

“HORROR” AS USED BY JESUS IN THE FORMATION OF HIS DISCIPLES

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In “The Case of M. Valdemar” Edgar Allan Poe imagines a narrator who wants to experiment with hypnotizing a person just before death. A friend, a M. Ernest Valdemar who is dying, agrees to be hypnotized. The hypnotic trance is successfully established. Afterwards, at intervals a few days apart, the hypnotist gets M. Valdemar to answer questions. At first, he talks of being asleep. But one day he says, “I am dead.” After this exchange there is no further evidence of breathing, but the tongue continues to vibrate when asked questions. “Death (or what is usually termed death) had been arrested by the mesmeric process.”

After seven months a decision is made to awaken M. Valdemar. Let Poe tell it:

I am sure that all in the room were prepared to see the patient awaken.

For what really occurred, however, it is quite impossible that any human being could have been prepared.

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of “Dead! Dead!” absolutely bursting from the tongue and from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once within the space of a single minute or less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence.

Poe was hoping that you would feel a loathing, a shuddering, a shiver—elements of the emotion, horror. The Oxford Dictionary defines horror as “the feeling excited by something shocking or frightful.” The hedgehog is in its origins. Horror recalls the standing up of the hair in moments of fear, so obvious in cats. It gets into creeping flesh.

In the Gospels, Jesus is aiming at this effect in some of his images:

“And at his gate there used to be a poor man, . . . covered with sores . . . even dogs came and licked his sores.” (Luke 16:20-21)

"If your eye is your downfall, gouge it out and cast it from you." (Mt 18:9)
 "... thrown into hell where their worm will never die not their fire be put out." (Mk 9:47-48)

Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (I, 7) comments on a passage from *The Iliad* where images are used in a way closely paralleled by Jesus. Aristotle is talking of the greater force that an image has if it goes into detail. Hence Homer says that Meleager was roused to battle by the thought of

All horrors that light on a folk whose city
 is ta'en of their foes,
 When they slaughter the men, when the burg
 is wasted with ravening flame,
 When strangers are haling young children
 to thralldom, fair women to shame.

(*Iliad* ix: 592-4)

Jesus also tried his hand at picturing a city taken by storm:

"For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a
 bank about you and surround you,
 and hem you in on every side,
 and dash you to the ground,
 you and your children within you."

(Lk 19:43-44)

Just as Homer was giving us the motive that Meleager had to make a decision—the decision to fight—so, too, Jesus was using his images to motivate his hearers to make a decision. When Poe used images of horror, he was not out to motivate, but rather to satisfy that desire for the strange pleasure we get from horror-stories. Jesus used horror to get his hearers to make critical decisions.

More in line with the reasons that Jesus had for using such imagery is the use Friedrich Engels made in his great study, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. In that work Engels was hoping to motivate people, to get them to do something. He presented his readers with images designed to horrify them, to make them demand an end to the frightful ways that the poor had been forced to live in the new industrial age.

Much of the book is simple descriptions of what he saw as he walked about in Manchester's less pleasant areas. Here is a typical item:

In one of these courts, right at the entrance where the covered passage ends is a privy without a door. This privy is so dirty that the inhabitants can only enter or leave the court by wading through puddles of stale urine and excrement.

The young Engels was horrified at what he saw. He knew that to get changes made he had to horrify others. The Gospel Jesus used horror in the same way—to get people to change, to make new decisions. The path they were on was leading to destruction. To continue on that path guaranteed a frightful future.

The Gospel Jesus sees himself as bringing on the endtimes. There is an urgency in his preaching. He has a task to do that allows for no delay.

Jesus sees men as rushing to their destruction. Everything is on a knife-edge. It is the last hour. The respite is running out. He unwearyingly points to the threatening nature of the situation. (J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Scribner's, 1971, p. 152).

Jesus lets his imagination play over the details of the catastrophe that is approaching so swiftly. The images he uses are designed to make people experience fear, terror, repugnance, and dread—to horrify them.

Jesus uses two images repeatedly. One is fire, the other darkness. He plants in his hearers' imaginations an image of a "blazing furnace" (Mt 13:42) and warns that people will be thrown into it. A not uncommon nightmare—being burned alive! It is like the mother who threatens to put her son's fingers in the burner's flames if he ever steals again. Over and over again Jesus leads his hearers to imagine being burned, not just in the fingers but throughout the whole body. We are used to the image and perhaps unmoved by it. An artist can make it come alive for us, and terrify us. But the aesthetic distance can soften it, and it is not seen as a threat to us.

But Jesus is trying to break through that distance, that false confidence that, in reality, this is no threat to me. He wants people to realize that their very existence is threatened with a catastrophic future.

The second image Jesus uses often is that of darkness. He threatens his hearers with a future without light. Again like a parent warning the child that if he doesn't change, he will be locked in the closet! And again we are in a nightmare world.

As for the good-for-nothing servant, throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. (Mt 25:30)

Here is a person trying to frighten his hearers, and spending much of his power of imagination in detailing a terrifying future. Had Jesus felt that, while this threat was real, yet it was so remote as to be unlikely, he could have largely ignored it. This is what we do with the

unlikely threat that an airplane will fall on our house. We know airplanes do fall on peoples' houses, but the odds are so high against it that we never take it into account. We act as if it cannot happen.

That same false confidence baffled Jesus. Not only were people threatened by a catastrophic future, but they were blind to it. They were confident that the message was not meant for them.

So Jesus often warns his hearers of how mistaken they are, and how surprised they are going to be. For Jesus, the future of his hearers will be filled with surprises. How carefully he depicts the wealthy man who decides to build bigger barns, and promises himself many years of pleasurable indulgence. Jesus imagines his inner thoughts and portrays so well that confidence in the future that grips the man. And then, the surprise: "Fool! this very night the demand will be made for your soul" (Luke 12:20).

It is like the skull grinning at the banquet that William James talks of. "It cannot happen to me." "It not only can, but it will, . . . unless you change."

The false confidence that Jesus found to be his main block was not a trust in wealth, but an assurance of being safe that sprang from a belonging to the chosen people. To undermine this most deep-rooted source of confidence in their future, Jesus used a device that is sometimes called "reversal." For instance, he deliberately imagines the great judgement day. The moment has arrived when his present hearers are called up to be judged. They are expecting some well-earned praise. Then Jesus imagines a strange interruption. A group of pagans rises up from among the onlookers—Assyrians, as a matter of fact! And their words will bring on condemnation of this generation—despite their membership in the chosen people. "Assyrians, pagans you have never met, rising up and successfully condemning you. That is what awaits you."

In another effort to imagine that great day, Jesus presents the Queen of the South, another pagan, exposing the evil hidden in his hearers. He is even willing to use the most abominable of all images, Sodom and Gomorrah, and he warns them that "it will be more bearable" for them than for those who today refuse to listen to these warnings.

Another very human source of confidence comes from the knowledge that "I was there when it all happened" or "I knew him when." It becomes the occasion for painting a most vivid reversal-scene. Again we are at the judgement. It is the moment when Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah of God. When his contemporaries, "this

generation," those who are actually listening to his words at this moment—when they see themselves being excluded, they will appeal to their closeness to him. "We were there when you came! Have you forgotten how close we were! We're not like these others; we were right there, and we ate and drank in your company! Remember: it was in our streets that you taught" (Luke 13:55ff.).

But they will hear the frightful words: "Away from me, you evildoers!" The cameras continue to roll: a scene of weeping, gnashing of teeth, as they watch with open-eyed disbelief, and "people from east and west, from north and south, will come and sit down at the feast" and they themselves are not let in. "You are headed for a terrible surprise. You who are now first will be last."

This great reversal was, for Aristotle, a crucial element in moving the audience towards the horror that great tragedy hoped to produce. He actually drew up a set of rules designed to help in producing that most intense effect.

First of all, the central character had to be someone we can identify with. Secondly, he had to go from happiness to misery. Thirdly, this reversal had to be brought about by a discovery of something that had been hidden from him. The hero's downfall must not be brought about by overwhelming outside forces. And lastly, the hidden reality is an error he has made in the past, not a depravity.

Aristotle felt that in the finest tragedies "the plot in fact should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents." In their search for effective drama, the dramatists were forced to focus, says Aristotle, on "families in which such horrors have occurred" (*On Poetics*, c. 14).

The scenarios that Jesus imagines are strikingly comparable. He presents to us, for example, the plight of a good man who stayed in his father's house and worked the family fields for many years. This is a person we identify with very easily, a faithful and obedient son. Jesus gives this man a younger brother, a man of consummate selfishness. Jesus describes his selfish indulgence in ways designed to arouse the hearer's contempt.

It is the return of this no-good that sparks the reversal that takes place within the elder brother. He has been in the fields, working away faithfully, and comes home to find that he has been invited to a feast, a welcome-home for his younger brother. The invitation produces in him incomprehension. He tries to make his father understand,

but without success. He becomes most miserable, and it is misery that would only be intensified were he to enter the banquet.

He has discovered that he is not like his father, at the deepest level. He had thought that they shared a common mentality, and now he knows they do not. It was what his life was all about. It was the foundation of the relationship, and of his sense of self. To enter the banquet would be unbearable exposure to a side of his father he has never known, and doesn't want to know now.

But, in contrast with Aristotle, Jesus relates the reversal to a cause in the elder brother's will, not just some error he has made in the past. Long before he came to discover that his father was unbearable to look at and listen to, he had turned his back on his younger brother. That choice of his has led to this misery. When he blinded himself to his brother, he had to ignore the love that his father had for the prodigal, a very deep level of his father's personality. He had imagined his father as other than he really was. Little by little he had come to not enjoy his father. He had come to feel that he had "slaved all these years," but it had been worth it because he was in. Now he is suddenly out. His confidence that he was in had been illusory.

Jesus uses this reversal over and over again. He warns his hearers that they will wake up one day, and find that they had been walking straight towards their own doom. And it would occur when it was too late to turn back! They will find themselves in an alien landscape. Then they will recognize how blind they had made themselves. How their confidence will suddenly be seen as obviously without foundation. What an awful eye-opening!

The cure? "Open your eyes now! Your reasons for confidence are illusory."

The Baptist had put it very clearly: "Do not presume to tell yourselves 'We have Abraham as our father.'" He rolled a hand-grenade at that defense-work. "God can raise children of Abraham from these stones" (Mt 3:9).

It was inevitable that a false confidence would spring up from nearness to the Messiah. Jesus is repeatedly undermining it. Capharnaum was an especially difficult case. "Do you want to be raised high as heaven?" He aims his image with such precision: "You shall be flung down to hell!" (Lk 10:15).

In fact, living at the time of the Messiah will prove to be a disaster for many. Presuming that you are one of the blessed who welcomes that Messiah will lead to a terrible reversal. This generation has the opportunity to be blessed above all, but it brings with it an

unexpected danger—rejecting the Messiah. For those who take part in that rejecting, a future filled with unprecedented evil.

This generation will have to answer for every prophet's blood that has been shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I tell you, this generation will have to answer for it all. (Lk 11: 50-51)

It is a paradox, but as Jesus makes disciples, he is actually providing people with a much greater source of false confidence. It is unavoidable. It forces him to expend much of his energy trying to undo it. Those close to him find it difficult to take the threats of disaster as referring to themselves when he assures them, "To you is granted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom, but to them it is not granted" (Mt 13:11).

How can you feel fear when you hear him say to you, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear. Many prophets . . . longed to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear and never heard it" (Mt 13: 16-17).

How can his disciples not feel secure against the threats when they work miracles? Their call to discipleship quickly becomes a protection against reality. If the disciples are to hear of the catastrophic future that threatens their lives, they must be stripped of all false confidence.

When the day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?'

Jesus is spelling it out so accurately. He reveals the hidden foundations of false confidence. What must it have been like to have your insides laid bare! Then, he aims right at it, to destroy it: "Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, all evildoers!" (Mt 7:22-23).

What a reversal! What a horror should I awake one day to hear those words! It is a fate much worse than that which threatens the crowds, and it is threatening them precisely because of their greater closeness to the Messiah. What could be worse than to hear these words at the judgement!

Let us return briefly to Aristotle. In his terms, we have actually been dealing with the relatively *less* horrible up to now.

"Let us see then what kinds of incident strike one as horrible." (*On Poetics*, c. 14). Aristotle concludes that when the deed is done within the family—brother on brother, son on father, etc.,—that is the height of horror. It is the intimacy that brings the act to the peak of

horror. To find I have accidentally run over an enemy may have little horror in it, but if I accidentally run over my only son—there you have horror.

Oedipus killed his father, but the fact is concealed from him until the end, the moment of awareness. He gouges out his eyes so overcome is he with what he has done.

It is a strange truth, but as we get closer to people, they become more vulnerable to us, and we are given the chance to do enormous evils, evils we cannot inflict on our enemies. Discipleship brings with it a capacity for much more terrible deeds than will ever be available to the crowds.

At the same time, discipleship brings in its wake an assurance that I shall never do anything really terrible, and hides from me the far more frightful future that can so easily be mine.

It was only to the disciples that Jesus said: "One of you is a devil" (John 6:7). Jesus reveals to his apostles, those closest to him, the true path of the Messiah. He trusts them with this awful secret. One of them refuses to accept it as real. He urges Jesus to forget such a depressing possibility. Jesus calls him "Satan!" (Mt 16:23). The assurance that nothing too bad can happen is now being pressed on Jesus by someone in his inner circle. That very assurance—"Nothing really bad can happen to me"—is precisely the reason why Jesus' warnings have had so little effect. And now it is actually pressed upon him by a close disciple. He lashes out. "You have become a tool of Satan!"

It was to Peter also that Jesus spoke this dreadful image: "In his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And *that* is how my Heavenly Father will deal with you" (Mt 18: 34-35).

Jesus here puts together the fatherliness-image, which is central to the good news that he preaches, and the master enraged at the behavior of his servant, enraged to the point of letting torture be applied. The warning is clear: these are one and the same God! In his fatherly bosom, a most dangerous thunderbolt! Unless you become keenly aware of this reality now, you will be stunned at the day of judgement. You will encounter a God you never knew: in place of the indulgent father, an unrelenting stranger with frightening power.

Jesus carves out another most vivid image of warning near the end of his public life. "The disciples came and asked him when they were by themselves, 'Tell us when is this going to happen'" (Mt. 24: 3ff.).

It is in this setting, talking alone with his disciples, that Jesus describes the great judgement in all its glory: "Come, you whom my Father has blessed."

He vividly pictures the scene down to the very words that will be spoken. He produces a script that includes a dialogue in all its threatening detail. Jesus even imagines the words he himself will be saying: "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Could he have created a more terrifying image for his disciples! Here was a will determined to frighten them.

But while the images of being handed over to torturers by the Father, and being cursed by Christ are fear-producing, they can have no real motivating power as long as the disciples feel that these outcomes are unlikely. Jesus has to make his disciples see that this is a very real danger for each of them.

"There is nothing in my life that could possibly lead to such terrible outcomes."

"What of your reluctance to forgive your brother from your heart!" This is the connecting link that Jesus points out to Peter in the parable of the unforgiving debtor. "Unless you forgive your brother from your heart, this image will indeed become your future."

In the judgement scene Jesus will link this terrible future to their present reluctance to feed the poor, to welcome the stranger, to visit those in prison. So much of his time with the disciples is spent in waking them up to those areas of their *present* reality that will, unless checked, lead to these frightful consequences.

Jesus used put-downs on his disciples, and not just occasionally. He had to undercut their sense of confidence if they were to understand the great dangers they were running. So he puts them down. When the centurion describes his faith, Jesus is astonished. He had learned not to expect this kind of faith. "In truth I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this" (Mt 8:10). He must enable them to see how little they are caught up in his words and how much they are like the unbelieving crowds.

On another occasion, when Jesus hears that his disciples could not work a cure, he bursts out: "Faithless and perverse generation! How much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?" (Mt 17:17). They see themselves as responding to him. He sees it otherwise, and he is exasperated that he cannot shake their confidence.

Afterwards the disciples come to him privately: "Why were we unable to drive it out?" Jesus replies: "Because you have so little faith." (Mt 17:19-20).

Then he spells out how very little their faith really is. If it were only the size of a mustard seed, but it's not even that big! It really can't get any smaller without disappearing.

On another occasion he tries to get at the apparently unimportant but actually vital presence of evil within their hearts. "Keep your eyes open; look out for the yeast of the Pharisees" (Mk 8:15). Growing secretly, hidden within you, a potential for terribly evil choices. Search for it. Presume it will be there even when you cannot see it.

But they misinterpret his words, and his exasperation flames out at them: "Do you still not understand, still not realize? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes and do not see? Ears and do not hear?" (Mk 8:17-18). This had been their distinction—that, unlike crowds to whom Jesus had applied this text of Isaiah, the disciples *did* see and hear. But that is no longer the case!

"Do you still not realize?"

It is a tongue-lashing, but it is badly needed. Their unimportant-seeming lives are filled with great potential for good and for evil. Unless they come to faith, all is lost. But he did wonder. "When the Son of man comes, will he find any faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8).

To be standing near when he spoke this way was an invitation to a very strange picture of reality. Those closest to him are in danger of the greatest enormities precisely because of their closeness, and all this is hidden from them, and its likelihood is ignored.

There are those in our day who claim that modern people cannot hear the warnings of Jesus, that our culture makes it impossible for us to take them seriously. The presupposition seems to be that it was quite otherwise in Jesus' day. But in the Gospels nothing is more plain than the reluctance of the disciples to hear what Jesus was saying. He was constantly trying to clear away the false confidence that prevented people from taking his warnings seriously.

This same desire of his is what is behind his warnings to keep any good deeds hidden. Fasting, prayer, almsgiving—all are dangerous! They can be used to assure us that we have nothing to fear. They must be kept hidden even from oneself! Otherwise his warnings will be taken with a grain of salt; his words will be explained away as "typical

Hebraic exaggeration"; his severity will be downplayed; his message will remain unheard.

Jesus knows how shallow their faith in him really is. He knows how, like the faith of the crowds, it is based on evidence, it is not real faith. The evidence for Jesus' authority on which their faith is based is about to be removed. He knows they will be strongly tempted to turn away from him, and be destroyed. What can he do? He can tell them of what will soon be happening, and how all the evidence for his authority is about to be removed. He can urge them to trust in his word and the power of the Father from whom alone true faith comes. He can warn them of the awful outcome of any turning away from him, and he can stress that this danger is much nearer than they imagine.

A most powerful warning is given in yet another depiction of the great judgement: "Anyone who disowns me in the presence of human beings, will be disowned in the presence of God's angels" (Lk 12:9). Jesus will disown the one who disowns him. Again listen to Luke:

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his own glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. (Lk 9:26)

If that happens, I will be ashamed of you. It is a side of him that they must not see at the judgement. Now he warns them: it is indeed a part of me.

What an image for the disciple! A Christ who is ashamed of him! How did they feel as they heard it? They felt it was all rather unreal, unlikely.

After the psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away from me tonight." (Mt 26:30-31)

Instead of a reaction filled with horror, it is rejected outright as unreal. Peter leads the way: "I will never fall away."

It is then that Jesus raises before Peter an even more staggering possibility: "You will disown me three times!" But the warning is rejected. Peter's self-image does not contain that possibility. His denying the Lord is seen as so unlikely as to be unreal and not worth considering, not even worth preparing himself against. The exchange is a cameo of the people's reaction to Jesus' words of warning, a vast confidence that none of this refers to them. Peter insists, "I will lay down my life for you" (John 14:37).

What unbreakable illusion! Jesus replies, "You will lay down your life for me, will you?" It is an invitation into the real world

hidden under that crust. Underneath the apparent grounds for confidence, hidden from Peter's eyes, is his reality—a capacity for cowardice, a likelihood for denying the Lord.

"One of you is about to betray me" (Mt 26:22). This image does shake them. Perhaps the words Jesus used: "Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me will betray me"—call up certain images of being betrayed by an intimate that they know well.

Even my friend who had my trust and partook of my bread, has raised his heel against me. (Ps 41:9)

If an enemy had reviled me, I could have borne it . . . But you, my other self, my companion and my bosom friend! You, whose comradeship I enjoyed; at whose side I walked in procession in the house of God. (Ps 55:12-14)

Here is *the* most horrifying—the betrayal of the long-desired Messiah by one of the closest to him. We are used to it, but to the disciples it was unnerving. There is not an immediate rejection, but a questioning, "Is it I, Lord?" "Surely not." And, then, a throwing it aside. We have Peter's words, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." (Mt 26:35) And all the disciples said the same.

Towards the end of the supper, when they affirm their faith in him, he will give them the same warning.

"We believe that you come from God." Jesus answered them, "Do you believe at last?" (Jn 16:31)

And then this warning:

"Listen; the time will come—indeed it has come already—when you are going to be scattered, each going his own way and leaving me alone."

It is their very closeness that makes them risk betraying him. It is only those close to us who can wound us at the deepest levels. An awareness that I can betray him is a sign of *intimacy*.

When in his *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius seeks to help the retreatant to enter into the experience of shame, he suggests a very similar image.

Of a knight brought before his king and the whole court, filled with shame and confusion for having grievously offended his lord from whom he had formerly received many gifts and favors.

(First Week: Additional Directions)

It is only by an openness to reality that we can glimpse the knife-edge on which our human life is poised. How crucial are our free choices. There is a glory and a catastrophe hidden within the humdrum

realities and the human relationships. The greatest intimacy with God and betraying him—one of them is our future.

The saints explored this world and were most familiar with it. Ever-present to them was the monstrous possibility. As that most happy saint, Philip Neri, prayed, "Lord, do not trust Philip, for he will betray you."