



Institute for Christian Studies  
Institutional Repository

Kuipers, Ronald A. "Working Through the Trauma of Evil: An Interview With Richard Kearney," in *The Other Journal: Evil*, edited by Andrew David, 7-14. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012.

**Note:** This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

### 3 Working through the Trauma of Evil: An Interview with Richard Kearney

by RONALD A. KUIPERS

**I**N THIS INTERVIEW, THE Irish philosopher Richard Kearney explores the human experience of evil and the role of the human imagination in responding to this evil. Kearney focuses on the healing steps people may take in order to “work through” traumatic experience, steps that include remembering, narrative retelling, and mourning. Such working through, he says, can turn melancholia to mourning, thus allowing those who have experienced suffering and loss to “give a future to their past” and, in so doing, to “go on.”

*The Other Journal (TOJ)*: In your latest book, *Anatheism*, you cite with approval the declaration Hannah Arendt made in 1945 when she said that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe.” In her landmark work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt had the audacity to describe a certain kind of monstrous evil as somehow the product of banality. It seems that in listening carefully to testimony from Adolf Eichmann’s trial and forthrightly describing what she heard, Arendt was engaged in the imaginative effort of “working through” (*durcharbeiten*) trauma, a process that you describe in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. Eichmann was a monster that she faced rather than attempted to slay, and because of this subtle difference, she dared to interpret Eichmann differently than his prosecutors; she was able to discern that Eichmann was, in her words, “not Iago.”<sup>1</sup> He was not out to prove himself a villain but rather someone quite dull and ordinary, thoughtless rather than

1. See Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 59; Arendt, “Nightmare and Flight,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1945* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 134; Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 103–5; and Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994), 287.

stupid, someone who saw himself as little more than a cog in a larger bureaucratic machinery. Could you share your thoughts on Arendt's vision of evil?

**Richard Kearney (RK):** I'm quite partial to Arendt's analysis. One could argue that the style of her book was too dispassionate, because when she speaks of banality it can sound dismissive, as if the horrendous events of the Holocaust don't matter, which is untrue, both in terms of history and in terms of what Arendt intended. But I think she's right that identifying this evil as banal demystifies and demythologizes it and renders human beings responsible. It renders Eichmann himself responsible above all, and of course the Nazis. But it also reminds us that holocausts, genocides, and other forms of unspeakable horror can also occur elsewhere. No nation, race, or country is exempt. Why? Because even the most radical forms of evil are human.

This doesn't mean we are all equally responsible for Auschwitz. I'm not a Nazi, and I don't want a Jungian relativist to come along and say we're all Nazis and that we all carry the Nazi around inside of us. I don't think we are all Nazis, but it is still very humbling and humanizing to recall how many good and potentially good people were taken in by Hitler. And it's not only the Germans who have this in their DNA and who seem to love dictators. Look what's going on in Syria, Libya, Iran, Iraq, and North America—this tendency is potentially in every people.

When Eichmann was imprisoned during his trial, the jailer who looked after him was named Captain Less. Eichmann and this jailer talked a lot, and at one point, shortly before he died, Eichmann realized that Captain Less had children, and loved dogs, and had dreams, just like any of Eichmann's own next-door neighbors. And one senses that if Eichmann had realized this earlier, he would not have been able to kill Jews as he did. This suggests that murder is the death of imagination. What Eichmann lacked was empathic imagination; he was unable to imagine that the person beside him—that the person he was demonizing as a Jew, the person who he believed deserved to be killed in order to purify the German race—was actually someone just like him. That's banal. That's an everyday, simple kind of discovery.

Now, take a step back. We also run the risk of scapegoating and demonizing Eichmann. We run the risk of mythologizing him as this evil beast who was possessed by the devil, as this man who was part of the dark German race that mysteriously, inexplicably, and inscrutably performed a horror that no one can ever understand. The great thing about the Eichmann trial is that when he was brought back from Argentina for trial—an act that was denounced by the United Nations, the American government, and Argentina as an infraction on the sovereign rights of Argentina and the rights of Eichmann, and yet an act that was itself ethical—there were endless days of prosecution and defense, and all of these testimonies were told, these simple stories that showed the banality of the horror of evil.

Rivka Yoselevka tells her story during Eichmann's trial and it's so moving because it's so ordinary—it's ordinary in the sense that we are with her as she goes to the German guards who take away her child and murder her family. And so to recognize the banality of evil is to increase our sense of the horror, not to diminish it. If we mythologize it and demonize it, then we say that it has nothing to do with us, that it has nothing to do with humanity, and that it is inhuman. But the terrible thing about evil is that it is human. And it's more: evil is the absence of God, the absence of being, the absence of the good.

When we make divisions between the utterly pure and the utterly impure, that is one of the greatest sources of evil—that's where scapegoating comes from. At the same time, I do not endorse the relativity of evil and good. I am not saying that Eichmann is just like us. If someone took Rivka Yoselevka aside and suggested that she could be Eichmann and he could be Yoselevka, that she is good and evil and so is Eichmann, as if the only difference between the two is where they stand in relation to the jail bars, that would be false. Yoselevka is an innocent victim and Eichmann is an evil perpetrator of torture and genocide. They're not the same. But to recognize the banality of evil, even Eichmann's evil, is to recognize that this man, following orders in a daily everyday way, lacked the imagination and empathy to recognize that the people he was killing were not monsters but other human beings.

This brings us to the matter of how we deal with evil and work through its consequences. One of the ways that the Eichmann trial did this—as did the Bloody Sunday tribunal in Northern Ireland and the Truth and Reconciliation tribunals in South Africa and Rwanda—is that the perpetrators had to admit what they'd done and listen to the stories of the people who were persecuted and tortured. That process of working through trauma is not a cure, but it is nevertheless important for survivors to be heard and understood. Evil blocks the power to erase, to remember, and to imagine, and working through that trauma—whether it is through therapy, truth and reconciliation tribunals, psychoanalysis, confession, or writing—helps us to honor our debt to the dead and to give a voice to the voiceless, as Paul Ricoeur says. The Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi kept living for as long as he kept writing, testifying to the story so that it could be read and heard. And then, when he could write no more, he committed suicide. What kept him going, what kept him alive, was, as he put it, this elementary need to keep on telling the story so that it would never happen again.<sup>2</sup>

I think one of the great errors of killing Osama bin Laden was that America missed an opportunity to work through trauma. When the Serbian military leader Ratko Mladić was picked up in a little farmhouse—very much like Eichmann—and put on trial in The Hague, his victims got a chance to tell their stories. I'm a great fan

2. See the chapter "Conclusions," in Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1988).

of President Barack Obama, but if there was any possibility of bringing bin Laden back alive, it should have been taken, because in hearing his story and the stories of the survivors and the families of those people who died at his hands, something very important would have happened. It would have become impossible to scapegoat bin Laden. That's not to say he was not evil—he was evil and what he did was evil—but there's a banality about what he did. Human beings can do monstrous acts, and there is a danger in treating human monstrosity as so alien that it becomes a serpent or a dragon, that it becomes the beast.

Of course, that's exactly what bin Laden did. He didn't see Americans; he saw the Big Satan. He didn't see Jewish Israelis, Christian Israelis, Arab Israelis, or Muslim Israelis in Israel; he saw the Little Satan. And in that way, the Osama bin Laden versus George W. Bush showdown was characterized by mutual scapegoating. I'm not suggesting there's moral equity here—I'm on the side of America against bin Laden; I believe in democracy—but it was an error not to put him on trial as the Jews did with Eichmann. The trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem was an important example of moral integrity; it allowed the stories to be told, it allowed us to recognize the banality of evil, and it showed us that we could have done that too. We didn't do it—and I hope we would never do it—but we're human beings, and for better or for ill, members of humanity have been able to do that, are capable of doing it, and can do it again.

My uncle was a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp for five years, and for a time afterward he couldn't walk down a street in London if there was a Japanese person nearby. He had to walk away. Now, he was ashamed of this. He said that he tarred every Japanese person with the same brush because of the horrors he experienced at the hands of his captors. They tortured everyone in his camp, and he was one of only two survivors. His best friends were crucified on barbed wire. Worse things happened in Auschwitz, as you know, and terrible things have happened in Srebrenica and in Rwanda, and they're still going on today in Syria. These examples all show that the danger we must avoid is the vilification of others. If we refer to our victims as rodents or to the perpetrators of horrible acts as dragons, then in both cases—and they're very different cases, obviously—we have a tendency not to analyze and understand as best we can. As Baruch Spinoza said, when faced with something evil, do not despair, do not seek revenge, but try to understand.<sup>3</sup> When faced with evil, we must recognize that there is something there that we're meant to wrestle with and seek to understand, even if we never understand it fully. There's something irreducibly inscrutable about the worst kinds of radical evil, but we can't take the easy route and just dismiss such evil as monstrous. We can use the word *monstrous* to describe it, but only if we also recognize that the monstrous is human and that the monstrous can be banal: a man

3. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (1677; Project Gutenberg, 2009), part 5, proposition 38, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>.

can be really nice to his children, read Shakespeare, listen to Beethoven, and then kill innocent people. That's the inscrutable enigma of evil, and it's an enigma we need to reckon with.

**TOJ:** That's how I understand Levi in the poem that begins *If This Is a Man*, where, in reference to the trauma of the Holocaust, he admonishes his readers to "meditate that this came about." That sentence jumps off the page at me because it suggests we have to stare evil down, to think again that this has happened. It suggests an ethical responsibility to avoid quick and easy answers. In both *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* and *On Stories* you discuss the importance of moving past a forgetful or amnesiac melancholy, through a transformative work of mourning, and to something like forgiveness. How does this transformative process work and what role does it play in terms of our experience of traumatic evil?<sup>4</sup>

**RK:** That's very tricky. I think Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers a way to consider this. If a trauma is from an inexperienced experience, as is the case with Hamlet, then one often remains in amnesiac melancholy. Hamlet has been away in Wittenberg, and so he was not there when his father was murdered and he has not seen his father being buried. And so Hamlet's father comes back as a ghost because Hamlet hasn't processed or experienced the trauma. It's unfinished business for him—there's something rotten in the state of Denmark, there's something out of joint. Hamlet is caught in this melancholy state where he can do nothing for as long as he can't let go.

Hamlet clings to an illusion that his father was perfect: he goes to Gertrude's boudoir, holds up two pictures, and says, "Here is my father, your husband; he was like a god, like Hyperion. And here is my uncle Claudius, your new husband; he is a satyr."<sup>5</sup> Hamlet has this idea of the perfectly good father and the evil anti-father. Hamlet is told by his father, the dead king, to remember him, and so Hamlet wants to hear the story of his father, to know what happened so that he can remember, so that he can carry it on and tell the story himself. But Hamlet's father is forbidden to tell the story of something that happened but that has not been acknowledged, and so his father says, "But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul" (1.5.13–16).

Then, during the course of the play, particularly through his interactions with the gravedigger, Hamlet learns that his father was not so perfect, that it was Yorick, the poor lowly court jester, who had been his real father, looking after him, carrying him on his shoulders while his royal father had been involved in a war with

4. Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce* (London, UK: Abacus, 1987), 17; and see Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, ch. 7–8.

5. Paraphrase of *Hamlet*, ed. W. G. Clark and W. A. Wright (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1878), 1.2.140–41: "So excellent a king; that was, to this / Hyperion to a satyr . . ." References are to act, scene, and line.

Fortinbras's father; and he also learns during this same gravedigger scene that the two kings had fought a duel to the death on the very day Hamlet was born. He goes through this process where he learns that his father committed a sin as a youth that condemned him to hell, surrounded by sulfurous fumes. We are never told exactly what this crime is, but there are lots of hints and guesses throughout the play, and it is Hamlet's business to try to find out—"by indirections find directions out" (2.1.65). Finally, at the end of the play, as he is dying—as he dies to his illusions—Hamlet goes from melancholy to mourning. He lets go of everything, including his illusions about his father, and at that point he says to Horatio, "Absent thee from felicity awhile / . . . to tell my story" (5.2.330–332). It is as if Hamlet—the name of Shakespeare's own son was Hamnet—is telling Shakespeare the author and dramatist (alias Horatio) to tell his story by writing it down and telling it to us the audience! And then Fortinbras arrives at the end and says, "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom, / which now to claim vantage doth invite me" (5.2.373–374). Thus, memory and storytelling are retrieved. The suppression of the truth and the cover-ups of the crimes—both Claudius's crime and Hamlet's father's crime—which were symptoms of the ongoing revenge cycle, are brought to an end. And there's something crucially healing about Hamlet (thanks to Shakespeare) finding the right words for this enigma. Indeed, we all carry secrets with us and therefore we live in melancholy because, like Hamlet, we find it so difficult to let go of our cover-up illusions and idealized projections. It's only by reexperiencing the repressed experience—by confronting the secrets, the fears, the delusions—that we can go forward.

Now, if you take the example of the Holocaust trauma, as I do in *On Stories*, it's interesting that two important movies, *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann and *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg, provide two different ways of telling the trauma. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann has people who still have memories of the Holocaust look at the camera and tell their stories. Many of the survivors had blocked those memories because that's how they survived: they became two people, they disassociated. Many of those who suffered in Auschwitz came back from the war and they never spoke again. That's a way of surviving; but to survive the survival, you've also got to take the next step, if you can, which is to tell the story. And there are two ways of doing that: you either tell the story directly, as some of them did in *Shoah*, or else you tell the story vicariously. One of the survivors of *Schindler* came up to me after a lecture I gave in Montreal and told me that she could never have done what some of her fellow survivors did in talking directly about their experiences in front of a camera (and indeed, some of the survivors who spoke to Lanzmann directly committed suicide, because it was just too much to bring back that memory). But the survivor who spoke with me said that by watching the movie *Schindler's List*, through the distance of an imaginary, fictionalized dramatic narrative (that was of course based on historical events), she was able

to revisit the experience of the Holocaust and see herself go through that experience in a way that wasn't too much to bear. Through the detour of narrative imagination she was able to return to that inexperienced experience and reexperience it. She was thereby giving a future to her past, surviving her own survival, and living again to tell the tale.

Thus, there are different ways in which we try to work through an unspeakable evil. There can never be a literal reenactment—that would be like reliving it all over again—but by putting it into certain words, particularly in the form of a narrative, we can create enough distance from the past to properly work through it. And in that sense, we learn to survive the trauma. The trauma never goes away—trauma is the wound that silences us and paralyzes us; in Greek it is a wound that cannot be closed—but to survive a trauma is to learn to live with it.

**TOJ:** In *On Stories* you mention that Lanzmann was trying to resist the temptation to put something so sensitive, something that a person can't make sense of, within a narrative frame.<sup>6</sup> However, as you note, some of the people in the Lanzmann film were revictimized or retraumatized by the project, which might explain why some of them killed themselves after participating in it. It seems that you are suggesting that by creating some distance from their traumatic experiences and enabling survivors to see it through a story that wasn't their own, Spielberg's approach allows them to experience their trauma vicariously, and so work through it in a way that avoids reopening the trauma. And that is revelatory to me because before you made this comparison, I would probably have assumed that Lanzmann was taking the higher road.

**RK:** Until I met that woman in Montreal and heard her give her version of the story, I thought Lanzmann was right too—even when he said that catharsis in the Aristotelian sense of purging traumatizing affects (*pathemata*) is impossible when it comes to the Holocaust. But now I believe it is in fact possible. Viewing one's experience through the mediation of narrative gives that person a certain distance so that what Aristotle calls the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear by pity and fear can occur.<sup>7</sup> The Holocaust survivor I met in Montreal was able to identify with herself because the self was another self, dramatized by somebody else, played by an actor. She experienced pity by virtue of being able to identify with *herself as another*, and she also experienced cathartic fear, which is a kind of detachment, a kind of distance, that enabled her to be not completely fused with the other. It's that dialectic of being able to pity and empathize with a victim while at the same time standing back and

6. See Kearney, *On Stories* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 50–51.

7. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b, 25ff.

trying to understand why this is going on. That dialectic of the two is what enables it to work.

In *On Stories* I talk about Helen Bamber who is one of the founders of Amnesty International and one of the first counselors who met with the survivors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. She describes how when she first visited the inmates, all she could do was listen. She said that people would either be totally silent, mute, lying on their beds motionless, or they would sit up and suddenly start speaking, speaking, speaking. As she put it, it was like a vomit that they were emitting. And the Greek word *katharsis* is again relevant here as it is used for the letting of blood, vomiting, menstruation, and the purging of toxic fluid. Bamber tells of how the survivors would see a dramatic presentation of Nazis barging in on a typical Jewish family, brutalizing the mother, taking the children, beating up the father, and so on. This scene would be repeated, and the audience would watch this scene, and they would identify with the characters. But they also realized that that was then and this is now. And that's the only way to deal with trauma. You must live the moment of the trauma, because as an inexperienced experience it never goes away. It comes back as a gap, an absence, a ghosting in repetitive flashbacks. It comes back in physiological reactions and allergies and phobias and acting out and so on. In trauma, there is no sense that that was then and this is now. But the drama, or the dramatizing of their experience, enabled these survivors to watch themselves suffering. They were able to find empathy for and with themselves and to experience a certain healing detachment from the evil itself. Once they had reenacted, however basically, some kind of shared narrative of their horror, they could walk out the doors of Bergen-Belsen. And that seems to me to be extremely telling as a way of overcoming evil. We tell what cannot be told in order to live on. Or as Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable* narrator puts it in the final sentence of that book: "I can't go on, I'll go on."<sup>8</sup>

8. See Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, the Unnamable* (New York, NY: Grove, 2009).