Let there be Spaces: Failure to recognize the Autonomy of Others as a Sign of Evil in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *Suspicion*

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**Abstract:** Prior to the 1983 publication of M. Scott Peck’s *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, the diagnosis of evil had never entered the psychiatric lexicon. To allow for this designation within the medical sphere, Dr. Peck’s treatise elucidates the characteristics of both individual and group evil. In the course of his landmark study the then practicing psychiatrist illustrates at least eight characteristics of evil individuals. They are: victimization of body and/or spirit, failure to recognize the separateness of others, depersonalization of others, unmitigated narcissism, the unsubordinated use of power, scapegoating, lying, and the total inability to tolerate legitimate criticism. This presentation will focus exclusively on the second and third characteristics: failure to recognize the separateness of and subsequent depersonalization of others. In order to substantiate the argument that these two manifestations serve as signs of evil, a novel written in both geographical and historical proximity to the Holocaust will be examined: Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *Suspicion*.

**Keywords:** individual evil, depersonalization

Prior to the 1983 publication of M. Scott Peck’s *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil,* the diagnosis of evil had never entered the psychiatric lexicon. To allow for this designation within the medical sphere, Dr. Peck’s treatise elucidates the characteristics of both individual and group evil. In the course of his landmark study the then practicing psychiatrist illustrates at least eight characteristics of evil individuals. They are: victimization of body and/or spirit, failure to recognize the separateness of others, depersonalization of others, unmitigated narcissism, the unsubordinated use of power, scapegoating, lying, and the total inability to tolerate legitimate criticism.

The creation of victims, who in turn can and sometimes do evolve into victimizers, constitutes the first and one of the most blatant characteristics of those considered evil. The second and third characteristics follow logically from the first: failure to recognize the separateness of and subsequent depersonalization of others. This presentation will focus exclusively on these latter two behavioral consequences.

In order to substantiate the argument that these two manifestations serve as signs of evil, a novel written in both geographical and historical proximity to the Holocaust will be examined. In 1953 Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s (1921—1990) *Suspicion* was first published in its entirety. The narrative tells of a Swiss physician, Fritz Emmenberger, during three crucial phases of his life: as a medical student, as a concentration camp physician, and after 1945, as the CEO of a clinic. Hans
Bärlach, a policeman and the novel’s second major figure, endeavors to prove that Emmenberger, presently the administrator of a Zurich hospital, is identical with one Dr. Nehle, who performed medical experiments on prisoners in Stutthof without the benefit of anesthesia. With the assistance of several secondary figures, his Jewish friend, Gulliver, chief among them, Bärlach confirms the suspicion that lies at the novel’s core. (260)

Those repressively as well as consistently seeking to influence others fail to recognize their inherent autonomy, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the obligatory separation between themselves and others. In other words, evil persons endeavor to curtail another’s free will, to thwart their development, their self-actualization. They attempt to do so not for the benefit of the other, but for their own. Permit me to explain. Any mother forcefully trying to dissuade her eight-year old not to continue headlong toward a raging stream obviously intends to foster her child’s welfare. Evil individuals, on the other hand, do not consider, let alone further, the legitimate needs or desires of those they choose to dominate.

Contradicting a prevalent assumption, Scott Peck describes one aspect of loving: “a major characteristic of genuine love is that the distinction between oneself and the other is always maintained and preserved.”iii He continues in emphasizing this crucial requisite repeatedly. “The genuine lover always perceives the beloved as someone who has a totally separate identity. Moreover, the genuine lover always respects and even encourages this separateness and the unique individuality of the beloved.”iv Rainer Maria Rilke phrases this requirement for a successful relationship in more poetic terms: “And this more humane love (which will evolve ever so respectfully and quietly, will resemble that love, which we prepare with considerable effort, considerable travail, that love, which consists of this, that two solitudes protect and limit and greet each other.”v While reflecting upon marital love, Kahlil Gibran emphasizes the identical issues:

\[
\text{[...]} \text{ let there be spaces in your togetherness,} \\
\text{And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.} \\
\text{Love one another but make not a bond of love:} \\
\text{Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your soul.} \\
\text{Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup.} \\
\text{Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.} \\
\text{Sing and dance together [...], but let each one of you be alone,} \\
\text{Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.} \\
\text{Give your hearts, but not into each other’s keeping.} \\
\text{For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.} \\
\text{And stand together, yet not too near together:} \\
\text{For the pillars of the temple stand apart,} \\
\text{And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow. vi}
\]

In his discussion of love, Erich Fromm likewise underscores the same characteristic. “It is a relationship between two people who experience themselves as separate entities
[. . .]. In order to experience love one must experience separateness.”vii While analyzing the various forms of incestuous ties (some more inhibiting, more pathological than others), the psychologist concludes: “For the symbiotically attached person it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sense a clear delineation between himself and the host person. [. . .] The more extreme the form of symbiosis, the less possible is a clear realization of the separateness of the two persons.”viii Consequently others are not experienced as being “fully human.”ix

From the myriad examples presented in Dürrenmatt’s novel, Dr. Emmenberger clearly did not intend to sustain, let alone encourage the lives of those in his purview; he did not regard them as fully human. On the contrary, his treatment or rather maltreatment of Nehle, Gulliver, Marlok, the dwarf, Bärlach, Glauber, and these names represent a far greater number, before, during or after World War II, always lead, if not to the death of those within his control, then to their physical and/or emotional undoing.

A glimpse at Dr. Marlok’s fate may serve as an illustration. Emmenberger confronts her in Stutthof and offers her a single option to survive; she must become his lover and assist him in the euthanasia programs. She has already been betrayed by her adopted country; the Russians release her to the SS as a result of the German-Russian Non-Aggression Treaty of 1939, and consequently she arrives in the concentration camp thoroughly demoralized. How can she refuse? She gives up on her self, on a future, which matters to her, and agrees to the Swiss physician’s demands. The price she pays for her physical survival is enormous, as she becomes a drug addict in order to dull her aversions. In sum, Marlok’s only value consists in what she could do for Emmenberger. In his eyes, she has no value apart from him.

This wanton inability to regard others as separate individuals leads to the third characteristic of evil people and is frequently, if not always, manifested by means of verbal depersonalization. In Suspicion, these depersonalizations fall into two broad categories. A devalued individual internalizes a negative self-image and subsequently devalues him-or herself. Or an individual reduces another to someone of a lower social class, an animal, an object, an appendage or a number, in other words to anything deemed less than fully human.

Let us look again at the mistreatment of Dr. Marlok. The manner in which the once highly principled young woman (217, 218) consequently speaks about herself reflects the undeniable changes in her vastly altered self-image. In her final exchange with Bärlach, the physician reveals a crucial segment of her past in showing him the number affixed to her right arm. “Into her lower arm, deep into the flesh a number had been burned, like a cattle brand.” (216) She answers his question as to whether she was in a concentration camp by simply saying: “‘Edith Marlok, prisoner 4466 in the extermination camp Stutthof near Danzig.’” (216)

Anyone solely identified by a number can readily learn to think of him- or herself as less than human. Whereas Bärlach upon first meeting Dr. Marlok makes the following observation: “The woman was beautiful, [. . .] she was a lady. [. . .]” (200); in her last conversation with him, she refers to herself as a “‘female.’” (226) As the two continue their dialogue, she reduces her significance even further. “‘If I could take you through this hospital, inspector, through this
Sonnenstein, which has made me what I am, neither female nor male, only flesh [ . . . ].”” (223) Treated like an animal, she deems herself as nothing more than a cut of meat. How true is John Powell’s observation: “Our lives are indeed shaped by those who love us … and by those who refuse to love us.” xi Taken aback just for a moment, Marlok attempts to describe to the incredulous police inspector her motivation for initially becoming Emmenberger’s lover. Again she denigrates herself: “‘A torturer took pity on a chronically ailing bitch,’ she said finally.” (217) Before leaving the elderly policeman’s hospital room, she does so one last time: “‘You already shudder in the presence of an insignificant, disgraced servant of this world, who has been sullied a thousand times over.’” (226)

As Marlok holds herself in scant regard, it is surely not surprising that she considers herself as well as all other human beings totally ineffectual, hence totally worthless. She reprimands Bärlach idealism in the following assessment: “‘Our dictum to combat evil [ . . . ] makes sense in a vacuum [ . . . ], but not on the planet, on which we hurl through the galaxies like witches on a broomstick.’” (218) She continues to subject him to the recitation of her wartime travails and again resorts not only repeatedly to animal, but also to faceless, to diabolical imagery. “‘When after a journey of several weeks, amongst countless other tattered figures, I was driven across a pathetic wooden bridge, [ . . . ] I understood the manner of the betrayal, which was being perpetrated in regard to us God forsaken poor devils [ . . . ].’” (219)

When Bärlach exhorts her never to surrender her struggle on behalf of the poor and the exploited, it wouldn’t be logical for her to consider the reminders of someone she also deems forever lost. Consequently in using synecdoche she alludes to his extreme physical vulnerability by focusing attention on his decimated condition: “‘A beautiful skeleton grins at you, doesn’t it, representing the chief criminal investigator of the city of Berne!’” (218) A few moments later, she suggests that particularly in view of his recent retirement, his reach does indeed exceed his grasp: “‘But a police dog well past his prime wants for more, I assume.’” (220)

Herself denigrated and fully cognizant of her degradation, she demeans in turn. As stated before, Marlok, the victim becomes the victimizer. In some ways the case of the dwarf proves identical; in others it does not.

As he can only utter unintelligible sounds, (261) he cannot be expected to describe the full measure of his debasement in his own words as Marlok had done so eloquently. He cannot be expected to articulate how his self-image has been negatively impacted as a result of Emmenberger’s malfeasance. We can only witness just how the physician exacerbated the dwarf’s disadvantages already inherent in his disfigurement.

It may be remembered that in his final exchange with Bärlach, Emmenberger refers to the dwarf as “‘A useful tool,’” and in the next breath adds: “‘Even then it almost managed to trip me up, this ludicrous thing.’” He continues his damning description in using such terms as: “‘shrimp,’” and concludes his degradation of this impoverished human being in saying: “‘I’ve always loved oddities, and a disgraced human being still manages to serve as the most reliable of instruments. Because the small monkey sensed, that he owed me his life, he allowed himself to be trained
most advantageously.’” (247) Taken from a single paragraph, these lines offer no fewer than eight examples of depersonalization; in each of them an already vulnerable human being is reduced to either an animal or an object. The dwarf’s value consists only in his usefulness in fulfilling Emmenberger’s expectations. He has only as much worth as Emmenberger apportions to him and not a fraction more. The diabolical physician does not accord the dwarf the intrinsic value that all human beings may claim as their birthright. Solely identified by means of his disfigurement, his shortcomings, never in the course of the narrative is he even given a name. In other words, Emmenberger considers the dwarf merely an extension of himself and consequently felt and feels free to do with him as he pleases. He functions merely as his appendage.

When describing just how the dwarf managed to kill Bärlach’s associate, Fortschig, in a manner baffling the local police force, Emmenberger emphasizes this particular type of depersonalization in referring to him as “‘Tom Thumb.’” (239) He uses the same term, when telling Bärlach just how he is planning the murder of his long-time friend and fellow physician, Dr. Samuel Hungertobel. (246) While thinking out loud in Bärlach’s presence, who might have realized that he was one and the same as Dr. Nehle of Stutthof, Emmenberger again reiterates this type of depersonalization. He surmises that perhaps it could have been someone who knew him both in the concentration camp as well as in his Swiss sanatorium and the dwarf would undoubtedly belong to that contingent and yet, he quickly posits that this eventuality remains slim “‘for I have all the entities, which I brought with me from Stutthof, firmly under control [. . .].’” (243) For one reason or another, he negates their independence, endeavors to suppress their ability to act, as they would choose.

In the novel’s final heart-rending scene, Emmenberger no longer among the living, Bärlach, Gulliver and the dwarf meet one last time. Within these pages, Bärlach’s wise Jewish friend, who frequently took matters into his own hands, addresses the dwarf in some of the same demeaning terms, used by his former adversary. He first summons the dwarf, “as if whistling for a dog.” (261) And then proceeds to speak to him: “‘There you are, my little monkey, my little animal, my little monster from hell,’ the Jew encouraged the dwarf with his mellifluous voice. “‘My poor Minotaur [. . .].’” (261) And yet the difference as to usage for Emmenberger and Gulliver would seem unmistakable. He continues: “‘my disgraced elf, you, who so often in the blood-red nights of Stutthof fell asleep in my arms, crying and whimpering, you the only companion of my poor Jewish soul!’” (261-262) Due to the discrepancy in size and level of articulation, Gulliver and the dwarf constitute polar opposites. Excellent friends, nonetheless, they understand each other on an emotional level, care for each other as only those can, who suffer the same fate.

“Come, my little monkey,” he called out and whistled. With a single powerful leap, whimpering and babbling, the dwarf shot forward and bounded onto the Jew’s left shoulder.

“Now you’ve got it, my little murderer,” the giant praised him. “‘The two of us will stay together. Both of us are ostracized from human society, you due to an act of nature and I, because I belong to the dead.’” (264-265)
Repudiation of another’s intrinsic value, his or her subsequent depersonalization undeniably constitute two of the eight characteristics of evil persons, for both orientations demean and dehumanize; upon further reflection, not only the object thereof is denigrated, but also the victimizer. And whatever diminishes us, threatens to make us evil.

Notes


ii All quotes and paraphrases from Der Verdacht followed by page numbers refer to this edition: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, (1991), “Der Verdacht: Ein Kriminalroman, 1951,” Gesammelte Werke: Romane, vol. 4, Zürich: Diogenes, 119-265. First published serially in Der Schweizerische Beobachter between September 15, 1951 and February 29, 1952, the novel was initially published in its entirety by Benzinger of Zurich, Einsiedeln and Cologne in 1953. All translations from this and any other texts cited are my own.


iv Ibid., 161.

v Rainer Maria Rilke, (1992), Briefe an einen jungen Dichter, 1929, Frankfurt: Insel, 39. “Und diese menschlichere Liebe (die unendlich rücksichtsvoll und leise, und gut und klar in Binden und Lösen sich vollziehen wird) wird jener ähneln, die wir ringend und mühsam vorbereiten, der Liebe, die darin besteht, daß zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüßen.”


viii Ibid., 104.

ix Ibid., 107.

x Ulrich Völklein, (1999), Josef Mengele: Der Arzt von Auschwitz, Göttingen: Steidl. From the legal documents gathered to prove the case against Josef Mengele, the following testimony corroborates this practice as historical fact. “Die Frauen wurden aus ihren Baracken in das Saunagebäude im Birkenauer Frauenlager B I geführt wo Mengele auf sie wartete. In Fünferreihen mußten sie sich ihm nackt vorstellen und ihren linken Unterarm mit der
eintätowierten Nummer gut sichtbar der Rapportführerin zeigen, so daß diese jene Häftlinge in
eine Liste eintragen konnte, die ihr von Mengele genannt worden waren.” (139) As one of the
victims, Esther Peterseil, recalls: “Meine Nummer war noch nicht einmal auf der Liste, weil die
Rapportschreiberin trotz der Tatsache, daß Mengele auf mich gedeutet hat, meine Nummer
ausgelassen hatte. […] Während dieser Selektion hat Mengele so viele Nummern diktiert, daß er
selbst die Kontrolle verloren hat […] (139-40) Additional references to this practice can be
found in: Martin Weinmann, ed. (1990), Das nationalsozialistische Lagersystem (CCP),
Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, XLI, LXXVII.


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