
>
> 'In accordance with the decree, the whole was reduced to ashes. The last piece to be found in the embers was still burning at half-past ten in the evening. The pieces of flesh and the trunk had taken about four hours to burn . . . '[15]

Two details in that description break the heart. Writhing in agony on the scaffold, Damiens asked his confessors to kiss him. Though the priest of St Paul's refused this office of mercy, Monsieur de Marsilly slipped under the rope and kissed him on the forehead. The other devastating detail is when Bouton tells us that Damiens twice raised his head to look at himself as his body was being torn asunder. It is hard to think about that look; even harder to fathom it. Was it a look of disbelief? A look of farewell? The *amende honorable* was so horrifying it was outlawed in 1791. But torture never vanished from the earth, and it has made a dramatic reappearance in our own day. What is hard to acknowledge is that, in the right circumstances, most of us are capable of taking part in it. This was established by the famous obedience experiment conducted by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram in 1963, in which people were encouraged to 'electrocute' peers as punishment for a mistake. Milgram established the experiment because he wanted to understand how so many 'good' Germans became involved in the murder of millions of Jews.

> Rather than search for dispositional tendencies in the German national character to account for the evil of

> this genocide, he believed that features in the situation played a crucial role; that obedience to authority was a 'toxic trigger' for wanton murder. After completing his research, Milgram extended his scientific conclusions to a very dramatic prediction about the insidious and pervasive power of obedience to transform ordinary American citizens into Nazi death camp personnel: 'If a system of death camps were set up in the United States of the sort we had seen in Nazi Germany, one would be able to find sufficient personnel for those camps in any medium-sized American town.'[16]

The history of the US war on terror illustrates the dramatic prescience of Milgram's observation. The approval of torture by the leaders of the United States Government is as well documented as the practice itself. Asked during a radio interview if he was in favour of a 'dunk in the water' for terrorist detainees, Vice President Cheney said he was, declaring that as far as he was concerned the question was 'a no-brainer'.[17] The homely-sounding 'dunk in the water' is actually an ancient and highly effective torture routine called waterboarding. It was used as an interrogation routine during the Italian Inquisition in the 1500s, but its most notorious use in recent history – until the Iraq War – was by the infamous Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in the 1970s. In an article on the subject, American journalist Julia Layton described the technique:

> Waterboarding as it is currently described involves strapping a person to an inclined board, with his feet raised and his head lowered. The interrogators bind the person's arms and legs so he can't move at all, and they cover

> his face. In some descriptions, the person is gagged, and some sort of cloth covers his nose and mouth; in others, his face is wrapped in cellophane. The interrogator then repeatedly pours water onto the person's face. Depending on the exact setup, the water may or may not actually get into the person's mouth and nose; but the physical experience of being underneath a wave of water seems to be secondary to the psychological experience. The person's mind believes he is drowning, and his gag reflex kicks in as if he were choking on all that water falling on his face.[18]

Torture such as waterboarding by the US has followed a well-established pattern. According to John Gray, American forces were following a well-trodden path here. Torture was used by Russia in Chechnya, by the French in Algeria and by the British in Kenya. But the modern American technique is different to these historic precedents, which mainly inflicted extreme physical pain. In Iraq, as well as in their network of detention centres throughout the world, American interrogators have used psychological pressure, including sexual humiliation, a particularly potent weapon in a Muslim culture. Gray says that by using these techniques the US has imprinted an indelible image of American depravity on the population of Iraq and ensured that no American-backed regime could ever achieve legitimacy.[19]

'Getting Away with Torture' is the chilling title of the Human Rights Watch report on the abuses, tortures and murder of prisoners by US military and civilian personnel since 9/11. While junior members of the military regime at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq have been

tried and convicted – President Bush's seven 'bad apples' in an otherwise immaculate military barrel – none of the architects of the system has been called to justice. This is the conclusion of the report:

> It has become clear that torture and abuse have taken place not solely at Abu Ghraib but rather in dozens of detention facilities worldwide, that in many cases the abuse resulted in death or severe trauma, and that a good number of the victims were civilians with no connection to al-Qaeda or terrorism. There is also evidence of abuse at controlled 'secret locations' abroad and of authorities sending suspects to third-country dungeons around the world where torture was likely to occur. To date, however, the only wrongdoers being brought to justice are those at the bottom of the chain of command. The evidence demands more. Yet a wall of impunity surrounds the architects of the policies responsible for the larger pattern of abuses.[20]

Among the 'architects', Philip Zimbardo names President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

The excesses of both sides in the War on Terror, like the excesses of Nazi Germany, reveal how easy it is, when the circumstances are ripe, for obedience to authority to trigger the human, all too human, tendency to unspeakable violence in people with no particular trauma in their background. We might even say that 'good' people who enlist obediently in evil practices are more culpable than those whose childhood trauma predisposed them towards violent aggression. Significantly, obedience to authority is considered a virtue in religion as well as in the military, and both go to great lengths to instil it in their members.

In the case of the military the logic, though unsettling, is obvious. A disciplined army requires soldiers to submerge their individuality for the sake of the group task. The difference between trained soldiers and an undisciplined rabble is that professionals work within a group to achieve an objective and submit themselves to the discipline of a common aim; whereas a mob is an inchoate mass that is as likely to take flight as turn and fight. Nevertheless, obedience to authority has a dark side, and history affords many examples of atrocities committed by men who claimed they were only obeying orders. The habit of obedience, too deeply instilled, can destroy the moral and rational autonomy of the individual; this is a spiritual disease that is prevalent among adherents of certain religions. While obedience may be tactically useful in achieving limited temporal ends, it is stultifying when it becomes a moral and intellectual default position. When that happens it places institutional authority above truth, so that truth is no longer what is the case, but what is asserted by authority to be the case. When Pope Urban VIII condemned Galileo's claim that the sun was immovable in its place and that the earth revolved round it, he pronounced his judgement not on the basis of investigation of the issue but on that of a twofold authority: the Bible and his own office. In the religious context 'truth' too easily becomes what authority says it is. Sometimes this can be endearingly old-fashioned, a simple refusal to accept unwelcome facts; but sometimes it can be the prelude to horror, as the flames that lick round the religious imagination and explode among us today clearly testify. The need to obey, to submit our freedom to the control of absolute authority, may be

nostalgia in our DNA for the days when we were driven unresistingly by the force of nature. This may account for its overwhelming attraction, as well as for its formidable power over us. Something in us wants to be pulled away from the responsibilities of the autonomous self back to the state of nature. History is full of examples of whole peoples who abandoned the rigours of freedom for the consolations offered by infallible authority, but none was more terrifying in its consequences than Nazi Germany.

Gitta Sereny wrote a couple of books to show how it was obedience to authority that prompted two very different men to assist in the massacre of millions in Nazi Germany. The first of her Nazi books was about Franz Stangl, who had been Kommandant of Treblinka, one of the four extermination camps in German-occupied Poland. Stangl was sentenced to life imprisonment for co-responsibility in the murder of 900,000 people in Treblinka. Her other book was a study of Albert Speer, the architect of Nazi Germany and Hitler's right-hand man. In the preface to the book about Stangl, *Into that Darkness*, she wrote:

> Over the months of the Nuremberg trials . . . I felt more and more that we needed to find someone capable of explaining to us how presumably normal human beings had been brought to do what he had done . . . an evaluation of such a person's background . . . might teach us to understand better to what extent evil in human beings is created by their genes, and to what extent by their society and environment.[21]

Sereny did not use the language of situational force, but her mention of genes, society and environment is another

way of characterising the 'X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing'. Though we never see the X in its own essence, it is revealed to us in the forms it adopts to achieves its ends. One way to characterise it is the accumulated weight of events – from the beginning of the universe to the person we happened to bump into at a party last night – which lie behind the destiny of a single character in the rolling narrative of human history. Most of us are determined and programmed by factors over which we have little control. We may pride ourselves on our autonomy and the ethical power of the choices we have made, but the right circumstances might surprise us by the swiftness with which our integrity would melt in the ecstasy of the mob. Few are immune to this possibility, though, as we shall see, there are always some who are immune to the pressure of the usual determinants and refuse to march to the drumbeat of authority. And they are usually the first to face history's firing squads.

The men Sereny studied, Stangl and Speer, certainly knew how to march in step, and their careers displayed the toxic power of obedience to authority in the context of Nazi Germany. Sereny discovered in their childhoods a similar denial of love to the one experienced by de Kock. Unlike Speer, Stangl was an unremarkable man. Diana Athill worked with Sereny on the book about Stangl, and says this about him in her memoirs:

> I still think – of how that unremarkable man became a monster as the result of a chain of choices between right and wrong – and the way in which no one he

> respected intervened in favour of the right, while a number of people he respected . . . behaved as though wrong were right . . . Stangl did not have a strong centre – had probably been deprived of it by a dreary childhood – so he became a creature of the regime. Other people without much centre didn't – or not to the same extent – so some quality inherent in him (perhaps lack of imagination combined with ambition) must have been evident to those who picked him for his appalling jobs. But it was surely environment rather than genes which made him what he became. [22]

Environment certainly, but the more significant factor, I think, lies in that tell-tale phrase 'lack of imagination'. Hannah Arendt made a similar judgement about another unremarkable man without a strong centre who also became a monster. Otto Adolf Eichmann, a former Nazi lieutenant colonel who fled from Germany in 1950, was kidnapped by the Israeli Secret Service on 11th May, 1960 and flown to Israel to stand trial. Eichmann had joined the SS in 1932 and did various jobs for them. Though he himself never pulled a trigger or manned a mobile gassing van, he ended up as the logistical wizard who organised the transportation of Jews to the death camps. In describing him, Arendt coined the phrase 'the banality of evil' to capture the dreariness and predictability of his personality.

> When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with

> Richard III 'to prove a villain'. Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing* . . . He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.[23]

When we turn to Speer the picture is more complex. Like Eichmann, Speer killed no one and felt no enmity, hatred or even dislike for the millions in Eastern Europe, Christians and Jews, who were systematically slaughtered. Sereny says he felt *nothing*, because there was a dimension in him that was missing, a capacity to feel that his childhood had blotted out, allowing him to experience not love, but only romanticised substitutes for it. (She says there was a strong erotic bond between Speer and Hitler – never sexualised, but hypnotically present all the same.) Pity and empathy weren't part of Speer's emotional vocabulary. He could feel deeply, but only indirectly – through music or landscape or art. His feelings could also be aroused through what Sereny calls visual hyperbole. He was the begetter of the great Nazi set pieces, such as the Cathedral of Light, with its flags and thousands of men at attention, motionless like pillars, as well as the rows of blond children, eyes shining, arms stiffly raised. This became beauty to him and – another substitute for love – allowed him to *feel*.

But the conclusion of his story is that he did finally learn to feel with real authenticity, and to enter, for the first time, the experience of others. He acknowledged

his part in Hitler's madness and came to a horrifying realisation of what had been done. Out of all this emerged a different Speer. In a final paragraph Sereny summed him up:

> This was a very serious man who knew more about that bane of our century, Hitler, than anyone else. This was an erudite and solitary man who, recognizing his deficiencies in human relations, had read five thousand books in prison to try to understand the universe and human beings, an effort he succeeded in with his mind but failed in with his heart. Empathy is finally a gift, and cannot be learned, so, essentially, returning into the world after twenty years (in prison), he remained alone. Unforgiven by so many for having served Hitler, he elected to spend the rest of his life in confrontation with this past, unforgiving of himself for having so nearly loved a monster.[24]

Let me pause before those daunting words: 'Empathy is finally a gift, and cannot be learned,' and compare them to words from Simone Weil:

> He who does not recognise to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss. Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.[25]

What can save us from despair at our own emotional incapacity is the fact that we can make a start at change

by understanding ourselves. We may lack the innate ability to be empathetic, to identify with the pain of others, but if we succeed in touching our own feelings, reaching our own grief and shame, we can start to practise projective identification with others. In my final chapter I shall try to show how we can measure the way in which force has used us and through us used others; how we can recognise that fortune and necessity hold us all in subjection; and how we can identify with others and refuse ever to turn them into things. This ability to feel ourselves into the lives of others is the root of a morality of sensitivity that refuses to become an unconscious instrument of force.

Apart from our failure to feel the pain we have caused others, another challenge we face is to avoid becoming evil in response to the evil that has been done to us, thereby affording force a double victory. This means we have to think not only about how we may have damaged others, but also about how to respond to those who have damaged us. Any sensible society has to protect itself against the depredations of those who have turned against humanity, whatever theory is held about the factors that produced them. Martin Luther King said that while a law could make no man love him, it could stop him from lynching him. This is why there will always be a defensive need for armed forces, for police, and for a criminal justice system. But, if we care for the values of the society we inhabit, the automatic desire to respond to the force of evil with the evil of force is a reaction worth exploring. If Nietzsche's guess about the origin of punishment is near the mark, then in our response to an

offence we must guard ourselves against the raw desire to make the offender suffer. The evolution of a public justice system as a replacement for personal responses to evil was intended to place an obstacle before the forward momentum of private revenge. Purging ourselves of hatred in responding to evil is not sentimentality or passivity. The criminal justice system, the institution that responds on our behalf to those who have injured us, has to practise an emotionless objectivity. And it does this in the name of an ancient principle. Arendt was passionate about the importance of justice in responding to the chaotic forces that face the human community. In her account of Eichmann's trial she makes the point clear.

> I held and hold the opinion that this trial had to take place in the interests of justice and of nothing else . . . and in view of the current confusion in legal circles about the meaning and usefulness of punishment, I was glad that the judgment quoted Grotius, who, for his part, citing an older author, explained that punishment is necessary 'to defend the honour or the authority of him who was hurt by the offence so that failure to punish may not cause his degradation'.[26]

The nature of the punishment is not itself the issue here, and can be widely varied in concept and execution; it is the fact that the person who was hurt by the offence was, in the language of Grotius, degraded, that is important here. Degradation is another way of saying the injured party had been turned into a thing and therefore violated at the very core of her humanity. This is why there is a fundamental need in people who have

been abused to have that fact acknowledged and proclaimed. Gobodo-Madikizela's experience in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission proved to her the importance of what we might call the performative rhetoric of justice. She says that a genuine apology is a 'speech act' designed to right the relationship damaged through the actions of the apologiser. The apology cannot, of course, erase what was done, but it has the potential to transform the situation created by the offence. In order to work, the apologiser has to name the deed, acknowledge the wrongdoing, recognise and in some sense feel the pain of the victim.[27]

Here Gobodo-Madikizela emphasises an aspect of justice that is insufficiently observed in the justice systems of Britain and the US: the needs of the victim. Western justice has been good at limiting the momentum of force by institutionalising its response to offenders who, in theory, are judged dispassionately in order to express humanity's disapproval of those who turn against it. What we have paid less attention to is the trauma caused to the victim who needs, for her own re-integration after degradation, to hear the offender 'perform' his acknowledgement of the wrong done. In some cultures this act *is* the punishment of the offender, who is brought back within the human community he turned against once he has sincerely owned the reality of what he did, has performed an adequate apology and made some form of restitution. There is growing evidence that the 'performance' of repentance has a greater chance of re-integrating offenders into the community than the imposition of other types of punishment. Unfortunately,

the momentum of the justice systems in the US and Britain is running counter to this insight, with the paradoxical effect that it tends to increase rather than correct criminality. Its promiscuous use of prison as punishment is closer to the ugly desire to cause pain to the offender than to Arendt's claim that the purpose of justice is the recognition that the person offended must have her humanity restored by an act that recognises her degradation. That is the first and fundamental element in a wise justice system. The second must be to try to find ways to restore the offenders to the human community they have turned against. Unfortunately, most of the punishment regimes in Britain and the US, especially the increasingly automatic use of imprisonment, only fortifies the evil and alienation of the prisoner. Of course, there will always be people who have turned so utterly against their own kind that they must be permanently separated from their fellows. Hannah Arendt, who supported the execution of Eichmann, expressed this necessity in words she wishes his judges had addressed to him:

> Just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations – as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world – we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you.[28]

The mystery of evil will probably always require us to make judgements like that, but we must never delude

ourselves about how, in the right circumstances, we ourselves might have found ourselves on the wrong road. Just as importantly, in our struggle against evil we must be careful not to let our own hearts be turned to stone by the pain we have suffered. That is why Simone Weil wants us to be aware of force's indifference to the human cost of its momentum, from the siege of Troy to the destruction of Fallujah; just as it is indifferent to the fate of the disordered children with whom we presently fill our gaols. It is using us all, presiding at the feast of hatred, turning us all to stone. Artists see this with greater clarity than the politicians who fancy themselves as men of destiny propelling history forward, whereas they themselves are being driven like leaves before a gale in autumn.

If we can derive anything from these explorations it is that being human is not easy. Consciousness and the apparent possession of free will incline us to believe that we have control over our lives, but the facts would suggest something rather different. It is as though we had been given the keys to a powerful automobile and set off along the motorway only to discover that, while we have some control of the vehicle, it also seems to be subject to other forces. It makes sudden and unforeseen manoeuvres, takes dangerous swerves into oncoming traffic, and sometimes stops for no obvious reason, engine still running, and refuses to move another inch. We do have some control over our lives, but there are other influences at work in us, not of our choosing, hardly even of our knowing, that exercise considerable power over us. Obviously, there is the great flow of the

life force itself and its determination to keep going, regardless of the consequences to those it has elected as its vehicles. We are certainly more than gene-replicating devices, but that is also what we are. And while we are theoretically in charge of our own character and its development, much of it is programmed by forces over which we never could have had any control. Apart from the unsearchable memory of the human species that lies deep within us, each of us was thrown into a unique and specific life-context, the earliest stages of which had profound effects, for good or ill, on our subsequent history. We are also strangely subject to the gravitational pull of the human herd. Sometimes the consequences of this magnetic force are endearingly pathetic, such as the need to have the latest fashion accessory or the most versatile mobile phone; but sometimes the consequences are truly terrifying. The human herd, when collectively aroused, is the most ferocious beast on the planet. It is responsible for every lynching, every gang-bang, every act of genocide, every heresy hunt, every ugly bout of group thinking that has ever afflicted the human community. Sadly, there always seem to be charismatic monsters around who are brilliant at rousing the herd and hypnotising it into obedient servitude to their terrifying visions. Fortunately, there also seem to be a few rare individuals who are impervious to all the pressures I have described. As I shall attempt to show, these alone are capable of consistently speaking the truth and naming the lie. The rest of us crowd ourselves uncertainly between the monsters and the martyrs: strangely attracted to the magnetism of the villain, yet made wistful by the courage

of the saint. History would suggest that we are more susceptible to the seductive power of the monster than the fierce challenge of the saint. But I shall argue that history also teaches that we can come to an understanding of the tragic complexity of the human condition and work to mitigate the damage we do to one another. The way to begin the turnaround is by telling the truth about ourselves to ourselves. Radical honesty about ourselves is the ground in which pity can flower.