

TERRY EAGLETON

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# On Evil

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Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

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Fifteen years ago, two ten-year-old boys tortured and killed a toddler in the north of England. There was an outcry of public horror, though why the public found this particular murder especially shocking is not entirely clear. Children, after all, are only semi-socialised creatures who can be expected to behave pretty savagely from time to time. If Freud is to be credited, they have a weaker superego or moral sense than their elders. In this sense, it is surprising that such grisly events do not occur more often. Perhaps children murder each other all the time and are simply keeping quiet about it. William Golding, an author whose work we shall be considering in a moment, seems to believe in his novel *Lord of the Flies* that a bunch of unsupervised schoolboys on a desert island would slaughter each other before the week was out.

Perhaps this is because we are ready to believe all kinds of sinister things about children, since they seem like a halfalien race in our midst. Since they do not work, it is not clear what they are for. They do not have sex, though perhaps they are keeping quiet about this too. They have the uncanniness of things which resemble us in some ways but not in others. It is not hard to fantasise that they are collectively conspiring against us, in the manner of John Wyndham's fable *The Midwich Cuckoo*. Because children are not fully part of the social game, they can be seen as innocent; but for just the same reason they can be regarded as the spawn of Satan. The Victorians swung constantly between angelic and demonic views of their offspring.

A police officer involved in the case of the murdered toddler declared that the moment he clapped eyes on one of the culprits, he knew that he was evil. This is the kind of thing that gives evil a bad name. The point of literally demonising the boy in this way was to wrong-foot the softhearted liberals. It was a preemptive strike against those who might appeal to social conditions in seeking to understand why they did what they did. And such understanding can always bring forgiveness in its wake. Calling the action evil meant that it was beyond comprehension. Evil is unintelligible. It is just a thing in itself, like boarding a crowded commuter train wearing only a giant boa constrictor. There is no context which would make it explicable.

Sherlock Holmes's great antagonist, the fiendishly evil Professor Moriarty, is presented as almost entirely without such a context. Yet it is significant that Moriarty is an Irish name, and Conan Doyle was writing at a time when there was much anxiety about revolutionary Irish Fenianism in Britain. Perhaps the Fenians reminded Doyle of his own drunken, violent Irish father, who had been locked away in a lunatic asylum. Making someone called Moriarty an image of pure evil is thus probably more explicable than it appears. Even so, evil is still often supposed to be without rhyme or reason. An English Evangelical bishop wrote in 1991 that clear signs of Satanic possession included inappropriate laughter, inexplicable knowledge, a false smile, Scottish ancestry, relatives who have been coal miners, and the habitual choice of black for dress or car colour. None of this makes sense, but that is how it is with evil. The less sense it makes, the more evil it is. Evil has no relations to anything beyond itself, such as a cause.

In fact, the word has come to mean, among other things, "without a cause." If the child killers did what they did because of boredom or bad housing or parental neglect, then (so the police officer might have feared) what they did was forced upon them by their circumstances; and it followed that they could not be punished for it as severely as he might have wished. This mistakenly implies that an action which has a cause cannot be freely undertaken. Causes in this view are forms of coercion. If our actions have causes, we are not responsible for them. I cannot be responsible for staying in your skull



with a candlestick, since it was your reproving tap on my cheek that caused it. Evil, on the other hand, is thought to be uncaused, or to be its own cause. This, as we shall see, is one of its several points of resemblance with good. Apart from evil, only God is said to be the cause of himself.

There is a kind of tautology or circular argument implicit in the policeman's view. People do evil things because they are evil. Some people are evil in the way that some things are coloured indigo. They commit their evil deeds not to achieve some goal, but just because of the sort of people they are. But might this not mean that they can't help doing what they do? For the policeman, the idea of evil is an alternative to such determinism. But it seems that we have thrown out a determinism of environment only to replace it with one of character. It is now your character, not your social conditions, which drives you to unspeakable deeds. And though it is easy enough to imagine a social environment being changed—slums demolished, youth clubs set up, crack dealers driven out—it is much harder to imagine such a total transformation when it comes to the question of human character. How could I be totally transformed and still be me? Yet if I happen to be evil, only such a deep-seated change will do.

So people like the policeman are really pessimists, even though they would probably bristle at the accusation. If Satan is what you are up against, rather than adverse social conditions, evil would seem to be unbeatable. And this is depressing news for (among other people) the police. Calling the boy a devil dramatises the gravity of their crime, and seeks to cut off tenderhearted appeals to social conditions. It makes the culprits harder to forgive. But it does so only at the cost of suggesting that this kind of malignant behaviour is here to stay.

If the young killers of the toddler could not help being evil, however, then the fact is that they were innocent. Most of us, to be sure, recognise that small children can no more be evil than grown-ups can divorce or enter into purchase agreements. Yet there are always those who believe in bad blood or malevolent genes. If some people really are born evil, however, they are no more responsible for their condition than being born with cystic fibrosis. The condition which is supposed to damn the terrorist succeeds only in redeeming them. The same goes for regarding terrorists as psychotic, a term which the British government's top security adviser has used for them. One wonders whether this man is really up to his job. If terrorists really are mad, then they are ignorant of what they are doing and are therefore morally innocent. They should accordingly be nursed with tender care in psychiatric hospitals rather than have their genitals mutilated in secret Moroccan prisons.

Men and women who are evil are sometimes said to be "possessed." But if they really are the helpless victims of demonic powers they are to be pitied, not condemned. The film *The Exorcist* is interestingly ambiguous about whether we should feel loathing or compassion for its diabolical little heroine. People who are supposedly possessed raise the hoary old question of freedom and determinism in thrillingly theatrical form. Is the devil inside the *Exorcist* child the true essence of her being (in which case we should fear and loathe her), or is it an alien invader (in which case we should feel pity for her)? Is she just the defenceless puppet of this power, or does it spring straight from within her? Or is evil a case of self-alienation, in the sense that this hideous force is both you and not you? Perhaps it is a kind of fifth columnist, yet one installed at the very core of your identity. In that case we ought to feel pity and fear at the same time, as Aristotle thinks we should when watching tragedy.

Those who wish to punish others for their evil, then, need to claim that they are evil of their own free will. Perhaps they have deliberately chosen evil as their end, like Shakespeare's Richard III, with his defiant "I am determined to prove a villain;" the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with his "Evil be thou my good!;" or Jean-Paul Sartre's Goetz in the play *Lucifer and the Lord*, with his boast "I do Evil for Evil's sake." Yet you might always claim that people like these, who consciously opt for evil

must already be evil to do so. Maybe they are somehow opting for what they already are, like Sartre's waiter playing at being a waiter. Maybe they are simply coming out of the moral closet, rather than assuming an entirely new identity.

The policeman in the toddler killing case, so it would seem, was trying to discredit the liberal doctrine that to understand all is to forgive all. This might be taken to mean that people are indeed answerable for what they do, but that an awareness of their circumstances will incline us to treat them leniently. But it might also be taken to suggest that, if our actions are rationally explicable, we are not responsible for them. The truth, on the contrary, is that reason and freedom are bound closely together. For those who do not grasp this point, trying to account for wicked acts is always a devious attempt to let their perpetrators off the hook. But to explain why I spend my weekends cheerfully boiling badge alive is not necessarily to condone what I do. Not many people imagine that historians seek to explain the rise of Hitler in order to make him look more alluring. For some commentators, trying to grasp what motivates Islamic suicide bombers by, say, pointing to the despair and devastation of the Gaza Strip, is to absolve them of their guilt. But you can condemn those who blow up little children in the name of Allah without assuming that there is no explanation for their outrageous behaviour—they they pulverise people simply for kicks. You do not have to believe that the explanation in question is a sufficient reason to justify what they do. Hunger is a sufficient reason for smashing a bakery window at two o'clock in the morning, but it is not usually regarded as an acceptable one, at least not by the police. I am not, incidentally, suggesting that resolving the Israel-Palestine problem, or any other situation in which Muslims today feel abused and humiliated, would make Islamic terrorism disappear overnight. The grim truth is that it is probably too late for that. Like accumulating capital, terrorism has a momentum of its own. But it is a fair bet that, without those humiliations, such terrorism would never have got off the ground.

It is also odd to assume that understanding is bound to lead to greater tolerance. In fact, the reverse is often true. The more we learn of the futile massacres of the First World War, for example, the less we feel they can be justified. Explanations may sharpen moral judgments as well as soften them. Besides, if evil really is beyond explanation—if it is an unfathomable mystery—how can we ever know enough about it to condemn evildoers? The word “evil” is generally a way of bringing arguments to an end, like a fist in the solar plexus. Like the idea of taste, over which there is supposedly no arguing, it is an end-stopping kind of term, one which forbids the raising of further questions. Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to be said about them. The argument of this book is that neither of these viewpoints is true.

No Western politician today could afford to suggest in public that there are rational motivations behind the dreadful things that terrorists get up to. “Rational” might too easily be translated as “commendable.” Yet there is nothing irrational about robbing a bank, even if it is not generally considered to be commendable. (Though as Bertolt Brecht remarked, “What's robbing a bank compared to founding one?”). The Irish Republican Army obviously had well-pondered political ends, however atrocious some of their methods of achieving them. Yet some in the British media still tried to portray them as psychopaths. If we are not to humanise these ogres, so the assumption goes, they must simply be no rhyme or reason in their actions. But it is precisely the fact that they are human that makes what terrorists do so appalling. If they really were inhuman, we might not be in the least surprised by their behaviour. The horrors they perpetrate might be everyday trifles on Alpha Centauri.

The police officer's use of the term “evil” was clearly ideological. He was probably afraid that the people would go easy on the offenders because of their tender years, and saw the need to insist that

even ten year olds are morally responsible agents. (In fact, the public did not go easy on them at all. There are still those who are eager to kill them now they have been released from custody.) So “evil” can be translated here as “answerable for one's own actions,” just like its opposite, good. Goodness is also sometimes thought to be free of social conditioning. The greatest of modern philosophers Immanuel Kant, held just such a view. This is why Dickens's *Oliver Twist* remains untainted by the low life of criminal London into which he is plunged. Oliver never loses his sweet countenance, moral rectitude, and mysterious ability to speak Standard English despite having been brought up in a workhouse. (The Artful Dodger, one suspects, would have spoken broad Cockney even if he had been raised in Windsor Castle.) But this is not because Oliver is a saint. If he is immune to the polluting influence of thieves, thugs, and prostitutes, it is less because he is morally superior than because his goodness is somehow genetic, as resistant to the mouldings of circumstance as freckles or sandy hair. If Oliver just can't help being good, however, his virtue is surely no more to be admired than the size of his ears. Besides, if it is his purity of will which renders him immune to the malignancy of the underworld, can the underworld really be as malignant as all that? Wouldn't a truly wicked Fagin succeed in corrupting that will? Doesn't the child's unassailable virtue unwittingly let the old rascal get the hook? We might also ask ourselves, with Oliver's impregnable innocence in mind, whether we really admire a goodness that cannot be put to the test. The old-fashioned puritan view that virtue must prove its credentials in strenuous combat with its enemies, and in doing so must expose itself to something of their depraved power, has something to be said for it.

As far as responsibility is concerned, Kant and a right-wing tabloid like the *Daily Mail* have a good deal in common. Morally speaking, both hold that we are entirely responsible for what we do. In fact, such self-responsibility is thought to be the very essence of morality. On this view, appeals to social conditioning are simply a cop-out. Many people, conservatives point out, grow up in dismal social conditions yet become law-abiding citizens. This is rather like arguing that because some smokers don't die of cancer, nobody who smokes dies of cancer. It is this doctrine of absolute self-responsibility which has helped to overpopulate the death rows of U. S. prisons. Human beings must be seen as wholly autonomous (literally: “a law unto themselves”), because to invoke the influence of social or psychological factors on what they do would be to reduce them to zombies. In the Cold War era, this was equivalent to reducing them to that worst horror of all: Soviet citizens. So killers with a mental age of five, or battered wives who finally turn on their pugnacious husbands, must be as guilty as Goebbels. Better a monster than a machine.

There is, however, no absolute distinction between being influenced and being free. A good many of the influences we undergo have to be interpreted in order to affect our behaviour; and interpretation is a creative affair. It is not so much the past that shapes us as the past as we (consciously or unconsciously) interpret it. And we can always come to decipher it differently. Besides, someone free of social influences would be just as much a nonperson as a zombie. In fact, he or she would not really be a human being at all. We can act as free agents only because we are shaped by a world in which the concept has meaning, and which allows us to act upon it. None of our distinctively human behaviour is free in the sense of being absolved from social determinants, which includes such distinctively human behaviour as poking people's eyes out. We would not be able to torture and massacre without having picked up a great many social skills. Even when we are alone, it is not in the sense in which a cockroach scuttles or the Golden Gate Bridge is alone. It is only because we are social animals, able through language to share our inner life with others, that we can speak of such things as autonomy and self-responsibility in the first place. They are not terms that apply to earwigs. To be responsible is not to be bereft of social influences, but to relate to such influences in a particular way. It is to be more than

just a puppet of them. “Monster” in some ancient thought meant, among other things, a creature that was wholly independent of others.

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Human beings can indeed achieve a degree of self-determination. But they can do so only in the context of a deeper dependence on others of their kind, a dependence which is what makes them human in the first place. It is this, as we shall see, that evil denies. Pure autonomy is a dream of evil. It is also *the* myth of middle-class society. (Which is not to say that to be middle class is to be evil. Not even the most militant of Marxists believe that, partly because they tend not to believe in evil in the first place.) In Shakespearian drama, those who claim to depend upon themselves alone, claiming sole authorship of their own being, are almost always villains. You can appeal to people's absolute moral autonomy, then, as a way of convicting them of evil; but in doing so you are pandering to the myth that the evil themselves have fallen for in a big way.

Decades before the two boys killed the toddler, another public outcry over the death of an infant shook Britain from end to end. This was the wave of moral hysteria over Edward Bond's play *Saved*, in which a group of teenagers stone a baby to death in its carriage. The scene is a fine illustration of the old cliché that just messing around can always get out of hand. Its purpose is to demonstrate, step by inexorable step, how a bunch of chronically bored young people could commit such an atrocity without being in the least wicked. The devil, as they say, makes work for idle hands, which rather oddly suggests that keeping yourself occupied is the best way to avoid landing up before a war crimes tribunal. The trouble with the wicked, however, is that they are far too busy, rather than not busy enough. We shall see later how evil has much to do with a sense of futility or meaninglessness; and one of the points of the Bond scene, heartless though it may sound, is that the teenagers are actually cobbling together some meaning for themselves. It was the ordinariness of the episode, quite as much as the horror of the act itself, which raised the hackles of the perpetually affrontable British public. We were being shown how the unspeakable can flow from the utterly familiar, which seemed to diminish the gravity of the action. Evil is supposed to be special, not commonplace. It is not like lighting up a cigarette. Malevolence cannot be monotonous. We shall see later how this, ironically, is a view shared by the evil themselves.

For there are indeed evil acts and individuals, which is where the softhearted liberals and the tough-minded Marxists alike are mistaken. As far as the latter go, the American Marxist Fredric Jameson writes of “the archaic categories of good and evil.”<sup>1</sup> One is forced to assume that Jameson is not of the view that the victory of socialism would be a good thing. The English Marxist Peter Anderson implies that terms like “good” and “evil” are relevant to individual conduct only—in which case it is hard to see why tackling famines, combating racism, or disarming nuclear missiles should be described as good.<sup>2</sup> Marxists do not need to reject the notion of evil, as my own case would exemplify; but Jameson and some of his leftist colleagues do so partly because they tend to confuse the moral with the moralistic. In this, ironically, they are at one with the likes of the U.S. Moral Majority. Moralism means regarding moral judgments as existing in a sealed domain of their own, quite distinct from more material matters. This is why some Marxists are uneasy with the whole idea of ethics. It sounds to them like a distraction from history and politics. But this is a misunderstanding. Properly understood, moral inquiry weighs all these factors together. This is as true of Aristotle's ethics as it is of Hegel's or Marx's. Moral thought is not an alternative to political thought. For Aristotle, it is part of it. Ethics considers questions of value, virtue, qualities, the nature of human conduct and the like, while politics attends to the institutions which allow such conduct to flourish or to be suppressed. There is no impassable gulf here between the private and the public. If morality is not just about the personal life, neither is politics just about the public one.

People differ on the question of evil. A recent poll reported that a belief in sin is highest in Northern Ireland (91 percent), and lowest in Denmark (29 percent). Nobody with any firsthand acquaintance with that pathologically religious entity known as Northern Ireland (the greater part of Ulster) will be in the least amazed by that first finding. Ulster Protestants clearly take a dimmer view of human existence than the hedonistic Danes. One takes it that Danes, like most other people who have been reading the newspapers, do indeed believe in the reality of greed, child pornography, political violence, and the barefaced lies of the pharmaceutical companies. It is just that they prefer not to call these things sins. This may be because they think of sin as an offence against God rather than as an offence against other people. It is not a distinction that the New Testament has much time for.

On the whole, postmodern cultures, despite their fascination with ghouls and vampires, have had little to say of evil. Perhaps this is because the postmodern man or woman—cool, provisional, laid-back and decentred—lacks the depth that true destructiveness requires. For postmodernism, there is nothing really to be redeemed. For high modernists like Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, or the early T.S. Eliot, there is indeed something to be redeemed, but it has become impossible to say quite what. The desolate, devastated landscapes of Beckett have the look of a world crying out for salvation. But salvation presupposes sinfulness, and Beckett's wasted, eviscerated human figures are too sunk in apathy and inertia even to be mildly immoral. They cannot even muster the strength to harm themselves, let alone set fire to a village of innocent civilians.

To acknowledge the reality of evil, however, is not necessarily to hold that it lies beyond all explanation. You can believe in evil without supposing that it is supernatural in origin. Ideas of evil do not have to posit a cloven-hoofed Satan. It is true that some liberals and humanists, along with the laid-back Danes, deny the existence of evil. This is largely because they regard the word "evil" as a device for demonising those who are really nothing more than socially unfortunate. It is what one might call the community-worker theory of morality. It is true that this is one of the word's most priggish uses, as we have seen already. But to reject the idea of evil for this reason works better if you are thinking of unemployed council-estate heroin addicts rather than serial killers or the Nazi SS. It is hard to see the SS as merely unfortunate. One should be careful not to let the Khmer Rouge off the same hook on which delinquent teenagers are impaled.

It is part of the argument of this book that evil is not fundamentally mysterious, even though it transcends everyday social conditioning. Evil as I see it is indeed metaphysical, in the sense that it takes up an attitude toward being as such, not just toward this or that bit of it. Fundamentally, it wants to annihilate the lot of it. But this is not to suggest that it is necessarily supernatural, or that it lacks all human causality. Many things—art and language, for example—are more than just a reflex of the social circumstances, but this is not to say that they drop from the skies. The same is true of human beings in general. If there is no necessary conflict between the historical and the transcendent, it is because history itself is a process of self-transcendence. The historical animal is one who is constantly able to go beyond itself. There are, so to speak, "horizontal" forms of transcendence as well as "vertical" ones. Why should we always think of the latter?

The modern age has witnessed what one might call a transition from the soul to the psyche. Or, one prefers, from theology to psychoanalysis. There are many senses in which the latter is a stand-in for the former. Both are narratives of human desire—though for religious faith that desire can finally be consummated in the kingdom of God, whereas for psychoanalysis it must remain tragically unappeased. In this sense, psychoanalysis is the science of human discontent. But so, too, is theology. With Freud, repression and neurosis play the role of what Christians have traditionally known as original sin. In each case, human beings are seen as born in sickness. But they are thereby not beyond

redemption. Happiness is not beyond our grasp; it is just that it requires of us a traumatic breaking down and remaking, for which the Christian term is conversion. Both sets of belief investigate phenomena which finally outstrip the bounds of human knowledge, whether you call this the enigmatic unconscious or an unfathomable God. Both are well supplied with rituals of initiation, confession, and excommunication, and both are ridden with internecine feuds. They are also alike in provoking derisive incredulity from the worldly, commonsensical, and hard-headed. The theory of evil I expound in this book draws heavily on the thought of Freud, not least on his idea of the death drive, but I hope in the process to show how this kind of argument remains faithful to many a traditional theological insight. One advantage of this approach is that it ranges more widely than most recent discussions of evil have done. A lot of these inquiries have been wary of straying too far from Kant, a philosopher who has much of great interest to say of evil, and from the Holocaust. In the end, evil is indeed all about death—but about the death of the evildoer as much as that of those he annihilates. To understand what this means, however, we need first to look at a few works of fiction.



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## Fictions of Evil

There aren't many novels in which the main character dies in the first few paragraphs. There are even fewer in which this is the only character in the book. We would be bemused if Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse were to break her neck in the first chapter of *Emma*, or Henry Fielding's Tom Jones were to be stillborn in the novel's opening sentences. Something like this, however, is what happens in William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin*, which begins with a man drowning:

He was struggling in every direction, he was the centre of the writhing and kicking knot of his own body. There was no up or down, no light and no air. He felt his mouth open of itself and the shrieking word burst out.

“Help!”

Given that there is no help to hand, and that the man, Christopher Martin, is wallowing in the middle of the ocean, this promises to be a gratifyingly short novel. With commendable presence of mind, however, he manages to kick off his sea boots, inflate his lifebelt, and struggle his way to a nearby rock, where he survives for a while. Except that his efforts are really in vain. The truth is that Martin dies before he heaves his boots off, though he does not know it. Neither does the reader, who discovers this only in the novel's last line. In watching Martin scrambling around on his imaginary rock, we are privy to the condition of the living dead.

*Pincher Martin* is the tale of a man who refuses to die. Yet we soon learn from a series of flashbacks that this grasping, lecherous, manipulative naval officer was never really alive in the first place. “He was born,” a colleague remarks, “with his mouth and flippers open and both hands out to grab.” His isolation on the rock magnifies the fact that he has been a solitary predator all along. Martin uses other people as instruments of his own profit or pleasure, and on the rock he is reduced to using his own exhausted body as a rusty piece of mechanism for accomplishing various tasks. As the sinewy, muscular style of the novel suggests, the hero is stripped down to his animality—to the instinctively self-preservative creature he has always been. It is fitting, then, that he is dead without knowing it, since death reduces the body to a meaningless piece of matter. It represents the divorce of materiality and meaning.

Estranged from his own body, Martin squats inside it rather as a man might sit inside a crane operating its limbs like so many levers. Evil involves a split between body and spirit—between an abstract will to dominate and destroy, and the meaningless piece of flesh that this will inhabits. Martin does not see but “uses” his eyes to look at the things around him. While he was alive, he negated the reality of other people's bodies, treating their flesh merely as a mechanical means to his own satisfaction. Now, in a neatly ironic reversal, he deals with his own body as though it were someone else's. His extreme fatigue, which means that he has to shift his limbs by sheer force of will, magnifies the way he has treated other human bodies all along. Certainly his own body is no part of his identity. It is at war with his selfhood, rather than the place where that selfhood is made flesh. All that is str



stirring in him is a sublimely unquenchable will to survive, which drives on the lumbering machine of his body like a despot. Because it transcends all natural constraints, this will represents a kind of infinity. As such, it is a secular version of the God against whom Martin will find himself pitted in his life-and-death struggle.

This shipwrecked sailor, then, is a mass of lifeless stuff pinned together only by a relentless drive. This drive is located in what the novel calls the “dark centre”—the eternally vigilant core of consciousness buried somewhere inside Martin's skull, which seems the only place where he is truly alive (though even this will turn out to be an illusion). This dark centre is the hero's monstrous ego, which is unable to reflect on itself. This can be understood in both a factual and a moral sense. Human consciousness cannot nip behind itself, since when we reflect on ourselves it is still we who are doing the reflecting. Our sense of the murky regions from which consciousness springs is itself an act of consciousness, and thus already remote from that realm. But neither can Pincher Martin know himself for what he is, in the sense of getting a fix on his own predatory nature. If he were able to do this, he might be able to repent, and so to die for real. As it is, he is stuck fast within his own skull. Even the rock, whose contours seem curiously familiar to him all along, turns out to be the exact shape of the missing tooth in his gum. He is literally living inside his own head. Hell is not other people, as Jean-Paul Sartre claimed. It is exactly the opposite. It is being stuck for all eternity with the most dreary and unspeakably monotonous company of all: oneself.

What the novel portrays, in the figure of its dead-but-won't-lie-down protagonist, is a chilling image of Enlightenment Man. It is, to be sure, a grossly one-sided portrait of that mighty current of human emancipation, as one might expect from a conservative Christian pessimist like Golding. But it captures with superb immediacy some of its less savoury aspects. Martin, as we have seen, is a rationalist who treats the world, including his own and others' bodies, as mere valueless stuff to be moulded by his imperious will. All that counts is his own brutal self-interest. As a kind of latter-day colonialist Crusoe, he even seeks to exercise dominion over the rock on which he is marooned, giving names to its various sectors and manhandling its bits and pieces into some kind of order. It is almost as though his briskly efficient activity on the rock is a way of concealing from himself the fact that he is dead. In this sense, too, Martin behaves rather like Robinson Crusoe, who chops wood and builds stockades on his desert island with all the stolid common sense of a Home Counties carpenter. There is something reassuring about witnessing such stout Anglo-Saxon practicality even in the most exotic of settings. There is also something mildly insane about it.

In fact, it is practical intelligence that Martin values most highly. Deludedly, he sees himself as Prometheus, a mighty hero of the Enlightenment and Karl Marx's favourite mythological figure. Prometheus, too, was chained to a rock but refused to submit to the gods. “Give up, leave go” is the temptation seductively murmured in his ear; but he is terrified of slackening his grip on himself, which is what dying would involve. Since all he has ever had is himself, the only alternative to survival would be pure nothingness. And even his tormented half-life on the rock is preferable to non-existence whatsoever.

Martin cannot die because he regards himself as too precious to disappear forever. But he is also unable to die because he is incapable of love. Only the good are capable of dying. Martin cannot yield himself up to death because he has never been able to yield himself up to others in life. In this sense, how you die is determined by how you live. Death is a form of self-dispossession which must be rehearsed in life if it is to be successfully accomplished. Otherwise it will prove to be a cul-de-sac rather than a horizon. Being-for-others and being-toward-death are aspects of the same condition. *Pincher Martin* is sometimes taken to be a novel about hell, but it is really a story about purgatory.

Purgatory is not an ante-room in which morally mediocre types sit around performing various degrading penances until their number is called and they shuffle shamefacedly forward into paradise. For Christian theology, it is the moment of death itself, when you discover whether you have enough love inside you to be able to give yourself away with only a tolerable amount of struggle. This is why martyrs—those who actively embrace their deaths in the service of others—traditionally go straight to heaven.

Martin is not in hell. Though he is dead on his feet, some ghostly trace of him still lingers on; and there can be no life in hell, which is a state of pure annihilation. There could no more be anyone “in hell than there could be anyone in a material location called debt or love or despair. For traditional theology, to be in hell is to fall out of the hands of God by deliberately spurning his love, if such a condition is actually thinkable. In this sense, hell is the most florid compliment to human freedom one could imagine. If one can even reject the blandishments of one's Creator, one must be powerful indeed. But since there can be no life outside God, who is the source of all vitality, the finality of hell is a matter of extinction, not perpetuity. If there is such a thing as hellfire, it could only be the fire of God's ruthless love, which burns up those who cannot bear it. The damned are those who experience God as a Satanic terror, since he threatens to prise their selves apart. His love and mercy loosen the hold on themselves, and in doing so risk depriving them of their most precious possession. Those who live in fear of hellfire, then, can rest assured. The good news is that they will not roast for ever and ever. This is because the bad news is that they will simply be consumed to nothing.

This, in the end, is probably what happens to Christopher Martin, though we can't be sure. His friend Nathaniel, whose gauche, gangly innocence infuriates him rather as the sheer fact of Othello's existence irritates Iago beyond endurance, speaks to him of “the technique of dying into heaven dissolving into the ultimate truth of things. Martin reacts rather less high-mindedly by trying to murder him. In our present warped condition, Nat argues, the love of God would appear to us as “sheer negation. Without form or void. You see? A sort of black lightning destroying everything we call life.” God is a kind of sublime nothingness. He is a terrorist of love, whose implacable forgiveness is bound to seem like an intolerable affront to those who cannot let go of themselves. The damned are those who experience the “good” infinity of God as a “bad” one. In the same way, one can experience what art historians call the sublime (towering mountains, storms at sea, infinite skies) as either terrible or magnificent, or both.

Like Faust, the damned are too proud to submit to limit. They will not bow the knee to the finite, least of all to their own creatureliness. This is why pride is the characteristic Satanic vice. This is also why they are so terrified of death, which is the absolute limit of the human. The “good” nothingness of God is counterpointed in the novel by the “bad” nothingness of Martin himself, his sheer incapacity for life. “I spit on your compassion ... I shit on your heaven!” he snarls in the final showdown. As the lines of black lightning play mercilessly around him, probing for some crevice or point of weakness where they may penetrate, Martin is reduced to a pair of enormous lobster-like claws, locked like a protective carapace over the elusive dark centre of his selfhood. The lightning probes away at the claws, seeking with infinite patience to undo them:

There was nothing but the centre and the claws. They were huge and strong and inflamed to red. They closed on each other. They contracted. They were outlined like a night sign against the absolute nothingness and they gripped their whole strength against each other ... The lightning crept in. The centre was unaware of anything but the claws and the threat ... Some of the [lightning's] lines pointed to the centre, waiting for the moment when they could pierce it. Others lay against the claws, playing

over them, prying for a weakness, wearing them away in a compassion that was timeless and without mercy.

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And this is where we take leave of our hero. We do not learn whether the black lightning succeeds in its probing and prying. Perhaps Martin is not annihilated after all. We do not know whether the lightning of God's remorseless love turns out in his case to be a bad negativity or a good one—whether it obliterates him or transforms him. This is one reason why *Pincher Martin* is not a novel about hell.

There is a final point to note about the book's terrifyingly apocalyptic conclusion. When the black lightning begins its destructively re-creative work, the rock and the ocean are revealed to be mere paper fictions:

The sea stopped moving, froze, became paper, painted paper that was torn by a black line. The rock was painted on the same paper. The whole of the painted sea was tilted but nothing ran downhill into the black crack which had opened in it. The crack was utter, was absolute, was three times real ... The lines of absolute blackness fell forward into the rock and it was proved to be as insubstantial as the painted water. Pieces went and there was no more than an island of papery stuff around the claws and everywhere else there was the mode that the centre knew as nothing.

Martin's self-created world turns out to be quite literally a hollow fiction. It is no more than a fantasy designed to plug the intolerable negativity of death. This final revelation is particularly shocking given the novel's intensely physical style, which works overtime to re-create the sensuous feel of things. If anything has the air of reality, it is this jagged wedge of rock and its frozen, skin-drenched tenant. Even this sense of solidity, however, turns out to be an illusion. Evil may appear robust and substantial, but it is in fact as flimsy as a spider's web. There is another kind of negativity, however—that symbolised by the black lightning of God's love—which is more real than reality itself.

There may be some significance in Golding's choice of surname for his hero. Not long before the novel's publication, a book appeared describing Operation Mincemeat, a celebrated ruse which took place toward the end of the Second World War. British forces dropped a corpse dressed as a Royal Marines officer off the coast of Spain, carrying letters which successfully fooled the Germans about where the Allies planned to invade Europe. The code name given to the corpse was William Martin, and in the introduction to a new edition of an account of the operation, Ewen Montagu's *The Man Who Never Was*, John Julius Norwich raises the suggestion that the dead man, whose identity remained secret to this day, was one John McFarlane, a name which sounds Scottish.<sup>1</sup> In the film of Montagu's book, there are also one or two hints that the anonymous body is that of a Scot, possibly from the Hebrides. There is a reference to the Hebrides in *Pincher Martin*, which might just be an allusion to Martin's home. In Operation Mincemeat, a dead man saved thousands of the living, as the duped Germans diverted their troops from the Allies' true landing place. In Golding's novel, a dead man believes that he himself is rescued. But he was never really alive in the first place. Pincher Martin is the man who never was.

Several of Golding's novels are concerned with what is traditionally known as original sin. *Lord of the Flies*, for example, is a heavily loaded fable of the "darkness of men's hearts." The schoolboys' efforts to build a civilised order on their island are inevitably undermined by violence and sectarianism. I call the fable "heavily loaded" because it is easy to prove that civilisation is only skin-deep if the people

you show trying to build it are only partly civilised animals in the first place (i.e., children). It is as easy as proving in the manner of George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* that human beings cannot run their own affairs by portraying them as farmyard animals. In both cases, the form of the fabrication determines the moral outcome.

Another of Golding's novels, *The Inheritors*, actually pinpoints the moment of the Fall itself, as one "unfallen" tribe of early hominids encounters another, more dangerous and destructive culture. This second tribe, because of its greater capacity for language, has made the crucial transition to conceptual abstraction and technology. And this involves developing more deadly weapons. It is as though this more evolved community has cut its bonds with Nature and entered upon the precariousness of history proper, with all its ambiguous gains and losses. The Fall, with impeccable theological correctness, is thus portrayed as a fall up rather than down. It is a *felix culpa*, or fortunate fault, in which human beings "lapse" upward from the natural world and the innocence of the beasts into an exhilarating, sickeningly unstable history. It is, to adopt the title of another of Golding's novels, a free Fall—one bound up with the fatal, double-edged freedom which advanced linguistic consciousness brings in its wake.

*Free Fall* is the title of Golding's most subtle investigation of original sin, a condition which has nothing to do with slimy reptiles and forbidden fruit. "Original" here means "at the root," not "in the beginning." The novel perceives that being "fallen" has to do with the misery and exploitation that human freedom inevitably brings in its wake. It lies in the fact that we are self-contradictory animals since our creative and destructive powers spring from much the same source. The philosopher Hegel considered that evil flourished the more individual freedom did. A creature equipped with language can develop far beyond the restricted scope of nonlinguistic creatures. It acquires godlike powers of creation. But like most potent sources of invention, these capabilities are also deeply dangerous. Such an animal is in constant peril of developing too fast, overreaching itself and bringing itself to nothing. There is something potentially self-thwarting or self-undoing about humanity. And this is what the biblical myth of the Fall is struggling to formulate, as Adam and Eve use their creative powers to undo themselves. Man is Faustian Man, too voraciously ambitious for his own well-being, perpetually driven beyond his own limits by the lure of the infinite. This creature cold-shoulders all finite things in his hubristic love affair with the illimitable. And since infinity is a kind of nothingness, the desire for this nothingness is an expression of what we shall see later as the Freudian death drive.

The Faustian fantasy, then, betrays a puritanical distaste for the fleshly. To achieve the infinite (the project known among other things as the American Dream), we would need to leap out of our wretchedly disabling bodies. What distinguishes capitalism from other historical forms of life is that it plugs directly into the unstable, self-contradictory nature of the human species. The infinite—the unending drive for profit, the ceaseless march of technological progress, the ever-expanding power of capital—is always at risk of crushing and overshooting the finite. Exchange-value, which as Aristotle recognised is potentially limitless, holds sway over use-value. Capitalism is a system which needs to be in perpetual motion simply to stay on the spot. Constant transgression is of its essence. No other historical system reveals so starkly the way in which potentially beneficent human powers are so easily perverted to baneful ends. Capitalism is not the cause of our "fallen" state, as the more naïve kind of left-winger tends to imagine. But of all human regimes, it is the one which most exacerbates the contradictions built into a linguistic animal.

Thomas Aquinas taught that our reasoning is closely bound up with our bodies. Roughly speaking, we think the way we do because of the kind of animals we are. It belongs to our reasoning, for example, that it always goes on within a specific situation. We think from inside a particular

perspective on the world. This is not an obstacle to grasping the truth. On the contrary, it is the only way we can grasp it. The only truths we can attain to are those appropriate to finite beings like ourselves. And these are the truths of neither angels nor anteaters. Overreachers, however, refuse to accept these enabling constraints. For them, only truths which are free of all perspective can be authentic. The only valid viewpoint is the God's-eye viewpoint. But this is a vantage point from which we humans would see nothing at all. For us, absolute knowledge would be utter blindness. Those who try to leap out of their finite situations in order to see more clearly end up seeing nothing at all. Those who aspire to be gods, like Adam and Eve, destroy themselves and end up lower than the beasts, who are not so plagued by sexual guilt that they need a fig leaf. Even so, this aberration is an essential part of our nature. It is a permanent possibility for rational animals like ourselves. We cannot think without abstraction, which involves reaching beyond the immediate. When abstract concepts allow us to incinerate whole cities, we know we have reached too far. A perpetual possibility of going awry is built into our capacity for sense-making. Without this possibility, reason could not function.

There is another sense in which freedom and destructiveness are bound up together. In the complex web of human destinies, where so many lives are meshed intricately together, the free-chosen actions of one individual may breed damaging, entirely unforeseeable effects in the lives of countless anonymous others. They may also return in alien form to plague ourselves. Acts that we and others have performed freely in the past may merge into an opaque process which appears without an author, confronting us in the present with all the intractable force of fate. In this sense, we are the creatures of our own deeds. A certain inescapable self-estrangement is thus built into our condition. "Freedom," observes Adrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, "always inclines toward dialectic reversals." This is why original sin is traditionally about an act of freedom (eating an apple) yet is at the same time a condition we did not choose, and one which is nobody's fault. It is "sin" because it involves guilt and injury, but not "sin" in the sense of willful wrong. Like desire for Freud, it is less a conscious act than a communal medium into which we are born.

The interwovenness of our lives is the source of our solidarity. But it also lies at the root of our mutual harm. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes, it is "as if persecution by the Other were at the basis of solidarity with the Other."<sup>2</sup> In a poignant moment in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, the long-suffering Jewish hero Leopold Bloom speaks up for love as the opposite of hate. It would be agreeable if this were true. But there are sound Freudian reasons for regarding love as deeply bound up with resentment and aggression. It may not be true, as Oscar Wilde claimed, that we always kill the thing we love, but it is certainly true that we tend to feel profoundly ambivalent about it. Given that love is a laborious process which requires a perilous risking of ourselves, this is scarcely surprising. The novelist Thomas Hardy knew that by a series of decisions which are both free and considerate of others, we can end up painting ourselves into corners where we cannot move an inch in any direction without inflicting grievous damage on those around us.

"People don't seem to be able to move without killing each other," remarks Sammy Mountjoy in Golding's *Free Fall*. It is only a short step from this to the feeling that simply to exist is to be guilty. It is this feeling that the doctrine of original sin is supposed to register. "Guilt reproduces itself in each of us," writes Theodor Adorno. "If we ... knew at every moment what has happened and to whom the concatenations we owe our own existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamities, even if we have done nothing wrong ... if one were fully aware of all things at every moment, one would really be unable to live."<sup>3</sup> To be implicated in a calamity without having done wrong: this is the very essence of original sin, as Adorno perceives. It is closely related to what tragic art traditionally sees as the "guilty innocent" figure of the scapegoat, who takes on the burden of others' misdeeds.

precisely because he is blameless himself.

~~This is what is so absurd about the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception~~ according to which Jesus's mother, Mary, was conceived without original sin. It regards original sin as a kind of genetic stain which you might be fortunate enough to be born without, rather as you might be unfortunate enough to be born without a liver. Original sin, however, is not about being born either saintly or wicked. It is about the fact of being born in the first place. Birth is the moment when, without anyone having had the decency to consult us on the matter, we enter into a preexistent web of needs, interests, and desires—an inextricable tangle to which the mere brute fact of our existence will contribute, and which will shape our identity to the core. This is why babies in most Christian churches are baptised at birth, long before they know about sin or indeed about anything else. They have already drastically reordered the universe without being aware of it. If psychoanalytic theory is to be believed, they are already imprinted with an invisible network of drives which bind their bodies to those of others, and which will prove a constant source of affliction to them.

Original sin is not the legacy of our first parents but of our parents, who in turn inherited it from their own. The past is what we are made of. Throngs of ghostly ancestors lurk within our most casual gestures, preprogramming our desires and flicking our actions mischievously awry. Because our earliest, most passionate love affair takes place when we are helpless infants, it is caught up with frustration and voracious need. And this means that our loving will always be defective. As with the doctrine of original sin, this condition lies at the core of the self, yet is nobody's responsibility. Love is both what we need in order to flourish and what we are born to fail at. Our only hope is learning to fail better. Which may, of course, prove not to be good enough.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, then, was mistaken to believe that human beings are born free. But that does not mean that they are born sinful either. No creature without language, which is what “infant” means, could be that. As the theologian Herbert McCabe writes, “Everybody is immaculate when conceived.”<sup>4</sup> Even so, it is true that the moral dice are scarcely loaded in our favour. Infants are innocent (literally, harmless) in the way that tortoises are, not in the way that adults who refuse to turn a machine gun on civilians are. Their innocence does them no particular credit. We are born self-centred as an effect of our biology. Egoism is a natural condition, whereas goodness involves a set of complex practical skills we have to learn. Men and women are thrust at birth into a deep mutual dependence—a truth scandalous to Rousseau, who in his petit-bourgeois way placed an excessive value on human autonomy. But original sin means that any such total autonomy is a myth. As such, it is a radical sort of notion. It questions the individualist doctrine that we are the sole proprietors of our own actions. Among other things, it is an argument against capital punishment. This is not to deny responsibility, simply to insist that our actions are no more inalienable than our property. Who can say for sure, in the great skein of human action and reaction, who really has ownership of a particular deed? Who exactly is responsible for killing the saintly Simon in *Lord of the Flies*? It is not always easy to say where my responsibility (or even interests, desires, or identity) ends and yours begins. Can't “who is acting here?” or even “who is desiring here?” be an intelligible question?

There is, to be sure, more than this to the idea of original sin. We must also keep in mind, as I have written elsewhere, “the perversity of human desire, the prevalence of illusion and idolatry, the scandal of suffering, the dull persistence of oppression and injustice, the scarcity of public virtue, the insolence of power, the fragility of goodness and the formidable power of appetite and self-interest.” None of this means that we are powerless to transform our current condition. It means, rather, that we shall not do so without soberly acknowledging our dispiriting history. This is not a history which rules out the possibility of, say, socialism or feminism. But it does rule out the possibility of utopia. The

are certain negative features of the human species which cannot be greatly altered. As long as there is love and death, for example, the tragedy of mourning those dear to us who perish will know no end. It is almost certain that we cannot root out violence without also sabotaging certain capacities we value. But though death and suffering may be beyond our powers to annul, the same is not true of social injustice.

Besides, that certain things cannot be changed is far from a bad thing. Only a social order which makes a fetish of the new is likely to deny this. To think in this way is one of the major misconceptions of postmodernism. We cannot alter the fact that infants need nourishing, but this is no reason to gnash our teeth. Not all permanence is an offence against the political left. Continuity is at least as significant a factor in history as change, and many continuities are to be cherished. It would appear to be a persistent feature of human cultures that great masses of people are not regularly slaughtered simply because the moon is full, but not even postmodernists should feel down in the mouth about this. Durability is no more precious or worthless in itself than is change. The assumption that change is radical whereas the unchanging is conservative is an illusion. Richard J. Bernstein writes that we must resist the temptation to see evil as “a fixed ontological feature of the human condition,”<sup>6</sup> since this means confessing that there is nothing to be done about it. We just have to live with it. Yet it does not follow that because something is a persistent feature of the human condition there is nothing to be done about it. Illness is one such enduring feature, but this does not persuade doctors to give up curing the sick in a fit of fatalism. People will probably always engage in bloodthirsty conflict, but this does not mean that we should not strive to resolve such contentions. The desire for justice might well be a constant feature of the human condition. Certainly the historical record would suggest so. Fixed ontological features are not always to be lamented. It is dogmatic, and thus not in the spirit of mutability, to believe so.

An equally purblind postmodern dogma holds that difference and diversity are always to be commended. No doubt this is often the case. But the blunt truth is that if the human race had been made up almost entirely of gay Latinos, with just a few heterosexual deviants thrown in here and there to keep the species ticking over, a great deal of mayhem and massacre would almost certainly have been avoided. No doubt gay Latinos would long since have split into a thousand rival sects, each armed to the teeth and distinguished from its fellows by the slimmest nuances of lifestyle. But the partisanship would be nothing to what tends to happen when one group of humans encounters another group with blatantly different markings. Of course these dissensions are largely political in form. But it is unlikely they will be resolved unless we acknowledge our built-in tendency to experience fear, insecurity, and antagonism in the presence of potential predators, a tendency which no doubt has eminently useful evolutionary functions.

Let us return, however, to the idea of original sin. Sammy Mountjoy, the hero of Golding's *Fire and Fall*, sets out to unravel the unfathomably intricate text of his own existence, seeking to pinpoint the moment when he lost his freedom. (Mountjoy is the name of a prison in Dublin.) He is out to trace what he calls “the awful line of descent” by which guilt is transmitted like a highly contagious virus from one human being to another. “We are neither the innocent nor the wicked,” Sammy reflects. “We are the guilty. We fall down. We crawl on hands and knees. We weep and tear each other.” But the Fall was never just a moment, and it is never simply in the past. Sammy has destroyed his love, Beatrice, and he is now taking soundings in “this ocean of cause and effect which is Beatrice and me.” But he, too, was torn apart as a child by a frustrated schoolmistress, who was in love with the pedophilic priest who adopted him. And so the entangled web of injury and guilt, action and reaction, ramifies endlessly. This state of negative solidarity, as one might call it, shades off indefinitely.

every direction.

For Golding's novel, only an act of forgiveness can break this toxic line of descent, cutting the knot and prising open the deadly circuit of cause and effect. So Sammy returns to his childhood home to forgive his schoolteacher, only to find that she has suppressed her sadistic treatment of him and escaped into innocence. The innocent cannot forgive, the narrator observes, because they do not know that they have been offended. Mountjoy is consequently left with his guilt on his back. In the end, his sadistic teacher has the upper hand. Beatrice, likewise, had lapsed into madness and is beyond mortal reach. What will really break the lethal line of descent is not Sammy's forgiving but his being forgiven. It is when he is shown mercy in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, released from a broom cupboard where he is crazed with terror, that the novel is able to conclude.

If *Pincher Martin* is a fable of purgatory, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* is an allegory of hell. In this most gloriously fantastic and perverse of Irish fictions, it is not the protagonist who dies in the first few pages, but the narrator himself. He has set out with an accomplice to rob old farmer Mathers of the cash box which he keeps concealed under the floorboards of his living room; but when he thrusts his arm under the floorboards to grope for the box, he is overtaken by a most curious sensation

I cannot hope to describe what it was but it had frightened me very much long before I had understood it even slightly. It was some change which came upon me or upon the room, indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable. It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye; perhaps all of these and other things happened together for all my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation. The fingers of my right hand, thrust into the opening in the floor, had closed mechanically, found nothing at all, and come up again empty. The box was gone!

Hearing a soft cough behind him, the narrator turns to find the farmer whose head he has just smashed in with a spade eyeing him silently from his chair in the corner. The reader discovers later that the narrator's accomplice has already removed the cash box, and in order to keep its contents for himself has replaced it with a bomb. The bomb has exploded, and the narrator is right to feel that some momentous transformation has come over him because he has just been blown to pieces.

In groping for the cash box, O'Brien's narrator finds "nothing at all;" and during his ensuing conversation with the dead-but-alive farmer, he gradually realises that every reply the old man gives to his questions is couched in the negative. "There is a lot to be said for No as a general principle," Mathers observes, perhaps echoing the Irish novelist Laurence Sterne's comment in *Tristram Shandy* that one should show some respect for nothingness, considering what worse things there are in the world. In a similar vein, the greatest of Irish philosophers, Bishop Berkeley, declared that something and nothing were closely allied. "I have decided," Mathers informs the narrator, "to say No henceforward to every suggestion, request or inquiry whether inward or outward ... I have refused more requests and negatived more statements than any man living or dead. I have rejected, reneged, disagreed, refused, and denied to an extent that is unbelievable."

The world of *The Third Policeman* is one of surreal impossibilities. Bicycles and their riders, for example, come by a subtle process of osmosis to intermingle their atoms and stealthily assume one another's characteristics. Men are to be found leaning casually up against fireplaces as though resting



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