

Book Review

# Rhetorical Allure, Real Evil: Claire Ortiz Hill

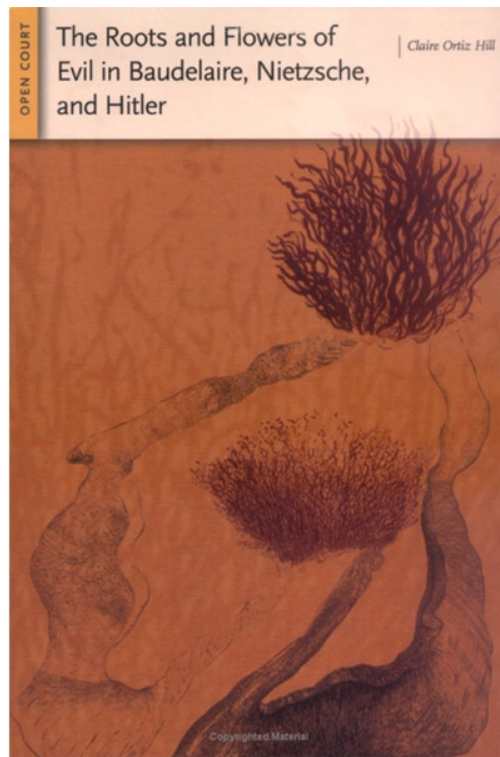
*The Roots and Flowers of Evil in Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Hitler*

by Claire Ortiz Hill (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2006)

reviewed by Angela Holzer (Princeton University)

Claire Ortiz Hill's interest in Nietzsche is not in fact primarily theoretical: She considers Nietzsche's writings, mostly focusing on the works of what she calls his "mature period," namely *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, alongside Baudelaire's poems and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. But she considers these writings in the first part of her book in order to divest the reader of the appeal that purely rhetorical or linguistic glorification of "evil" can exert. Therefore, the second part of the study deals with descriptions of real terror—albeit, of course, textually mediated—and the third part suggests that nonviolent responses to evil that might seem naïve are actually grounded in "human realities" (xvii) and should therefore be adopted in real life to resist and reduce evil in the world. Evil, the study attempts to show, "bears within itself its own contradictions and in them the seeds of its own destruction" (xvii).

Thus, the aim of the book is a rather direct one; it is fueled by humanistic belief in the possibility to outdo and overcome evil by collective will—by the refusal to acquiesce in its silent workings as well as by empowering nonviolent responses to it. The author has dedicated her study to victims of Buchenwald as well as to her spiritual mentor, Jacques Sommet, S.J., survivor of Dachau and member of the French Resistance. Her decision to study philosophy, as the author explained, arose out of the desire to understand her century with its vast devastating force, examples of which make up part two of her present book. Keeping this in mind, it is a laudable effort of the author to confront the problem of evil, and, even more, to argue against a cliché understanding of Hitler as the incarnation of evil. In fact, her taking Hitler's writings seriously, she confesses, might be considered "perverse or offensive" (5). Nonetheless, she attempts to analyze



him along with Baudelaire and Nietzsche as a systematic thinker who gave “serious, original and coherent answers” to the problem of evil. But why does she group Nietzsche, Hitler and Baudelaire together at all? Why these three authors, the philosopher, politician and poet? Hill sees in them the “great experts on the problem of evil” as well as “history’s most eloquent and alluring disseminators of ideas about evil” (3). It seems, of course, somewhat anachronistic to argue that Hitler’s thought was rational and systematic: historians have acknowledged this for a long time now. The same goes for the argument considering Nietzsche’s consistency. It seems, if not superfluous, at least irrelevant for the purposes of the study to argue that Nietzsche’s thought is to be taken seriously as philosophy and cannot be dismissed as paradoxical, ambiguous, and contradictory. After decades of post-war Nietzsche-exegesis beginning with Walter Kaufmann’s study, it should seem, however, that there is no need to rehabilitate either Nietzsche’s philosophical importance, nor is it necessary to defend him by cleaning his writings of paradoxes and inconsistencies. While the set-up of the study comparing Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Hitler could be quite interesting, the basis of it does not have to be an argument that all of them—even Baudelaire, who is really read for his ideas at the expense of their poetic form, which is debatably impossible—can be taken seriously as systematic thinkers.

It is one thing to write about Hitler’s writings, another one to adopt his thoughts and use them methodologically, as the author does. Why does she repeatedly resort to this gesture? Not only is the image of a mosaic, which the study tries to put together with regard to evil, borrowed from *Mein Kampf*. Also, to “give my argumentation form I have adopted a methodology inspired by *Mein Kampf*” (xiv), namely the reciprocal verification of theory and reality.

The first part, then, develops the theoretical mosaic of elements of evil. A philosopher, especially one versed in Nietzschean thought, might be disappointed to find no elaboration of the idea of evil that is being sought after or dealt with; there is no philosophical or theological definition or argument on which the search can be based. No recent studies on evil—like Susan Neiman’s for example—are taken up or taken issue with. Rather, evil is quite commonly understood as “that which is intentionally morally bad or injurious, or causes suffering, misfortune, or disaster” (3). Implicit in this definition is, of course, that “morally” means the liberal, egalitarian, humanistic morality. Thus, already at the outset the argument moves on a level that seems inadequate to the intricacies of a Nietzschean, genealogical argument about morality and its historical becoming as part of a value-system of specific groups. Briefly, the study argues from a viewpoint that Nietzsche sought to question without justifying this viewpoint. The author then seems to search for thoughts in the works of the three authors that can be classified in one of the following categories, which are the elements of “evil”: anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian sentiment (only partially valid, I submit, in the case of Hitler); contempt of the sick, philosophy of life; ennui and resulting (violent) capriciousness; anti-Marxist and anti-Jewish sentiment; the role of the “devil” in these writings; magical power of words—the allure of oration—that all three were able to exercise as speakers. All of these aspects contribute to the “theory of evil” expounded in the first part.

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Unfortunately, the author more or less assembles respective thoughts from Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Hitler, often without analysis. She neither contextualizes the texts historically, nor does she put pressure on the literal word. The hermeneutic stance taken toward the texts does, then, seem rather banal, and results in the mere statement that, yes, some passages in Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Hitler apparently glorify “evil”—“Nietzsche was also keen about showing crime and vice in a better light” (78). It is also questionable if Nietzsche can in fact be simply seen as advocating an inverted value system (that whatever conventional morality considered to be evil should be viewed as being good, 118). This is a crass reduction of Nietzsche’s foray into the realm of ethics and does not even do justice to his *grand politics*. Arguably, this approach in fact contributes to turning Nietzsche and Baudelaire into thinkers of evil. A more subtle reading would surely be able to show how they did not necessarily extol evil for evil’s sake. Also, a compilation of the most provocative thoughts in Nietzsche does not aid to an understanding of what he “really meant” (8), a hermeneutic approach prone to the intentional fallacy at any rate. The first part closes with Carl Jung’s reflections on Hitler, in the vein of the argument that Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Hitler were not realistic in their descriptions of evil, but that they were realists about the way “human beings are behind appearances and any masks they wear.” They had, according to the author, “a realistic sense [...] of the raw material upon which they worked, a realistic sense of human nature, of the human mind. And that is indeed being realistic about the true nature of evil” (83). This seems to suggest that evil is seen by Hill as anthropologically grounded: it seems to be neither projection, nor imagination, but part of human nature as such.

The second part of the book opens with a discussion of the relation of theoretical and real evil, the pen and the sword. Rather than advancing her own arguments, the author again only offers a summary and quotes, this time of Harry Mullisch’s book from 1961, which portrays a number of German Romantic authors as “prefiguring the universe of Hitler” (99). She seems to be unaware of who Jean Paul was (“there was the person whom Mullisch just calls Jean Paul” 99), but seems to adopt Mullisch’s thesis of the Romantic prefiguration of Nazism. She then, again following Hitler’s suggestion, proceeds by “setting aside aesthetics” (101) by turning to the reality of evil (paradoxically, however, this section witnesses the two only completely reproduced poems, one by Owen, one by Baudelaire without analysis)—the inherent problematic of doing so in a mediated way, even without the “beautification” of evil, which, according to her, is in itself “an evil thing to do” (101) is unfortunately not addressed. But then, the “reality” of evil which the second part discusses is not an ontological question, but the paradigmatic ability of Hitler to convert the latent tendencies in society, infused by “evil” theories—“pathological fantasies” as she calls them with Carl (Gustav) Jung (116)—like the one discussed in part one, into action. To subsume Baudelaire and Nietzsche under such a heading—quasi as mouthpieces of a collective pathology that Hitler then put into practice—does seem exquisitely simplistic, but it nevertheless appears to be the bottom line of this chapter. And what justification is there for taking Jung and, occasionally, Freud as opponents rather than as symptoms of their age?

Are the socio-psychological explanations of modernity and of “the Germans” as suffering from a collective inferiority complex (Jung) really sufficient to explain the occurrence of National-Socialism? The second part not only expounds the terrors perpetrated by it, but also focuses on Hitler’s mental genesis explaining his success in realizing terror—which he had learned, as the author shows, from Social Democrats. While “many Nazi SS-men would fit Nietzsche’s description of hardened, powerful, revengeful, hostile, malicious, distrustful people ready for the most horrible things and inventive and insatiable in cruelty” (120), the French General Aussaresses is compared or portrayed as manifestation of Baudelaire’s “hardy soul” (125). Not only do these applications of 19<sup>th</sup> century visions to 20<sup>th</sup> century political agents seem futile, they don’t explain anything. They moreover add to what can be called a mystification of evil—given the rhetorical effort the author put into their description (in the chapter that sets aside aesthetics). Surely many members of the SS were much more mundane than that. And the problem of Aussaresses is not simply one of “evil,” but the one of Guantanamo: Do Western liberal constitutions have to be suspended in the face of danger that can seemingly only be controlled by force? Is torture justifiable? In this case, as well as in others, it would be useful to distinguish between different acts of evil and categories of crimes rather than subsume every atrocity—from Nazi killings of mentally disturbed to the war in Algeria and Stalinist Terror—under the heading “evil.” But what is the author’s aim in bringing to mind and describing in detail real massacres and slaughters? Is there an anthropological, ethical, political, juridical, theological insight to be gleaned beside the one that massacres are often theoretically legitimized and prepared, or that ideals that inspire evil seem to be born from inversed projection, i.e. that Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Hitler were themselves physically far from the ideal they seemingly glorified (139)? Is there any explanatory worth in relating the sicknesses of Nietzsche once again as if they would invalidate his philosophy? And how does Jung’s analysis of Nietzsche and Hitler as psychopathically German help to confront the nature of evil?

The third part discusses the ideas and justifications—philosophies—of leading proponents of non-violent action, mostly Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mikhail Gorbachev, and argues that this is not only a possible solution to the problem of evil, but the only possibility in the current state of the world. Ortiz Hill is intent on demonstrating the realistic character of non-violent action and the self-destructive force of “evil” regimes. Tolstoy and King are profiled as radical opponents of Nietzsche, and “Gandhi contra Hitler” (203). Paradoxically, however, also “that veteran of the underclass Hitler and that sickly Nietzsche were as lucid about the puissance of the powerlessness, the might of weakness, the force of nonviolence, the potency of spiritual forces” (220). Do we now have to see in them theorist of nonviolence as well? The chapter proposes that love can ultimately be a stronger force than evil and more congenial to human nature—the Christian principal of agape serves here as proof, in comparison to which Freud’s *eros* seems selfish: “Love, goodness, life, creation, peace have to be primary or there would be nothing for hatred, evil, death, and destruction try to undo. [...] The flowers of evil ultimately wilt and die, a dream

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carries them away” (220).

The story Ortiz Hill tells, largely by citing a handful of secondary sources, is the one of a pathological (German) modernity of which Nietzsche is a symptom and Hitler the culmination point—despite her comment, that a direct line from Nietzsche to the Third Reich cannot be drawn, she often and explicitly brings them in close juxtaposition. Anti-Semitism is one of its fiercest evils, which she also detects in Baudelaire and the “work of Hitler and his minions to annihilate the Jewish people” (148) is “the most outstanding example” (148) of the radical evil of extermination, in turn prepared by thoughts of Baudelaire and Nietzsche (148). The aestheticization of evil that she described in the first part is part of this evil and its perversion, a kind of sinister second skin of evil—but is it also a reason or motif for evil acts?

Apart from the historically reductive character of this line of argument, it does nothing to help us gain insights into a phenomenology of evil—the motivations for it are restricted to some Jungian pathologizations. Rather, it proposes the view that evil, as described in the book, is an invention of the 19<sup>th</sup> and a reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—neglecting the fact that there have always been reports of large-scale atrocities in history. If evil action is grounded in human nature—as we assume due to the lack of better explanations—it remains fundamentally unclear how it can be confronted and overcome—even by non-violence.

The problem posed by Nietzsche, namely the inextricable interrelation of violence and culture, is, unfortunately, not even addressed. The book on the whole does not explain the roots and flowers of “evil,” it rather assembles a number of its canonical instances. The role of language in beautifying evil is not brought to analytical clarity: the author seems on the one hand to condemn it without really inquiring into its workings; on the other hand, she inserts poems, like Baudelaire’s “A corpse” into her description of the reality of evil as if it captured the real sight of death. There is also no reflection on the mediated character of her own, often detailed description of massacres and murders—and on its consequences.