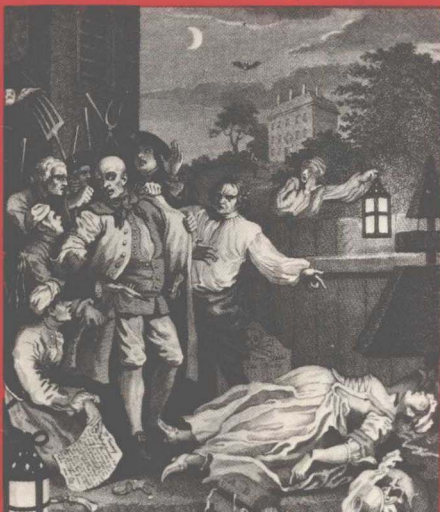
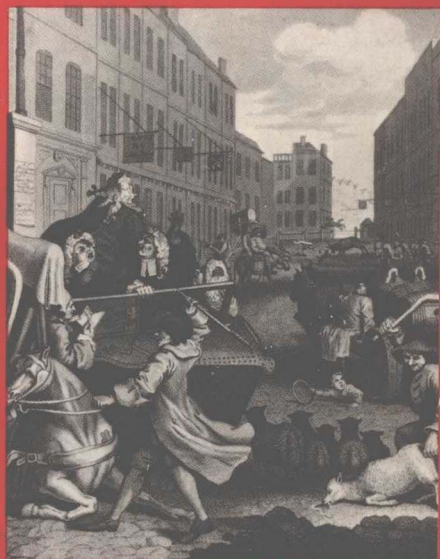


CRUELTY

Philip P. Hallie

Revised Edition



CRUELTY

By PHILIP P. HALLIE



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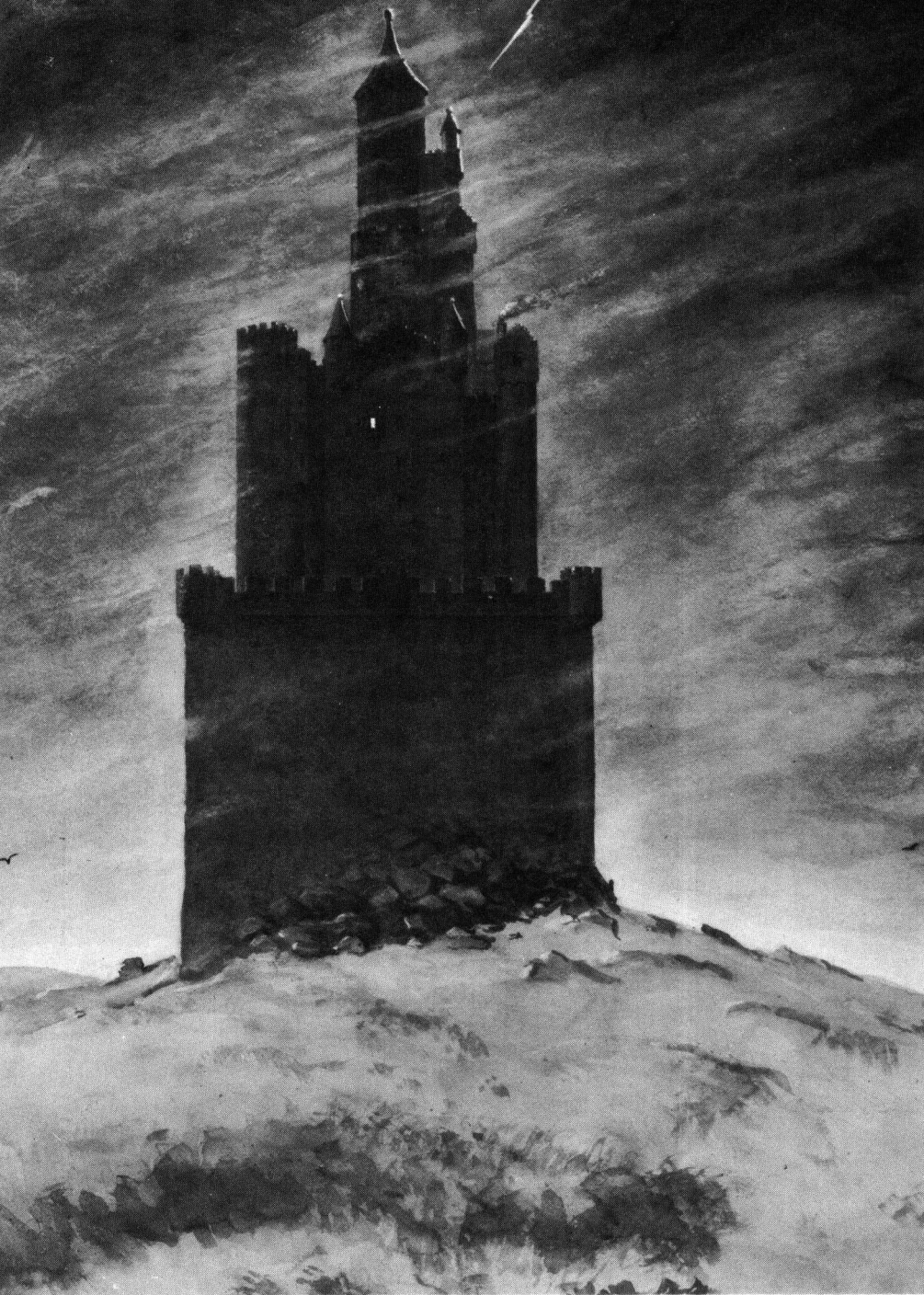
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Frontispiece painting by Samuel M. Green

*For Edwin C. Sanders,
who, even after all those cruelties,
is black and beautiful*

The greatest defeat, in anything, is to forget, and above all to forget what it is that smashed you, and to let yourself be smashed without ever realizing how thoroughly devilish man can be. When our time is up, we people mustn't bear malice, but neither must we forget: we must tell the whole thing, without altering one word—

LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE
Journey to the End of the Night

... we had little sayings that were passed on from generation to generation; some of them had probably come to us from as far back as the superstitious people hundreds of years before. When there was a flash of lightning that streaked across the sky a child would say, "The devil's beatin his wife." And when the deafening explosion of thunder followed, another child would reply, "Yeah, man, but she's fightin back." ...

RONALD L. FAIR
"We Who Came After"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have already discussed the first picture of *Marriage à la Mode*, a product of Hogarth's rich middle period of productivity, and in doing so we have picked out some of the main features of cruelty, at least as we shall be studying it. Cruelty is the smashing of the weak by the strong, either peacefully, civilly, or noisily, bloodily. Those two dogs in the foreground, chained to each other, are enduring a kind of cruelty somewhere in between the quiet and the loud, but they "suffer" in their way, just as the other weak ones in that picture suffer in their several ways.

In a few words, this is the philosophy of Sade: the only justification for the "cruel act of murder" is "the passions" of an individual; the law, cold and impersonal, has nothing to do with these, and therefore is not justified in killing men. To kill in cold blood is unnatural. Only hot blood can justify murder.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPER EDITION

IF history is a nightmare, it is because there is so much cruelty in it. In peace as in war members of our species are cruel to one another, and human progress seems to consist not so much in diminishing that cruelty as in finding more impersonal and more efficient ways of crushing and grinding one another. Perhaps it is a long way from a cave man torturing his enemy or his woman to a Heinrich Himmler advising the leaders of the SS in a 1943 speech to be “decent” and “hard” in “exterminating a bacillus,” the Jewish people. Still, across the changes those who need to understand the nightmare with better conceptual apparatus than the anecdotal sensationalism of a journalist feel the need to grasp the family resemblances between the various cruelties that make up so much of human history. Some of us need to see what it is that keeps recurring in the nightmare.

But if episodic journalism is a danger in the study of cruelty so is empty pattern-mongering. The dance of bloodless categories that broad theories present to us cannot show us the particular textures of the horrors. The sensationalistic journalists of cruelty know that we need to stay close to the episodes, close to the passions and actions of particular human beings if we are to penetrate the nightmare. And they are right. If I as a student of ethics were to spin out an intricate web of high-level abstractions regarding good and evil, and then fit into that web the

particular evil we call “cruelty” I would be evading the truth that the horror-mongers never fail to see: that understanding cruelty is a cruel task. It is not a task for those who do not know by their own experience what a nightmare is.

And so, decades ago in my first efforts to keep the right cognitive distance from this immense and immediate subject, I decided to turn to etymological dictionaries. The origins of words are often rich in concrete and yet suggestive language. I found that the word “cruelty” comes from a variety of old words relating to the Latin “*crudus*” or “raw,” and this word in turn is related to the Old Slavonic word for blood and the Sanskrit word for raw flesh. The origins of the word lie in the spilling of blood, in opening raw flesh.

But etymologies are not enough, just as history is not enough. The now is important too. And in present usage “cruelty” is not simply a reference to fleshy or bloody matters. It has much to do with awareness. A modern dictionary defines the word with the phrase “disposed to give pain to others.” The patterns of past and present usage inform us that mental pain and physical bloodshed are the main ingredients of cruelty.

But how many times have we seen cruelty without bloodshed? How many times have we seen or heard about children and husbands and wives torturing each other not with hard weapons but with hard words? In Reska Weiss’s *Journey Through Hell* there is a passage on one of the deepest cruelties the Nazis perpetrated upon extermination camp inmates. On a certain march “Urine and excreta poured down the prisoners’ legs, and by nightfall the excrement, which had frozen to our limbs, gave off its stench. . . .” Weiss goes on to talk in terms not of local bodily pain or of bloodshed, but in other terms: “. . . We were really no longer human beings in the accepted sense. Not even animals, but putrefying corpses moving on two legs. . . .”¹

Cruelty involves maiming a person’s dignity, crushing a person’s self-respect. Local bloodshed and pain are sometimes superficial matters as far as cruelty is concerned. Whips and bleeding flesh, like the dictionaries, do not take you very far into it. The understanding of cruelty lies in the depths of an understanding of the fragility of human dignity.

In excremental assault, in keeping prisoners from wiping themselves or from going to the latrine, or in making them drink from a toilet bowl full of excreta (and the excreta of the guards at that) bodily pain is nothing—disgust and humiliation are everything. Whether or not we are skeptics about ranking people or ranking pleasures or ranking pains, we human beings believe in hierarchies. There is a hierarchical gap between shit and me. And if you winced at the word in the last sentence, it is because you are “above” even using the word “shit.” You are above walking around besmirched with feces on your face, on your hands, on your legs. Our dignity, whatever the origins and nature of that dignity may be, does not countenance it. We vulnerable creatures insist upon being “higher” than shit, and when we are not our lives are maimed at the very center, in the very depths, not merely wounded in some portion of our bodies.

And so it is necessary to turn away from dictionaries and look at the life of the word, its ways of being used in various contexts and circumstances. When you do this you not only discover that the victims of cruelty are often humiliated, not simply bloodied; you also discover that those victims are the ones who use the word the most often, not their victimizers. The word “cruelty” has an expressive function: it *expresses* pain and humiliation, does not simply describe these feelings. And these feelings are felt by the victims of cruelty, not by the perpetrators of it. Victimizers seldom use the word. There is a speech mentioned earlier that was delivered by Heinrich Himmler in Posen in 1943. Himmler was head of the Nazi SS and he was speaking to a select group of his immediate SS subordinates in a closed session. His subject was one of the most cruel episodes in the history of our species, but his language was free of such words as “cruel”:

. . . Let me, in all frankness, mention a terribly hard chapter to you. Among ourselves, we can openly talk about it, though we will never speak a word of it in public. . . . I am speaking of the . . . extermination of the Jewish people. That is one of those things where the words come so easily. “The Jewish people will be exterminated,” says every party member, “of course. It’s in the program. . . . extermination. We’ll take care of it.” And then they come, these nice 80 million Germans, and every one of them has his

decent Jew. Sure, the others are swine, but this one is a fine Jew. . . . Most of you will know what it means to have seen 100 corpses together, or 500, or 1000. To have made one's way through that, and—some instances of human weakness aside—to have remained a decent person throughout, that is what has made us hard. That is a page of glory in our history that never has been and never will be written. . . .

And later he goes on: “. . . we can say that we fulfilled this heaviest of tasks in love to our people. And we suffered no harm in our essence, in our soul, in our character. . . .”² There is no hint of cruelty here, only “tasks in love” and “a page of glory in our history.” The victims of the Holocaust, the survivors of it, and those who try to understand that page of glory from their point of view speak of cruelty, but not the victimizers. The language of the Nazis does not carry the pain and the humiliation that the word “cruelty” carries. With a few changes, Himmler's speech could have been about the extermination of rats in Germany. Frederick Douglass in his autobiography *Life and Times* can speak of cruelty when he speaks of the point of view of the black slaves in the United States, but the slave holders and their overseers seldom use the word.

“Cruelty” is a perspectival word, and the perspective it expresses is usually the point of view of those who suffer, not of those who inflict that suffering. The study of cruelty, whatever else it may be, is a study of the victim's point of view on the process of crushing human beings.

Having learned these things about the word, it became clear to me that the study of cruelty required more than an understanding of the general meaning of that word. To find the right cognitive distance from the subject, I found it necessary to distinguish various types of maiming and humiliation. Cruelty in general is almost as vague as evil in general. And so, using what I had learned about meanings, I found myself distinguishing bloody, violent cruelty from bloodless, genteel harm-doing. A chorus of venomous minds can sing its tuneless, hate-filled songs to baffled black children almost to the point where blood breaks through the victims' skins, but not quite. Chanted words outside a school being desegregated need draw no blood from their vic-

tims; to be cruel they need only draw from the children's lips the question, "Why do they hate me so much?"

Another important distinction among cruelties is between cruel episodes and institutionalized maiming. A word, a stone can hurt for a moment, but the hurt can fade in time; a persistent, traditional way of degrading human beings, by slavery or by Jim Crow behavior or by genocidal hatred, does not fade in time. It endures beyond the fading moment, so that even its victims sometimes become their own victimizers, sucking their feelings of inferiority or even disgust with themselves with their mothers' milk.

Still, having noticed these distinctions and generalizations, I found myself nagged by the feeling that I had not understood the dynamism of the nightmare. I was classifying, sorting out symptoms; but symptoms are signals, and what were these symptoms signals of? I felt like a person who had been studying cancer by sorting out brief pains from persistent pains, pains in the belly from pains in the head. I was being superficial, because I was not seeing what triggers these various kinds of maimings.

And then one day I was reading *Life and Times*, one of the great autobiographies of western civilization. I came across a passage on the origins of black enslavement, or at least the origins of Douglass's enslavement. He was asking himself: "How can my master keep me enslaved?" Then the answer came to him: "... The right to take my earnings was the right of the robber. He had the power to compel me to give him the fruits of my labor, and this *power* was his only right in the case. . . ." ³ As a slave he was systematically humiliated and used. Where did these indignities come from? On the first day of the year 1836 Douglass found himself thinking: "... My faculties and powers of body and soul are not my own, but are the property of a fellow-mortal in no sense superior to me, except that he has the physical power to compel me to be owned and controlled by him. By the combined physical force of the community I am his slave—a slave for life. . . ." ⁴

There is a difference between the strong and the weak, and

in the process of cruelty that difference is transformed into humiliation and suffering for the weak. Whatever intimacies there may be in the cruel relationship (and love and hatred can be cruel) there is the pathos of distance in it, the feeling of fatal difference. The essay that follows is an attempt to see how power becomes pathos.

—January 1982

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