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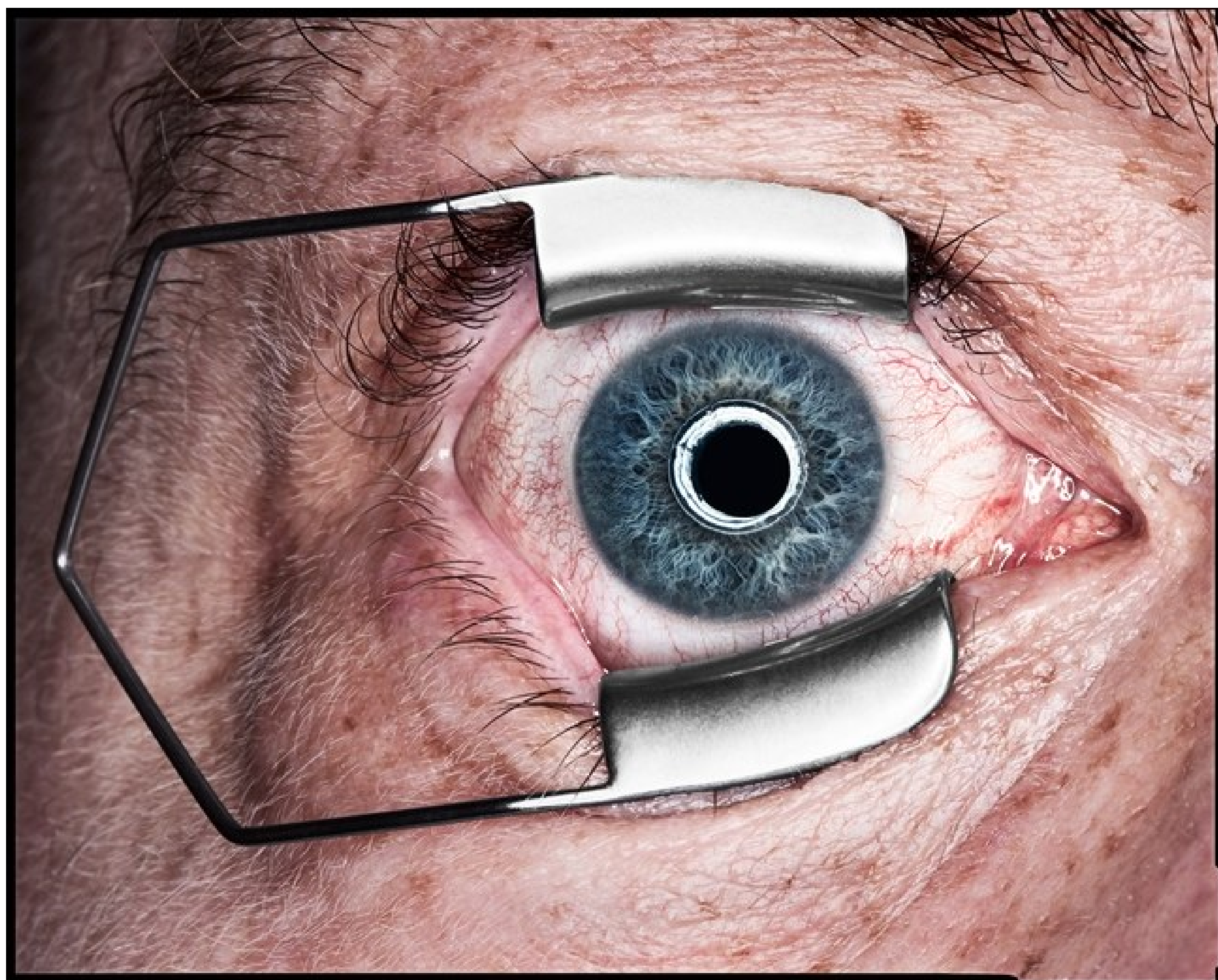
THE CLOCKWORK CONDITION

The author comments on his most famous book, in 1973.

By Anthony Burgess



Photograph by Dan Winters

I am by trade a novelist. It is, I think, a harmless trade, though it is not everywhere considered a respectable one. Novelists put dirty language into the mouths of their characters, and they show these characters fornicating or going to the toilet. Moreover,

it is not a *useful* trade, as is that of the carpenter or the pastry cook. The novelist passes the time for you between one useful action and another; he helps to fill the gaps that appear in the serious fabric of living. He is a mere entertainer, a sort of clown. He mimes, he makes grotesque gestures, he is pathetic or comic and sometimes both, he sends words spinning through the air like colored balls.

His use of words is not to be taken too seriously. The President of the United States uses words, the physician or garage mechanic or army general or philosopher uses words, and these words seem to relate to the real world, a world in which taxes must be levied and then avoided, cars have to be run, sicknesses cured, great thoughts thought and decisive battles engaged. No creator of plots or personages, however great, is to be thought of as a serious thinker—not even Shakespeare. Indeed, it is hard to know what the imaginative writer really does think, since he is hidden behind his scenes and his characters. And when the characters start to think, and express their thoughts, these are not necessarily the writer's own. Macbeth thinks one thing and Macduff a thing diametrically opposed to it; the King's ideas are not Hamlet's. Even the tragic dramatist remains a clown, blowing a sad tune on a battered trombone. And then his tragic mood is over and he becomes a buffoon, tumbling about and walking on his hands. *Not* to be taken seriously.

It sometimes happens, however, that a mere entertainer like myself is drawn, against his will, into the sphere of "serious" thought. He finds himself forced to give his own views of deep matters. The occasion of this compulsion may well be a sudden public interest in one of his novels—a book he wrote without profound consideration of its meaning, an intended rent-paying potboiler that turned out to have a significance unguessed at by the author. Or it may be a novel that, because of an uncontainable concern or anger with something taking place in the real world, the novelist—to his shame—made less of an entertainment than usual, more of a sermon or homiletic or didactic statement—the production of such things not really being the novelist's job. I find myself now writing a book a good deal different from any I have written before, and the occasion of my writing it is less public interest in one of my novels than public interest in a film made from one of my novels.

The novel and the film alike are called "A Clockwork Orange." I first published the book in 1962, and, since that year, it has had sufficient readers on both sides of the

Atlantic to keep it in print. But, ten years after my correcting the proofs, its title and content became known to millions, not merely thousands, because of Stanley Kubrick's very close film interpretation. I have found myself called upon to explain the true meaning of both book and film in all the public media of America, as well as some of those in Europe, and my explanation has been more or less as follows.

First, the title. I first heard the expression "as queer as a clockwork orange" in a London pub before the Second World War. It is an old Cockney slang phrase, implying a queerness or madness so extreme as to subvert nature, since could any notion be more bizarre than that of a clockwork orange? The image appealed to me as something not just fantastic but obscurely meaningful, surrealistic but also obscenely real. The forced marriage of an organism to a mechanism, of a thing living, growing, sweet, juicy, to a cold dead artifact—is that solely a concept of nightmare? I discovered the relevance of this image to twentieth-century life when, in 1961, I began to write a novel about curing juvenile delinquency. I had read somewhere that it would be a good idea to liquidate the criminal impulse through aversion therapy; I was appalled. I began to work out the implications of this notion in a brief work of fiction. The title "A Clockwork Orange" was there waiting to attach itself to the book: it was the only possible name.

The hero of both the book and the film is a young thug called Alex. I gave him that name because of its international character (you could not have a British or Russian boy called Chuck or Butch), and also because of its ironic connotations. Alex is a comic reduction of Alexander the Great, slashing his way through the world and conquering it. But he is changed into the conquered—impotent, wordless. He was a law (a lex) unto himself; he becomes a creature without a lex or lexicon. The hidden puns, of course, have nothing to do with the real meaning of the name Alexander, which is "defender of men."

At the beginning of the book and the film, Alex is a human being endowed, perhaps overendowed, with three characteristics that we regard as essential attributes of man. He rejoices in articulate language and even invents a new form of it (he is far from alexical at this stage); he loves beauty, which he finds in Beethoven's music above everything; he is aggressive. With his companions—less human than he, since they do not care much for music—he terrorizes the streets of a great city at night. This city

could be anywhere, but I visualized it as a sort of compound of my native Manchester, Leningrad, and New York. The time could be any time, but it is essentially now. Alex and his friends rob, maim, rape, vandalize, eventually kill. The young antihero is arrested and punished, but punishment is not enough for the state. Because imprisonment is not noticeably a deterrent to crime, the Home Office or Ministry of the Interior introduces a form of aversion therapy guaranteed, in a mere two weeks, to eliminate criminal propensities forever.

Alex, in his innocence, welcomes the opportunity to be "cured." He has such faith in the indestructibility of his own libido that he considers himself more than a match for the behaviorist experts of the state. He is injected with a substance that brings on extreme nausea, and the onset of nausea is deliberately associated with the enforced viewing of films about violence. Soon he cannot contemplate violence without feeling desperately sick. As the act of love has been to him merely an aspect of aggression, even the sight of a desirable sexual partner brings on intolerable nausea. He is forced to walk a tightrope of imposed "goodness." Society is pleased and looks forward to a crime-free millennium.

But men are not, after all, machines, and the demarcation of one human impulse from another is always difficult. Alex's treatment has consisted of watching violent films and feeling induced nausea. These films have had, as "emotional heighteners," soundtracks of symphonic music. After his treatment, the reformed delinquent finds that he can no longer listen to Beethoven without feeling desperately ill. The state has gone too far: it has entered a region beyond its covenant with the citizen; it has closed to its victim a whole world of non-moral goodness, the vision of paradisal order which great music conveys. Maddened by a recording of the Ninth Symphony, Alex attempts suicide. Shock and compassion are aroused in the liberal elements of society, and Alex undergoes hypnopaedic therapy, which restores him to his former "free" condition. We take leave of him as he dreams of new and more elaborate patterns of aggression. It is meant to be a happy ending.

What I was trying to say was that it is better to be bad of one's own free will than to be good through scientific brainwashing. When Alex has the power of choice, he chooses only violence. But, as his love of music shows, there are other areas of choice. In the British edition of the book—though not in the American, nor in the film—there is an

epilogue that shows Alex growing up, learning distaste for his old way of life, thinking of love as more than a mode of violence, even foreseeing himself as a husband and father. The way has always been open; at last he chooses to take it. He has been a sour orange; now he is filling with something like decent human sweetness.

Is freedom of choice really all that important? For that matter, is man capable of it? Again, does the term "freedom" have any intrinsic meaning? These are questions I must ask and attempt to answer. For the moment, I have to record that I have been derided and rebuked for expressing my fears of the power of the modern state—whether it be Russia, China, or what we may term Anglo-America—to reduce the freedom of the individual. Literature has warned of this power, books like Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" and George Orwell's "1984," but "sensible" people, not much moved by imaginative writing, are always telling us that we have little to worry about. Indeed, B. F. Skinner's book "Beyond Freedom and Dignity" came out at the very time that "A Clockwork Orange" first appeared on the screen, ready to demonstrate the advantages of what we may call beneficent brainwashing. Our world is in a bad way, says Skinner, what with the problems of war, pollution of the environment, civil violence, the population explosion. Human behavior must change—that much, he says, is self-evident, and few would disagree—and in order to do this we need a technology of human behavior. We can leave out of account the inner man, the man we meet when we debate with ourselves, the hidden being concerned with God and the soul and ultimate reality. We must view man from the outside, considering particularly what makes one item of human behavior move on to another. The behaviorist approach to man, of which Professor Skinner is a great exponent, sees him moved to various kinds of action by aversive and non-aversive inducements. Fear of the whip drove the slave to work; fear of dismissal still drives the wage-slave to work. It is such negative reinforcements to action that Professor Skinner condemns; what he wants to see more of is positive reinforcements. You teach a circus animal tricks not by cruelty but by kindness. (Skinner should know: much of his experimental work has been with animals; some of his achievements in animal conditioning approach a high professional circus level.) Given the right positive inducements—to which we respond not rationally but through our conditioned instincts—we shall all become better citizens, submissive to a state that has the good of the community at heart. We must, so the argument goes, not fear conditioning. We need to be conditioned in order to save the environment and the race. But it must be conditioning of the right sort.

It is, in the Skinnerian argument, conditioning of the wrong sort that turns the hero of "A Clockwork Orange" into a vomiting paragon of non-aggression. That I myself consider any kind of conditioning wrong must be accounted, I suppose, to the strength of the religious tradition in which I was reared. I have, so to speak, been conditioned by it, but my reason approved the convictions that I feel in my very gut. My family comes from Lancashire, that northern county which used to be a stronghold of the Catholic faith. The Protestant Reformation, which turned England into what she is today, never quite reached Lancashire, or, if it did, it did so gently and reasonably, in the peaceful infiltrations of the more tolerant periods that followed the bloody impositions of the Tudors. The kind of Protestantism that flourished in the time of Cromwell and bred a new race of bourgeois merchants was Calvinistic. Predestination was its doctrinal core. Man could not will his salvation; his future state had been predetermined by God.

Catholicism rejects a doctrine that seems to send some men arbitrarily to Heaven, others—quite as arbitrarily—to Hell. Your future destination, says Catholic theology, is in your hands. There is nothing to prevent you from sinning, if you wish to sin; at the same time, there is nothing to prevent your approaching the channels of divine grace that will secure your salvation. The fact that the two opposed doctrines—that of free will and that of predestination—are able to subsist in the same religious faith needs some explaining. There is, to start with, the fact of God's omniscience. If God knows everything, He knows whether I am going to be damned or saved: my ultimate abode has, so to speak, been reserved from the very beginning of time. But if God gives man the power of free choice He may be thought of as deliberately withholding from Himself His awareness of what man is going to do with that power. An omniscient and omnipotent God, as a gesture of love for man, limits both His own power and His own knowledge.

Sean O'Faolain, in his autobiography, records an inability to reconcile man's free will with God's total knowledge which was resolved—in a sudden magical or miraculous flash of insight—one day before a taxi ride in Manhattan. O'Faolain put it to himself this way: Any action of man remained a free action until it was performed. Once performed, it became something God had willed. He and the taxi-driver got drunk on this discovery.

But the Calvinists have always had a very heavy piece of artillery with which to support their predestination campaign. At the free-will army they aim the cannon of the Fall. Adam fell through the primal sin of disobedience; he transmitted to all his descendants the guilt of that sin. Men are predisposed to sin; they are not free creatures. The orthodox reply to that is, of course, that Christ died to make men free, but Calvinism seems singularly unelated by this fact. The theocracies built by Calvinists, city-states or whole commonwealths ruled by self-elected holy men, have always been characterized by a kind of wet-weather gloom. Look at Cotton Mather's Massachusetts, the Geneva of John Calvin himself. To them, it was a mark of Catholic depravity to let men work out their own destinies. Men are sinful, men will not avoid sin (why should they, since they are predestined to Hell or Heaven whatever they do?), men must be made to be good. And, even more so, women, daughters of treacherous Eve. Calvinism is full of negative reinforcements.

It is not my aim to teach elementary theology here, and it is certainly not my intention to view the contemporary world from an angle of inherited faith. I am merely concerned with showing that certain terms we borrow from theology have validity in a secular approach to our problems. Being a person in whom religious faith has been shaky for forty years, it would be hypocritical if I preached that, to stop war and regenerate the polluted rivers, we should get back to God. What I do suggest is that religion, and such secular or anthropocentric disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and sociology, have something in common, and that is an awareness of the abiding fact of man's unhappiness. And it would seem that certain words of ancient provenance—like "good," "evil," "free will," even "original sin"—do not have to be superseded by pseudo-scientific terminology just because they happen to derive from a God-centered approach to man.

"We called the chess-board white,—we call it black," says Bishop Blougram in Robert Browning's poem. In other words, an optimistic view of human life is as valid as a pessimistic one. But whose life do we mean—that of the entire race or that of the inconspicuous fragment of it each of us calls "myself"? I think I am optimistic about man: I think his race will survive, I think—however slowly or painfully—he will solve his major problems just because he is aware of them. As for myself, all I can say is that I am growing old, my sight is blurring, my teeth always need attention, I cannot eat or drink as much as I once did, I am more and more frequently bored. I cannot

remember names, my reason works slowly, I have spasms of envy of the young and of resentment at my own imminent decay. If I had a burning faith in personal survival, this gloom of senescence might be greatly mitigated. But I have lost this faith and am unlikely to recover it. Sometimes I have a desire for immediate annihilation, but the urge to remain alive always supervenes. There are consolations—love, literature, music, the colorful life of the southern city in which I spend much of my time—but these are very fitful. There is a bigger and more abiding consolation—the fact that I am free to write what I wish, that I have to follow no clock, that I need call no man "sir" and defer to him through fear. But such freedom breeds its own compunctions: I feel guilty if I do not work; I am my own tyrant. The things I have now I needed most when I was young. I remember Goethe's dictum: "Beware of wishing for anything in youth, because you will get it in middle age."

I recognize that I am better off than most, but I do not regard myself as having opted out of the agony and anxiety that plague men and women who are slaves to lives they did not choose and denizens of communities they hate. I think especially of the citizens of great industrial and commercial towns—New York, London, Bombay, my own Manchester. "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou earn bread": the Book of Genesis says it best. The maintenance of a complex society depends increasingly on routine work, work with no zest or creativity. The things we eat, clothes we wear, places where we live become increasingly standardized, because standardization is the price we pay for the prices we are able to pay. Life ticks along for most of us like a Woolworth's alarm clock. We grow used to the rhythm imposed on us by our need to subsist: soon we get to like our bondage.

One of the slogans of George Orwell's superstate in "1984" is "Freedom is slavery." This can be taken to mean that the burden of making one's own choices is, for many people, intolerable. To be tied to the necessity of deciding for oneself is to be a slave to one's will. I remember when, at the age of twenty-two, I joined the British Army. At first I resented the discipline, the removal of even minimal liberty (such as the right to eat when and what one chose, the right to go to the toilet when one's bowels, and not the bugle, dictated). Soon my reduction to a piece of clockwork began to please me, soothe me. One of a squad, obeying orders with the whole squad, forbidden to ask questions or to question orders—I was, after four years of rigorous academic life, having a delicious vacation from the need to be *choosing* all the time. I can, after six years of that,

sympathize with the civilian who is unhappy about making his own decisions—where to eat, whom to vote for, what to wear. It is easier to be *told:* smoke Hale—ninety per cent less tar; read this novel, seventy-five weeks on the best-seller list; don't see that movie, it's artsy-shmartsy.

Perhaps there is something to be said for conformity in social life when our working lives have so little room for rugged individualism: it is painful to be an expert on Spinoza in the evenings and a machine operative for the rest of the day. And there is something in our gregarious makeup which makes us want to conform. Even rebels against conformity find a conformity of their own—the uniform of long hair, beard, chinos, beads or amulet, for instance, the invariable taste for pot and protest songs on the guitar. A man has to conform to a pattern of work in order to feed himself and his family; a man may find it pleasurable or natural or convenient to conform in his social tastes. But when patterns of conformity are imposed by the state, then one has a right to be frightened. Unfortunately, the political conformity which leads to a colored uniform, a flag, a slogan, a muzzle on free speech tends to work on a willingness to conform in nonpolitical areas.

We probably have no duty to like Beethoven or hate Coca-Cola, but it is at least conceivable that we have a duty to distrust the state. Thoreau wrote of the duty of civil disobedience; Whitman said, "Resist much, obey little." With those liberals, and with many others, disobedience is a good thing in itself. In small social entities—English parishes, Swiss cantons—the machine that governs can sometimes be identified with the community that is governed. But when the social entity grows large, becomes a megalopolis, a state, a federation, the governing machine becomes remote, impersonal, even inhuman. It takes money from us for purposes we do not seem to sanction; it treats us as abstract statistics; it controls an army; it supports a police force whose function does not always appear to be protective.

This, of course, is a generalization that may be regarded as prejudiced nonsense. I personally do not trust politicians or statesmen—very few writers and artists do—and consider that men enter politics for the negative reason that they have little talent for anything else and the positive reason that power is always delicious. Against this must be set the truth that government makes healthful laws to protect the community and, in the great international world, can be the voice of our traditions and aspirations. But the

fact remains that, in our own century, the state has been responsible for most of our nightmares. No single individual or free association of individuals could have achieved the repressive techniques of Nazi Germany, the slaughter of intensive bombing, or the atomic bomb. War departments can think in terms of megadeaths, while it is as much as the average man can do to entertain dreams of killing the boss. The modern state, whether in a totalitarian or a democratic country, has far too much power, and we are probably right to fear it.

It is significant that the nightmare books of our age have not been about new Draculas and Frankensteins but about what may be termed dystopias—inverted utopias, in which an imagined megalithic government brings human life to an exquisite pitch of misery. Sinclair Lewis, in "It Can't Happen Here"—a novel curiously neglected—presents an America that becomes fascist, and the quality of the fascism is as American as apple pie. The wisecracking homespun Will Rogers-like President uses the provisions of a constitution created by Jeffersonian optimists to create a despotism which, to the unthinking majority, at first looks like plain common sense. The trouncing of long-haired intellectuals and shrill anarchists always appeals to the average man, although it may really mean the suppression of liberal thought (the American Constitution was the work of long-haired intellectuals) and the elimination of political dissidence. Orwell's "1984"—a nightmare vision which may conceivably have prevented the nightmare fact from being realized: no one expects the real 1984 to be like Orwell's—shows the unabashed love of power and cruelty which too many political leaders have hidden under the flowers of "inspirational" rhetoric. The "Inner Party" of Orwell's future England exerts control over the population through the falsification of the past, so that no one can appeal to a dead tradition of freedom; through the delimitation of language, so that treasonable thoughts cannot be formulated; through a "doublethink" epistemology, which makes the outside world appear as the rulers wish it to appear; and through simple torture and brainwashing.

Both the American and the British visions conjoin in assuming that the aversive devices of fear and torture are the inevitable techniques of despotism, which seeks total control over the individual. But, as long ago as 1932, Aldous Huxley, in his "Brave New World," demonstrated the submissive docility that powerful states seek from their subjects as being more easily obtainable through non-aversive techniques. Pre-natal and infantile conditioning makes the slaves happy in their slavery, and stability is enforced

not through whips but through a scientifically imposed contentment. Here, of course, is a way that man may take if he really desires a world in which there are no wars, no population crises, no Dostoyevskian agonies. The conditioning techniques are available, and perhaps the state of the world may soon frighten man into accepting them. But, so Huxley states through his hero, an uncivilized savage brought up on an Indian reservation, happiness is not really what we want. Man is, almost by definition, a restless creature—creative, destructive, given to elation and pain. The young savage demands what the brave new world cannot give—unhappiness—and so he kills himself.

"Man," said G. K. Chesterton, "is a woman"—he does not know what he wants. There are few of us who do not reject outright both the Orwellian and the Huxleian nightmares. In a sense, we would prefer the repressive society, full of secret police and barbed wire, to the scientifically conditioned one, in which being happy means doing the right thing. All of us might agree with Professor Skinner that a well-run, conditioned society is an excellent thing for a new race—a breed of men rationally convinced of the need to be conditioned, so long as the conditioning is based on rewards and not punishment. But we are not the new race, and we stubbornly do not want to be anything but what we are—creatures aware of our faults and determined, more or less, to do something about those faults in our own way. We may even think in terms of two kinds of human being—ourselves, free men or imperfect men, and the new men yet to be made (man's own creation, not nature's), whom we might perhaps call neoanthrops, a coinage which sounds like strangulation. To christen a being of the new, or Skinnerian, age a newman might be inappropriate: the great English cardinal would turn in his grave.

Curiously, or perhaps not, the figures in history we most revere are those men and women who fought against repression and were even martyred for upholding the right or the good. Prometheus, Socrates, Jesus Christ, Sir Thomas More, Giordano Bruno, Galileo—the list is extensive, and history goes on adding to it with heroes like the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is as though we perversely need intolerance because we cannot do without heroes. What the great intransigents do for us is remind us of certain absolutes, like good and evil. It was the Nazi occupation of France that made Jean-Paul Sartre formulate a new philosophy of man which sounds, though it is not, like a theology. Speaking of that "age of assassins" foretold by Rimbaud, Sartre (in his "What Is Literature?") says:

> We have been taught to take [evil] seriously. It is neither our fault nor our merit if we lived in a time when torture was a daily fact. Châteaubriand, Oradour, the Rue des Saussaies, Dachau and Auschwitz have all demonstrated to us that Evil is not an appearance, that knowing its cause does not dispel it, that it is not opposed to Good as a confused idea is to a clear one. . . . In spite of ourselves, we come to this conclusion, which will seem shocking to lofty souls: Evil cannot be redeemed.

The stale, tired, corrupt period of the nineteen-thirties in France represented a kind of clockwork condition, a zestless ticking of the human machine. When Frenchmen were least free, under the occupation, then, by a paradox typically human, they were at last free to recover a sense of the dignity of human freedom. There was the Resistance; there was the final and irreducible freedom to say no to evil. This is a right not available in a society concerned with reinforcing behavior. That a man may be willing to suffer torture and death for the sake of a principle is a kind of mad perversity that makes little sense in the behaviorist's laboratory.

We all tend to use the term "evil" without being willing to define it. It is not quite a synonym for "bad," since we cannot talk of an evil orange, except poetically, or an evil performance of the violin. It is certainly not a synonym for "wrong." "Right" and "wrong," we recognize, are terms with variable referents—in other words, what is right at one time can be wrong at another. In a period of war against Germany, it can be so wrong to be friendly with Germans that you may be shot for it; in a period of peace, it can be right to be friendly with them, or at least a matter of neutral import. It is right to obey whatever laws are in force at a given time, and wrong to deliberately flout them. We cannot take right and wrong very seriously, since they shift and waver so much. We need absolute terms like "good" and "evil." Our attitude toward good is curiously

noncommittal or halfhearted; we are more used to being told not to commit evil than exhorted to do good.

Evil is always evil, and it may be thought of, perhaps, as essentially destructive, a willed and deliberate negation of organic life. It is always evil to kill another human being, even though it is sometimes right to do so. It is probably evil to kill any organism, even the bullocks and sheep we need for our nutriment. To be a carnivore is neither right nor wrong, at least in Western society: it is a thing of neutral significance. Hinduism feels so strongly about the sanctity of all life that it opposes the killing of anything, for food or even, at times, for self-protection. It is permissible to use a mosquito net but not to swat the insects. I have seen Hindu workmen holding up great constructive enterprises in order to look after the welfare of the crawling life dug up with the spade or shovel. East and West meet in principle on the sanctity of life, but the West is more pragmatic about it. By a kind of metaphorical extension, the West will go farther than the East in regarding as evil (not just wrong) the destruction of an artifact, especially if that artifact is a work of art. A work of art is somehow organic, and to slash a painting or smash a statue is not just an offense against property but an offense against life.

One may take the principle of evil as applying in areas of conduct where the destruction of an organism is not intended. It is wrong to push drugs among children, but few would deny that it is also evil: the capacity of an organism for self-determination is being impaired. Maiming is evil. Acts of aggression are evil, though we are inclined to find mitigating factors in the hot spirit of revenge ("a kind of wild justice," said Francis Bacon) or in the desire to protect others from expected, if not always fulfilled, acts of violence. We all hold in our imaginations or memories certain images of evil in which there is no breath of mitigation—four grinning youths torturing an animal, a gang rape, cold-blooded vandalism. It would seem that enforced conditioning of a mind, however good the social intention, has to be evil. ♦

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