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A Touch of Evil

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> It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas that seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance … totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace.
>
> But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.
>
> ––James Baldwin, "Me and My House" (1955)

> Evil is silly … it may be horrible … but it's predictable … it needs a headline, it needs blood … it needs all that *costume* in order to get anybody's attention. … But the opposite, which is survival, blossoming, endurance, those things … . are more *fascinating*. … We are already born, we are

> going to die … so *you have to do something interesting, [something] that you respect, in between*.
>
> ––Toni Morrison, Interview (2001; emphases added)

This brief meditation on what the 2024 US presidential election means to me as a naturalized US citizen and an Eastern European immigrant resonates with both Baldwin's and Morrison's words. As someone who voted for the greater good—or a lesser evil—I am profoundly disillusioned and disappointed with my American home where the twenty-first-century version of fascism is now triumphantly arising. "How could you let it happen?" a Polish TV journalist friend asked, weeping on the phone the morning after (we both wept). Yes, the Depression-era writer Sinclair Lewis was right; it *can* happen here! The election was won in cyberspace, and we soon agreed it could not have gone any other way, for no one was interested in the truth or untrendy "greater good." The media led the way by giving evil overexposure; the trolls did the rest. Complex truths, facts, and explanations that would have educated audiences about the reality of our situation fell on deaf ears among the populace that does not know how to read anything longer than a simple sentence. The disconnect between what is real and what is not continues to widen. Make-believe wins the battle for our attention in a culture where profitability remains paramount. And that is evil, too, and it must change. How?

In a 1963 interview, Baldwin explained the tremendous power of literature to both heal and train one for the good fight: "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoyevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive." [1] That literature engenders intimate connections between one and the rest of humanity echoes in Baldwin's early book review of the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. Baldwin proclaims that art "has its roots in the lives of human beings: the weakness, the strength, the absurdity … It belongs to all of us, and this includes our foes, who are as desperate and as vacuous and as blind as we are and who can only be as evil as we are ourselves."[2] Reading makes you know yourself as much as your enemy. It enables you to see through your lies and recognize the evil inside your soul. If you want to learn how to read yourself and others, you must learn how to read books. The trouble is, hardly anyone seems to do it anymore.

Evil has always thrived on stitching sound bites, outrage, and reactivity into a superficial garb, "all that *costume*" that grabs attention but teaches nothing, as Morrison reminds us.[3] Today, we wear cyberspace couture to hide who we are from ourselves and each other. Hard truths are uncomfortable and require the labor of self-reckoning. Instead, we can focus on the emperor's newest clothes and thus forget that this is how liars and murderers cover themselves. Our misinformation age no longer needs an emperor—a mere costume, an empty pile of textiles is enough. It signifies

nothing yet occupies us and colonizes our minds. Like Europeans after World War I, in a few short years, Americans became blind to the evil that is simple, banal, even pathetic, but that surrounds us in an ever-tightening grip. (Morrison's dismissal of evil as "silly" echoes Hannah Arendt's famous post-World War II injunction rather unfortunately for our moment.) Addicted to dopamine hits of the unreal, Americans quickly embrace the privilege of "voting one's conscience" with righteous pride and indignation, unaware that their doing so has been the plan all along. The emperor always "needs blood." We should never willingly give it.

Evil always slays, and has slain unsurprisingly in this land, because too many voters still lack self-awareness combined with the long and honest view of history. In 1923, D. H. Lawrence pointed out the young American nation's costume of innocence covering the soul of a killer. The make-believe of national history is like that costume: "The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom."[4] The reason why the right-wing parties lost recent national elections in Poland and in the UK, and why this did not happen here, was because memories of World War II are still fresh in Europe. Voters there know that preventing evil must always be the paramount goal. My University of Central Lancashire friend and Fulbright scholar, Alan Rice, confirmed this: Even if you have to hold your nose while casting your ballot for a lesser evil, you do it, for the greater good demands such a sacrifice. Being a responsible citizen means doing what is right, even if you must offend your ego or fiercely held ideological commitments in the process. Unwillingness to do that cost all Americans this last election. (In the swing state of Michigan, where I live, this was tallied up unequivocally.) Those who did not vote, as much as those who voted for evil, helped elect the man who claims that those who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2020, were "patriots" and "heroes." They were pardoned in 2025 with much fanfare. Written by the victors, national histories lie no matter who wins, I am told, but I find it of small comfort, yet again.

The image of the South African immigrant tech billionaire Elon Musk executing a Nazi salute on CNN will remain burnt into my memory as much as those of Adolf Hitler that haunted my childhood. I was born and raised in Poland. I defected from my odious Communist/Catholic country in 1987 while, unbeknownst to me, the Cold War was slowly waning. Today, the war has come back with a vengeance, all over the world, and inside the minds of people who are now my fellow citizens. As Anne Applebaum and David Sanger caution, authoritarianism is seductive, and the New Cold War enriches the few in power across the globe.[5] As an educator, I am frightened by what the US's digitally driven turn toward a totalitarian ethno-state is doing to our minds, and especially to the minds of our young people.

Having been brought up on, with … even *by* the Internet, the young today seem to have fewer tools than I had, ironically enough, when I was growing up in Poland all those years ago. We had to be real for we did not have social media and smartphones, obviously, and hardly ever watched state-run television for its censorship and party line. But we had books, and samizdat literature (illegal publications that circulated clandestinely) and we read voraciously and discussed it all endlessly. We also heard

stories that our parents and grandparents told us about the Nazi occupation; we were all taken on school trips to Auschwitz/Oświęcim. What we read, heard, saw, and talked about made us rooted and forever wary of sleekly prepackaged propagandists. Literature, theater, and art—no matter how censored—helped those of us who wanted to learn how to decipher newspeak and false histories and how to deconstruct a pretty costume. Arts and humanities have always stood up for social justice and preserved voices and stories that those in power would cover up or erase. We would be wise to defend them with all our might now, before this emperor bans them completely, or begins locking up artists and intellectuals in prisons and insane asylums like Stalin did in the USSR and Putin continues to do in Russia.

I came to the US in the same year Baldwin died in his home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France. What I already knew as a budding literature scholar was that words and meaning mattered; that what and how we said things to one another mattered. Most of all, I knew that reading books was one of the best tools to resist and fight evil both outside and inside one's own self. As Baldwin lay dying in November 1987 in France, he expressed disappointment in his birthplace in words that ring painfully true today: "I don't see anything in American life—for myself—to aspire to .... Nothing at all. It's all so very false. So shallow, so plastic, so morally and ethically corrupt." In conversations with my son, Cazmir, who is twenty-three and studying for a political science degree in Belgium, we often agree that the corruption Baldwin speaks of has not changed; if anything, tech has made it more vicious and ubiquitous.

Caz is finishing college this year and intends to pursue a postgraduate career in the European Union. My son has had all the advantages of being raised in a friendly, liberal college town in Michigan. He is trilingual and has regularly traveled between my country of birth and his own. Why, despite all this privilege, would he choose to abandon his country? The answer he gave me is twofold and reflects my feelings. Like mother, like son: First, the ossification of the two-party system leaves no hope for young people of his generation that this could ever change given its roots in racist exploitation and inequity. Second, young folks do not buy the lies that the United States is an authentic, participatory democracy. They have learned their country's painful history and understand that a multi-party parliamentary system that goes hand in hand with representative politics is not possible if the power continues going back and forth between Republicans and Democrats like a mad tennis match.

I, too, want a country that relies on unencumbered access to voting, where one person means one vote, and where we can cast ballots securely, in many places, for several days, without missing work or neglecting family. Imagine elections without the shenanigans of the Electoral College that was founded by and for white slave owners *and* imagine campaigns without big money super-pacs. The impossibility of this vision matches only the spreading of evil we are witnessing today. This brings to mind Germany in the 1930s. We all know how that ended. No wonder those who have the privilege to do so may want to get out. I remain interested, and I guard my own heart. Bruised and worn out, I intend to keep on keeping/reading on and hold on to hope that

some young folks will throw away their phones and join me. We've lots of stuff to talk about.

Notes

[1] James Baldwin, "Me and My House" (later retitled "Notes of a Native Son"), *Harper's*, November 1955, 54–61.

[2] James Baldwin, Review of "*Mother by Maxim Gorky,*" in *Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings,* ed. Randall Kenan (Vintage, 2011), 244.

[3] Toni Morrison, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *Connecticut Forum*, May 4, 2001, https://www.ctforum.org/event/a-conversation-between-toni-morrison-and-frank-mccourt/, emphasis added.

[4] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Thomas Seltzer, 1923).

[5] Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Knopf Doubleday, 2020); and David E. Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Penguin Random House, 2024).

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