Evil's guises

The Disney machine is so successful partly because it feeds with colour-coded morality nostalgia for a world of simpler Manichean oppositions. It's also a relief I suppose, for people to see evil so manifest because in real life it is often not; it is a good method actor, a chameleon; more than that, it is naturalised as part of the climate, so that only occasionally where there's turbulence, do we remember there is an atmosphere, and it's there in it, all the time, refracting our light and inflecting the way we see. It is an acclimatisation. Banned as essentialist, chased from smart discourse, evil is happy to perform its endlessly protean incarnations insidiously, subtly, in broad daylight.

It seizes any tropes made available by new technologies and their associated cultures and pleasures. It works by telling us that the world is so complex, the machinations of international capitalism so mystifying there is nothing an individual can do. Evil inhabits the non-resistance to itself, and is enlarged by this. It is the unconscious or wilful forgetting that others are having their lives torn apart, the failure to put one's voice to collective denunciation of systematic or institutionally reproduced violence, whether this discriminates by gender, race, or class.

Evil is a failure to recognise the sacredness of alterity, that the other also is a subject, not an object to be incorporated into a cannibalistic, infantile self. Yet the swoons of religious or erotic transport, the giddy loss of self in the other, the veering away from such categories as subject and object in mutual infolding, are not necessarily distinguishable from the sly invasions of evil; if evil came fanged and snarling, spitting toxins, Mephisto as cane toad in a suit, it would be easy. But the problem is that
evil borrows all the guises of seduction. Mephisto is one cool dude who always makes himself attractive and is much more amusing than God. Evil offers transformation; evil comes marketing a plot. It's only Satan who can kick a narrative along. Evil seeks sweet revenge for damage long since done to its own moral being, it comes with flattery, a virus with a visa written in the language of generosity, wanting to infuse memory of its wound into the blood of the raw recruit. It's not for nothing that in the Judeo-Christian tradition Lucifer was God's favourite boy. Evil is always repetition of evil done. God gave no second chance to little Lucifer and Lucifer’s pain is cosmically repercussive. Evil also can come coated as virtue wounded, as righteousness. It finds in a vulnerable candidate a site to displace the memory of its own wounding, for the infusion and relay of that venom. Evil needs a host already visited. The perpetrators of evil have suffered violence to their own beings, or been brought up in a climate where it is normalised, where sadistic acts pass without comment, habitual, casual, as a naturalised aspect of femininity (bitching) or masculinity (bullying, sledging).

**Evil as cleverness**

Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint, I am the spirit who endlessly negates or denies, Goethe’s Mephisto said. Negativity, denial, negation. Humour is fuelled by these; people count as wits perpetrating them; evil can happen with the instantaneity of a pun, in the unreflecting side-swope of a joke; the devil of wisecrack skewers her victim for the sake of entertaining a third party. In love with its own velocity, cleverness forgets the other; alongside, devoutly defending the complex humanity of the joke’s victim, Goodness is the party pooper, looking very dumb. (Saturnine, melancholy, Moliere’s Alceste turns in despair from all the froth and casually cruel wit of the salons.) Still the spirit of perpetual denial is what is also known as critical thought.

One must not look stupid: therefore trust nothing, doubt everything. After many years of gape-mouthed gullibility, unable to see irony, I eventually woke up to the fact that that negation or universal scepticism was equivalent to critical intelligence. One must doubt everything. In a sense, though, the critical mind can be a rude negator, and a cruel one. It’s the tradition the west is so proud of but often what counts as intelligent debate involves slashing through the other’s discourse, puncturing their reasoning, demolishing as useless anecdote their insufficient-
ly examined premise, forgetting that this might be their heart's testimony, their authentic habitation - their true story.

The decades of so called postmodernity, from the sixties at least, have implied a difficulty in claiming anything beyond a local viability for any moral position because cultural relativism has prevailed. One of the great problems of postmodern consumerism, despite the apparent good in the levelling of cultural hierarchies, is that democracy implies choice only for the Happy Few; the levelling of high and low culture through the electronic marketplace of images screens us from the persistence of hierarchies of the most outrageously oppressive kind, ensuring the reproduction of pain and dispossession. Evil has happily pursued its course with genocidal wars in Rwanda, Somalia, the Balkans, Kosovo, Chechnia, while many intellectuals and artists were promoting the positivity of 'perversion' or sado-masochistic practices and babbling about semiospheres, talking down the essentialism of those who would bring notions of morality back into cultural analysis and production.

**Evil as denial**

"Fuck me white", one of the Nyoongar characters jokes bitterly in Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*.¹ In this beautiful, complex, and disturbing book, Kim Scott sets the imaginative reactivation of events alongside documents testifying to the genocidal impact in the southwest of Australia of a eugenicist dream: to breed out Aboriginality. Through the mutual imbrication of past and present, *Benang* shows how history denied is toxically active. Only when remembrance is allowed expression and confronted with clear-eyed recognition and apology can the massive abscess be lanced and society move on toward some health. Evil infects us all as long as we tacitly acquiesce to our leaders' denial of the Stolen Generations and promotion of a mythic version of the Anzac Generation. Policies which, in the name of 'protection', were conceived in a will to cultural genocide and were expressed in insidious forms of physical genocide, and often in outright massacre. Many non-indigenous Australians would prefer to agree with Howard that they shouldn't have to carry any guilt for policies they had nothing to do with. We non-indigenous Australians, who inherited from the invaders our privilege based on the expropriation of land and ensured by skin colour have everything to do with the past. We profited from the dispossession of Australia's indigenous people and are still profiting. Of course guilt
reduced to sentimentalised rhetoric is useless. Action is not.

Forgetting and denial are themes I’ve tried to explore in my novel, *Prowler.* I try to show that in nursing one’s own narcissistic wound and forgetting the pain of the other, one is condemned to a depressive repetition. Like Australia, itself. I have tried to show through a handful of characters that evil can be perpetrated through a romance of the other so sentimentalised and reductive that it entails oblivion.

**Evil as passivity**

We prefer caricatures because the deep anxiety is that we participate in it more or less passively, in a banal way, all the time. Evil is an adjustment to the habitual denial of choice. *But what can you do? The case is closed.* I only have to cast an unsentimental eye on my own sloth, my moral pusillanimity, my failure to act politically, my deep laziness, my coddling of petty grief and wounds, my numbing out, and I see something like evil at work.

Insidious, evil moves through a slow narrative. It is the slow, festering accumulation of the undone, the putting off and putting off. Death in every medieval morality play finds its candidate a beggar for time. The evil is postponement, procrastination, or being in the thrall of any morbid idea or substance-enabled numbing, which ensures the paralysis of the will. It is there in Baudelaire and to a pathological degree in Mallarme. It is one of the great themes of modernity, perhaps because of the alienation of consciousness from the forces of production, the severance of art from labour:

> Can virginal, vivacious, resplendent Today
> Ever with one drunken wing blow break
> The haunting of old ice on that forgotten lake
> Transparent glacier of flights too long delayed?

What interests me as a writer, and more particularly as a novelist, is this relationship of consciousness to time, to duration. What constitutes an act of negligence is not so much the dramatic moment of denial like Peter’s of Christ but the gradual, ineluctable accretion of moments when one might have acted, when inertia, or moral sloth, become conclusive with the forces of oppression and consign the other to oblivion.

Sartre said of Baudelaire that he chose to be at fault, a sinner. In his study of *Literature and Evil,* Bataille asks if that isn’t rather that he
chose poetry, which necessitates hard, cold self-reflexivity. “A man necessarily rises in judgement against himself and cannot recognise himself nor love himself to the end unless he knows himself to be the object of a condemnation.” Unless he figures he is at fault. Baudelaire watches himself watching; never loses self-consciousness in the act of seeing. It’s this relentlessly unforgiving gaze he fixes on himself that on occasion makes his poetry rise to great emotion. “Mere des souvenirs, Maitresse des Maitresses... Mother of remembrance, mistress of mistresses/To thee all my desire and all my distress.” After all the exoticising and sadistic celebrations of his life’s companion, Jeanne Duval, after all his dandified demonism and narcissistic exaltation of his wounds, this broken voice of syphilitic middle age addressing in the language of prayer the broken, also syphilitic wreck of the beauty Jeanne Duvall had been, makes it hard not to read “Le Balcon” (“The Balcony”) without weeping. Cautionary notes against the waste of time and talent through indulgence and laziness appear again and again in Baudelaire’s notebooks: “Hygiene. Work. Poetry. Do not go to the café.”

But the poetry, when Baudelaire breaks from paralysing fascination and when, for a moment, will is wrested from its current snare (hashish, opium, wine, sex, or beauty) the voice carries the grain of authentic remorse and can attract some kind of grace. Remorse is the muse of so many of the Flowers of Evil. Remorse is the gnawing of conscience through time. It’s time that makes sinners of us, the cumulative not-doing. It’s recognising this through time that perhaps makes redemption also thinkable, and poetry, always retroactive, aware of its wake, kills time.

Most of us don’t actively seek the pain of the other, to fill wells with the mutilated, to leave toxic sludge where once were lakes, to tear children from their families because they are ethnically “mixed”. But most evil comes in the disguise of apathy or sentimental denial.

This might not be consciously intentional: one can dupe oneself, calling by the name of love the will to dominate and the pleasure in having one’s ego played by the other, calling devotion this mad pursuit, this baiting of the other and then declaring ‘it’ over when one has exhausted her or him of their substance. The acts of seduction are heady, in the name of the seducer’s self-improvisation, perhaps even in the name of experience garnered for art’s sake, but looked at from the position of abandonment are frequently indistinguishable from acts of predatory cruelty.
Evil is not an absolute, of course; it is relative, all in inclination, in the insidious, asymptotic approach: to write about it I can simply magnify my own tendencies. Writing is an ethical laboratory, a rehearsal for a performance, where the what-if's are tracked to their worst or best consequences: the notion of parallel lives, of literature as an imaginative ethical experiment, isn't new. Writers often wonder if their need for material doesn't plot their lives in certain directions. It's true that for the sake of their work writers are capable of stealing other people's stories and then out of shame forgetting that the person displaced and disguised and redistributed amongst characters might be still walking wounded outside their book. In a sense one always is at risk in writing because any representation will inevitably entail a reduction of complexity. Representing the other is perhaps always a matter of betrayal: does the pen always wound because representing always punctures the self-image of the other?

I once had a visit from Mephista.

That first day of her stay she said, smiling, as if in admiration, "You don't understand evil, do you? Perhaps you need to, for your work. It lacks those shadows. Yes, that's what it is," she said, pleased to have identified the flaw. And she was launched into a torrent of denunciation. She was right. I hadn't really considered the question of its actually lodging in a being; that individuals might nurse deeply malicious intent. For a moment there was a Faustian quiver: should I lay myself bare to the wounds she wanted to inflict, let her infuse her venom and through this envenoming, this new knowledge, write with more shadows? All the while through the house while I made her meals and tried to work Mephista's voice pursued me with its mellifluous eloquence.

At the worst of it, when she located the pathological moment on which she claimed I had elaborated my identity, and announced there was indeed something monstrous in me, probably madness to boot, I thought if I survived this at least I would know something I hadn't before. It was true I had been sentimental about women and had not explored in my writing how they can contrive to destroy one another, how their lust for gloating maternal power can subjugate in the name of love or friendship. I had forgotten about the way a certain slave mentality can turn into toxic jealousy. I'd been naive in my private snow-dome romance of the sisterhood. I thought, Well, here we go and to think I invited her! She came to stay! I detached myself in order to observe my own slow dismantling through the sustained lashings of her tongue.

Whether I wanted to or not, Mephista found the lesion through an old
guilt to infuse the venom of self-doubt, undoing my composure, taking me back to schoolyard again where I was orphan, impostor, cheat; one whose desperate need to call her mother back from the wax and wire mannequin she'd become made me too hungry and sly. I was almost radiant with it, pregnant with it, the more she went on. Almost for the sake of my own wounding and thus my own propensity to wound, I was going to bring into my world the idea of evil. I was going to find a character and the character would be a wordsmith like her, and manic like her, and would systematically dismantle the woman he inveigled into his house, until the sight of her, utterly broken would offer her daughter, vicariously humiliated, the embryo scenario for revenge.

Thus is set the relay of evil, perhaps remorse, and later, some sort of recovery through redemptive recognition. She, my daughter character, will in turn seduce and betray. But what then will betrayal be, but a kind of slicing off of her own wounded self? This kind of story needs the thickness of simulated duration, that is, something like the novel.

**Evil, time, redemption**

I would argue for a conservative function of the sustained narrative because it offers anachronistically a different kind of temporality from film, video, and television. The novel allows for the vicarious experience of duration: of evasion, forgetting, then jolting or shameful memory, and ultimately, perhaps, active remembrance. It can stretch its concertina miraculously to enfold landscapes within landscapes, or alternatively find shards of traumatic remembrance in its intimate tissue: thus offering away from the sped up e-world, a space for the anachronistic project of moral reflection. It engages us actively in the translation from the personal to the social dimensions of memory, a process essential to a healthy culture. To remember is only one step towards frustrating the repetition of evil. By dramatising individual acts of remembrance, and especially now in so-called postmodernity, writing can help. This is a necessary function: not to strive to rival the fast jump-cutting of video or the cinematic thrall of the visual. More importantly the novel can let readers into its imaginative cumulus, its slow spaces offering them the massive time of memory, in which there might be something like redemption.
Different versions of this paper were given at the Perth 2000 Writers Festival and at the Queenscliffe 2000 Feast of Words.

Endnotes

2 Marion Campbell, Prowler. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999.
3 Trans. mine.
   Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd’hui
   Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre
   Ce lac dur, oublié, que hante sous le givre
   Le transparent glacier de vols qui n’ont pas fui.