

## **Yvonne A. Owour (Kenya)**

### **The horror, the horror: Reflections on Reaction**

Once upon a time...while unlocking the secrets of the universe...William Wordsworth  
*Wandered lonely as a cloud...*

*That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
 When all at once I saw a crowd,  
 A host, of golden daffodils;  
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze...*

But then...

*The horror, the horror*, Joseph Conrad observed.

*Uhhh...translation:* The theme of evil intrudes into the beginning notes of a benign musing about Daffodils.

*The reaction:* "Exterminate the brutes" of "something that lurks beneath." Something which causes existence to ache, to break.

*The reaction:* The construction of many aphorisms, myths, songs, poems, onomatopoeic utterances (*muhaha*<sup>1</sup>), parables, sayings and clichés that have evolved around that sudden absence of life that terrifies existence, the *absent present thing* that is known by the generic term "evil." And like God-the-Immutable, recognized by its character rather than its form.

And Writers, being ravens of experiences as you well know, recognize "evil" as excellent source material for the construction of literary sculptures. (But the writer may also choose to concentrate his or her life work on the contemplation of the daffodils of existence.)

*A peek from a part of my window into the universe:...*

In one of my short stories, "The Knife Grinder's Tale"—pounded out of sheer reactionary rage at the meaninglessness of the deaths of two brothers who were stoned in Kenya this February by a group of "upright citizens" who thought they "looked like" thieves—the protagonist, Ogwang, looks into the eyes of one of his murderers and recognizes evil while the man glares at Ogwang and sees an evil which he shall exterminate.

*Whose gaze is it anyway and what is the truth?*

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<sup>1</sup> (*Where muhaha symbolises reaction and response to the enigma of evil—acceptance, laughter or sarcasm or Elmore Leonard who makes the gaze on evil all so "cool"*)

Lightly probing the etymology of “evil,” it seems that as a concept it has outgrown its origins. It was translated in the past as *uppy* and then *bad*, before becoming the sort of omnipresent-omnipotent presence, characterized by the likes of Darth Vader.

Dictionary descriptions propose *morally reprehensible*: “*an impulse for bad*,” “*repulsive*,” “*offensive*,” “*inferior*,” “*terrifying*,” “*misfortune-causing*,” “*sin*”... You get the idea that evil is acknowledged as present but cannot really be named.

Does evil exist? I don’t have an absolute answer, neither is it my place to construct one. But as human beings don’t we recognize the feeling of *not right*, a hard to pin-point “badness” that offends something primal of our lives? We recognize this “thing in the landscape of our dramatic existence,” and observe its startling simplicity.

Banal things: like the nineteen steps from the train to the crematorium at Auschwitz for example or three handsome boys laughing when the police come to arrest them for torturing a cat to death. A family man in Burundi jovially negotiating manner of death with his murderers: one bullet costs 150 USD, decapitation by machete—free.

The mysterious things that defy naming: The mother drowning her five children because voices in her head told her to do it? The cherished father hanging himself, with no explanation, knowing that his fourteen-year-old son will be home in time from school to find him?

We recognize the thing that makes our stomachs clench in these life-story lines. We cannot explain it, but can we describe the feeling of “the evil thing” in order to...exorcise it? That word, *exorcism*, and its connectivity to evil we-cannot-name. Exorcism and the surprise-horror of glimpsing the thing that distorts our inner face.

It is Conrad’s cry through Kurtz, “Exterminate the brutes.”

It is what we do in our myriad ways, like writing rites of exorcism.

*Once upon a time...in a blue cabin hewn into the water-worn rocks of the old mountains—something seethed with hate and rage and choked on its own screaming.... Outside, the cold wind soused with the scent of honey moaned through the grass and the late season daffodils, rusted and yellow, waved...*

We are nervous—that maybe, because “this evil thing” is of our human experience, it is not just of us, it could be...us.

Makes our hair stand on end. Butterflies and dragons in our bellies...and we look over our shoulders and leave the night-light on...and in between dreaming we pray that this thing will leave us alone.

In the story, the hateful living thing will roam the community and sow seeds of fear/hate/ugliness/death/meaninglessness/chaos/that thing that appalls our within-ness. And we will be horrified that blood is wasted. Spilled like spit. We are sickened by the methods, the rational methods of causing anguish and forcing the soul to reveal itself. We are filled with the inexorable urge to purge, *exterminate the brute*. The urge becomes the stuff of nightmares drawn on pages—the human experience as source material—name it, shame it, face it, eradicate it, laugh at it—exterminate it so that we can sing with the daffodils dancing in the wind. The rhapsody of the human being is ruptured by evil's searing, jarring note, the thing that sits wrong in an otherwise perfect universe that simply will not go away.

*A morality tale from my Kenya Luo community:*

*Chon gi lala* (Once upon a time) ...

His name is Tekayo. A good man, a beloved grandfather who herds his livestock and thinks of life. One quiet sun-drenched day, a predatory bird drops a sliver of liver which lands at Tekayo's feet. He thanks God for His omnipotent providence as he builds a charcoal grill. He roasts the liver and eats it. Ah! The sweetest thing ever savored and it fills his senses. The quest to find another sliver becomes Tekayo's obsession. Tekayo spends day after day, season after season, killing all manner of animal, bird, insect—anything that might have a liver. The story ends when Tekayo, in the middle of a storytelling session for his favorite grandchild, leaps upon and kills the child, extracting the liver. Here he finds that which he has sought. And the taste is as he imagined it would be. He kills another of his grandchildren—he becomes what in your culture is called a serial killer—a person moved by a chaotic, ravenous hunger which he visits on other lives. To purge himself of the hunger, Tekayo chooses to chew on his own tongue, a prelude to consuming himself.

...

Even among Wordsworth's gentle daffodils waving yellow on pure sod, a type of evil is lurking to spoil the picture of perfection, or maybe even—dare we suggest this (of course we do)—complete it? Neath those daffodils there is a worm that feeds on the very yellow of the flowers. I think, to those daffodils waving in the wind, the worm is pure, creepy crawly evil.

There is a beautiful picture I wanted to show you. You may have already seen it. The photo of a starving child, dark eyes wide open dying. A fat vulture waits close by. His eyes are on the child's eyes. The child died. The photojournalist, a South African, won several international prizes for this picture. I read that soon after this, he killed himself. I have wondered what it was he saw that suddenly made his existence intolerable. What it was that could not be simply washed away with prizes.

*Here is a well-known hand washing story (or how to try to not be implicated).*

Once upon a time, a man had been accused, scourged, beaten and had thorns pressed into his head. A Roman Procurator before whom he barely stood said to the waiting ordinary folk:

*Ecce Homo?* Behold the man.

A gasp of horror. "Is this of us?"

Exterminate the brutes, or brute in this case, the Procurator's audience shouts. And it is done through crucifixion.

But watch the Roman Procurator. He calls for water and washes his hands. There is an historical rumor that he shall spend the rest of his life calling for water and washing his hands until they bleed into stumps.

The *urge to purge* when a human becomes conscious of a disorder in life in which the one who is now conscious is oddly implicated, forced to a battleground for meaning, for freedom, for light, for peace, for the integrity to say: "Ecce homo" without being ironic or eaten by grief.

*Ecce homo.*

I am a human being who writes, in awe of life and the shape of my existence, the existence itself, the existence of others, creatures...the relationships and connections felt. With the tools of text, it is not the sequence of events that I seek to make sense of as much as the quest for the right question, the proper way to say "Why?" so perfectly that it shall elicit the perfect answer.

I was six-years-old when I stumbled upon a book with pictures and simple stories taken from the life experiences of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Names that tasted good on the tongue.

Hyperventilating, I went to my parents: Are these people? Like us? What's happened? Why? Did God allow it? Why? Poor parents, they lisped their horror. They said: Only God knows.

I started dreaming of Auschwitz and Birkenau, first faces and then stories of lives and names of people I did not know.

In my mixed-up teenage years, I bumped into Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Do you remember the line, I forget who utters it—"The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man."

*This is also what I think:* I am implicated, because I am human. And it is not possible to be still lest the silence that accuses will overwhelm my existence. I don't choose to recognize these experiences. They appear and demand my attention whether I like it or not.

I write partly because I am haunted by the life of *this thing*, this *absence-presence* which negates existence,—and if God is Existence, I am haunted by the tension of not screaming out like Nietzsche did: “God is Dead.” I wish this thing, “evil,” would remain contained in a sealed container, labeled and buried; if only it did not seek human company and consume meaning. War bothers me. It feels as if this awful presence roars with fiery laughter in the arena of war where humans slaughter humans and couch it in literary phrase-turns that squash the screams into silence, “collateral damage,” “civilian casualties.” It is as if this thing that lurks beneath is laughing at my existence.

*Ecce homo.*

War; this illogical, irrational gesture of the human spirit—I am haunted by the seeming helplessness of life in its chaotic, beautiful wilderness. When Rwanda’s genocide unfolded, we witnessed “the horror, the horror” walk in. We could have shouted “Halt!” We did not—in Kenya we levied extra taxes on fleeing souls seeking refuge and peace. *Reaction:* I wrote out a letter of resignation from the human race and it became a tangible encounter with Divine Silence—*Deus Absconditus*. (A letter should at least be acknowledged as received.) Transcending Silence, the living space between the words, and the sigh between human experiences. Silence of silence. Here was a greater terror than any evil. Thankfully. Because, here, solitary Hope strolls through in a paradox—and in the light of its eyes, redemption can be proposed. This then is how I write the rite of exorcism and cover it with daffodils.

*The beginning.*

“In the beginning was the Word...it is said. And the light shines in the darkness, contained within it, not apart from it or intruding upon it...I listen to characters suggesting that *the secret is in the gaze and the gaze is informed by what lurks in the heart of the seeker*. Here we are then, reluctantly mesmerized by the chaotic beauty of the mystery of evil, and what it adds to our human existence. Here we are chasing scattered letters, the cut-off screams of roaring, ravaged souls that roam the cosmos seeking the light of the ultimate word. Here too, the worm among daffodils presents its list of justifications: just doing its job, right to exist, can’t help wormliness. And frankly—sod the daffodils. Worms exist. What do you do about it? Maybe ask the earth which sustains both daffodil and worm. (*Which is another way of saying...whatever!*)