

What is Left of the Angel?

Rafael Argullol

I doubt whether the word *terror* has been repeated more often in the press than now, at the start of this millennium. If archeologists in the distant – and hypothetical – future take the trouble to search through the archives of our times, their conclusions will probably be extremely sombre for that word is used so much, suggesting both the utmost fear gripping human beings in particular circumstances and the brutal escalation of their capacity for destruction. In the end, those future archeologists would be able to deduce that we were terrorized and lived in the grip of terrifying forces.

As we lack the distance those archeologists studying us may have, we run the risk of falling into the confusing trap created by constant repetition of the word *terror*. Contrary to the limited use made of it until now (historians talk, for example, about the Millennium Terror of the year 1000 or the Terror in Robespierre's France), *terror* is casting its shadow in every direction at the beginning of this century. The dark cloud has unleashed its deadly cargo over New York, Madrid, London, Bali, New Delhi and Amman, and the bodies dropping in the streets of Baghdad are no longer being counted. It is also the same cloud we recognize in the storm that recently gripped the rundown estates of the Paris suburbs. We have got used to pockets infected by *terror*, from the Basque country to Chechnya, in Europe alone. We give that *terror* – sectarian, fanatical, nihilistic – the label 'terrorism'.

Of course the advent of this millennium has seen many other unforgettable manifestations of *terror*. The bombing of defenceless towns in the context of unequal wars is just as much a manifestation of *terror* as an occupying army pushing a civil population towards collective disarray. Particularly sombre – a shadow in the shadow, so to speak – is the concealed *terror* aroused by torture, whose images will probably figure among the most agonizing our hypothetical archeologists will have to look at. Even more likely to take them aback is the sight – which we have not yet been allowed to judge – of that handful of *imaginary prisons* our contemporaries are said to have dug in the basements of the world to interrogate their opponents. For

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that *terror* there is no straightforward expression, even though some also refuse to see in it anything other than terrorism.

Those who think words are the reflection of feelings would say that the 21st century is off to a bad start. For if the archeologists – or anthropologists or entomologists – of the future, who are not satisfied with the information in the press, were to undertake a genealogical analysis of our *terror*, they would find out how far we have conflated matrices of destruction which in the past would have seemed quite distinct.

Traditionally, for all cultures, human beings' *terror* was based in God or the gods, in nature and in humanity itself. God would punish humans or threaten them with punishment in order to instil the fear needed to shake their self-sufficiency or their claims to equality with the divine. Each mythology contains a version of this ancestral nightmare, which related to the vision of the divine. Nature, for its part, while pulling the strings of life as far as possible – sickness, old age, death – would from time to time spread terror with its cataclysms and disasters. And finally wars controlled the *terror* human beings shared. The whole history of human fear could be explained by those alternating matrices of suffering.

Now we find ourselves disoriented about that alternation. Hitherto we thought that God had left the scene and that, even if we had not entirely domesticated nature, technology was opening up generous prospects in that direction. And as regards war, had the fall of the Berlin Wall not given us the illusion of *perpetual peace*? The 20th century drew to a close on somewhat fragile convictions, but convictions nevertheless.

A few years later everything seems to have been turned upside down in the grip of *terror* and the new confusion it creates. The muddling of images is becoming obscene. I remember that at the time of the great *tsunami* catastrophe religious interpretations of the earthquake were outrageous in the extreme, while the technocratic ones, coming from those who appeared almost offended by nature's unexpected intrusion into a world domesticated by technology, were utterly pathetic.

Faced with a disaster of that magnitude, those sorts of interpretations create quite a crude caricature of the delicate balance between human dignity and fragility. Nonetheless it is a fairly representative caricature of the historical moment we are living through, impregnated as it is by a tragic phantasmagoria of *terror* in which some disproportionate figures are randomly mixed together: the Islamist fanatic committing suicide and taking with him on his journey to paradise a procession of corpses; the sordid sectarian who thinks anything is justified in the name of the nation; the pilot who bombs towns thinking he's having fun with a video game; leaders who claim to have a hotline to God; the bureaucrat who tinkers with documents about destruction to justify yet more destruction; the soldier who is holding the nonexistent prisoner in the secret jail and wielding, poor devil, the power of a god or nature.

Scanning this landscape our future archeologists will probably notice the conspicuous absence of a word likely to act as an antidote to the ubiquitous *terror*. And a word would be needed – that is, a form of behaviour – to express resistance to the brutality and confusing processes of the different kinds of terrorism. There are words that partly express that resistance: *resolution*, *strength*, *conviction*. But the truly

effective word would be one that could accept, within a single measure, all the particular demands of power, economics or religion, that could reconcile generosity and firmness, strength and freedom of mind.

Though the last century's revolutionary splendours are already long gone, the word most likely to meet with a wide consensus today might be *dignity*. How can we not trust dignity as armour against the spears of *terror*? Various traditions, cultures and religions come together on this point and it is certainly the most frequently recurring term in the 'codes of good intentions', that is, our Universal Declaration of Human Rights or various communities' constitutions.

The problem is that the word *dignity* – like every significant word – easily feeds into rhetoric and grandiloquence, and we often forget that, beyond the 'morally appropriate', it invokes a risky wager and a commitment of the will which are hard to fit with the general conformism. When the humanist Pico della Mirandola tried to define what *dignity* was (*Oratio de hominis dignitate*), he insisted that people had to choose, by exercising their freedom, between elevation and degradation, between the angel and the beast:

We have placed you at the centre of the world so that, from there, you can more easily observe the things in it. We have not created you from heaven or earth; neither immortal nor mortal, so that, by your free will, as if you were creator of your own mould, you might choose to shape yourself in the way you prefer. By your power you can degenerate, assume the lowest forms of life, which are animal. By your power, and with your soul's discernment, you can be reborn into the highest forms, which are divine.

The puzzled archeologists of the future will then only have to conclude that the disorientation that typified the start of the 21st century proceeded from the fact that human beings at this time had a clear, even exaggerated, image of the beast. But they had no idea what might have become of the angel.

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