BEING’S WOUND: EVIL AND EXPLANATION IN

THE KILLER INSIDE ME

Jim Thompson’s 1952 noir novel The Killer Inside Me is a powerful early postmodern representation of evil – one that reflects the moral catastrophe of WWII and is proleptic of current philosophical discussions. The novel’s narrator and protagonist, Lou Ford, is a complex, confounding, ultimately enigmatic sensibility comprised of several voices; Ford spins a narrative out of the cultural imaginary that instructs us in the problematics of evil in the postmodern world. While Iago may have said too little about his evil, and Eichmann too much, Lou Ford falls somewhere in between but tells nothing more than Eichmann or Iago about the sources of evil. Like Iago’s acts and Eichmann’s bodies, Lou shows rather than tells us about evil; yet paradoxically Lou’s evil is inextricably bound up in his narrative, in his telling. In this paper, I will investigate the strategies of this narrative and the ways they gesture towards even as they cover up and obscure the causes of his evil. We can compare Lou’s narrative strategy to a psychoanalytic symptom – a symptom attempts to conceal a conflict or the unacceptable. Its every manifestation reveals the very truth it is designed to mask; yet, uncannily, that which it attempts to reveal keeps disappearing. Evil, we will see, is what keeps disappearing, keeps slipping away; in the post-Holocaust world, we have only the material reality of the dead bodies – and in the face of these bodies – no explanation is adequate.

This postmodern uncertainty about the nature of evil typifies what is generally described as the condition brought about by the devastating events of World War II. We remain caught in the literal and metaphoric meanings of Auschwitz. As Susan Neiman describes in Evil in Modern Thought, the Holocaust left philosophers and theologians in a state of moral vertigo and helplessness “because our conceptual resources seem[ed] exhausted” and “our trust in the world [was] shattered” (281), for shattered also was our faith in God, in Reason, and in ourselves. Written just a few years after the rupturing events of WWII, and long before its full ramifications had saturated the cultural imaginary, The Killer Inside Me surprisingly captures this condition and unveils a world in which making meaning becomes both imperative and impossible. The formulaic narrative structure of pulp/detective fiction with its clear plot
devices and ultimate clarifying climatic resolution provides Thompson with a playful and deadly serious way to represent both the desire and impossibility of making sense. We enter a world in which, as Susan Neiman notes, we are homeless and irremediably wounded.

_The Killer Inside Me_ depicts this post-Holocaust world as the _anus mundi_, a world morally devastated, its apparent decency, like its narrator Lou Ford, masking corruption. For Thompson, the tension between reality and appearances was at the heart of his vision; “There is,” he said, “only one plot: things are not what they seem” (Polito 7). In _The Killer Inside Me_, this traditional notion becomes a dizzying kaleidoscopic assault of shifting appearances. The novel’s setting, Central City, depicts a world, to paraphrase Yeats, where the “center cannot hold” and moral anarchy has been set loose. “Things are not what they seem”: Central City – appears the mythic jewel of small town America, but is filled with corruption. As Robert Polito writes, “_The Killer Inside Me_ detonates some myths of small-town America the benevolent cop, the kindly physician, the free and open country. The public guardians of morality, justice, and power all are whitened sepulchers, privately depraved or criminal. Ford’s family, Central City – each is a stinking prison” (350). Central City is morally eviscerated, a fallen world, and Lou a potent reflection of its corrupt core.

A spectacular representation of this moral cataclysm, Lou Ford’s astonishing first-person narrative both proposes and, at the same time, ironically rejects all Grand Narratives about evil in the human character. Unlike Iago, who offers no self-explanation for his actions, Ford is presumably telling us this narrative to explain why and show how he killed, in order to present the proof the authorities could not have – which he tells us is himself. This narrative illuminates the post-war problematic of evil by, first, embodying evil in Ford’s “career” as a serial killer, and then by deconstructing all attempts to understand what he has done by using the theoretical templates available in the twentieth century. But Ford does not merely present and then reject attempts to explain his acts. Like a “good” postmodern (anti) hero he shows exactly how each model of explanation can be used to craft a plausible account of his actions, and then he humorously establishes a devastating distance between himself, as impenetrable and inexplicable agent of evil, and all such merely believable explanations.

Through Thompson’s impeccable use of the literary device of the unreliable narrator, Ford’s every “explanation” is subverted, destabilized and left behind, its inadequacy to be ciphered by the reader. In the final