

De Wit, Theo WA<sup>1</sup>  
Faculty of Catholic Theology,  
University of Tilburg

## The adornment of evil. Narrativity, evil and reconciliation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Are we at all able to *recognise for what it is*, that phenomenon which in contemporary political opinion, in our philosophical and theological traditions, but also in prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, is designated 'evil'? And here I mean: are we able to *think* it without betraying it, without 'changing the subject', without reducing it to something more reassuring, not *reconciling it prematurely*, but at the same time without being seduced by it, by positing it as omnipotent or imbued with an implacable necessity? This seems to be no easy task, for as the proverb goes, 'the devil is the master of disguise'.<sup>2</sup> He tricks us, and seduces us to self-deception. Evil goes *incognito*, and, in a society such as ours, where power – according to Michel Foucault's well-known statement – is no longer primarily aimed at repressing or prohibiting something, but rather at promoting usefulness, productivity and health, it not infrequently assumes the form of the forces of humanity and the humanitarian, as the implementation of good within a recalcitrant world.

A second introductory consideration. Our actions - therefore also our bad ones - are, in Hannah Arendt's definition, inseparable from words and narratives. That which I do, I identify by means of an account or a description; in turn others produce accounts concerning my actions. Moreover, these accounts – my own and those of others – are always evaluative. Therefore cultures or even small communities such as towns or families manifest as series of more or less contesting accounts or stories.<sup>3</sup> With the three modalities of the French verb 'to answer' (*répondre*) are given the three different types of narrative here at play. When responding to the concrete other (*répondre à*), I respond to a question, a request, an appeal, a declaration of war, a plea, etc. In this regard, for example the Taliban's initial response to the US government's demand to hand Osama bin Laden shortly over after 9/11: a narrative rooted in the Pashtunwali code of asylum (*nanawastai*), which, as hosts, prohibited them from handing over any person which had sought refuge in their midst. In the second instance, when I 'vouch for myself' (*répondre de*), I am busy weaving at my self-understanding and my private narratives, my private mythology. And finally, when answering to a community (*répondre devant*), I combine the first two narratives, for instance in the form of an apology or criticism, with the narrative of collectivity - for instance that of the national or constitutional community. Also within a collective such as the national state (hegemonial) narratives concerning the identity of the political community alternate. In this

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1 Dr. Theo W.A. de Wit (1953) teaches Social Ethics and Political Philosophy at the University of Tilburg, Faculty of Catholic Theology. He wrote a (cum laude) Dissertation on the Political Philosophy of Carl Schmitt (in Dutch: *De onontkoobaarheid van de politiek*, Nijmegen 1992; *The Unevitability of Politics*) and is the (co)editor of seven books, among other things on Solidarity, Religion and Politics, Toleration, and Humanism and Religion. He wrote several essays (in Dutch, German, English) on Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Jacob Taubes, Alain Finkielkraut et al.

2 Frans De Wachter, 'Hoe radicaal is het radicale kwaad'? in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 65<sup>e</sup> Jg.nr 1, (2003), 33-59; 52.

3 See for similar formulations Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, 6.

regard, think of a narrative such as that of the multi-cultural, inclusive South African 'rainbow nation'.

As a final introductory consideration, the intrinsic link between narrativity, self-delusion and conflict. A public intellectual such as the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut has over the course of years become increasingly conscious of the polemical dimension of the narratives discussed above. He sketches the background as follows: 'our fantasmatic activity knows no interruption. Our interior has become a permanent cinema. We are ceaselessly consuming and producing stories. Even when we grow tired, we do not flag: all facts are cashed in as anecdotes, whatever happens is told. The most significant obstacle between the world, and us indeed between us and ourselves is Romanesque in nature. The veil which is cast over the world, just as much as its unveiling, has a narrative texture. While in this time of the new media one may perhaps justly worry about the future of the book, one has absolutely no reason to worry about the disappearance of the fable.'<sup>4</sup>

As we may already suspect from this last comment regarding our fabulating nature, the narrative texture of our conception of reality and ourselves also represent an inexhaustible source of self-deception, both with regard to ourselves as singular persons, and as collectives. In a recent American philosophical discussion on self-deception, this link between self-delusion and narrativity was seen as primarily related to our deeper longings, such as those for recognition and love, and the fantasies these engender. Thus we are far more prone to fooling ourselves when it comes to making a judgement call on our position within a romantic relationship - than for instance on choosing a new car or calculating the time needed to get to an appointment. And our assessment of the relationship with the beloved is by no means fixed, but prone to re-evaluation. For example: should I regard the security and stability of my relationship as signs of its emptiness and superficiality, or are these exactly the qualities, which define what is great about it?

As a result of these two aspects (our narrative fantasy is unceasingly at work; it easily gets carried away when our deeper longings and fears are at play) we are extremely vulnerable to self-deception. In her article on fantasy, depth and self-deception, Julie Kirsch therefore pleads for constantly submitting ourselves to being corrected by others, especially our friends.<sup>5</sup> After all, it is far easier to spot the self-delusion in friends and colleagues than in oneself. According to Kirsch, people who have rich emotional lives and are capable of making subtle emotional and moral distinctions, are, as a result of this interplay of fantasy and the power of deeper longings, at certain moments especially prey to illusion, self-delusion or the blind pursuit of self-interest. And it is hardly surprising that this entire structure of narrative identity, fantasy, deeper longings and self-deception becomes even more intensely manifest when deeds which have at some time been labelled misdeeds, are at issue.

## 2. THREE EXAMPLES CONCERNING THE LINK BETWEEN NARRATIVITY, EVIL DEEDS AND (PREMATURE) RECONCILIATION

(a) Let me start with a classic example of a political-philosophical diagnosis in which the link between evil deeds and narrative self-deception is explicitly made. In one of his most striking pieces of political analysis<sup>6</sup>, concerning the successful *coup d'état* of the dictator Louis Bonaparte

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4 Alain Finkielkraut, *Un coeur intelligent*, Parijs: Stock Flammarion, 2009, 279-280.

5 Julie E. Kirsch, 'Maladies of Fantasy and Depth', in: *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 35, No1, jan. 2009, special Issue: Self-Deception, 15-28.

6 Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (2<sup>e</sup> druk 1869), Ned.vert. *De Achttiende Brumaire van Louis Bonaparte*, Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1976.

in France in 1851, Karl Marx writes these now famous words:

'Man makes his own history, but not out of free will, not according to self-chosen conditions, but to ones which are directly given, inherited. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs as a heavy burden upon the minds of the living. And precisely when they seem about to turn themselves and the things around, create something which has not existed before, precisely during such times of revolutionary crisis, they fearfully summon the spirits of the past into their service, derive names, battle cries, costumes from them in order to act out a new act in the history of the world, dressed-up in these respectable disguises, and using these borrowed languages. In this way Luther donned the disguise of the apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789-1814 cloaked itself initially as Roman republic, then as Roman empire, and the revolution of 1848 was unable to come up with anything more original than now parodying the revolutionary tradition of 1789, now that of 1793-1795.'<sup>7</sup>

And Marx concludes with a sentence in which the narrative structure of our identity and its transformation is described as follows:

'Thus the novice, having learnt a new language, continues to translate this back into his mother tongue. Only once he becomes able to move within this new language without a memory of his own language, forgets his mother tongue within her, does he manage appropriate the spirit of this new, allowing him to freely produce within it'.

Why do people need to dress up like this – need these 'world historical exorcisms of the dead' as Marx calls it – when describing themselves? Marx suspects the answer may be the following: No matter how *unheroic* modern bourgeoisie society – ultimately the result of the modern revolutions he refers to in the passage above: the Reformation, the French revolution and the uprisings of 1848 – may be, according to Marx 'heroic courage, sacrifice, terror, civil wars and battles between peoples were required to bring her into the world'. And the necessary courage for enmity and violence, to sacrifice self and others, could only be acquired by means of an imaginary identification with the greats of the past. And here Marx uses the word 'self-deception'. The gladiators which established bourgeoisie society, we read in Marx, 'found in the classically strict traditions of the Roman republic the ideals and forms of art, the *self-deception*, which they required in order to conceal the limited middle class content of their struggle from themselves, to keep their passion on par with great historical tragedy.'<sup>8</sup>

The meaning of this regression therefore lies in a form of self-deception, which all the same had a very clear function: to create the enthusiasm without which people are not capable of revolutionary - and thus risky - behaviour. A powerful sublimation, exaltation, exaggeration, adoration seems required in order to bring about such a turn-about: 'The resurrection of the dead during these revolutions therefore served to exalt the new fights, not to parody the old; to exaggerate the task at hand, not to flee from its realisation; to retrieve the spirit of revolution, not to set her spectre wandering'.<sup>9</sup> Further in the text Marx even goes so far as to speak of the 'intoxication' of the self.<sup>10</sup> (And in fact, this has always - literally - been the case: the most gruesome crimes and atrocities are still almost invariably committed by drunk or drugged-up militias, regular army units, child soldiers, hooligans and youth gangs). This self-deception and 'concealment of reality from the self' (to Marx, with regard to the examples he uses above, reality

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7 Marx, o.c., 19.

8 Marx, o.c. 20 (my italics)

9 Marx, o.c. 21.

10 Marx, o.c. 22: 'The earlier Revolutions needed world-historical memories to stupify themselves with their own content.'

is the realisation of the self-interest of the 'third estate', regicide, the merciless persecution of the so-called 'enemies of the Revolution', respectively) assumes the form of a certain kind of ecstasy. During these civil revolutions, according to Marx's observation, 'people and things appear to be encrusted in diamonds, ecstasy permeates the atmosphere of the everyday'.<sup>11</sup> But, observes Marx, in the aftermath of such a giddy high a kind of hangover is inevitable, before society is able to soberly appropriate the achievements of its *Sturm und Drang* period.

A psychoanalytical reader of Marx's text referred to this phenomenon as 'functional regression'.<sup>12</sup> Returning to the past is functional, for it gives us the courage for deeds and misdeeds by which a new social reality may become established. A return to hallowed Roman past is the ideological form by which people seek to give *universal* effect to their own *particular* interests.

(b) But now a second example. Here evil is reconciled and thereby legitimised, for it brings *mankind to its destiny*. This is the famous Hegelian *List der Vernunft* (cunning or trickery of reason): the rational World Spirit also – dialectically – requires its opposite – that is, the irrational and evil deeds – in order to arrive at its destiny. Since Leibnitz the cunning of reason has been a major strategy by which modernity sought to give meaning to evil, *reconcile* it with a greater whole, in short, take the edge off it – a phenomenon that Odo Marquardt appositely refers to as the 'amelioration of evil'.<sup>13</sup> But are we still capable of believing in the cunning of reason? I have to confess that I, in common with many others born after the Second World War, have lost that faith; a fact, which I can once more illustrate by means of good old Marx, this time, read against the grain. In a short English article dating from the same period as the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, entitled *The British Rule in India* (1852), Marx presents a merciless analysis of British colonialism in India. In India, says Marx, the British managed to accomplish something, compared to which the perennial disasters, famines, invasions and revolutions which she has historically been accustomed to, appear as mere epiphenomena. In a relatively short period of time the British had managed to completely and irrevocably lay waste to the basal structure, the very socio-economic fabric of Indian society (that is, village communities, based on agriculture, spinning and weaving). The result is a sea of hitherto unknown poverty and suffering, with the loss of the old and familiar world borne with a uniquely Indian sense of melancholy.

However, towards the end of his text the great philosopher-economist suddenly pulls a magic rabbit out of the hat. For, as obviously criminal and 'disgusting' the sea of misery colonialism had brought about may be to anyone endowed with the capacity of 'human feeling', on a balance of factors, one is nevertheless forced to give one's blessing to the more encompassing historical process in the name of Progress. 'For can humanity reach its destiny', Marx solemnly proclaims, 'without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?'. Thus the crimes of the British should ultimately be seen as an 'unconscious instrument' in the hands of history.

Marx thus believed – as did many other nineteenth century thinkers as a matter of fact – in history as the world-historical march of progress, best understood as the self-completion and the *self-realisation of humanity*. Only after the First World War would this faith in progress start to decline. The massive bloodbath which was the 'Great War' lead many to suspect that 'humanity' may after all not be set on course of perpetual progress. 'Also humanity is mortal', writes Valéry. But only after Auschwitz, and certainly after the all too visible failure of communism, would the link between truth and history which had underpinned this ideology of progress, become firmly rejected. To Levinas,

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11 Marx, o.c. 23.

12 Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Marx et la répétition historique*, Parijs, 1978, 129 e.v.

13 Odo Marquardt, 'Entlastungen. Theodizeemotive in der neuzeitliche Philosophie', in: id., *Apologie des Zufälligen*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 11-33; 13.

Lyotard and many others, this belief in the indifferent march of history is nothing but a relentless, secularised version of the traditional *theodicee* (the doctrine which exonerates God from evil). 'Belief in progress is in conflict with human dignity', in the harsh assessment of Hannah Arendt, for, after Hitler, she herself had no more illusions about the innocence of the union between truth and historical becoming.<sup>14</sup>

In this political narrative the link between evil deeds and self-deception assumes the form of the *inscribing* of evil into a grand narrative centred on themes of a universal mission, a necessary destiny or an exalted utopia. In a sense the evil deeds increase in stature, for they are embedded within a grand context.

(c) A third example: personal narratives as the instrument of rational reconciliation. Already at the start of the twentieth century the Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin parted ways with orthodox Marxism and communism's massive faith in progress. 'All those who have ever triumphed, march along in the victory parade of the rulers over those who have bitten in the dust. In well-established fashion, they parade the plunder. Plunder: cultural goods. (...) These cultural goods thank their existence not only to the exertions of the great geniuses that had created them, but also to the anonymous servitude of their contemporaries. No document of culture ever existed which was not by the same token a document of barbarity.'<sup>15</sup>

This quote is a good example of Benjamin's views on the past, on the anonymous toil of labourers and slaves.

After all, here Benjamin touches upon an immense question, for in essence each and every universalistic ideology of emancipation aimed at the *Wiedergewinnung des Menschen* (Marx) is placed before the question of what status to give to the innocent victims and 'enslaved ancestors' who had toiled in the service of a better future for subsequent emancipated generations. Has their suffering ceased to be of any significance? Does only visible suffering constitute an obstacle to happiness? Should we forget their fate in order to avoid the risk of poisoning our happiness? Or should emancipated generations rather acknowledge their debt towards 'the work of the past' (Benjamin)? But, states Marx Horkheimer, one of Benjamin's friends who were very sensitive to the question: 'No *quid pro quo* is possible with regard to past injustice'. Therefore, he continues, 'perfect justice cannot be realised in history. For even if a better society was to emerge from current disorder, it will neither redeem the poverty of the past, nor the injustices which have been visited upon non-human nature'. Is some form of 'anamnetic solidarity', attuned to the voices of our ancestors, therefore not the precondition for a truly historically minded emancipation movement?<sup>16</sup>

The 'Angel of History' constitutes an important motif in the thinking of Benjamin. In Benjamin's conception, one should think of it as something like Paul Klee's fragile *Angelus Novus*, floating in an empty space, with its 'gaze fixed on the past'. And, continues Benjamin: 'What we perceive as a chain of events, *she* sees as one huge catastrophe, a relentless heaping before her feet of one ruin on top of another'.<sup>17</sup> Here Benjamin seems to be saying that for us humans it is *impossible* not to repress the catastrophic dimensions of history, to recognise history in its totality: that we are condemned to self-deception. At any rate not when assuming that 'nothing which has ever

14 Koestler, geciteerd bij J.L. Heldring, 'In de schaduwen van morgen', in: *NRC-Handelsblad* 5/03/09.

15 Benjamin, *Maar een storm waait uit het paradijs. Filosofische essays over taal en geschiedenis*, Nijmegen: Sun, 1996, 146-147.

16 Horkheimer, quoted in Lenhardt. The expression 'anamnetic solidarity' is forged by Christian Lenhardt, 'Anamnetic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*', in: *Telos* 25 (1975), 133-154. See also Theo. W. A. de Wit, 'De verloren onschuld van de solidariteit', in: Theo de Wit en Henk Manschot (red.), *Solidariteit. Filosofische kritiek, ethiek en politiek*, Amsterdam: Boom, 17-74; vooral 40 e.v. .

17 Benjamin, o.c. 144.

happened may be seen as lost to history'.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the angel is mesmerised by the terrors of events, 'we' are compelled to act with our futures in mind.

Elsewhere he expresses this idea of history-as-catastrophe by means of a concept derived from Carl Schmitt, namely the 'state of exception'. But unlike for Schmitt, Benjamin's state of exception does not signify an extreme situation in which the law is no longer able to function, where an authoritarian intervention has become necessary. Rather, seen from the perspective of the oppressed, the state of exception describes the continuity of everyday life, in other words, the whole of history – to which the 'messiah' will make an end by establishing an 'actual, real state of exception, the perpetually awaited miracle'.<sup>19</sup> 'The real catastrophe is that things continue as they do', states Benjamin; being fated to live within a (mythical) order devoid of law. To me, it seems that only on the basis of this conception of history can Benjamin's strategy to maintain inherited theological themes within politics – specifically in appealing to figures such as the 'angel' and the 'messiah' – be understood.

Let me give an example from modern history to explain the *ratio* of Benjamin's thinking – one which, to anyone used to a more or less stable political-juridical order, is likely to come across as extreme or even Gnostic. A single example, in which Benjamin's call for anamnestic solidarity with our enslaved ancestors is heeded while at the same time all kinds of philosophical-historical triumphalism are firmly kept at bay, is perhaps constituted by the work of South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Committee* (TRC) during the 1990's.

It is common knowledge that during the late 1980's and early 1990's South Africa was frequently poised on the brink of catastrophic civil war. Unlike when Apartheid was still formally entrenched as government policy, that experience which Jacques Derrida in a text dedicated to Benjamin had termed the 'experience of aporia'<sup>20</sup> (to make a decision in an situation without solution) was now faced by all parties to the conflict. Take for example a statement by President De Klerk's from this period: 'We do not want to simply replace one dictatorship with another'. This statement, aimed at the ANC, is remarkable, for here De Klerk explicitly acknowledges the illegitimacy of his own government: a 'dictatorship'. His statement also underscores the gravity of the situation in the country at the time: the absence of *any* legitimacy. In such a situation, Derrida's paradox – which I paraphrase here – comes into play: On the one hand it seems to be *simpler* to criticise the founding power (that power creating a new beginning), for it is unable to appeal to any prior given legality, unable to justify itself, and is thus bound to appear unrestrained and wild ('another dictatorship' in De Klerk's words). On the other hand, it is more *difficult* to criticise this founding power, for one is not able to summon it before any existing law; after all, the moment it establishes a new state of law, it ceases to recognise the hitherto existing state of law (for its part, the ANC regarded the then incumbent government as an illegitimate 'dictatorship').<sup>21</sup>

In this context, the statement made by a woman in Soweto amidst all the manifestations of violence and counter-violence at the time, is less incomprehensible and irrational than it may appear at first glance. 'Perhaps God needs to kill us all tonight, so that tomorrow there can be a new beginning with new people'. In other words, she is referring to a force, a ruling and an origin, which, in some kind of Day of Judgement scenario, will lay waste to existing legitimacy and legality in all its forms, in order to make possible a new beginning. I do not think I will be

18 Benjamin, o.c. 146-147;143.

19 See about the relation Benjamin-Schmitt: Marin Terpstra en Theo de Wit, 'Walter Benjamin en Carl Schmitt: een politiek-theologische confrontatie', in: *Benjamin Journaal*, number 5, Historische Uitgeverij, Groningen 1997, 56-75.

20 Jacques Derrida, Force de loi : Le « Fondement mystique de l'autorité », in : *Cardoso Law Review* Vol 11, juli-aug. 1990, 5-6 ; especially 1946 e.v.

21 Derrida, o.c. 1000.

doing Benjamin any injustice were I to relate this to the 'miracle' and the 'divine violence' of which he speaks in conclusion to his *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. Stronger still, I even suspect that exactly the catastrophic interrelationships of culpability which this woman evokes, and the 'us' (which includes both her friends and enemies) to which she refers, were instrumental in enabling the new beginning, the 'miracle' of South Africa's transition into a democracy which so astounded the world.

Also the establishment and activities of the TRC, through which the disclosure of the 'truth' by Apartheid's victims and perpetrators was formally structured, publicly ritualised, deservedly drew worldwide attention. After all, the TRC represented an unprecedented experiment in coming to terms with a violent past; one, which managed to partially, transcended the narrow confines of (criminal) law. Also this can be seen as consistent with Benjamin's thinking, where he, in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, makes a case for a non-judicial (for instance diplomatic) approach to and settlement of conflicts.<sup>22</sup>

But as a number of analyses have shown in the meantime, in the admirable method of the TRC also laid the aporia of the whole enterprise. For how can the singular accounts of victims and perpetrators simultaneously serve in the disparate interests of reconciliation, of nation building and of establishing a new respect for the law within the fledgling *non-racial democracy*? How can these extremely gripping, but all the same personal, narratives manage to simultaneously generate the meta-narrative of national reconciliation? In short, how to accomplish a fair 'exchange' between truth and amnesty, between the acknowledgement of accounts of suffering, and forgiveness? Only by committing treason against the very victims which were given the opportunity to relate their accounts. Because the necessity of national reconciliation was fixed as 'framing narrative' (the alternative being a relapse into the Hobbesian 'state of nature' of civil war), the individual accounts were by necessity subordinated. For this reason the TRC more or less silently found some accounts more useful than others; in other instances (of for instance almost unimaginable atrocities) accounts were plainly found disruptive, and had to be sacrificed to oblivion.<sup>23</sup>

Here we are able to catch Benjamin's 'catastrophic' history in the act: once the *instrumentalisation* of the suffering of preceding generations becomes of vital necessity to a new political project (such as South African democracy, but no less that of Israel and the Palestinians; Serbia, etc), then justice is unavoidably betrayed. Does Benjamin not precisely invoke the 'Angel of History' as emblem of the acknowledgement of this betrayal? For it is only through the Angel of History - capable of not flinching from the vision of 'one huge catastrophe, a relentless heaping of one ruin on top of another' - that we are able to speak of 'progress'. After all, this angel is driven into the future by 'a storm blowing from paradise'.

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22 Benjamin, 'Een kritische beschouwing van het geweld', in: id., *Maar een storm waait uit het paradijs*, o.c. 53-79; 66.

23 See the excellent analyses of Leonhard Praeg, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation*, Atlanta/Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000, especially Chapter 4, 'Truth and Reconciliation: a social contract', 220-300.