Chapter Eight: Refusal to Heed Criticism

Evil originates not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it.

Evil individuals do not tolerate reminders of their shortcomings; they do not tolerate legitimate criticism: the eighth characteristic.

Whether that criticism originates within or without their persons seems to make scant difference. They will not hear, let alone internalize, a negative truth about themselves. On some level, to subject themselves to any sustained form of introspection - as would, for instance, be germane to the process of psychoanalysis, which could offer healing - “does, in fact, seem to them like suicide.”

Obviously, we wouldn’t survive very long without an array of defence mechanisms, both physical and psychological. Although in his exhaustive The Wisdom of the Ego, George Vaillant considers some defences as immature, if not psychotic, he also acknowledges that they remain indispensable for our survival. “All reduce unbearable conflict.” In fact he blurs the lines between survival, coping and defence mechanisms and describes one in terms of the others.

In short, defenses are creative, healthy, comforting, coping, and yet often strike observers as downright peculiar. But that is why defenses - like immune mechanisms - serve adaptation. That is why defenses integrate experience by providing a variety of filters for pain and mechanisms for self-deception. Defenses creatively rearrange the sources of conflict so that they become manageable.

And yet evil individuals have overdeveloped one particular variant thereof. To admit that they sinned, made a mistake or two, are perhaps prone to making them again and again, and are consequently not faultless seems to represent for them certain death. Though generally not weak-willed, able to exert relentless effort in the realization of their aspirations, they will not attempt to avoid any and all manner of pain. “It is only one particular kind of pain they cannot tolerate: the pain of their own conscience, the pain of the realization of their own sinfulness and imperfection.” In brief, they do not wish to be reminded that they are human like the rest of us.

It is impossible to be human and not err. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” We all make
mistakes; we are all prone to missteps, some larger, some smaller; in our inherent blindness we all inflict unnecessary pain on others as well as ourselves. And yet most of us are not evil. Though no one likes to admit occasional, let alone more frequent, lapses of judgment, sooner or later many of us do. Motivated by a host of secular and/or religious concerns - the hindsight that we might have done differently, the desire to spare others or ourselves the aftermath of our wanton folly, the inefficiency of an immoral life, the wish to return God’s love for us - we adjust our subsequent behavioural strategies accordingly. As paradoxical as it may seem: “... evil deeds do not an evil person make.”6 It is the repeated failure to acknowledge their errors, when circumstances and/or other persons strive to point them out that characterizes the evil. To phrase it another way: “The essential component of evil is not the absence of a sense of sin or imperfection but the unwillingness to tolerate that sense.”7 And again: “Evil originates not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it.”8 Due to this “absolute refusal” to acknowledge their imperfections that are concomitant with their humanity,9 the evil, Peck maintains, lack a self-correcting mechanism; consequently over time, they “become uncorrectable grab bags of sin.”10

In the novel’s penultimate chapter, the two elderly adversaries finally face each other alone. No one else can distract or, for that matter, assist either party in this confrontation. Emmenberger utters the first sentence in this exchange; commensurate with his mind-set, his unrelenting desire to dominate, this seems fitting as well as thoroughly logical. Furthermore, as he directs the hospital’s day-to-day operations, he can determine the exact moment he chooses to enter Bärlach’s room. After the policeman composes himself at least to some minimal degree, he manages to formulate his initial reply. He loses no time in beginning his critique of Emmenberger with the naming of one of the physician’s more recent crimes. “‘You had poor Fortschig killed,’ said Bärlach.” (237) He states his accusation directly using a simple straightforward sentence: a single subject, verb and direct object.

This factual statement constitutes the first of Bärlach’s criminal and moral indictments against Emmenberger; of this genre it also represents his last. Ever willing to appear in supreme command of the situation, Emmenberger reveals to the policeman the precise means through which Fortschig met his end. (239) Clearly he knows so much more than the police. (246) He also continues to accuse himself in adding one entry after another to the ignominious list of his reprehensible acts; he mentions not only past and present victims, e.g., the dwarf, Nehle, (243-244) Marlok, (239) but also adds two projected victims to the roster: Dr. Hungertobel (246) and Bärlach himself (238). The Swiss physician also explains to the ever more frightened police detective in exhaustive detail all the evidence against him, accumulated over the decades. Among other transgressions, he admits to his