

The greatcoat

Professor Morganti and I met at a symposium on neurobiology and the physics of complex systems. I was there to listen and, equipped with a good deal of confidence, to learn. I succeeded in the former quest. As for the latter, however, I am afraid that my comprehension of the universe is doomed to remain irredeemably romantic and impressionistic. After the conference I approached Morganti, exploiting the moment he managed to dodge the crowd of scientists, eager doctoral students and researchers that had overwhelmed him with questions and inquiries all day, as if he were an oracle. His presence at such a conference was a sensation, indeed, for Morganti was and remains a bright light in the night of ignorance. To him, in fact, we owe the quantum modelling of learning processes. Actually, I felt attracted to this peculiar man by some invisible halo that circumfused him and feebly flickered before my inner eyes like a faraway lamp in a misty night. I remember his restless expression, haunted by some torment that resounded in his quiet voice. He was a brilliant and generous talker, and not five minutes later we had already decided to desert the boring conference dinner and go, instead, the two of us, to a pub I had noticed the day before, from which came a delicious smell of food.

At dinner we first talked about futile things, then travels, and finally, science. I realised that something upset my guest, without affecting the polished precision of his arguments. We

asked for two glasses of scotch and went on chatting. As the hours passed and the pub grew quieter, our conversation began to veer toward an unexpected topic. Morganti expounded on some ideas he had about the academic world, and although he remained reticent nor did he say who, where or when, he implied he had seen evil grow like a disease in the human soul. I certainly had no reason to disagree, although I couldn't get Morganti's point. He had ventured on a path that diverted him from any orthodox consideration of the state of affairs in the material world. He was talking about evil, quoting books and articles, philosophers and theologians, and I must confess that I started to find it quite hard to follow his arguments. I could see he had read about and thoroughly investigated the topic, looking for answers in art and literature, but nowhere had he found a formula or definition of evil capable of satisfying him. Experience and study, however, had convinced him about a upsetting truth, that is, that evil may be a kind of immaterial substance capable of passing from one living being to another, assuming from time to time the most diverse forms and adapting to its host just like a virus. Of course, Morganti did not believe in the devil and hoey alike. Evil, to him, was no intelligent entity. By drawing from his scientific collection of concepts and figures, he described evil as a force that "propagates itself" from one soul to another under given circumstances. Morganti tried to produce metaphors as precise as fascinating. He kept on repeating that with the appropriate instruments he would observe evil in physical terms for the first time ever, thus starting the greatest revolution in human history. However,

this was just utopia like time travel and teleportation. Some things exist, he said almost with sadness, only because we have imagined them and succeeded in fitting them perfectly into possible worlds that we might never see. What else could I do but nod to his words, raising my glass for a solemn toast?

«Wicked people – he said leaning toward me – can infect their fellow human beings through their actions and words, or bad examples, by polluting their thoughts and favouring the development of negative and obnoxious emotions and feelings, to the detriment of happy and friendly thoughts.»

Similarly, he believed that there are places in the world that have the faculty of dampening the spirit of good people without any apparent reason, so he said with a sombre expression:

«Imagine someone strolling in the countryside in the warm sunshine of a mid-spring morning, yet ignoring that this very piece of ground was once a battlefield or a place where gallows rose and the bodies of murdered innocents were buried in mass graves. Suddenly, the wanderer feels oppressed by anguish and all the gay thoughts that one second before flew out in the form of a hummed melody now sink under gloomy feelings and inexplicable unhappiness. Evil haunts the air like malaria in a swamp, it saturates the earth and everything there, it pierces the nostrils and penetrates through the pores into the skin, blending with the blood and reaching heart and brain, like a toxin.»

I contributed to our exchange of ideas by considering the medical aspects – so to say – of the matter. I said that a body, if contaminated, can get sick, decay and eventually die. I also

explained that the mind can resist pathogens much longer than the body, trying innumerable remedies to fight infections:

«Several neuroses we can observe in people are nothing but the iceberg's tip. The mind can endure the most extraordinary strain to withstand pain, fear and anguish. Sometimes, it twists itself so intolerably that it winds up unleashing that disorder which is commonly referred to as madness. The mind wastes away and dies, in the long run, if exposed to excessive contamination.»

Morganti listened and nodded:

«It is like mixing the water of a mountain stream with a sewer», he said. «At the mound, the water will irredeemably result polluted, no matter how clear and pure it was at the spring. Evil transits, as it were, from one soul to another in a way that is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to describe.»

Morganti believed that one day scientists will discover the physical nature of evil and learn how to fight and vanquish it like pox or polio. In the end, I asked him why he had come to such a peculiar theory, teleologically compelling, albeit scientifically indemonstrable. He had expounded it with many arguments and not without passion and eloquence, and yet one aspect remained unexplained: how can evil pass from one host to another as if it were a material substance or a virus?

«I don't know», he replied shaking his head. «Nonetheless, I saw it happen.»

He must have caught a glimpse of doubt in my glance, but because I was more curious than perplexed, I begged him to continue. And thus, he told me this story.

* * *

Several years ago, we were in the early 2000s, I was invited to the United States through a Visiting Professorship programme. The labs were on a campus built in the middle of a forest, a few miles south of V. The canteen, the Student Union and the sporting grounds were all that I could afford without driving for twenty miles. Of course, this was the ideal condition to focus on my job. At the Union, I came across Frank, a shy young man gifted with extraordinary imagination, who had a sense of humour, too, subtle and somewhat macabre. The other students avoided him because he spoke very little and never looked you in the eyes. However, if you managed to penetrate that cocoon of silence, you would discover an extraordinary wealth of ideas and feelings as I rarely happened to find in other human beings. Frank was an antenna. He could catch the slightest change in other people's mood, like an animal, and this ability, perhaps, made others uncomfortable more than anything else. He never asked for others' approval. He believed in his ideas and passed over the rest in silence, and when you engaged him in a conversation you had the impression that he wasn't really talking to you but to some intangible – and mysterious – version of you that existed unnoticed in another dimension.

His ideas were surely uncommon on the horizon of the young Americans of his age: philosophical and poetic, almost mystical ideas, I dare say, which he obviously could not share with his fellow students. Can you guess what his favourite place was? The old cemetery in R. This was a depopulated hamlet connected to the campus by a white road through the woods. There, the roots of the trees ran deep beneath the graves. Down there, Frank said, life had got rid of all vanity. And then, there was the Great River with its marshes. Frank spoke about them almost whispering. The murky water had a depressing effect on me, and the smell of putrefaction disgusted me. The vegetation disturbed me more than everything else, with those trees growing under the water, those crawlers hanging like beards from the boughs, and the smell. There, on the contrary, Frank perceived the presence of the sacred:

«Water washes everything away – he always said –, it transforms and regenerates. The river and the swamp are the father and mother of all things. On their quiet surface the earth mixes with the sky. In their depth, slumber the mysteries of life and death.»

He claimed that pain and suffering are essential to life, a flaw we must accept. Instead, evil upset him. He said this is a human creation, for nature is incapable of evil. Thus, we became friends and willy-nilly a sensation all over the campus, where the students called us *Moody & Loony*. Frank did nothing to disavow such a reputation. Not content with his odd asocial manners, he also showed the utmost peculiar fondness for military uniforms, a remarkable collection of

which he had put together from flea markets and wore with exceptional straightforwardness, remaining indifferent to laughter and mocking. I can still remember that old and worn-out battle jacket of his, which once belonged to a veteran of the Second World War. Frank had bought it for a few dollars in a vintage shop and loved it. That he was a conscientious objector and a pacifist only made his strange passion for military uniforms more mysterious.

When I learned that his birthday was approaching, I decided to present him with something special. It took some time, but I eventually found a very rare article in Nashville. When I spotted it, hidden in the back of a dusty vintage shop, I almost could see it on the shoulders of my friend. It was a Confederate greatcoat in perfect condition and miraculously preserved. Close-fitted and double-breasted, it was completed by a cape covering shoulders and arms down to the elbow. At first, I suspected it might be a replica, but the internal markings did not lie, it was authentic. It cost me a fortune, but I didn't mind. It was for Frank.

When he unwrapped the packet, I saw his face crack into a happy, luminous smile that made me feel warm inside. The greatcoat perfectly fitted him as though it had been tailored on his slender shoulders. Its pale grey palette matched his complexion, and the golden buttons exalted the deep blue of his eyes.

All this happened at the end of October. My job, in the meantime, got stuck and my experiments were not giving the expected results. There must have been something wrong in my math, so I had to check it all over again, and this kept me

secluded in my office most of the time. I didn't see Frank for a few weeks, and when I came back from a conference in Chicago I noticed a strange look on his face. He had become even more silent than usual and his hair was wild and uncombed. He had also taken up smoking and looked as though he had not slept a wink for days. I invited him for a drink and as soon as we sat at the table in the cafeteria, he sighed deeply. He never took off his coat and I could catch the sarcastic glances of the other students. Staring at an indefinite spot on the table, he began to tell me about an odd dream he had had every night for some days, always the same. In the dream, he was standing in the middle of a cotton field under a grey sky. From afar, a sad and monotonous chant could be heard, mixed with a metallic tinkling. The wind brought painful cries and the cracking sounds of whips. And suddenly, he felt like he was sinking. He looked down at his feet and saw them shod in knee-high, dark leather boots. Both his legs were sinking into a dark puddle of blood. The dream upset him profoundly, and I found it unsettling too. I tried to interpret the strange symbols of his nightly vision, but nothing came to my mind. I instead succeeded in distracting him with a few funny anecdotes about my trip to Chicago, and we ate a pizza. He seemed a little relieved, but when I left him before his door, that strange melancholy expression had returned on his face.

The weather turned gloomy. One day, as I was driving to Port Gibson through the woods, I glimpsed for a second a strange shape among the trees, so I pulled over and got out of my car to have a closer look. As I got nearer, I realized it was

Frank's coat hanging from a tangle of branches. I was staring at the thing in bewilderment, when Frank suddenly stepped out of the shadows, making me jump:

«Jesus Christ! You scared me», I shouted. «What the hell were you doing?»

«Nothing», he answered flatly. «I saw something and wanted to check it out.»

«Why on Earth have you hanged your coat like that?», I whimpered in exasperation.

«I didn't want the thorns to tear it.»

«Well, let me tell you, that thing looks pretty weird from the road. If a patrol had passed by instead of me, you'd be in trouble now, buddy. What did you see, by the way?»

Frank didn't answer me and looked away. I noticed there was some dirt under his nails and his hands shook a little.

«Come on, I'll drive you back», I said.

«No thanks, I'll walk.»

«You sure? It's some miles.»

«I'm ok.»

That being said, he put on his coat, lit a cigarette and walked away along the road. I stood there stunned, watching him until he disappeared. As if he knew I was watching him, he raised his bony hand and waved without turning back. In the damp twilight, the sight of my friend clad in that grey coat was ghastly. For the first time, I regretted having given him that thing.

Frank made himself scarce and missed not a few classes. I saw him again in December and thought he was perhaps going through that awful crisis that many third-year doctoral

students know only too well, when the prolonged mental strain begins to take its toll, written pages are still scarce, and one can feel the nervous breakdown closing in day by day. I told Frank he needed a break, but he wouldn't listen. I remember the misty look in his eyes, like murky water, and just as in the swamps the alligators hide a few inches below the surface, so did I perceive something ominous in that gaze. Frank had lost at least six pounds, and his sunken eyes and a week's unkempt beard on his waxy face completed the picture. He was nervous and vigilant, as if some mysterious force was stirring inside him. I noticed Frank kept touching his neck where the rough wool of the collar had chafed the skin. Nonetheless, he never took off the greatcoat, even in the overheated cafeteria. The uniform adhered to his slender body tightly, even better than before, as though it had somehow adjusted on his limbs and shoulders. Frank quaffed three cups of coffee before asking me to follow him. We stepped out into the cold and damp December air. The sky was grey and flat like a cellar ceiling, and under that veil of clouds, we took the path into the woods.

«Where are you taking me?», I asked him nervously.

He stopped and stood still for a while, staring at his shoes. Then he said:

«There's something I'd like to show you.»

I followed him to a clearing where a shack rose beside a pond. Somewhere in the woods, a woodpecker was hammering. I asked Frank why we were there, and he told me to follow him behind the cabin, where a horrible stench made me stay put. Frank turned to me and nodded. Curiosity can be

stronger than fear, so I went there where he was standing still in front of the decomposed carcass of some beast.

«Isn't it beautiful?», he asked me as if inspired.

I felt sorry for my friend. I grabbed his arm and dragged him away. We walked back to the campus, and I decided he would stay at my place for the night. He tried to decline my invitation, but I managed to be convincing and stubborn enough, and he eventually dug in. When he took off his coat, for the room was warm, it hurt me to see how lean he was. The coat seemed so tight that he had to struggle to free his arms from its strong grip. We sat down and ate something, and Frank's gaze slowly returned a bit clearer. I finally asked him what he found so beautiful in a carrion.

«Life is a full circle and what happens once will happen again and again», he said. «Death is not the end, and this is why it's so beautiful.»

«Ok, I get that. But why were you so attracted by that rotting thing?»

«Because I killed it.»

«What? Why did you do that?»

«I just had to. I had to make it happen, I summoned death to make it live again.»

He said that with a disquieting calm in his voice.

«This is insane, Frank, do you get that?»

«I can't help it. It's trying to return.»

«What are you talking about?»

«Everything returns in time. What lives must die, and after death life is born again. It endured, for it found a place to hide and wait. I must allow it to come back, that's what it want.»

«I don't follow. What is it?»

«Like all other living forces, it just wants to live and spread, but it can't do without me. The time is ripe for it to return. The killing of that beast was my initiation.»

«You give me the creeps, Frank. Where did you find all these crazy notions? You really should take a break and leave this place for a while.»

«I can't.»

«Why?»

«It's in my head, always calling for me. It comes in the night, in my dreams, it needs me.»

«You're sick, Frank. You've pushed it too hard, and you need to stop now.»

«The dreams are back», he said almost in tears. «They're terrible, full of bloody mud, and I sink, no matter how I try to hold on to the earth and the bushes. There's a rope hanging from a branch right over my head, and it ends into a noose.»

He said no more. Telling me about the dream upset him and he hardly fell asleep. The following day, I resolved to see the doctor for advice about Frank's condition. However, before I arrived at the infirmary, I saw Frank take the path into the woods, so I decided to follow him. When we reached R., I hid behind a bush and watched my friend enter the cemetery, although reluctantly and as if against his will. I even thought I heard him whimpering, but I could not understand what he said. He kept touching his neck, where the chafed skin was bleeding. I saw him stop before a tombstone, where he stood with his head sunken. Then, like a captive beast whose bonds are suddenly cut, he fled and

briskly walked back to the campus without turning back. A light rain had begun to fall as I left my hiding place and entered the abandoned churchyard. I wandered among the tombstones, many of which were covered with moss and crawlers that concealed the inscriptions. Other stones were broken, half-sunken or lying on the ground. The one that so much attracted Frank looked old but clean, as though someone had recently freed it from the vegetation. I stepped closer and read its inscription:

EDWIN JEFFREYS

14 JULY 1843 – 21 JAN. 1864

DELIVERED TO THE EARTH BY MERCIFUL HANDS

The discovery left me puzzled. What was so interesting in that grave? Who was that person and why did Frank visit him? I made it back to the campus and without wasting any time I went to my office and wrote to the historical archive in Jackson to find out who Edwin Jeffreys was. When I went back to my apartment, tired and cold, I felt terribly stupid for having wasted an entire afternoon that I could have employed to put my calculations in order. That night I went to bed with a fever. Sleep eluded me, and in my insomnia, my imagination began conjuring the most unlikely hypotheses about Frank's strange metamorphosis. An idea had crept into my mind that the greatcoat had some connection with his nightmares. I recalled his words about something trying to return and suddenly realised that the chafing on his neck looked very much like the mark of a noose! Half-asleep, I

dreamed of a lean and pale figure wandering in the woods, clad in a grey coat, until at some point in the night, I finally slipped into a deep slumber.

The following day I woke up at around noon, the fever was gone and all the crazy theories and visions of the night before seemed just ridiculous and grotesque. I remained moping in bed for about another hour and in the early afternoon I decided to go for some air. As soon as I reached the Union, though, I saw Frank fighting with another student. The boy was bleeding badly from the nose and I struggled to hold back Frank, who seemed maddened with a wild anger. In the scuffle, one sleeve of his coat had been torn and a gash had opened on the back. Suddenly, the whole garment looked shabby and formless, so different from when it fitted so tightly on Frank's slender shoulders and limbs. On that very day, the coat ended up in the trash. You may not believe me, but Frank quickly returned the dear, shy young man I knew. Of course, I never made him privy to my crazy notions, I only wanted him to recover from his state of abjection.

When the Christmas break arrived, Frank invited me to spend our vacations together at his mother's place in Louisiana, an invite I happily accepted, having no one else to see. After all, leaving the campus and those sad woods for a while would certainly do me no harm. Frank's mom welcomed me warmly, and no sooner I had entered her home than I noticed the pictures in the lounge. Each of them portrayed a young man wearing an officer's uniform. The woman kindly told me that her husband Floyd had died in Vietnam when Frank was just a newborn. I then realised why

Frank abhorred war, which had robbed him of his dad. At the same time, I guessed he collected and wore old uniforms because he perhaps found in them some spiritual or ideal connection to his father. Anyway, allow me to finish my story.

The winter was almost spent when a woman from the historical archive in Jackson contacted me. She wrote that she had found a record apparently matching my Edwin Jeffreys buried in R. He was a private in the Confederate Army, who deserted in 1863. The Unionists arrested, trialled and hanged him as a bandit at the beginning of 1864 in R., where he was buried on January 21. I read her email, astounded, over and over. I have never forgotten the evening when Frank said that something was waiting to return, having endured time and death. As a scientist, I can't interpret these words without clashing with all my certainties. I can only say that the red mark disappeared from Frank's neck, and so did his nightmares once the coat was destroyed, the old greatcoat that Edwin Jeffreys had once owned and worn.

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Morganti fell silent, and I stared at him for a few seconds, astonished to see how deeply that story could still bother him. I could have offered some comforting psychological interpretation to explain his friend's obsession, perhaps owing Frank's nightmares to suggestion, shyness and tiredness, or by piling on the hypothesis of a trauma connected with the image of his father wearing a uniform. I could have conjured any

hypothesis, but I would have said nothing true or serious, nor would Morganti have benefitted from such a clumsy solution. The truth, sometimes, must remain behind an invisible shroud, detached from us and intangible. We can guess, imagine, and almost feel we hold it in our hands like a thing, and yet it remains formless and mutable as long as we stir it. The story of Frank and his greatcoat had planted the doubt in Morganti's mind that reality is innerved by forces we are not aware of, which nonetheless are the causes of tangible effects. He was well aware that the rubbing of the harsh wool against the skin was enough to produce the wound his imagination had easily identified with the mark of an invisible noose, an idea which upset him insofar as it blatantly contradicted his scientific understanding of the world. Nonetheless, when our mind entrenches itself in the invincible determination to prefer a difficult and impossible explanation to an easy and plausible one, with all due respect to our very reasonable Ockham, then all kinds of monsters begin to rise from the slimy floor of our consciousness, and no method, argument, or doctrine will ever be able to dispel their unsettling shapes.