



On Rereading *The Exorcist*

[Martin Rosenstock](#)

And he carried away all Jerusalem,
and all the princes, and all the mighty
men of valour
2 Kings 24:14

I was fourteen, maybe fifteen when I first read Blatty's novel. One evening I pulled it from my parents' tightly packed bookshelf and disappeared into my room. We don't pick our reading material at random. Probably I'd heard someone talk about the book. Or I'd read a movie blurb in the TV mag, and now I wanted to prove to myself that I could handle 'the scariest story ever told.' Or the Catholicism appealed to me – I was attending a Catholic school at the time, some of my teachers were nuns.

Since then I've read many books, scary ones too. I've become a professional reader of sorts. Holding that old, pre-King, pre-Barker horror story in my hands, a phrase popped into my mind: to understand what touches us. A mantra of literary critics. *The Exorcist* had certainly touched me back in my teenage years. It had touched me the way Mike Tyson's jab used to touch his opponent's chin. I finished the book sometime around 4am. The rest of the night I paced my room, waiting for the sun to rise.

Some years later I watched the movie. My psyche had grown some calluses in the meantime, but Chris MacNeil's harried face, Regan's leer, the priests speaking the lines of the Roman ritual by the bedside have been snapshot memories ever since. Looking down, I realized the book had stayed with me through many moves. I had never returned it to my parents' bookshelf. The story had been waiting to shoulder its way back into my consciousness.

Well, I thought now after years in grad school, it's an uncanny tale, in the best Freudian sense. The return of the repressed, of the supernatural and occult. Effective, no doubt, but conceptually simple. Was that really all there was to *The Exorcist*? An instance of a hundred-year old concept, whether or not a conscious play by Blatty was of little importance. Maybe I ought to read the book again. And so I did.

This time I didn't finish it in one sitting. I finished it over a weekend. This time I could switch off the light, but I did lose sleep. Not through fear, though there was

certainly unease. My thoughts kept me up. The story had caused a cramp in my brain. But why? Why does this novel *touch* me?

What can get overlooked amidst the green vomit, levitating bed, and a head making a 180, *The Exorcist* is a detective story, sort of. One rule of a detective story: the reader mustn't know more than the detective. Where would the fun be otherwise? Where would you get the ego boost of beating Sherlock to the finish line if he didn't stand a chance? You'd feel sorry for the guy. Well, Inspector Kinderman doesn't stand a chance. We are way ahead of him, and yes, we feel sorry for the guy.

"See, it's not a detective story," a friend of mine said. "Just a story *with* a detective. It's about the exorcism of a little girl possessed by a Babylonian demon." "True," I answered, "that's the drama." But the struggle for Regan's soul did not give rise to the feeling that all along I'd missed a sad truth about the record of human activity. That sense came from a space defined by the intellect. "How about this?" I said. "It's a detective story without faith in the detective."

Let's backtrack for a moment, to the beginning of documented time. That's where the novel gets underway. A priest-cum-archeologist excavating in the rubble of the original Bible Belt gives Evil some new ideas. The land Abraham left to make his voyage westward, the place of origin, the place where it all began, is also where *The Exorcist* begins. And then we jump cut, from the cradle of civilization, from the HQ of the ur-super power, to D.C., the hub of western power in the late twentieth century. Evil was present at the beginning, it's still present today.

But is Evil the only constant? Has nothing else lasted? Christianity hasn't been around so long. Father Merrin, the grizzled, world-wandering man of God, is digging his way into a past that antecedes his faith by centuries. Who else was present at the beginning? Who, despite everything, has endured the span of western history? Only the children of Abraham. They survived slavery in the demon's homeland, they survived many more trials in the intervening millennia, they have proven more enduring than dynasties, empires, and civilizations, all of which the wheel of time has ground into dust.

It is no coincidence that the detective in *The Exorcist* is a Jew. It is also no coincidence that the last three items on the list of atrocities Blatty chose as epigraphs are sites of the Holocaust. Joseph Goebbels once said that if he and his kind were ever compelled to leave the scene of history, they would slam the door so hard that the universe would shake and mankind stand back in stupefaction. Not many good things to be said about Dr. Goebbels, but he had a way with words. Our universe is still shaking – vibrating, at the least – after all these years.

Inspector Kinderman, like Holmes and Miss Marple, embodies things we like to believe. That if we put our mind to a problem, we can solve it. That applied rationality will mend the ills of society, save the innocent, reward the good, punish the bad, and make the world a better place. It's Pop-Enlightenment, our Kantian inheritance, the cherished notion of progress. During his first conversation with Father Karras the detective calls himself the "walking Age of Reason."

By the novel's end the walking Age of Reason knows the truth. But his knowledge is useless, not to say impotent. Karras and Merrin, proponents of a different world view, are the ones who must do battle with the demon. Reason might be sufficient to contend with what is bad in the world. But to face down Evil requires power of a different kind.

Yet the price of success is the lives of both priests. Good and Evil fight each other to a standstill, and for a moment there is peace so that Kinderman can finally go to the movies. Some might take comfort in this resolution. Evil has once again been contained, and perhaps Blatty intended this to be an upbeat ending – who knows? But I only breathe a small sigh of relief at Regan's deliverance. This was the second time Merrin exorcised Pazuzu, another priest will again have to struggle with the demon in the future. The prologue opened the vista of all history: this was only a subplot in an endless narrative. The face of Evil laughs at Enlightenment optimism. All we can hope for is to survive, like the deceptively shleppy Inspector, whose people have been surviving from the beginning. But we cannot win, cannot beat the devil, not for good.

Is this the direction from which the blow to my teenage psyche came? The sense of perpetuity, that in the best of circumstances all we can pull off is not to lose. That humankind has made no progress against Evil, and never will. The notion seems a little abstract for early adolescence. Maybe it was simply the demon's monstrous sexuality that shocked my virgin self. But then again, sometimes we lack the words for the things we know. What touched me then is irretrievable, but perhaps I've learned to understand what touches me when I reread the novel today.