

*Memories and Myths of Evil;  
a Reflection on the Fall from Paradise*

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As I think back about my childhood in Holland at the time of its brutal occupation by the German National Socialist regime, I remember, first of all, a number of well rehearsed and inoffensive family stories. These all seem to have been carefully edited so they can be told around the dinner table without arousing anxiety or giving offence to anyone. But hidden behind these inoffensive stories, I discover errant traces of more problematic memories hinting at more ominous events. These take the form of unconnected sounds and truncated images that refuse to be assimilated into the existing repertoire of stories and that lead an errant and solitary life, far removed from the pleasant sphere of dinner conversations.

Thus I am captured by the haunting sound of soldiers marching the cobble-stoned streets of our village or I hear sirens blaring late at night, accompanied by the steady drone of Allied aircrafts crossing the night sky overhead on their way to the German cities. There are the piercing and crisscrossing German searchlights stationed in our schoolyard and there is the glimpse of a crashed aircraft, half buried in the mud of a potato field.

These images appear as so many aimlessly wandering fragments of a buried past that is forever in search of a narrative home.

Remembering the readymade family stories demands little effort; it resembles in many ways the retrieval of an ancient document or the faithful reproduction of a preexisting reality. But the recovery and interpretation of the disconnected and errant traces of the past demand a much more active and creative approach. They require the composition of mythic tales or artful images that provide shelter and give context to these errant traces, and thereby enable them to reveal themselves.

In this way, we come to think of myths, poems, or paintings as hospitable sites where the scattered and lost memories of painful events can be sheltered, where they are given a name, a face, and a voice, and where they begin to participate in the communal life of religion, art, and thought. It is in this way that suffering may yield insight into the human condition and that evil, which destroys meaning and fragments the soul, can be confronted and denied its victory.

### ***My Encounter with John the Nose and my Discovery of the World of Myth***

The village in the North of the Netherlands where I grew up was rich in colorful and extravagant characters. We lacked a mental hospital and managed as best we could with our delusional or otherwise mentally disturbed fellow citizens. There was an eternally grinning hebephrenic young man who took little notice of us and mostly talked to himself, and another delusional fellow who sang on the sidewalks and imagined himself a great opera star. We called the latter John the Rose because of his habit of always wearing a flower in the lapel of his faded jacket. We watched in fascination as he reached by successive stages the grand finale of his arias, leaning steadily more backward and contorting his massive body in the most improbable ways. His performances were always greeted with raucous cheers and laughter. At times the butcher would come out of his shop to reward John with a piece of sausage.

Among this group of local eccentrics was also a severely retarded man whom I remember most vividly because it was through my relationship to him that I discovered the revealing power of myth. The man was called John the Nose because of the prominence of that feature of his face, which was still further accentuated by the fact that he lacked a proper forehead.

John spent his days aimlessly wandering the farmlands surrounding the village. He seemed perpetually lost and befuddled, and he often was unable to find his way back home. Our parents impressed on us our duty to bring John home to his parents whenever we saw him wandering the fields towards the end of the day. We amused ourselves with this simple, dimwitted man, imitating his awkward gait and exaggerating his bizarre expressions and inarticulate speech.

One day, my father spotted me in a crowd of jeering children that followed John on his way home. It was that evening at the dinner table, as we talked about our village eccentrics, that I heard my father say that there was no absolute way to measure the worth of a person and that we therefore could never be entirely sure who might be the real fools or sages of our village. He then suggested that in the heavenly world to come, God and the angels might prefer John the Nose's company to that of our village notables. To my reckoning, this included, besides my father, the chief of police, the mayor, and the local minister.

This suggestion sent me off on an exciting and unprecedented train of thought. I tried to imagine a heavenly world completely different from my own, where some of my clearest convictions would be considered false, and where all that I took to be feebleness and idiocy would be seen as holiness and purity of heart.

That night, I dreamt of John sitting at the right hand of God while being offered delicacies by diaphanous angels and smiling at us as Saint Peter passed him a plate.

It was only much later that I realized that my father's remarks and the dream that followed afforded me a first opportunity to step away from the crowd of jeering children, and thereby to begin to see John in an entirely new light. I had entered an engrossing dialogue with an entirely new and different world that stood in sharp contrast to my own, and that thereby tested all my ordinary observations and convictions.

What surprised me about my discovery was that this strange and unknown heavenly world infused my actual quotidian surroundings with new life and interest. The very things that only a moment ago had appeared commonplace and barely interesting now aroused my vivid interest and persuaded me to think.

I came to understand that established doctrines, common perception, and shared convictions tended to eventually rob the world of its interest and deprived things and beings of their power to fully manifest themselves. It seemed that the power for things to reveal themselves was intimately connected with our ability to take a distance from our own certitudes and with our willingness to see the existing world as we understood it against the background of *another* world. For the first time in my life, I touched upon the mystery of the renewal of our world, which takes place when the guest begins to see his own world against the background of that of his host and vice versa.

As part of the jeering crowd, I knew all there was to know about John the Nose. Everyone knew that he was an imbecile, unable to perform the simplest tasks. But liberated from these certitudes by the mysteries of a truly *other* world, the village idiot transformed into an intriguing stranger who aroused my interest and posed questions that engaged both my heart and mind.

One late afternoon, as I brought John home from the fields, he showed me the pebbles, keys, and other small objects that he kept hidden in his pockets. A current of sympathy passed between us as I looked at the things he held out in his hand and as he looked back at me with a mixture of shyness and pride.

His world opened up to me, not because I was exceptionally kind or virtuous, or perspicacious, but because I had learned to place a common, everyday world against the background of a mythical *other* world. I thus learned the paradoxical truth that common, ordinary reality requires the power of myth to fully reveal itself and that our world becomes accessible to us only when we place it in a dynamic and hospitable relationship to a neighboring world.

Understanding our world is therefore not simply a question of our mind wholly absorbing and grasping a preexisting and unchanging natural reality. It rather is a question of countering the quotidian world of force and habit with a contrasting, festive world of myth and poetry. Such understanding perpetually crosses the bridge spanning the distance between two adjoining worlds.

A coherent human world is a thoroughly inhabited world that makes place for both the self and the other, for both divine and human beings, and for both the living and the dead. Such a world does not exclude either the earth or the heavens, it does not reject the world of the host or that of the guest, it does not seek to eliminate either the self or the other.

My relationship to John the Nose taught me that as long as I locked myself within the established routines and convictions of everyday workaday reality, I had access only to the village idiot. But as soon as I placed my relationship to him within the larger context of a coherent religious myth, John had his humanity restored to him and I was able to recognize him as my neighbor.

I would later come to understand that personhood can manifest itself only in a world that is bordered by and intersects with a radically *other* world. Myth represents this other world with which we must maintain neighborly relations so as to comprehend the world in which we live and work. Myth and metaphor reveal themselves here as the ultimate horizon surrounding an intelligible and inhabitable human world.

### ***Some Preliminary Remarks about the Notion of Evil***

Each age and cultural milieu devises its own stratagems and issues its own edicts about what can properly be discussed in public and what is better left unsaid and unthought. It is today as difficult for a psychologist to raise questions about the nature of evil as it once was, in a Victorian home, to discuss sexuality. We might legitimately differ about the ways we may approach these subjects, but there can be little dispute about the importance of reflecting on these topics.

Moreover, to refuse to think about evil, or to deny its very existence, does not make for a better or more innocent world. Such denial can only add to our confusion and create a more incoherent world. No matter whether we find the problem of evil intriguing or stifling, regressive or progressive, agreeable or disturbing, we can be sure that it will not disappear from our world simply because we would wish it. The matter of good and evil is too important a topic and forms too large a part of our cultural history to be ignored by psychology or by any other human science.

### ***Childhood Memories of War Crimes***

I was eight years old when, on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, Hitler's army invaded the Netherlands and overran the country in a few days time. The last vestige of resistance was overcome on the third day of the invasion, when the German Luftwaffe carpet-bombed Rotterdam and laid waste to more than a square mile of the city's center. A few weeks after the attack, I

traveled with my father by train past the still-smoking ruins of what had once been our most enterprising and most modern city. The only building still standing in the center was the ghostly Saint Laurens Church, which stood erect amidst the debris like the tattered mast of a ship wrecked on a far-flung shore.

As we past the scene, the train slowed down to almost a walking pace. It seemed a way to pay homage to the fallen city and to the people that had died with her. It also afforded us the time needed to let the horrific reality of the massacre penetrate our numbed minds and our uncomprehending hearts. An eerie silence took hold of the train that lasted long after the ruined city had faded out of sight.

As I looked up at my father, I was alarmed to see him so forlorn and defeated and so utterly unable to respond to the scene we had just witnessed. The sight had overwhelmed us too much to find words of consolation, or even of anger, to help us cope with what we saw. All we could do was to share our spiritual defeat before an act of brutality so great that it destroyed the very words and images that rose up to describe it.

The strongest impression left by this sight of evil was that of an infinite and grey expanse of destruction that lacked the heartbeat of a beginning and an end, and seemed to lack a horizon that could promise another world and another day. Time stood still and words froze on our lips. All one could do standing before this wasteland was to struggle against drowning into the vast expanse of grayness or sinking into the impenetrable gloom. It was hard to breathe in the sight of so much willful destruction.

There was no doubt but that we stood face to face with evil.

A similar scene repeated itself three years later when I awoke at home, in the middle of the night, to the sounds of hundreds of people moving silently through the street below. I walked downstairs through the hallway and found my father standing behind our front door, peering through the small window that looked out on the street. We stood there silently, afraid to make any noise that might attract the attention of the German soldiers who walked on the sidewalks, on both sides of the street. Between them, in the middle of the street, we saw hundreds of our Jewish neighbors being herded like cattle to the train station nearby.

Again we stood together in silence, able to share only our fear and our spiritual paralysis before a scene of unimaginable evil. There was for us no mystery about the fate that awaited these people. We all knew that they would be transported to slave and death camps, that they were all marked for death and that their only chance of survival would depend on a rapid advance of the Allied forces.

The next morning, I went with a few friends to the Jewish quarter of the village to find there all the windows broken, the doors left open, and family possessions looted or

destroyed. I will never forget the infinitely sad spectacle of family portraits torn from the walls and smashed underfoot on the floor. The murderous intent of the enemy could not have been made clearer or its hatred more evident.

Walking along the railroad tracks that day, we found snippets of paper slipped through the cracks of the cattle wagons. Some contained touching pleas to look after a dog or a cat, or to pass on a message to a relative, or to say goodbye to a friend.

### *About Marching Soldiers*

Much later, I would come to think of these crucial childhood experiences as the starting point of a lifelong meditation on the mysteries of evil and on the human passion for destruction.

As a child, I did not have recourse to philosophical concepts or to literary or artistic works to nourish and guide my search, nor did I have the means to understand political ideologies. But I did have at my disposal a child's immediate and intuitive grasp of a human situation and the ability to imaginatively participate without reserve in what unfolded before my eyes.

I vividly remember the German soldiers as they loudly goose-stepped through the village and clicked their heavy, iron-shod boots against the cobble-stoned streets. As they marched, they sang in a loud and overbearing manner, the better to frighten and bully the local population. The violent and mechanical movements of their arms and legs would form sharp angles to their stiff and unyielding bodies: they seemed to have transformed themselves into mere robots ready to execute any command coming from their regiment commander or from their beloved Fuehrer.

As a boy, I understood something about the pleasure these young soldiers may have felt in abandoning their own vulnerable, individual bodies and submerging themselves wholly within the heroic, collective body of the singing and stomping regiment. Their theatrical gestures and fake heroic posturing betrayed their immense longing for a totally unified and solidified world that would show neither cracks nor fault lines and that would be completely free of contradictions. Their marching and loud singing proclaimed the desire for a world without divisions in which it would be possible to live one's entire life without conflict, without questions, and without thought.

The marching column was all at once the image of such an ideally unified world and the very instrument that had been fashioned to conquer and secure it.

I sensed early on that what I saw on display was the very heart and soul of the German National Socialist regime, and that the artificial and willful body movements and the

imperious shouting all spoke in some eloquent and immediately accessible way about the essential nature of a totalitarian regime. At the same time, the scene made clear a fundamental relationship between a craving for absolute unity and a passion for boundless destruction.

### ***Totalitarian Unity and the Idea of Evil***

Early on in the war, we all had been forced to turn in our radios; throughout the war it would be a capital offence to own one. In exchange for our radios, we were supplied with government-issued loudspeakers that would only broadcast programs selected by the National Socialist Party. Among the more bizarre features of the broadcasts were the lengthy party rallies and the interminable speeches of their great leader, Adolph Hitler.

I understood little of these German broadcasts, but I remember the often repeated slogan of the Leader: “*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuehrer*” [“One People, one State, one Leader.”] In this slogan the emphasis would be on the word *ein*, pronounced with a strange and lilting intonation. It is as if that one word carried the weight and significance of all the others.

Seen in retrospect, these words and their strange intonation laid bare for me a fundamental trait of the two most radical and destructive political regimes of the twentieth century.

The central feature of both the fascist and the communist political regimes was the establishment of a culture of slavish unanimity and uniformity that would not tolerate an aberrant thought or a genuinely personal expression. Neither of these two regimes would tolerate anyone marching out of step with the regiment or in opposition to the ruling party. For the German socialists, this striving for unity and uniformity would find its most virulent expression in the quixotic quest for a racially pure nation; their Soviet counterparts murdered with equal zeal in their pursuit of a classless society. The one regime was in pursuit of an Aryan nation, the other wished to realize a workers’ paradise.

This slight difference was in keeping with the National Socialists’ preference for biological, and the Soviet socialists’ preference for sociological and economic metaphors. German National Socialism would draw its principal inspiration from half digested biological metaphors and Soviet socialism would build its ideological edifice on a pseudoscientific sociology and economics.

Both sought to be ruled by a single materialist and atheistic doctrine, and both pursued the dream of a universal human world that would no longer have to deal with anything outside or beyond itself. Both dreamt of a uniformly atheistic world where churches would be converted into movie theaters and synagogues burnt to the ground. They would build a political regime that would be vast enough to include the heavens and powerful enough to

absorb all nations so that neither the future Aryans nor the future socialist workers would ever again have to deal with earthly or heavenly neighbors.

Both regimes strove to build a nation that would be possessed of a single mind, ruled by a single party and by a single leader. All understanding would henceforth flow from a single doctrine, reigning supreme over a single, natural, and universal world. That world would be inhabited by a single universalized and naturalized humanity belonging to a single race or a single class.

### ***Scientism and Totalitarianism***

As an adult, I have often wondered why it was that the twentieth century, spanning an age of unprecedented scientific and technological progress and economic prosperity, also became the age that gave birth to the two most barbarous and murderous political regimes of all times. Thinking about the mystery of evil from the perspective of the twentieth century inevitably leads us back to the realities of these twin political regimes and their later Chinese, Cambodian, Korean, and Middle Eastern offspring.

In my lifetime, there has been much discussion about the major and minor differences that set the German National Socialist regime apart from its Soviet counterpart. During the Second World War, apologists for German National Socialism would protest any such comparison and insist that German socialism was a unique political system and that fascism had nothing whatsoever to do with communism.

After the war, it became fashionable for the Western intellectual elite to show sympathy for the Soviet cause and to insist that Soviet socialism was morally distinct from its German counterpart. For a time, it became even acceptable to see all political activity in terms of these two totalitarian systems and to identify fascism with the “right wing” of political life and communism with its opposing “left wing.”

But the accounts of what life was like for those living under these regimes show us the utter fallacy of these distinctions. What they tell us is the same story of mass murder, brutal repression, and soul-killing uniformity.

As an adult, I learned to place my childhood memories within the framework of the writings of Alexandre Koyré, the great historian of the modern natural sciences. Koyré, a student of Husserl, suggested that the beginning of modernity can be traced back to the moment when astronomers first began to reject the age-old notion of a dual cosmos, made up of a separate heavenly and earthly realm, and replaced it with the all-embracing notion of a single natural and material universe.

The older dual and mythic conception of the world had always held that the earth and the heavens formed two distinct but complementary and interactive parts of the cosmos. Each of these parts was thought to be governed by a different inherent logic, and so the study of these realms required two separate disciplines of natural science, one devoted to celestial and the other to terrestrial phenomena. So it was believed since Aristotle that celestial movement was essentially circular, flowing, and uninterrupted, while movements on earth tended to be linear, with frequent and irregular interruptions.

Modernity replaced this classical vision of a dual, interactive cosmos with that of a single material and natural universe. This single universe would be studied provisionally by a number of separate disciplines, all of which would eventually coalesce into a single, unified discipline that would encircle the universe. In the fullness of time, both the universe and the one natural science studying it would form a single, absolute, and undivided whole.

As the natural universe gradually came to replace the ancient dual cosmos as the ultimate object of human understanding, natural science came to be looked upon not merely as a most useful and successful form of rational inquiry, but as an emerging, all-encompassing philosophy or religion that was destined to embrace and guide all aspects of human life.

The very success of natural science gave birth to the modern ideology of scientism, which in turn laid the foundation for the modern totalitarian state. It is this fateful development that laid the groundwork for the political catastrophes that marked the twentieth century.

Premodern astronomers and philosophers of nature had modeled their vision of the cosmos on the metaphor of the couple. They saw heaven and earth as two distinct, inhabited domains that stood in relationship to each other as a husband to a wife, or as a neighbor to a neighbor. Unlike the natural unity of the modern natural universe, the wholeness and integrity of the ancient cosmos therefore did not present itself as a natural fact, but rather as a humanizing task that demanded to be accomplished. It was precisely the accomplishment of this task that set human beings apart from the rest of creation.

Within this ancient configuration, all human interactions assumed a cosmic significance, so that it would be impossible to think of any personal relationship, be it of a familial, civic, or of a purely amicable nature, that would not also have a bearing on the relationship between heaven and earth. All personal human relations thereby came to be charged with metaphysical implications and assumed cosmic significance.

With the growing success of the modern sciences, the natural and physical universe came to be regarded as the ultimate model of unity and coherence. The human scientists who followed in their footsteps began to assume that human unity and harmony could be modeled on the natural integrity of a natural-scientific universe. It came to appear plausible that a human world, constructed strictly on the model of a natural-scientific universe, might usher in a new era of effortless peace and harmony. There arose the expectation that the

way to freedom and happiness might be that of a completely secular and naturalized human society, where mankind would live completely free and unconstrained, in the absence of the ancient burdens of having to maintain convivial relationships with difficult divine or mortal neighbors.

This new naturalist and universalistic vision made it possible to conceive of peace and brotherhood not as difficult cultural achievements, but as *natural* human attributes whose true nature had been obscured by millennia of perverse cultural practices, in the way an antique treasure might lie hidden beneath the accumulated debris of succeeding civilizations. Given that framework, it is not difficult to understand the destructive zeal of the countless major and minor modern revolutions that all aimed to destroy existing civilizations in the hope of building a natural human society that would have the physical universe rather than the dual cosmos as its foundation.

The modern human sciences are intimately implicated in this aspect of the modern political and scientific revolutions and in the progressive materialization and objectification of the human world. These sciences have brought us a wealth of new information about the human condition, but they also shielded us from the realities of a human and divine cosmos, and thereby impaired our ability to be at home in a truly human world.

It was no doubt the triumphal march of the modern sciences that inspired the pioneers of the human sciences to make human beings and human societies the object of sustained natural-scientific inquiry. In taking this step, these new scientists proposed to study human behavior not as it might actually appear within the context of an inhabited, dual cosmos, but as we might conceive of it were it to take place in a natural and physical universe.

The resulting studies were not without interest and they revealed many aspects of human life that would have otherwise remained hidden. But however novel and interesting this new universal perspective may have been, and whatever practical benefits it may have conferred on our practical and economic life, it has become abundantly clear that the pursuits of natural science cannot ever replace the need for serious and sustained reflection on the human condition as it is lived in a neighborly cosmos.

The devastations of two world wars and the growing cultural poverty of the twentieth century all point to the need to shift our unique cultural focus away from the physical and natural universe and to bring it to bear on the inhabited cosmos. This cosmos forms the cradle of humanity and it remains the ultimate source and homestead of all the arts and sciences, including the ones that take the natural and material universe as their exclusive focus.

By thus shifting our cultural focus and by restoring human phenomena to their original place within a cosmic setting, we can begin to chart another course that would not only benefit the arts and the humanities by restoring meaning to myth and ritual, but that would

also benefit the natural sciences. It would do so by making visible the limits of their expertise and the particular but restricted range of their vision, and thereby lift from them the impossible burden of being regarded as a sole form of rationality and an ultimate source of truth.

As we intimated before, the modern idolatry of the natural universe and the confusion surrounding the revealing powers of the natural sciences remain intimately connected to the totalitarian political visions of the twentieth century.

We already mentioned that a cosmic perspective assigns every person the cultural task of upholding and renewing the bonds that hold heaven and earth together and that link the self to the other in various culturally prescribed ways. By contrast, a universal perspective assigns us the role of an observer of natural events who guards himself from being personally implicated in what he sees and who stands in a relationship to the world that remains outside the sphere of traditional mores and customary law. A natural universe is solely held together by brute force, while the coherence and harmony of a cosmos depend on just and hospitable relations between neighbors.

There is therefore a direct path that leads from the idolatry of the universe to the idolatry of brute natural force as an ultimate means to bring order, stability, and harmony to a human world. It is this idolatry that spawned the modern totalitarian state and created political regimes whose chief aim would be to destroy the old cosmic order and erase all traces of the distinction between heaven and earth. In doing so, it removed at the same time the very basis for a cultural distinction between self and other, man and woman, parent and child. The intention was to create a new political state that would mirror the properties of the natural-scientific universe and that would be governed in like manner by a single party, obeying a single body of unchanging universal and physical laws. And, again in imitation of that natural universe, it would only honor relations of force and thereby disavow all customary, moral law.

This struggle to overthrow the existing cultural order and the effort to create a political order modeled on a natural universe required a violent struggle that had to be fought with real bullets, bayonets, and bombs. National Socialism evoked the image of a Darwinian struggle to characterize its assault on the cosmic order of a Jewish and Christian civilization. This struggle could not be won by persuasion or diplomacy; it could only be won through violent conquest followed by terror and a systematic destruction of entire populations.

This entire murderous and totalitarian frame of mind was on display as the shouting and stomping troops marched through the streets of our village. At times, the soldiers appeared drunk with power and as they marched, they seemed to throw off the cultural burdens of trying to understand and accommodate others, of entering into dialogue and being constrained by notions of what is just and fair. They appeared drunk with joy at the

prospect of being liberated from the constraining cultural task of conciliating and bridging the gap between self and other and between heaven and earth. They felt they had freed themselves from religious superstition and from the moral qualms that had been imposed on them by an alien Jewish and Christian culture. They had thrown off the yoke of an oppressive and alien religious culture and they would henceforth rule the world guided only by what they perceived to be the laws and precepts of a natural-scientific universe.

### ***A further Reflection on the Revealing Power of Religious Myth***

Seen from a natural-scientific or workaday perspective, our actions necessarily appear to us as entirely circumscribed and determined by natural and physical forces. A mythic perspective, on the other hand, makes place for personal initiatives, for meaning and for right and wrong. It sees our actions as forming an inextricable part of a human and divine cosmos.

A natural universe presents itself as the ultimate, material source of all that is, while a mythic cosmos points to divine and human encounters as the ultimate foundation of a human world and as the very source of all that is real and true.

To describe the workings of the natural universe, we must temporarily defer our desire to come face to face with reality and be content to describe the natural succession of natural events. But when we return to a mythic perspective, our quest for truth takes the form of a vivifying encounter in which both self and other seek to become fully manifest.

Within this context, we come to understand scientific research as an ascetic exercise that demands that we temporarily abandon our place in an ordered cosmos, that we practice total self-effacement and denude our world of personhood. The result and the reward of this exercise is that we are allowed to witness the extraordinary transformation of a human world into a natural and material universe.

The workaday world of labor constitutes a preamble to this ascetic enterprise. To work in the fields, in our workshops or factories, to toil in the mines or to enter the vast forest in search of game, one must be willing to temporarily sacrifice the comforts of home and the protection of a human and divine cosmos. It is in this way that we come to confront an alien, material world that is indifferent to our fate and that must be resisted and tamed so as to enable us to live a human life. To remain too strongly attached to the comforts of home and hearth means to become ill-equipped to meet the challenges of a natural world that can only be confronted with force and cunning.

Yet, those who venture forth into the forest in search of game or those who labor in the fields in the heat of the day are able to complete their arduous tasks only because they can look forward to returning home when the day is done. Their sojourn in a resisting, alien,

natural world would not have been possible without the promise of a safe return to the cosmic order of the home and the village.

It is in like manner that the self-denying ascetic practices that grant us access to a natural, physical, and universal world can only be sustained by a cosmic order, founded on the miracle of human and divine encounters and ruled by laws that bind together host and guest.

Human beings can sustain themselves for a limited time in the workaday world and in the universal world of the natural sciences. These worlds cannot serve mankind as a permanent abode and they can be made to appear only in the shadow of a larger cosmic order that is founded on and sustained by human and divine encounters. The workaday world and the world described by the natural sciences must ultimately be seen as forming part of a larger whole of which the cosmos is the center. Whenever we are in danger of getting lost in the routines of our daily tasks or in the abstractions of a natural universe, we are rescued by poems, myths, rituals, and works of art. These invariably lead us back to a primary world of divine and human encounters in which we meet face to face with what is real and true and discover communalities with our neighbors.

Freud was the first psychologist to make extensive use of myths and dreams to draw hidden childhood memories into the light of day and back into the current of our lives. He thought that these would not only reveal parts of our personal past, but that they also would help us better understand the ways and byways of human desire.

In all this, he remained a thoroughly modern man, however, who placed his ultimate faith in natural science and who thought of the natural universe as the ultimate source and cradle of our humanity.

Nevertheless, he should be credited with his attempt to re-inject mythic narratives into modern psychological discourse. He squared his reliance on myth with his general scientific outlook by claiming that this reliance was only temporary and that further progress of the natural sciences would eventually make such use unnecessary. He fully suspected that mythic insights into the human cosmos would eventually be replaced by naturalistic descriptions of events taking place in a natural universe.

It is to be regretted that this scientific faith largely isolated his work from his rich Jewish heritage. He never cited Biblical wisdom as a source of inspiration for or legitimation of his psychoanalytic insights. It was this same residual scientism that led him to only make use of myths that had outlived their religious significance and had become in fact carefully preserved but religiously inert cultural artifacts.

Religious significance refers in this context principally to the power of myth and ritual to link together heaven and earth into a meaningful neighborly whole. Natural science remains

an inherently secular activity since it reflects no awareness of a heaven as distinguished from the earth and it can therefore conceive neither of their separation nor of their reconciliation.

Academic psychology and psychoanalysis have, throughout their history, adopted the natural universe as their ultimate horizon. A psychology that takes a different path and that finds its inspiration in art, in myth, and in the great traditions of Western thought is required to look beyond that narrow horizon so as to rediscover an inhabited, hospitable, and ever changing dual cosmos.

### ***About the Myth of Genesis and the Birth of Evil in our Midst***

The Genesis myth recounts a crucial moment in the creation of humanity, when Adam and Eve were seduced by the Serpent and introduced evil into their world. We might say, in a preliminary way, that the human introduction of evil into their paradisiacal world exposed Adam and Eve to the threat of losing their humanity and of becoming purely natural creatures living in a natural paradise. From the very beginning, evil threatened to transform a divine and human cosmos into a natural and material universe.

The myth tells us that Adam and Eve had been permitted to freely explore and use any part of the Garden, but that they were to keep a respectful distance from its very midst, where God had planted the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The evil Serpent told Eve to disregard the divine command and thereby, through disobedience, to become the equal of God.

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden"; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."

As a child, I tried to imagine how Adam and Eve might have spent their days in Paradise. I was told that God had placed them in charge of the Garden, so I imagined them being busy from sunrise to sunset, performing the endless tasks imposed by rural life. They would clean the house, work in the orchards and gardens, and care for their livestock and pets. But at the end of their busy days, I imagined them cleaning up, eating a meal, and then taking a stroll in the evening air. They would pass by the fields and the orchards and look in satisfaction upon their crops, all the while taking note of what needed to be done in the days to come.

Eventually, they would reach the midst of the Garden, where they would come face to face with the majestic tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This would be the most beautiful

and most sacred place in all creation, and I imagined them sitting down on the grass near the tree whose trunk was so straight and tall that it effortlessly joined together heaven and earth. The couple would sit there in silent admiration as the evening breeze stirred the majestic crown of the tree and refreshed their spirits.

I came to understand that it was at this magic spot that Adam and Eve learned to pray and began to tell stories to each other. Perhaps it was here also that they began to sing and learned to play reed pipes and draw figures in the sand. And it was surely here that they began first to reflect on the miracle of human and divine love and on their relationship to their Creator and to each other. It was here also that they began to understand what it was that brought order to their world and what kept it whole. They already knew that it was not just a question of a faceless law or of merely physical forces, but of faithfully maintained reciprocal bonds of love and respect. They already had learned to dwell, that is, to maintain hospitable, reciprocal relations with a neighbor. They also knew that such bonds could be broken and that the relationship between heaven and earth or that between man and wife or even between friends and neighbors could be made to fall apart. It was in this way, perhaps, that they began to reflect on good and evil.

Then, one night, their reflections and meditations were interrupted by the Prince of Darkness who appeared to them in the form of a snake. He slithered silently to where Eve sat upon the grass and began to whisper in her ear.

“Why,” he murmured, “would you sit so still and passive beneath this magnificent tree? Why don’t you walk up to it and take from it what you want?”

The Evil One did not understand much about meditation or prayer. He had been observing the couple for some time and was genuinely puzzled as to why they sat so still and reverently before a marvelous tree that looked so tempting to climb and so ready to harvest. The Prince of Darkness thought of prayer as a hoax and considered contemplation a waste of time. He thought of love as a confusing and mendacious sentiment whose inner core was merely selfish desire. He could not understand sitting still beneath a tree that offered such an abundance of beautiful ripe fruit.

Eve was disturbed by the Serpent’s questions and found at first no ready way to answer them. She then told him that she would not touch the tree out of respect for the command she had received from her Creator and out of fear that such a breach of trust might disrupt her relationship to God and make her mortal.

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.”

There follows the story of Adam and Eve's seduction and their subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden. As a child, I could not further penetrate the meaning of the story and I decided that God had been overtly harsh with the first couple when He chased them from Paradise. At the time, I felt that the Almighty should have forgiven a first offence and grant a reprieve to His beloved children.

But my later reflections on the story told me something more about the mysterious relationship between religious worship and the birth of civilization, and also about the nature of evil as a never-ending temptation to destroy the human world under the guise of liberating and rationalizing human conduct.

We should note that the Garden contained at least two very different types of trees. There were those that the first couple was instructed to cultivate and harvest, and those they were enjoined from touching or harvesting.

The trees they could cultivate formed part of the ordinary workaday world. But the text makes clear that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil stood apart from the others in the way a divine being stands apart from mortal human beings, or in the way a festive or sacred time stands apart from ordinary quotidian time. The divine command created, as it were, a threshold between two neighboring worlds that together formed the inhabitable dual cosmos that was the Garden of Eden.

The Garden would maintain this dual cosmic structure only as long as Adam and Eve would obey the command and not violate the threshold that set the one type of tree apart from all the others. It was this same threshold that separated and held together the House of God and the house of Adam and Eve.

As long as they kept the Commandment, the Garden served as a school in humanity where the first couple learned to inhabit a dual cosmos by making place in their life not only for trees that could be cultivated and harvested, but also for trees that pointed beyond the narrow scope of the workaday world to a festive and divine realm. This meant that the paradisiacal world they inhabited made place not just for the first human couple, but also for their Creator, who was their Neighbor.

This division between the two kinds of trees meant, first of all, that Adam and Eve were not to spend all their hours in monotonous labor, but that they should cease their work in the evenings and on the Sabbath so as to leave time for prayer and meditation. In this way, they would not merely advance during the day in practical, technological, and scientific knowledge, but they would, in their leisure hours, acquire moral wisdom and spiritual understanding.

During the day, the first couple would work in the fields with the plants and trees they were allowed to cultivate and harvest. But at night, they would cease their work and sit beneath

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. During the day, they would actively and physically interact with a material world and develop increasingly sophisticated strategies to make it conform to human needs and desires. They thereby laid the foundation for a future universal, scientific, and technological understanding of their world. But in the evening the couple would kneel or quietly sit near the mysterious tree in the center of the Garden, to reflect on their relationship to each other, to their Creator, and to the things and creatures entrusted to their care.

Their labor in the orchards and gardens taught Adam and Eve to understand the natural world and helped them develop the tools and skills needed to build and maintain their home, to cultivate their crops, and to care for their cattle. But at night, under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they learned to respect boundaries and to honor the threshold of their Neighbor's house. They came to understand that the knowledge of good and evil cannot be obtained by a calculating mind or grasped solely by skilful or industrious hands. Technical and scientific knowledge can be gained by spying and intrusive probing. But the human wisdom needed to live with one's neighbors cannot be acquired by subterfuge or stealth or through aggressive prying. To get to know our neighbor, we must leave our pressing tasks, walk to the midst of the garden and patiently wait before a threshold that gives access to his domain. To violate that threshold means to erase the difference between self and other, and thereby obscure and neglect the fateful distinction between good and evil.

The Serpent seduced the couple by intimating that the divine command was but a clever trick employed by the Creator to exercise power over his subjects. The Dark Prince paralyzed their judgment by pretending that brute natural power is superior to love because it does not hesitate or dither before a threshold and is ready, if needed, to kick in the door.

The Prince of Darkness presented himself in the disguise of a serpent, whose clandestine ways has always permitted it to slither past thresholds and crawl through a crack in the wall. The serpent represents here a lowly creature, ignorant of the difference between the domains of self and other and who cannot distinguish between heaven and earth. He appears in the story as one who disrespects and destroys boundaries and who presents these crimes as a way to total liberation and to the acquisition of unlimited power. The Serpent counseled the woman to adopt his animal way of life and he promised that she would thereby gain divine power and absolute mastery over her world.

Seen against the background of human history, the myth can be seen as warning against the age-old temptation to replace a creative unity of dialogue and mutual consent with the sterile unity achieved by violence and trespass. Put in another way, we may understand the myth to warn us against the age-old temptation to replace a human and divine cosmos with a natural and material universe.

It was precisely to prevent this catastrophe from occurring that God banned Adam and Eve from Paradise and sent them to a far away place where the sacred tree would be outside their immediate reach. Ever since, human beings have been able to destroy the earth, but they have not been able to touch the heavens.

As soon as they arrived on earth, Adam and Eve created anew, as best as they could, the way of life they had been forced to leave behind. They continued to work the land and look after their livestock, even though they now encountered more resistance in their labor and had to suffer to renew their world.

In the midst of their domain, they left an empty place to remind them of the magnificent tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They would continue to visit this spot when their work was done and when they had some time to make music, to tell stories, or to look up at the stars and wonder about the world beyond. In time, they would build there an altar and perform rituals and prayers that linked their human world to a world divine. Their descendants would later choose that spot to build sanctuaries, and in doing so they laid the foundation for future cities, municipalities, kingdoms, and empires.

We may think of the thresholds of these temples as both separating and linking together two distinct worlds, one human and the other divine. It was in contemplating these thresholds that human beings learned to give form to their longing and love for a world beyond their own, a world outside the reach of either force or cunning.

It was here that the arts were born, that thought developed, and that myth and ritual began to see the light of day. It was here that human beings came to affirm their humanity by making room in their lives for a world beyond that they could never possess, rule, or make wholly their own. It is here that they learned to love and to live in peace with their neighbors. Thus were laid the foundations of future civilizations.

### ***Once again: about the Nature of Myth***

Let me conclude with a few further remarks about the nature of myth. The myth of Genesis tells us about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it does not tell us the knowledge that was stored under its crown or beneath its bark. Myth does not eat from that tree nor shake its branches. It does not pierce its bark or penetrate its core in a search for what may be hidden in a secret interior. It does not spy on the tree or devise experimental strategies to make it confess what it knows. Myth does no more than seek the face of things and beings and it grants them a voice.

It is for this reason that myth, art, and poetry do not provide us with the kind of knowledge that is immediately useful in our daily struggles in a workaday world. Nor can these assist us in a scientific quest to penetrate a faceless natural universe. Myth does not teach us how

to fish or to hunt or how to deal with flooding rivers or dry seasons. It can only draw us away from our daily tasks and draw us to the center of the garden where it invites us to contemplate beneath the sacred tree.

Myth comes to us as a gift that we receive in heritage from previous generations. We accept it not on the basis of what it may grant us in terms of power or profit. Nor do we pretend to measure its value before it becomes part of our life. We adopt a heritage of myths as our own in the way we adopt a particular staple, like corn, rice, or wheat, and we do so for no other reason than that it sustains us and that we received it as a gift from those who loved us and wished us well.

Myths form part of our spiritual staple and our ways of telling and interpreting them can be compared to a gastronomic art that explores and refines a particular culinary tradition. The truth of myth is that it sustains us and that in its absence our spirit withers and dies.

Modernity has presented us with the image of a false struggle between natural science, on the one hand, and myth, art, and ritual, on the other. It is very revealing that the triumphal march of the modern sciences has unfailingly been accompanied by a dogmatic scientific ideology that has sought to discredit myth and to discourage religious practice. This devaluation of myth and religion is not intrinsic to the practice of natural science as such, but it represents the totalitarian vision of those seeking the total cultural hegemony of the natural sciences. To further that goal, they would replace ritual with technology and replace mythic narratives with natural-scientific descriptions and explanations.

This totalitarian scientific ideology conflates the different values and functions of myth and natural science as when it urges us to abandon our heritage of creation myth and replace it with natural-scientific accounts of evolutionary processes. Such a recommendation obviously does not recognize the profound difference that separates our wonder and joy at the birth of a child from our natural curiosity about physical and biological processes. The wonder and joy clearly belong to the festive and meditative world of myth, while our natural curiosity about how things work and how they are put together invariably draws us back towards the workaday world, where we measure our strength and match our wits against an ever-resisting natural world. To conflate these very different cosmic and universal perspectives only increases our perplexity and contributes to our confusion.

Myth makes for bad science, but science makes for very dangerous and misleading myth. We may think of Adam and Eve as having made use of science and technology as they cultivated their fields and orchards and tended to the needs of their livestock. But when they wished to confront the larger question about life and death and about how to distinguish good and evil, they would cease their labor, approach the center of the garden and meditate beneath the tree they were forbidden to touch or to harvest.

We may interpret this to mean that the first step towards fully inhabiting their place in the cosmos demanded that they renounce all claims to absolute mastery over their world and over the things and beings surrounding them. To better understand their world, they had to loosen their grip on what they saw and understood, and in that way grant things and beings the space to fully reveal themselves.

Only a world released from the grip of technology and from the coercive strategies of the natural sciences can fully reveal *itself*. Only such a world can shelter beauty and be hospitable to thought. Only such a world can bid us truly welcome and invite us to dwell in a fully human way.

To dwell on earth in a human way means to enter into a rhythm that alternates between work and celebration, between conquering obstacles and seeking to come into the revealing presence of what surrounds, undergirds, and overarches us. To enter into this rhythm means to move back and forth between, on the one hand, the fields and orchards that demand our labor and, on the other, the contemplative center of the garden where we seek to come into a full and festive presence of our world. Neither the orchards and the stables nor the contemplative center of the garden can be dispensed with, nor can the one be substituted for the other. Only a rhythmic going back and forth between the labor-demanding periphery and the contemplative center can change chaos into cosmos and transform wilderness into a fully human world.

My childhood encounter with John the Nose had taught me that the common sense, workaday world becomes truly accessible to us only when we place it against the background of a radically different world. We may contemplate that different world, but we cannot touch or use it. The power of practical common sense, of technical know-how and scientific invention come to full fruition only when their calculations and strategies are hospitably contained by the larger, more encompassing logic of poetry, art, ritual, and myth.

The penetrating logic of the natural sciences and the industrious and fearless reach of technology make possible the efficient cultivation of the garden, but only the circuitous, indirect, and poetic logic of myth can hold and safeguard the center.

We are put in immediate touch with the nature of evil when we contemplate what would have happened to John the Nose or John the Rose had their existence come to the attention of the functionaries of the totalitarian state. What other than purely technical or material reasons could have made such functionaries hesitate to dispatch these men to the gas chamber or the gulag? Living in a world lacking the revealing power of myth and the cohesive force of a sacred center, such functionaries could only have roared with laughter or sniffed in contempt at the very idea of a heaven, and at the very thought of an idiot being seated at the right hand of God.