

The Vapidity of Evil

“The Evil Child” is the title of a story by Susanna Piontek, in which a little girl, to the horror of her mother, kills her pet guinea pig. Little by little we learn the reason for the bloody deed. The guinea pig was the means by which the older brother blackmailed his sister, in order to continue molesting her with his sexual phantasies. His impulse has shifted from the weak brother to the still weaker sister. The epidemic characteristic of evil becomes visible through a seemingly trifling event.

The precipitous obedience of the girl turns out to be meaningless, even counter-productive. Her brother, deprived of his means of pressuring her, now threatens to kill their Grandma, in case his little sister does not continue keeping quiet about his nocturnal visits to her room. We aren't entirely certain, whether he would be able to follow through with it. On the other hand, what would hinder him? Where would the scruples come from which would prevent him from carrying out his threat? That decalogue has largely disappeared from general consciousness.

The strength of Susanna Piontek's texts lies in these messages which are hidden in her everyday stories. Crime scenes children's room, TV couch, dentist's chair. At these respectable locations skullduggeries, deception, in some instances, murder are planned and carried out. Human beings interpret their lives as an experiment. How far do they dare to go? Imperceptibly the figures drift into yesterday's forbidden territories which have become perhaps feasible today. Surreptitiously they cross the thin borderline between normality and crime. For their part, they can be manipulated, being not quite conscious in a TV-induced trance, or under the influence of consciousness-changing drugs. In the spell of an outer-directed hedonism they stop at nothing in their struggle to gain an advantage, money, pleasure and so called “fun”.

For that reason adultery, anonymous letters, secret spying, blackmail and intrigues make up the lives of these little Machiavellis. A young woman, good-looking, but poor, has specialized in marrying well-to-do-men, who have serious cardiac diseases. A physician friend of hers tops her off. She seduces them to participate in pleasures deleterious to their health, buries and inherits them. What she does is not illegal. She looks upon human beings from a perspective quite customary today: as consumer goods, as expendable.

Frequently Piontek's stories end in amazing points. The well-groomed old gentleman, who tries to make the acquaintance of solitary ladies in coffee-houses could, at first glance, be a lonely man looking for a partner. But there is something about him that makes one distrustful: something calculating, lurking. With much narrative skill, little by little, Piontek introduces small suspicious arousing clues. We suspect that he is a not quite trustworthy human being, somehow out on a hunt for booty, a confidence man, a marriage-impostor. Towards the end we are pretty sure that he is a marriage-impostor. Again he addresses an elderly woman, joins her at her table, ensnares her, asks, whether they had not encountered each other before, but is increasingly irritated by the strange horror with which she stares at him. Until he sees, to his own dismay, the engraved prisoner's number on her lower arm. Yes, we have met before, the woman whispers. She has recognized in him the former overseer of a concentration camp.

The monstrous, Piontek finds, originates from scarcely perceptible nuances, minute decisions, frequently only as a result of weakness, half-heartedness, of letting things take their course. The readiness for committing crimes is embedded in us. It is a matter of inner resistance whether we succumb to it or not. Where such resistance does not exist, where humane misgivings remain undeveloped, scruples have been abandoned, mercifulness and

compassion have atrophied, criminality has to become the everyday pattern of life. It is the visible outside of a prior internal desolation.

When Hannah Arendt, in the context of Eichmann, spoke of the “banality of evil”, Piontek’s stories approach the thesis that evil is even more trifling, it is vacuous. To be sure, its effects are often monstrous and alarming. But when one seeks out its underlying impulse, its motivations, its origins, one grasps at nothing. Susanna Piontek’s figures – even when they threaten or destroy the lives of other people – are barely conscious of what they are doing, don’t know why they are doing it. In the wake of the spontaneous laughter which some of the stories evoke, shock often follows. Susanna Piontek addresses herself to those who still know that feeling, to those who don’t consider the apparent triumph of mercilessness as the ultima ratio, to those who don’t admire the swindling, deceiving, despoiling of one another, which is at home in these bedrooms, armchair corners and offices.

The author herself belongs to those who are unimpressed. She tells the grotesque events in her stories at times in a humorous, at times in a detached tone, which does not immediately expose the nature of her characters. They start out as normal, decidedly average people and only gradually do they ensnare themselves in passions, cravings, transgressions. The human beings, not the events stand in the center. Even though the stories are exiting, surprising, suspenseful, they are not being told for their own sake, but for the sake of the human beings, on whom the author expands her sympathy.

This sympathy makes the stories of Susanna Piontek unforgettable. Even when her figures reveal nothing but aggression, egoism, hollowness, the storyteller bestows on them her compassion. The presumed victors are, in truth, losers. The reverse of the fun-loving society is its mercilessness. All too late the laughing, self-assured people will understand, that in the end all of us need help, sympathy and love. Susanna Piontek’s stories strike a basic humane basic tone, a rather sad admonition to a humaneness under increasingly absurd circumstances that neglects human beings. It is, I feel, the best soil in which literature can flourish.

(c) German original: Chaim Noll, 2006

Susanna Piontek: *Rühlings Erwachen und andere Geschichten*. Verlag für Berlin und Brandenburg, 2005

Note: This review refers to the German version of Piontek’s collection of short stories [Have We Possibly Met Before? And Other Short Stories](#).