

Evil

By LANCE MORROW

I think there should be a Dark Willard.

In the network's studio in New York City, Dark Willard would recite the morning's evil report. The map of the world behind him would be a multicolored Mercator projection. Some parts of the earth, where the overnight good prevailed, would glow with a bright transparency. But much of the map would be speckled and blotched. Over Third World and First World, over cities and plains and miserable islands would be smudges of evil, ragged blights, storm systems of massacre or famine, murders, black snows. Here and there, a genocide, a true abyss.

"*Homo homini lupus*," Dark Willard would remark. "That's Latin, guys. Man is a wolf to man."

Dark Willard would report the natural evils—the outrages done by God and nature (the cyclone in Bangladesh, an earthquake, the deaths by cancer). He would add up the moral evils—the horrors accomplished overnight by man and woman. Anything new among the suffering Kurds? Among the Central American death squads? New hackings in South Africa? Updating on the father who set fire to his eight-year-old son? Or on those boys accused of shotgunning their parents in Beverly Hills to speed their inheritance of a \$14 million estate? An anniversary: two years already since Tiananmen Square.

The only depravity uncharted might be cannibalism, a last frontier that fastidious man has mostly declined to explore. Evil is a different sort of gourmet.

The oil fires over Kuwait would be evil made visible and billowing. The evil turns the very air black and greasy. It suffocates and blots out the sun.

The war in the gulf had an aspect of the high-tech medieval. What Beelzebubs flew buzzing through the sky on the tips of Scuds and smart bombs, making mischief and brimstone? Each side demonized the other, as in every war: *Gott mit Uns*. Saddam Hussein had George Bush down as the Evil

One. George Bush had Saddam down as Hitler. In most of the West, Hitler is the 20th century's term for Great Satan. After the war, quick and obliterating, Hussein hardly seems worthy of the name of evil anymore.

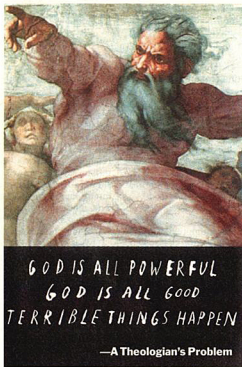
Is there more evil now, or less evil, than there was five years ago, or five centuries?

The past couple of years has brought a windfall of improvements in the world: the collapse of communism; the dismantling of apartheid; the end of the cold war and the nuclear menace, at least in its apocalyptic Big Power form. State violence (in the style of Hitler, Stalin, Ceausescu) seemed to be skulking off in disrepute. Francis Fukuyama, a former U.S. State Department policy planner, even proclaimed "the end of history." The West and democratic pluralism seemed to have triumphed: satellites and computers and communications and global business dissolved the old monoliths in much of the world. Humankind could take satisfaction in all that progress and even think for a moment, without cynicism, of Lucretius' lovely line: "So, little by little, time brings out each several thing into view, and reason raises it up into the shores of light." But much of the world has grown simultaneously darker.

Each era gets its suitable evils. The end of the 20th century is sorting out different styles of malignity. Evil has been changing its priorities, its targets, its cast of characters.

The first question to be asked, of course, is this: Does evil exist? I know a man who thinks it does not. I know another man who spent a year of his childhood in Auschwitz. I would like to have the two of them talk together for an afternoon, and see which one comes away persuaded by the other.

The man who does not believe in the existence of evil knows all about the horrors of the world. He knows that humanity is often vicious, violent, corrupt, atrocious. And that nature's cruelties and caprices are beyond rational account-



ing: Bangladesh does not deserve the curse that seems to hover over it. But the man thinks that to describe all that as evil gives evil too much power, too much status, that it confers on what is merely rotten and tragic the prestige of the absolute. You must not allow lower instincts and mere calamities to get dressed up as a big idea and come to the table with their betters and smoke cigars. Keep the metaphysics manageable: much of what passes for evil (life in Beirut, for example) may be just a nightmare of accidents. Or sheer stupidity, that sovereignty, unacknowledged force in the universe.

The man's deeper, unstated thought is that acknowledging evil implies that Satan is coequal with God. Better not to open that door. It leads into the old Manichaean heresy: the world as battleground between the divine and the diabolical, the outcome very much in doubt: "*La prima luce*," Dante's light of creation, the brilliant ignition of God, against the satanic negation, the candle snuffer. Those uncomfortable with the idea of evil mean this: You don't say that the shadow has the same stature as the light. If you speak of the Dark Lord, of the "dark side of Sinai," do you foolishly empower darkness?

Or, for that matter (as an atheist or agnostic would have it), do such terms heedlessly empower the idea of God? God, after all, does not enjoy universal diplomatic recognition.

Is it possible that evil is a problem that is more intelligently addressed outside the religious context of God and Satan? Perhaps. For some, that takes the drama out of the discussion and dims it down to a paler shade of Unitarianism. Evil, in whatever intellectual framework, is by definition a monster. It has a strange coercive force: a temptation, a mystery, a horrible charm. Shakespeare understood that perfectly when he created Iago in his secular and motiveless malignity.

In 1939, as World War II began, Albert Camus wrote in his notebook: "The reign of beasts has begun." In the past year or two, the reign of beasts seemed to end, in some places anyway: brilliant days, miraculous remissions. But as Jung thought, different people inhabit different centuries. There are many centuries still loose in the world today, banging against one another. The war in

the gulf was in part a collision of different centuries and the cultural assumptions that those centuries carry with them. Camus's beasts are still wandering around in the desert and in the sometimes fierce nationalisms reawakening in the Soviet Union. They are alive and vicious in blood feuds from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka.

Saddam Hussein raised atavistic questions about evil. But the West has grown preoccupied by newer forms—greed, terrorism, drugs, AIDS, crime, child abuse, global pollution, oil spills, acid rain. The fear of nuclear holocaust, which not long ago was the nightmare at the center of the imagination, has receded with amazing speed.

It is touching in this era, and rather strange, that nature, even at its most destructive, has clean hands. Humankind does not. For centuries nature's potential for evil, its overpowering menace, made it an enemy to be subdued. Today, at least in the developed world, nature is the vulnerable innocent. The human is the enemy.

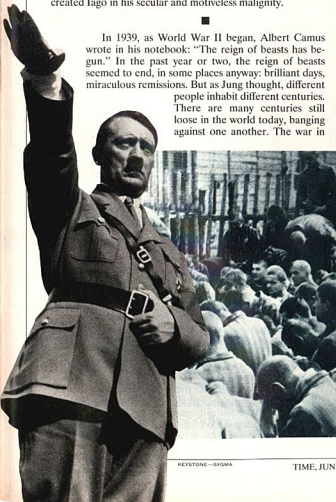
New forms of evil raise new moral questions. Who is to blame for them? Are they natural evils—that is, acts of God and therefore his responsibility, or acts of the blind universe and therefore no one's? Or are they moral evils, acts that men and women must answer for?

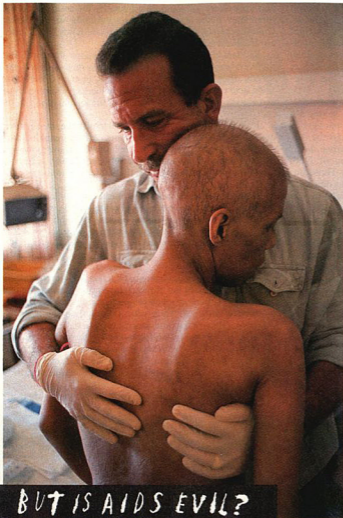
Padrica Caine Hill, former bank teller, Washington mother and wife, dresses her three children one morning, makes breakfast for them, smokes some crack cocaine and lets the kids watch cartoons. Then with a clothesline she strangles eight-year-old Kristine and four-year-old Eric Jr. She tries to strangle two-year-old Jennifer, but leaves the girl still breathing softly on the floor. When the police come, Padrica Hill says she loves her children. Why did she kill them? "I don't know," she answers in apparently genuine bewilderment. "I hadn't planned on it."

Who or what is responsible? The woman herself?

HITLER WAS EVIL ...

He became the century's measure of individual evil, not only because of the carnage—6 million Jews exterminated in camps like Dachau, for example—but also because he invented a new form of systematic malignity. In 1939 Camus wrote that "the reign of beasts has begun."





PHOTOGRAPH BY JANE BIRD

BUT IS AIDS EVIL?

It is. But who is responsible? Nature? The victim? The government and medical research for not finding the cure fast enough? The new plague may stigmatize the suffering it brings. Or else it may turn the disease into a sort of political outrage and a cause.

She did smoke the crack, but presumably the effect she anticipated was a euphoric high, not the death of her children. The drug arrived like Visigoths in her brain and destroyed the civilization there, including the most powerful of human instincts, her mother love. The crack itself? The dealer who sold the crack? The others in the trade—kingpins and mules who brought the cocaine up from South America encased in condoms that they had swallowed? The peasants in Colombia who grew the coca plants in the first place?

The widening stain of responsibility for evil on a constricting planet changes moral contexts. Microevil, the murder of an individual child, becomes part of the macroorganism: all the evils breathe the same air, they have the same circulatory system. They pass through the arteries of the world, from the peasant's coca plant in Colombia to the mother's brain in Washington, thence to her fingers and the clothesline that

kills the children in the middle of morning cartoons.

■ Many writers have said that one of evil's higher accomplishments has been to convince people that it does not exist. Ivan Karamazov's bitter diabolism was a bit different: "If the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness." In a nightmare, Ivan meets the devil, a character of oddly shabby gentility, who mentions how cold it was in space, from which he lately came, traveling in only an evening suit and open waistcoat. The devil speaks of the game of village girls who persuade someone to lick a frosted ax, to which of course the tongue sticks. The devil wonders idly, "What would become of an ax in space?" It would orbit there, "and the astronomers would calculate the rising and setting of the ax." Dostoyevsky's devil was precise, speaking a century before bright metal began to fly up off the earth and circle round it. There is something spookily splendid about evil as an ax in space.

You must ask what evil would be if it did exist. What does the word evil mean when people use it?

Evil means, first of all, a mystery, the *mysterium iniquitatis*. We cannot know evil systematically or scientifically. It is brutal or elusive, by turns vivid and vague, horrible and subtle. We can know it poetically, symbolically, historically, emotionally. We can know it by its works. But evil is sly and bizarre. Hitler was a vegetarian. The Marquis de Sade opposed capital punishment.

Evil is easier than good. Creativity is harder than destructiveness. Dictators have leisure time for movies in their private screening rooms. When Hitler was at Berchtesgaden, he loved to see the neighborhood children and give them ice cream and cake. Saddam Hussein patted little Stuart Lockwood's head with avuncular menace and asked if he was getting enough cornflakes and milk. Stalin for years conducted the Soviet Union's business at rambling, sinister, alcoholic dinner parties that began at 10 and ended at dawn. All his ministers attended, marinating in vodka and terror. Sometimes one of them would be taken away at first light by the NKVD, and never seen again.

Evil is the Bad elevated to the status of the inexplicable. To understand is to forgive. Evil sometimes means the thing we cannot understand, and cannot forgive. The Steinberg case in New York City, in which a lawyer battered his six-year-old foster daughter Lisa to death, is an example. Ivan Karamazov speaks of a Russian nobleman who had his hounds tear an eight-year-old boy to pieces in front of the boy's mother because he threw a stone at one of the dogs. Karamazov asks the bitter question that is at the heart of the mystery of evil, "What have children to do with it, tell me, please?"

■ Evil is anyone outside the tribe. Evil works by dehumanizing the Other. A perverse, efficient logic: identifying others as evil justifies all further evil against them. A man may kill a snake without compunction. The snake is an evil thing, has evil designs, is a different order of being. Thus: an "Aryan" could

kill a Jew, could make an elaborate bureaucratic program of killing Jews. Thus: white men could come in the middle of the night in Mississippi and drag a black man out and hang him.

Getting people to think in categories is one of the techniques of evil. Marxist-Leninist zealots thought of "the bourgeoisie," a category, a class, not the human beings, and it is easy to exterminate a category, a class, a race, an alien tribe. Mao's zealots in the Cultural Revolution, a vividly brainless evil, destroyed China's intellectual classes for a generation.

Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge sent to the killing fields all who spoke French or wore glasses or had soft hands. The Khmer Rouge aimed to cancel all previous history and begin at Year Zero. Utopia, this century has learned the hard way, usually bears a resemblance to hell. An evil chemistry turns the dream of salvation into damnation.

Evil is the Bad hardened into the absolute. Good and evil contend in every mind. Evil comes into its own when it crosses a line and commits itself and hardens its heart, when it becomes merciless, relentless.

William James said, "Evil is a disease." But it can be an atrocious liberation, like the cap flying off a volcano. The mind bursts forth to explore the black possibilities. Vietnam taught many Americans about evil. Hasan i Sabbah, founder of a warrior cult of Ismailis in the 11th century in Persia, gave this instruction: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." It is a modern thought that both charmed and horrified William Burroughs, the novelist and drug addict who like many in the 20th century somehow could not keep away from horror. During a drunken party in Mexico in 1951, Burroughs undertook to play William Tell, using a pistol to shoot a glass off his wife's head. He put a bullet in her brain instead.

Evil is charismatic. A famous question: Why is Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* so much more attractive, so much more interesting, than God himself? The human mind romances the idea of evil. It likes the doomed defiance. Satan and evil have many faces, a flashy variety. Good has only one face. Evil can also be attractive because it has to do with conquest and domination and power. Evil has a perverse fascination that good somehow does not. Evil is entertaining. Good, a sweeter medium, has a way of boring people.

Evil is a word we use when we come to the limit of humane comprehension. But we sometimes suspect that it is the core of our true selves. In *Young Goodman Brown*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Everyman goes to a satanic meeting in a dark wood, and the devil declares, "Evil is the nature of mankind. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race."

Three propositions:

- 1) God is all powerful.
- 2) God is all good.
- 3) Terrible things happen.

As the theologian and author Frederick Buechner has written, the dilemma has always been this: you can match any two of those propositions, but never match all three.

At the beginning of his *Sum-*

ma theologiae, Thomas Aquinas admitted that the existence of evil is the best argument against the existence of God.

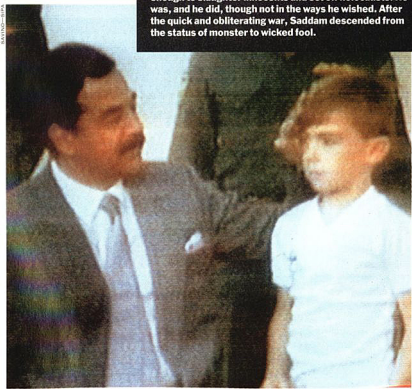
Theologians have struggled for centuries with theodicy, the problem of a good God and the existence of evil. Almost all such exertions have been unconvincing. Augustine, speaking of the struggle to understand evil, at last wrote fatalistically, "Do not seek to know more than is appropriate." At the time of the Black Death, William Langland wrote in *Piers Plowman*: "If you want to know why God allowed the Devil to lead us astray . . . then your eyes ought to be in your arse."

The historian Jeffrey Burton Russell asks, "What kind of God is this? Any decent religion must face the question squarely, and no answer is credible that cannot be given in the presence of dying children." Can one propose a God who is partly evil? Elie Wiesel, who was in Auschwitz as a child, suggests that perhaps God has "retracted himself" in the matter of evil. Wiesel has written, "God is in exile, but every individual, if he strives hard enough, can redeem mankind, and even God himself."

Perhaps evil is an immanence in the world, in the mind, just as divinity is an immanence. But evil has performed powerful works. Observes Russell: "It is true that there is evil in each of us, but adding together even large numbers of individual evils does not explain an Auschwitz, let alone the destruction of the planet. Evil on this scale seems to be qualitatively as well as quantitatively different. It is no longer a personal but a transpersonal evil, arising from some kind of collective unconscious. It is also possible that it is beyond the transpersonal and is truly transcendent, an entity outside as well as inside the

BUT IS SADDAM EVIL?

Before the gulf war, he looked like a devil dangerous enough to slaughter innocents and set off holocausts. He was, and he did, though not in the ways he wished. After the quick and obliterating war, Saddam descended from the status of monster to wicked fool.



human mind, an entity that would exist even if there were no human race to imagine it." So here evil rounds back again into its favored element, mystery.

Perhaps God has other things on his mind. Perhaps man is to God as the animals of the earth are to man—picturesque, interesting and even nourishing. Man is, on the whole, a catastrophe to the animals. Maybe God is a catastrophe to man in the same way. Can it be that God visits evils upon the world not out of perversity or a desire to harm, but because our suffering is a byproduct of his needs? This could be one reason why almost all theodicies have about them a pathetic quality and seem sometimes undignified exertions of the mind.



An eerie scene at the beginning of the *Book of Job*, that splendid treatise on the mysteries of evil, has God and Satan talking to each other like sardonic gentlemen gamblers who have met by chance at the racetrack at Saratoga. God seems to squint warily at Satan, and asks, in effect, So, Satan, what have you been doing with yourself? And Satan with a knowing swagger replies, in effect, I've been around the world, here and there, checking it out. Then God and Satan make a chillingly cynical bet on just how much pain Job can endure before he cracks and curses God.

Satan wanders. Evil is a seepage across borders, across great distances. Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, wrote that a colt in rural Vermont, if it smells a fresh buffalo robe (the colt

having no knowledge or experience of buffalo, which lived on the plains) will "start, snort, and with bursting eyes paw the ground in phrenzies of affright. Here thou beholdest even in a dumb brute the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism of the world."

Evil and good have probably been more or less constant presences in the human heart, their proportions staying roughly the same over the centuries. And perhaps the chief dark categories have remained constant and familiar. The first time that death appeared in the world, it was murder. Cain slew Abel. "Two men," says Elie Wiesel, "and one of them became a killer." The odds have presumably been fifty-fifty ever since. The Old Testament is full of savageries that sound eerily contemporary. (The British writer J.R. Ackerley once wrote to a friend, "I am halfway through *Genesis*, and quite appalled by the disgraceful behavior of all the characters involved, including God.")

Petrarch's rant against the papal court at Avignon in the 14th century sounds like a hyperbolic inventory of life in certain neighborhoods of the late 20th century: "This is a sewer to which all the filths of the universe come to be reunited. Here people despise God, they adore money, they trample underfoot both human laws and divine law. Everything here breathes falsehood; the air, the earth, the houses, and above all, the bedrooms."

Western thought since the Renaissance has considered that the course of mankind was ascending, up out of the shadow of evil and superstition and unreason. Thomas Jefferson, a brilliant creature of the Enlightenment, once wrote, "Barbarism has . . . been receding before the steady step of amelioration; and will in time, I trust, disappear from the earth."

In the 20th century, Lucretius' shores of light vanished like the coasts of Atlantis, carried under by terrible convulsions. The ascendant civilizations (the Europeans, Americans, Japanese)

accomplished horrors that amounted to a usurpation of the power of God over creation. The world in this century went about a work of de-creation—destroying its own generations in World War I; attempting to extinguish the Jews of Europe in the Holocaust, to destroy the Armenian people, the Ukrainian kulaks and, much later, the Cambodians—all the reverberating genocides.

In any case, the 20th century shattered the lenses and paradigms, the very mind, of reason. The universe went from Newton's model to Einstein's, and beyond, into absurdities even more profound. An underlying assumption of proportion and continuity in the world perished. The proportions between cause and effect were skewed. A minuscule event (indeed, an atom) could blossom into vast obliterations. Einstein said God does not play dice with the world. But if there was order, either scientific or moral, in God's universe, it became absurdly inaccessible.

If evil is a constant presence in the human soul, it is also true that there are more souls now than ever, and by that logic both good and evil

BUT IS NATURE EVIL?

The cyclone, we assume, had no terrible intentions. It crashed across Bangladesh with a casual violence and left behind an evil result. When had luck descends repeatedly, destructively, it begins to take on the prestige of a force above nature: a curse.



MURPHY THRENTON/WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES



MAYBE GOD IS IN EXILE

There was a child there—a nine-month-old boy who was standing in his baby walker. He was killed by a bullet the police called random. At the heart of the mystery of evil is Ivan Karamazov's bitter question: "What have children to do with it, tell me, please?"

are rising on a Malthusian curve, or at any rate both good and evil may be said to be increasing in the world at the same rate as the population: 1.7% per annum.

The world is swinging on a hinge between two ages. The prospect awakens, in the Western, secular mind, the idea that all future outcomes, good or evil, are a human responsibility. John Kennedy said in his Inaugural Address, "Here on earth, God's work must surely be our own." When there will no longer be any place to hide, it becomes important to identify the real evils and not go chasing after false evils. It is possible that people will even grow up on the subject of sex.

Religions over many centuries developed elaborate codifications of sin and evil. The Catholic Church, for example, identified Sins that Cry to Heaven for Vengeance, (oppression of the poor, widows and orphans, for example, or defrauding laborers of their wages), Sins Against the Holy Spirit, and so on, sins mortal and venial, virtues cardinal and sins deadly.

With the emergence of a new world will come a recodification of evils. Obviously offenses against the earth are coming to be thought of as evils in ways we would not have suspected a few years ago. The developed world, at least, is forming a consensus that will regard violence to the planet to be evil in the way we used to think of unorthodox sexual practices and partnerships as being outside the realm of accepted conduct.

A Frenchman named Jean Baudrillard recently wrote a book called *The Transparency of Evil*. We live, says Baudrillard, in a postorgiastic age, in which all liberations have been accomplished, all barriers torn down, all limits abolished. Baudrillard makes the (very French) case that evil, far from being undesirable, is necessary—essential to maintaining the vitality of civilization. That suggests a refinement of an old argument favored by Romantics and 19th century anarchists like Bakunin, who said, "The urge for destruction is also a creative urge." It is not

an argument I would try out on Elie Wiesel or on the mother of a political prisoner disappeared by the Argentine authorities.

And yet . . . and yet . . . evil has by these perversities, or good has such resilience, that a powerful (if grotesque) case can be made that Adolf Hitler was the founding father of the state of Israel. Without Hitler, no Holocaust, without Holocaust, no Israel.

Scientists working with artificial intelligence have a fantasy—who knows if it is more than that?—that eventually all the contents of the human brain, a life, can be gradually emptied into a brilliant, nondecaying, stainless, deathless sort of robotic personoid. And when the transfer of all the vast and intricately nuanced matter of the mind and soul has been accomplished, the memories of the cells etched onto microchips, the human body, having been replicated in a better container, will be allowed to wither and die.

Will evil be transferred along with good and installed in the stainless personoid? Or can the scientists sift the soul through a kind of electronic cheesecloth and remove all the ancient evil traces, the reptilian brain, the lashing violence, the tribal hatred, the will to murder? Will the killer be strained out of the soul? Will the inheritance of Cain be left to wither and die with the human husk, the useless flesh?

If so, will grace and love, evil's enemies, wither too? The question goes back to the Garden. Does the good become meaningless in a world without evil? Do the angels depart along with the devils? If the stainless canister knows nothing of evil, will Mozart sound the same to it as gunfire?