



2017

## Anthony Daniels, Good and Evil in the Garden of Art: Discrimination as the Guarantor of Civilization

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### Recommended Citation

Vaughan, G. M. (2017). Anthony Daniels, Good and Evil in the Garden of Art: Discrimination as the Guarantor of Civilization. *Society* 54(4): 375-376. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0156-3>

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Anthony Daniels, *Good and Evil in the Garden of Art: Discrimination as the Guarantor of Civilization*

New York: Criterion Books, 2016. 267 pages, \$20.00. ISBN-978-0985905248

Geoffrey M. Vaughan

This book is a collection of essays from *The New Criterion*, dating from 1999 to 2013, all by Anthony Daniels, a doctor and psychiatrist. Anyone familiar with his work under this or his pen name, Theodore Dalrymple, will be pleased to find him writing at his best. While the subjects range widely over literature, the visual arts and architecture, each is a gem in the ubiquitous but rarely well-executed form of the essay. Both informative and personal, the author is deeply humane, even with the limitations that implies.

In this journey through the garden of art, Daniels acts as a modern day Virgil, a personal guide through the Hell and Purgatory of contemporary culture from the astonishingly low to the unsuccessfully high. But just like Dante's guide, ours cannot take us into Paradise. Daniels may suffer the curse of medical training, spotting disease rather than health. Or he may simply be faced with Dante's own challenge, that of making the good and beautiful appear interesting. Regardless, on this tour of the garden we see far more of the evil than we do of the good.

The book is divided into three sections, the largest by far being devoted to literature. The other two, on "Art" and "Miscellaneous Pieces," do not come up to the length of the first section. Nor are they as successful. Literature allows Daniels to do what he does best, describe the pathologies of the modern world with brio. The first essay, ostensibly about H.G. Well's *Time Machine* sets up a most disturbing but plausible analogy.

The essay opens with a description of a concert in an English city. We know only that it is not London, although this matters little. The important point is the vast chasm separating the

concert goers from the young people out on the streets, beginning their nightly ritual of public drunkenness just as their elders flee the streets for the safety of their homes. Anyone without direct experience of the nightly havoc in English city centers must want to choose between which is least credible, the stories people tell or the complacency of the city officials. Daniels brings life to both by comparing them to Wells' novel.

That Daniels should be reminded of the Morlocks—those future descendants of the English working class, subterranean, violent and cannibalistic—when stepping outside the concert hall is not surprising. It is certainly not novel. It is his attention to concert-goers as Eloi, however, that is arresting. The Eloi, Wells imagined, will be the descendants of the upper classes and, by the time the Traveler encounters them, they are timid, naïve little creatures with no capacity and barely any instinct for self-preservation. Daniels, not Wells, describes the encounter between the two groups: “Outside the concert hall, the audience entered a different, alien, and hostile world, one in which untold thousands of young people, dressed with a voluntary uniformity, paraded themselves, raucous, drunken, exhibitionist, and volatile.”

(“Voluntary uniformity” is one of those observations that makes Daniels such a pleasure to read.) He continues, “The audience shrank away and scurried home, in an effort not to be noticed by these young creatures of ostensibly the same species as themselves; they feared to be preyed upon by them.”

H.G. Wells' book is an instance in which literature provides Daniels an opportunity to understand the world. The next chapter on Robert Louis Stephenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and a later one on Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* look at the way literature can cause us to misunderstand ourselves and the world around us. Daniels, as a prison doctor, met many people who claimed to be nice, respectable Dr. Jekylls who, but for the

influence of alcohol or drugs, would never commit a crime. Often their victims, when they were their lovers, would understand them the same way, that is, as essentially good people who only accidentally turn bad when forced to do so by some chemicals. “It is curious,” writes Daniels, “how a work of literature such as Stephenson’s *Strange Case* should have supplied a universal metaphor, and yet one that is almost always used in a sense precisely the opposite of the meaning that a deeper consideration of the story itself might suggest.” Stephenson’s point was that evil is not alien to us, something repulsive and introduced from outside. It is something we can indulge in and increasingly do as it becomes habitual. Yet the violent acts of the prisoners Daniels has met with over the years are excused away by this handy trope that, when misunderstood, obscures a proper analysis of the self.

Similarly, Butler’s autobiographical novel has perverted the common understanding of the family, both historical and our own. “Although *The Way of All Flesh* is a fictionalized (allegedly but slightly fictionalized) account of one man’s relationship with his father, we are clearly intended to take it as being in some way typical or at least emblematic of a whole society and its way of life.” Two problems arise, according to Daniels. Firstly, the oppressive household of the protagonist is taken to be characteristic of all Victorian homes, even though evidence internal to the book says that this was not the case. And secondly an “unhappy childhood and tortured relations with one’s progenitors were essential preconditions of a reputation for profundity.” Although he acknowledges that Butler is not uniquely and solely responsible for it, in some large way his novel did contribute in a significant way to changing filial piety from a virtue to “at least a character defect or a handicap in human life’s constant race for self-improvement.”

In the one case, Stephenson's novel is misunderstood and used to exculpate when it was intended to accuse. In the other, Butler's is understood perhaps too well and has become, itself, an excuse for what Daniels describes as "misery in the midst of plenty." In the essay on Stephenson he suggests that, perhaps, "no knowledge of literature is better than a misunderstanding of it." When one author is misunderstood, the effects are bad, but when one is rightly understood the result is the same. What might good literature do to make it so good or at least not misunderstood? Here our Virgil must abandon us for he cannot go further, or he chooses not to do so. These two essays were written in subsequent years, yet the juxtaposition did not seem to make an impression on their author.

The last two sections of the book are, as has been said, less successful than the section on literature. This is not so much for lack of insight as it is because the material does not seem to afford the author as much scope for (entirely warranted) grumbling. For example, an essay on the playwright Harold Pinter allows him to describe the dominant social trends of the last fifty or more years as, "a coarsening of sensibility, the triumph of irrationalism, a skepticism about the inability of the human mind to order experience, a loss of faith in the ability of language to deliver meaning, a belief that only relations of power are real and all else is illusion, a slide into intellectual dishonesty and attitudinizing, and a tolerance of psychopathy." That is not to say the essays are without insight. In a discussion of still life paintings he suggests that, in a world of unprecedented material abundance as we now have, the sublimity of the perfect bunch of grapes is lost on us. We can eat them at any time, in any season. That familiarity dulls our ability to look closely, not only at art, but at the world. Thus modern people are "driven by their lack of powers of contemplation to seek brute sensation." These are the Morlocks we began with.

Some readers may find Anthony Daniel's relentless observations of modern social pathologies tiresome. This reviewer did not. Others might find them haughty or elitist. That would be a mistake. He knows more intimately the underside of modern culture than anyone likely to read this book. He could have moved out of prison work to find more genteel clients, where there is no shortage of work for a psychiatrist. But he did not. Instead, he worked with patients most of us hope never to encounter. We may find his judgement of the Morlocks harsh, but he does not spare his judgement of the Eloi: "It is the privilege of the privileged to revolt against their privilege."

Geoffrey M. Vaughan is Associate Professor of Political Science at Assumption College, Worcester, MA. He is author of *Behemoth Teaches Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Political Education* and is completing a book on becoming an American citizen.

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