

Koba the Dread

and

Richard III's soliloquies

I do not know why I have had an interest in the history, actions and personal psychology of tyrants and in the nature of evil. Raised Catholic, we received theological training beginning in first grade. At that age the instructional emphasis often fell on the reality of sin. It is not much of a leap from sin to evil, from thinking about venial sin to pondering the worst mortal sins.

Maybe because I have so often been on the receiving end of goodness, I wonder how its opposite functions?

I have lived a fortunate life. I have not lived under a tyrant or in a country enduring the after-effects of his actions. As with most Americans, on the surface, I am historically innocent. I have read enough to have an awareness of our nation's dark places, our capacity for torture, for massacre, for intimidation and corruption. But because we have striven to be a nation of laws (and paid the price in blood to do so), and because we have a democratic ideal that seems psychically attached to us as citizens inside the country (I am aware of the irony of that wording), we have avoided monsters who have plagued other regions of the world.

Americans are not morally superior individuals just by dint of being Americans. That makes no sense. That kind of arrogant posturing is repellent and dangerous. How often have those who thought of themselves as repositories of goodness created hells on earth? God knows our record with Native Americans, slavery, imperialism, rendition, and Abu Ghraib should set that thought aside. We are sinners all. Our monsters have been restrained from taking total power. Our democratic institutions and inherent distrust of the state have served us well.

So why care about tyrants? Maybe the more we seek to understand the nature of earthly, daily evil, the better chance we have to recognize it when we see it and thus to oppose it and perhaps avoid its awful toll. Maybe because it seems inherently mysterious and unknowable and mysteries naturally attract us. Maybe because it has its own fascination. After all, why do we find Iago funny? Why does Richard entertain us? Why could Hitler charm children?

How do we make sense of them as human beings with inner lives?

Richard III is a great villain, one of the worst of Shakespeare's criminal-creations, but in order to understand him, to place him into some kind of context, we can turn to history to help us. When we look at historical tyrants, we learn more about Richard III and Richard gives us insight into them.

History can teach us how to see him, how to listen to him, how to understand his manipulations and terrible, inhuman decisions and literature can teach us how to see and understand tyrants. From Richard, we can then learn more about the real men who destroyed so many during this past century.

Koba the Dread by Martin Amis

Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were the 3 great architects of Soviet Communism. Here are their own words and the actions that illustrate those words.

In 1910 a political opponent said of Lenin that you couldn't deal with a man who "for twenty-four hours of the day is taken up with the revolution, who has no other thoughts but thoughts of revolution, and who, even in his sleep dreams of nothing but revolution."

Ideology by its very definition seems deadly. Backed by unrestrained power, any creed that so locks us into categories of the redeemed and the irredeemable can only result in dungeons and bullets. Fanaticism is the devil. Absolutely focused ambition tied to a cold, remorseless will creates the Pit.

Lenin – March 19, 1922: **"We must now give the most decisive and merciless battle to the clergy and subdue its resistance with such brutality that they will not forget it for decades to come...."**

That year, 2,692 priests, 1,962 monks and 3,447 nuns were murdered by the communists.

Lenin – January, 1918: **"The dictatorship – and take this into account once and for all – means unrestricted power based on force, not on law."**

Trotsky – 1932: **"We must put an end once and for all to the papist-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life."**

In 1932, 6 million men, woman and children starved to death in the Ukraine in a state produced famine orchestrated by Stalin.

Stalin: **"Death solves all problems. No man, no problem."**

In one small instance of this dictum: In July of 1938, Stalin is given a list of 138 names. He returns the list with "shoot all 138" accompanied by his signature.

A Soviet decree of April 7, 1935: children of twelve and over will be subject to "all measures of criminal punishment" including death.

What can a tyranny of unrelenting fear produce in families? in normal human relationships?

Stalin's inner circle was composed of Nikita Krushchev, Vyacheslav Molotov, Mikhail Kalinin, Anastas Mikoyan, Aleksandr Poskrebyshv.

This happened to members of their families as ordered by Stalin:

NK's daughter-in-law was jailed.
VM's wife was sent to the gulag*.
MK's wife was beaten unconscious in interrogation and later sent to the gulag.
AM's 2 sons were sent to the gulag
AP's wife was sent to the gulag and shot.

Gulag = the Gulag Archipelago, a system of hundreds of prison camps and prisons run by the communists and meant to contain criminals and political prisoners.

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On being arrested, the invariable response was **Zachto?** (Why? What for?)

Because there were quotas to fulfill.
Because someone had been paid to denounce you.
Because an enemy was settling a score.
Simply to exercise cruelty.
To emphasize the use of terror as a psychological weapon.
For no reason.

Richard kills to advance himself (and he enjoys cruelty). Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky killed to advance themselves and to advance an idea –the dictatorship of the proletariat, the end of capitalism, the utopian vision (nightmare) of a communist world. Thus, their killing was epidemic. Killing in service of a utopian idea larger than any one person gives the killers a righteousness that Richard lacked. He killed a handful that threatened his advancement and possession of the throne. They killed millions.

But Richard's psychology and perceptions help us see a Stalin.
Listen to these lines.
Read them aloud.

Richard in **Henry VI, Part 3:**

Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb;
And for I should not deal in her soft laws,
she did corrupt frail nature with some bribe,
to shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub,
to make an envious mountain on my back,
where sits deformity to mock my body;

Richard's initial grievance is with nature. His form is an abomination to him as it has been to others. He hates a part of himself and thus chooses instead to master men and not love's "soft laws." His enemies began to afflict him before his birth. He believes himself a victim, one unable to be loved.

To shape my legs of unequal size,
to disproportion me in every part,
like to a chaos, or an unlicked bear-whelp
that carries no impression of the dam.

An animal disconnected from its mother, “disproportion[ed]”, “withered”, deformed, mocked, forsworn.

Where does casual slaughter begin? If you are Richard, it begins with his body and his sense of himself within that body – “a chaos”. Maybe he seeks order and psychological calm. For someone this damaged and self-pitying, for someone with such a deep sense of ugliness but also intelligence and ambition, what better way to seek such order than in aggression, in “command”?

Am I a then a man to be beloved?
O monstrous fault to harbor such a thought!

Disconnected from the possibility of love “in his [my] mother’s womb”, Richard has no hope that another will love him. Some historians believe that Stalin lost whatever deeper humanity he may have possessed upon the suicide of his first wife. He wept at her grave and was disconsolate for time thereafter, but he had been a killer before her death. Are their degrees of monstrosity beyond giving the order for the murder of one, a dozen, hundreds, tens of thousands? How do we enter such calculations within the minds of such men?

The reader also gets the sense here that Richard tries to see his life and the royal world around him in stark, cold, realistic terms. There is no idealism, no innocence left in him at all – if “this world [is] but hell, he can only “make his [my] heaven to dream upon the crown.” His hell becomes his heaven only when he has achieved the “glorious crown”, absolute power to do as he pleases.

Stalin rejects any world but the Soviet Union and its enemies and any life but the one he can ‘hew ...out with a bloody axe.’

Then since this earth affords no joy to me
but to command, to check, to overbear such
as are of a better person than myself,
I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
and whiles I live, to account this world but hell,
until my misshaped trunk that bears this head

be round impaled with a glorious crown.
And yet I know not how to get the crown,
for many lives stand between me and home;
And I – like one lost in a thorny wood,
that rents the thorns, and is rent with the thorns,
seeking a way, and straying from the way,
not knowing how to find the open air,
but toiling desperately to find it out –
torment myself to find the English crown;
And from that torment I will free myself,
or hew my way out with a bloody axe.

Richard does not know “how to get the crown.” He rents and is rent on his journey to seek power, is lost and finds his way, grows desperate and tormented. Such volumes of frustration and inner fear must receive release, but Richard cannot show weakness. He survived the *War of the Roses*. He knows what happens to the weak. So therefore strike out; destroy one’s enemies so as to “free” one’s self from fear and uncertainty.

The glory of soliloquies by Richard and Iago, Edmund, Claudius, and Macbeth is that in imagining the inner lives of these villains, murderers all, he gives the reader hope to achieve an understanding of other historical killers: Stalin, Mao and Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Mugabe and Hussein. Perhaps more than any other writer in the western tradition, Shakespeare understood the tyrannical mind.

Why, I can smile and murder while I smile
And cry “Content” to that which grieves my heart,
and wet my cheeks with tears,
and frame my face to all occasions.
I’ll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall,
I’ll slay more gazers than the basilisk...
deceive more slyly than Ulysses could....

I can add colors to the chameleon.
Can I do this and cannot get a crown?

III, ii, l. 153-194:

Follow Shakespeare's verbs: *smile, murder, cry, wet, frame, drown, slay, deceive, add*. Listen to how simply and clearly Richard lays out his confidence in his abilities to fool others and strike without remorse. He is speaking to us. He is charming us, as monsters sometimes can and will. What a feeling of joy is in this section. He is sly. He can fool others, but he wants us to know. Has there ever been a tyrant who did not believe he was a superior creature?

And again:

"I...have neither pity, love, nor fear.
Then since the heavens have shaped my body so,
let hell make crooked my mind to answer it.

Richard becomes like the anti-Job, the sufferer who curses Yahweh and who embraces darkness.

I have no brother. I am like no brother;
And this word 'love' which greybeards call divine,
be resident in men like one another, and not in me.
I am myself alone.

V, vi, 67-83

Richard believes himself incapable of pity, that emotion whereby we extend our feeling of understanding to another. He believes himself to be utterly alone, as if he were another species: "I am like no brother."

If no feelings of empathy connect him to anyone, if he cannot understand "this word love" on anything other than an intellectual plane, if he believes himself to be utterly cut off from all other human beings, "myself alone", than why not kill anyone who thwarts his will? They are not important. No one is important unless that person serves him. And as for the servant, how could he ever be certain of his master's mind, will, heart, when the master himself seems not to believe in sympathetic connections. How does one confidently serve a master who sees a world of aliens?

What fills up someone bereft of love? Despair? Loneliness? Regret, if that is even possible? What does someone bereft of love but possessed of enormous power do with his time? Plot, anticipate and then act.

Facing a world that "affords no joy" to him but possessed of intelligence and will, why not "command...check...and overbear" everyone you can reach?