

Art Is for Seeing Evil

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I teach a class called “Death,” on the question of whether it is rational to be afraid of death. Like all my classes, it is a philosophy class, so of course I assign the seminal philosophical texts on that topic. But I also assign Karel Čapek’s play *The Makropulos Affair*, Leo Tolstoy’s novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Philip Larkin’s “Aubade”—a poem I strongly disagree with. In my class on the philosophical puzzles surrounding self-creation, we read contemporary philosophical essays—and we also read novels by James Joyce and Elena Ferrante. I teach Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* alongside Descartes’s *Meditations*: they are both about what it’s like to be trapped in one’s own head, looking for a way out. I pair Plato’s *Euthyphro* with Sophocles’s *Antigone*, because they offer contrasting portraits of the clash between human and divine law. In my class on courage, we read some Platonic dialogues, bits and pieces of Aristotelian treatises and all 24 books of Homer’s *Iliad*.

Looking back, I am surprised by how many pages of literature I have assigned over the years, far more than is the norm in college philosophy classes. I never formulated a plan to do so; I never self-consciously aimed for interdisciplinarity. How did my syllabi wind up populated by so many novels, stories, poems and plays?

As an undergraduate, I did not major in philosophy, perhaps in part because there were so few novels on the syllabi. The (non-philosophy) professors in whose classes I read Homer and Tolstoy claimed for those texts a kind of moral authority, presenting novels as sources of personal ethical guidance. Initially, I accepted this rationale, but over the years I have come to question it: I don’t feel that reading novels has helped me navigate difficult decisions, or made me more empathetic.

So why assign them to my students? I do acknowledge that great art affords us access to distinctive aesthetic pleasures, but I don’t see it as my job to expose students to them. My goal in constructing my syllabus is neither to improve their moral character, nor to offer them literary entertainment. Rather, the situation is this: the topic of the course requires reference to something that doesn’t show up clearly outside the space of artistic fiction. My hand is forced, because without the novels my course omits something that I see as crucial to understanding death, or self-creation, or courage, or self-consciousness.

I am talking about evil.



There are many complex theories about the nature and function of art; I am going to propose a very simple one. My simple theory is also broad: it applies to narrative fiction broadly conceived, from epic poems to Greek tragedies to Shakespearean comedies to short stories to movies. It also applies to most pop songs, many lyric poems and some—though far from most—paintings, photographs and sculptures. My theory is that art is for seeing evil.

I am using the word “evil” to encompass the whole range of negative human experience, from being wronged, to doing wrong, to sheer bad luck. “Evil” in this sense

includes: hunger, fear, injury, pain, anxiety, injustice, loss, catastrophe, misunderstanding, failure, betrayal, cruelty, boredom, frustration, loneliness, despair, downfall, annihilation. This list of evils is also a list of the essential ingredients of narrative fiction.

I can name many works of fiction in which barely anything good happens (Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, José Saramago's *Blindness*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Jon Fosse's *Melancholy* are recent reads that spring to mind), but I can't imagine a novel in which barely anything bad happens. Even children's stories tend to be structured around mishaps and troubles. What we laugh at, in comedy, is usually some form of misfortune. Few movies hold a viewer on the edge of their seat in the way that thrillers and horror movies do: fear and anxiety evidently have their appeal. Greek and Shakespearean tragedy would rank high on any list of great works of literature, which is consonant with the fact that what is meaningful and memorable in a novel tends to be a moment of great loss, suffering or humiliation.

David Hume's essay "Of Tragedy" gestures at this simple theory in a footnote when he observes that "nothing can furnish to the poet a variety of scenes, and incidents, and sentiments, except distress, terror, or anxiety." So does C. S. Lewis in his essay on *Hamlet*:

I feel certain that to many of you the things I have been saying about *Hamlet* will appear intolerably sophisticated, abstract, and modern. And so they sound when we have to put them into words. But I shall have failed completely if I cannot persuade you that my view, for good or ill, has just the opposite characteristics—is naïve and concrete and archaic. I am trying to recall attention from the things an intellectual adult notices to the things a child or a peasant notices—night, ghosts, a castle, a lobby where a man can walk four hours together, a willow-fringed brook and a sad lady drowned, a graveyard and a terrible cliff above the sea, and amidst all these a pale man in black clothes (would that our producers would ever let him appear!) with his stockings coming down, a dishevelled man whose words make us at once think of loneliness and doubt and dread, of waste and dust and emptiness, and from whose hands, or from our own, we feel the richness of heaven and earth and the comfort of human affection slipping away.

I love this paragraph, especially the last few lines: *Hamlet* is indeed about loneliness and doubt and dread and waste and dust and emptiness and the feeling of all good things slipping away. But I would offer two corrections. The first is that Lewis's "naïve and concrete and archaic" point generalizes far beyond *Hamlet*, and the second is that it can indeed be put into words that are not "intolerably sophisticated, abstract, and modern." Those words are: art is for seeing evil.

The poet William Blake commented, of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils

& Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." Blake is implying that art—real art, true art, great art—is not designed for seeing good.

The philosopher Irad Kimhi, in an essay on Walter Benjamin, writes that "poetic-thinking, in the sense that applies to Benjamin, is the point of view from unhappiness." Kimhi says that artists "give (un-) form to un-being, namely, give un-being, the Unheimliche, an un-home among us." If I understand Kimhi, he is saying, "art is for seeing evil." I am not claiming that the simple theory is original to me; but those who hold it—and I suspect they are many—do not seem to want to come out and say it.

If the simple theory were even simpler, if it read "art shows us some evils," it would be unobjectionable. No one could deny that one of the things art does is show us evils, or that one of the places we can see evils is art. But doesn't art sometimes show us joy and happiness? And aren't there other ways to see evil? Let me set aside the first question, for the moment, to focus on the second. Does our ordinary experience of life—both our own, and our close associates'—show us evil? No, not really. Life is censored.



Think about what you see when you enter a room. If you're tired, you'll notice places you might sit; if you're thirsty, you'll notice cups you might drink out of; if you're hot, you'll spot windows you might open or close. If the room belongs to someone about whom you would like to know more, what will jump out at you are those items—such as books—that offer up clues. What you *see* in the room is a function of what's *useful* to you in that room, given the aims with which you walk into it. Most of what's in the room you miss. Recall that famous psychology experiment in which a man in a gorilla suit walks through a group of students passing around basketballs, and the experimental subjects don't notice the gorilla because they are busy following the instruction to count the number of times the players in white pass the ball. Your whole life is like that.

We are relentlessly efficient in targeting our movements, including those of our eyeballs, at some apparent good. Even our mental movements—thought processes—are subject to this regulative pressure. You permit a problem into your line of sight only insofar as you are looking for solutions to it; we instruct our children to ponder the mistakes they've made, but only so as to do better in the future; holding wrongdoers accountable is important because it allows us to "move forward." The value of mourning lies in "working through" grief; crying is a way to "let it out." When you criticize someone, you should do so "constructively." The soul is like a compass; it can't help but point goodwards almost all of the time.

When it does stray, we muscle it back into line. If you consciously notice your mind wander and land on something "irrelevant"—a speck of dirt on the window, a memory of an unpleasant encounter, a problem you can't solve at the moment—you tell yourself

to focus on what needs doing. If your mind goes even further afield, you might be called to use force. Consider the story of Leontius in Plato's *Republic*:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet: He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!"

Leontius's eyes, having performed their usual scan of his visual environment, light upon some corpses. He rushes to censure his eyes as evil and disgusting—just as, more generally, we censure rubbernecking, and spiteful gossip, and anything that strikes us as an instance of willfully wallowing in badness. Leontius denies his eyes a glimpse of the badness they crave, and his eyes rebel at being constrained in this way. Perhaps we, like Leontius, will judge this rebellion as an instance of some kind of perversion or sickness. But another way to think about this is that your eyes, and something in your soul more generally, want to see what's there—but you won't let that happen. You are the censor of your own reality.

I have never seen a corpse in real life, and if I did I suppose that I would feel compelled to turn away, but I see them often in movies. They are featured prominently in war movies, action movies, horror movies and thrillers, but they are also liable to show up in dramas, romances and even comedies. The camera lingers on the sometimes naked, sometimes disfigured, lifeless human body. It invites our eyes to take their fill of the "beautiful" sight.

In normal life, vision is burdened by positivity: we tend to be aiming, achieving, improving, appreciating and enjoying. There's almost always something we're up to, and that purpose skews our process of observation. When the things around us make no practical contribution—affording no use or joy—they do not readily summon our attention; when harms refuse to take the friendly shape of surmountable obstacles, we endeavor to ignore them; when evils offer up no positive face, no compensatory pleasures, we command ourselves to turn away from them. We swim in an invisible sea composed of all that is irrelevant, unhelpful or downright wicked.

Art suspends our practical projects, releasing the prohibition against attending to the bad. Our ravenous consumption of badness in art reveals just how much we standardly deprive ourselves of it. We commonly praise some piece of art for its "realism"; we could fault life for its lack thereof.



When Tolstoy takes off his novelist hat to offer a philosophical theory of art, as he does in his book *What Is Art?*, he is relentlessly moralistic, ready to condemn any works

that fail a strict moral test. He insists that good art must transmit only sentiments that are helpful to mankind, which is to say, the specific sentiments that correspond to Tolstoy's particular brand of Christianity. The result is that Tolstoy dispenses with much great art, including everything, apart from two short stories that he himself had written.¹

Philosophers theorizing about the value of art tend to dismiss *What Is Art?*, but they do not dismiss Tolstoy. Indeed, the first sentence of *Anna Karenina* is quoted so often by philosophers that it has become a running joke to question how far their knowledge of literature extends beyond it. The sentence runs: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Sometime in the next few years, I hope to teach a class on marriage. If I do, I will assign *Anna Karenina*—all eight hundred pages of it—in spite of the fact that I think Tolstoy is wrong about happy families. They're not all alike. At any rate, they are not nearly so alike as the happy families in Tolstoy. The few happy couples in Tolstoy's fiction—Kitty and Levin, Natasha and Pierre, Marya and Nikolai—resemble one another to an extraordinary degree, as though cut from the same basic, not especially interesting pattern. By contrast, his more numerous unhappy couples—Anna and Vronsky, Anna and Karenin, Pierre and Helene, Andrei and Natasha, Sonya and Nikolai, Sonya and Dolokhov, Dolly and Stiva, Ivan Ilyich and his wife, etc.—are each unhappy in their own unique, fascinating way.

When Tolstoy writes philosophy, he is concerned with the transmission of morally edifying sentiments, but when he writes novels, he wants to show us evil. Even when he shows us good, he does it to show us evil. Side by side with the slow-moving disaster that is the relationship of Anna and Vronsky, Tolstoy offers us the happy, budding romance of Kitty and Levin; we watch it mature from what seemed an initially doomed courtship into an idyllic form of marriage and parenthood. But if you have read *Anna Karenina*, ask yourself: Could you imagine the novel with those sections removed? Now how about the other way around, with Anna deleted? To me, the first is readily imaginable, the second unthinkable. There is a reason Tolstoy did not call the work *Kitty Scherbatsky*.

Tolstoy theorizes about art in an idealistic vein that tells us what he would like to see in it. Hume, the empiricist, is a better source for what is actually there:

If, in the texture of the piece, there be interwoven any scenes of satisfaction, they afford only faint gleams of pleasure, which are thrown in by way of variety, and in order to plunge the actors into deeper distress, by means of that contrast and disappointment.

The positive has a secondary and derivative place in fiction, just as the negative has a secondary and derivative place in life. In life, we are looking for all the various ways to make our marriages succeed; in fiction, we are fascinated to observe all the possible ways a marriage could fail. That is the insight behind Tolstoy's opening sentence: it is true of fiction, even if it is not true of life.

There is a wonderful scene, toward the end of the novel, where we watch faithful family man Levin be drawn in by the seductive personality of the adulteress Anna. By the end of the conversation Levin comes close to jumping into her arms:

As he followed the interesting conversation, Levin admired her all the while ... He listened, talked, and all the while thought about her, about her inner life, trying to guess her feelings. And he who had formerly judged her so severely, now, by some strange train of thought, justified her and at the same time pitied her, and feared that Vronsky did not fully understand her.

Tolstoy's moral voice is represented by Levin's outraged wife Kitty, who, learning of this meeting on the eve of giving birth to their first child, furiously condemns Anna as a nasty, fallen woman. Levin, ashamed of having been tempted, commits to avoiding her. Levin must live a good and upright life, and that is incompatible with giving Anna the attention that Tolstoy on some level feels she deserves. But the reader stands where Joyce describes the artist as standing: in the background, indifferent, paring our fingernails. We have the luxury of admiring Tolstoy's many detailed descriptions of Anna's dangerous beauty and of her devilishly deceptive charms. Unlike Kitty, we don't need to "condemn" Anna for being a fallen woman; unlike Levin, we aren't duty-bound to turn away from her as quickly as possible. We can allow our eyes to take their fill of her delicious badness.



The simple theory led Plato to take simple measures when constructing his utopia in the *Republic*: artists are banished from his ideal city. Even the works of Homer were to be censored, relieved of the passages that might lead his citizens to empathize with and give close attention to people whose characters and lifestyles Plato sees as best avoided. Plato instructed us to turn away from "evil" in both its senses—first, acts of injustice and viciousness; second, experiences of suffering and harm. The former might lead us to take spiteful pleasure in the prospect of wrongdoing, and the latter might induce us to openly indulge in feelings of grief and sadness—for instance, if our children die. Plato thought that mourners should suppress such reactions, so as to reorient themselves as quickly as possible to the good:

We must accept what has happened as we would the fall of the dice, and then arrange our affairs in whatever way reason determines to be best. We mustn't hug the hurt part and spend our time weeping and wailing like children when they trip. Instead, we should always accustom our souls to turn as quickly as possible to healing the disease and putting the disaster right, replacing lamentation with cure.

Plato understood that there will always be something in us that yearns both to “hug the hurt part” by weeping and wailing, and to wallow in the spiteful anger that, to quote Achilles, is “sweeter than dripping streams of honey, / that swarms in people’s chests and blinds like smoke.” Plato was well acquainted with the inclination to resist being pointed goodwards; he simply did not see fit to indulge it, or the poets who describe it so indulgently.

Plato’s censorship arguments in *Republic* II-III and X have many fans but few adherents. Not even as militant a Platonist as Allan Bloom, who condemns rock music on Platonic grounds, would suggest committing *Anna Karenina*—a Platonically impermissible text if there ever was one—to the flames. Tolstoy himself expresses a grudging admiration for the extremism of Platonic censorship, and pronounces it superior to the attitude of “the people of civilized European society of our class and day,” who “favor any art if it but serves beauty” and “only fear lest they should be deprived of any enjoyment art can afford.” He rejects Platonism only because it seems somehow impossible: art is “one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not exist.” But why? What is there that only art can communicate? Surely not the pious moral lessons to which Tolstoy wants to consign artistic expression. If you need preaching done, hire a preacher, not a poet.

There is a certain noble lie that we tell students about art. I was told it, and I hear it retold often by those defending great books and humanistic education. The lie is that art is a vehicle for personal moral edification or social progress, that art aims at empathy and happiness and world peace and justice and democracy and the brotherhood of man. But those are the goods of friendship, or education, or politics, or religion—not of art. The point of art is not improved living; the point of art is precisely *not* to be boxed in by the sometimes exhausting and always blinkered project of leading a life. When art does transparently aim at moral guidance or social progress we dismiss it as dogmatic, pedantic and servile.

And yet the conceit that art is something productive, and safe, and easily subordinated to what we were all doing anyways—the conceit that we have *tamed* art—may be part of the compromise that supports our anti-Platonic absolutism when it comes to censorship. To permit art, we withhold the truth about it. Plato, otherwise fond of noble lies, is in this case a spokesman for the ignoble truth. Defenders of Great Books are inclined to situate Plato’s *Republic* at the heart of any canon, but Plato was not their friend. You can see that by contrasting his theory of art with Aristotle’s. In the *Poetics* Aristotle posits a kind of aesthetic homeopathy—“katharsis”—by which exposure to wickedness and suffering has a cleansing effect with respect to the corresponding impulses. If the viewers of tragedy exit the theater refreshed and improved, ready to take up the mantle of productive citizenship, then there will be no need for Platonic censorship after all. One might have thought that the natural label for the books most finely attuned to wretchedness and vice would be something like “The Evil Books.” Perhaps the story of the rebranding to “Great” begins with Aristotle. His is the first complex theory of art.

On the simple theory, art and censorship go hand in hand: art takes up what life has censored. Plato's draconian censorship regime follows naturally: In an ideal city, why not have politics double down on life? In the real world as it currently stands, it is doubtful that censorship could work, because the force by which people are drawn to art is stronger than any we feel comfortable having the state exert. (Banning books is like banning sex.) Full-blown Platonic censorship is not in the cards for us, and I am wary of those, like Bloom, who apply Plato's arguments opportunistically. But things would be different if I found myself inside a Platonic thought experiment where I, as the philosopher-statesman, had free rein to construct the city of my dreams. Faced with Kallipolis's compliant citizenry, I might well find myself retracing many of Plato's moves.

And yet, when I start to think more concretely about that class on marriage, and I imagine assigning philosophy journal articles on the nature of commitment, the theory of shared agency, reasons to value relationships, love as a moral emotion, the distinction between caring and attachment, I think to myself: All of that is great, but what about the misunderstandings? The standing, ever-present loneliness? The small betrayals and minor cruelties and unspoken disappointments? The problem of marital sex? The ambiguities of divorce? Those are parts of marriage, too. And it is the poets who get them into view. They take a long hard look at what the rest of us can't bring ourselves to examine; they are our eyes and ears. Indeed, there are times when the poet's power to confront what the rest of us turn away from marks such a dramatic escape from the confines of ordinary humanity that we find ourselves drawn to describing them with the language of "a divine spark." God is, after all, the one who sees the unseen. Going only on the data my own life has provided me, the theory that great novels provide practical guidance strikes me as empirically less well-supported than the theory that they are, in some way or other, divinely inspired.

I stand in awe of the poets and their power to reveal. I see no way to banish them from my syllabi.

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