The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical

The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical: The Latent Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy

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PREFACE

DISCOVERING MCCARTHY

When I came across one of McCarthy's novels for the very first time in 2003, he was a strictly marginal novelist, commonly referred to as a "writers' writer." In Poland, he was virtually unknown, with merely two of his novels translated into Polish: *All the Pretty Horses* in 1996 and *The Crossing* in 2000.[1] Today, this situation has changed quite radically. After receiving the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his latest novel, *The Road* (2006), accepting, to the great surprise of his readers, Oprah Winfrey's offer to sit for a television interview with her, and finally agreeing to the Oscar-winning film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* by the Coen brothers as well to John Hillcoat's screening of *The Road*, McCarthy is commonly recognized as one of the best living American authors. Another five of his novels have been recently translated into Polish, and the blurbs on their covers proudly present him as a superb equal of such celebrated American novelists as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Philip Roth.[2]

Since my first encounter with Cormac McCarthy's prose, I was strongly convinced that he would, sooner or later, acquire a broader reading public. Each of his books makes a truly striking impression, blending an exquisite elaborateness, lyrical enigma, and profound wisdom on the one hand with some kind of genuinely basic simplicity, unfeigned forthrightness, and an absolutely unique ability to instantly reach the very "bones" of things on the other. Similarly, McCarthy's language is both defiantly intricate, with juxtapositions such as "witless paraclete," "threatful

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[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Rącze konie,* trans. Jędrzej Polak (Poznań: Zysk i s-ka, 1996); *Przeprawa,* trans. Jędrzej Polak (Poznań: Zysk i s-ka, 2000).

[2] *No Country for Old Men* was translated as *To nie jest kraj dla starych ludzi* (trans. Robert Bryk, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2008), *The Road* as *Droga* (trans. Robert Sudoł, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008), *Child of God* as *Dziecię boże* (trans. Anna Kołyszko, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009), *Blood Meridian* as *Krwawy południk* (trans. Robert Sudół, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010), *The Orchard Keeper* as *Strażnik sadu* (trans. Michał Kłobukowski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010), and, most recently, *Outer Dark* as *W ciemność* (trans. Maciej Świerkocki, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010).

supplicant," or "besotted bedlamites," with sentences running on for whole pages without any punctuation marks to guide us through, and, at the same time, amazingly simple, offering lucid, matter-of-fact descriptions of the most elemental daily activities of the protagonists, and dryly reporting their succinct, synoptic conversations.

Although the reality McCarthy portrays is essentially dark and hostile, the people–malicious, unsociable, and estranged, and the nature–violent and unpredictable, the reader is not burdened with an experience of meaninglessness, despair, or futility. Quite paradoxically, we have an overwhelming impression that all existence in McCarthy's books is imbued with deep and resonant spirituality, and that each described entity–whether it is a horse saddle, a human being, or a forest creek, is intensely sacred in some arcane, fundamental sense. Despite the fact that violence and evil, which I have adopted as the subject matter of my study, are the predominant topics of virtually all of McCarthy's novels, what attracts us to them the most is not the sensational, often intimidating dimension of their plots but rather the irrepressible feeling that the message they convey comes remarkably close to our deepest thoughts and convictions, imparting a kind of elementary though challenging and disturbing truth about ourselves and the world around us. As I will be attempting to demonstrate, this import is anything but plain or straightforward; in fact, the very value of the books I will be analyzing lies precisely in their inconclusiveness and equivocacy, in their convergence not on the final destination but on the road in itself, not on the "will be" or "ought to be" but on the "is."

McCarthy's Actual and Virtual Identity

Not much is known about Cormac McCarthy. In what has for many years been referred to as the only full time interview McCarthy has ever given (even though it is *not* in fact an interview *per se* but just an essay comprising the free impressions of a journalist who managed to invite the writer out for lunch), Richard B. Woodward described him as a "hermitic author, who may be the best unknown novelist in America."[3] And although, as I have already mentioned, with McCarthy's recent coming into fame the present circumstances are somewhat different than back in

[3] Richard B. Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times,* April 19, 1992. Accessed May 4, 2009. http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE6DA163EF93AA25757C0A964958260&sec=&spon.

1992, still, the facts we may be certain about with regard to his person are truly scarce.

What we *do* know is that he was born in Rhode Island on July 20, 1933, as Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., and that his family (his parents, two brothers, and three sisters) moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, when Cormac was four. We also know that he studied liberal arts at the University of Tennessee, but never finished his studies since he joined the U.S. Air Force in 1953, where he served for four years. From that point on, his life consisted of unstable relationships (he was married three times) and unstable jobs (he never took up a steady occupation and earned his living doing various types of casual physical work). In 1976, he moved to El Paso, Texas, and at the end of the 1990s to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he lives until today. Since *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965, McCarthy has written altogether ten novels, two unfinished plays, and one screenplay. The first four novels (*The Orchard Keeper*, 1965; *Outer Dark*, 1968; *Child of God*, 1973; *Suttree*, 1979), because of their characteristic local scenery, are referred to as the Appalachian works, and they are all set either in the murky forests, hills, and valleys of Appalachia or else, in the case of *Suttree*, in the slums and street mazes of Knoxville, Tennessee. Although during this time McCarthy received three scholarships for creative writing, the sales of his novels never exceeded 2,500 copies. He therefore lived practically on the verge of indigence, rejecting all offers to lecture on his work, to blurb a newly published novel, or to teach a course on creative writing. As his former wives report, he had lived in barns, pig farms, and rented rooms in cheap motels, cutting his own hair, eating his meals off a hot plate or in cafeterias, and doing his wash at the Laundromat.

In 1985, McCarthy completed *Blood Meridian*, which most critics regard as a turning point in his writing career. Although at the time of its printing it received scarce critical attention, today it is probably the most extensively analyzed work of all that McCarthy has written. Because it is set on the borderlands between Texas and Mexico and, to some extent, alludes to the conventions of the American Western, *Blood Meridian* is referred to as a South-Western masterpiece. McCarthy's next three novels (the so called Border Trilogy: *All the Pretty Horses*, 1992; *The Crossing*, 1994; and *Cities of the Plain*, 1998) depart from the puzzling mysteriousness and outright violence of his earlier works, and instead consistently depict the adventures and the maturing of two American boys, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. Focused around the motif of the journey, they follow the heroic protagonists in their quests across the Western frontier. Interestingly, *All the Pretty Horses* was McCarthy's first novel that gained

unanimously positive reviews and attracted the attention of a broader reading public (it sold 190,000 copies in hardcover within the first six months of publication, became a *New York Times* bestseller, and won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award). After a seven-year period of silence, in 2005 McCarthy published *No Country for Old Men*. Although the events that it depicts take place sometime in the twenty-first century, in its grim portrayal of callous evil, *No Country for Old Men* is thematically closer to McCarthy's earliest works. Finally, a year later, he completed his most renowned novel, *The Road*, hailed as "the searing, postapocalyptic novel destined to become Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece."[4]

Despite his increasing literary fame, the whole knowledge we possess concerning Cormac McCarthy's person–his private life, his views, opinions, and experiences–is a mere hodgepodge with scraps of second-hand information coming from various sources, many of them of questionable reliability. When he received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his last novel, *The Road*, and agreed to be interrogated by Oprah Winfrey during her show, the public hoped to learn more about the renowned "hermit." The interview was a surprise indeed, yet McCarthy, for all the uneasiness he must have felt being on TV for the first time in his life, quite naturally replied to Oprah's detailed inquiries delving into his secretive life. As commentators later admitted, "McCarthy wasn't as gnomically apocalyptic as we'd speculated he would be. Slouching in an overstuffed armchair, he seemed more like a nice-enough old man, gamely trying to answer the inane questions posed by the overenthusiastic woman sitting opposite."[5] Although Oprah Winfrey's enquiries were disappointingly derivative and facile ("Where did the idea for this novel come from?"; "Do you have a writing routine?"), McCarthy treated them seriously and replied with thoughtful care. Yet apart from learning that he has an eight-year-old son, to whom *The Road* is dedicated, we did not find out anything new about the "best unknown novelist in America." Oprah's interview, pronounced as poor and wasted, went practically unnoticed by the wider public, while McCarthy himself admitted he did not mind that millions of people were at present reading his books, but that he also did not honestly care. "You would like for the people who appreciate the book to read it,

[4] The dust jacket of the 2007 Alfred A. Knopf hardcover edition.
[5] "Cormac McCarthy Bombs on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show,'" *New York Magazine*, June 6, 2007. Accessed May 6, 2009. http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/06/cormac_mccarthy_slouches_towar.html.

but as far as many, many people are reading it, so what?" he said. "It's ok, nothing wrong with it."[6]

This is the authentic Cormac McCarthy–ascetic and reserved, overly modest and distanced. However, we may risk the contention that, owing partly to his specific aloofness and partly to the unrestrained development of cyber technology, besides this "real" McCarthy, there is also a *virtual* one–one whose identity has been construed online by his readers, fans, and regular blog-enthusiasts. Interestingly, not everyone is aware of the fact that the two are actually distinct. One of McCarthy's readers sensed the incongruence and admitted he "was surprised Mr. McCarthy even put a forum on his site [cormacmccarthy.com] in the first place," to which the Cormackian guru, Rick Wallach, promptly and comprehensively replied,

> It's not Mr. McCarthy's site. The site was put up by the Cormac McCarthy Society, with which the author has no official connection whatsoever. FYI the site began as a scholarly group thirteen years ago, but Mr. McCarthy's growing popularity resulted in a much broader field of interest. In any case the Society has since 1993 sponsored annual scholarly conferences in both the USA and Europe on Mr. McCarthy's work and related fields. Many, if not most, of the critical books on McCarthy currently in print were compiled from papers first delivered at those conferences.[7]

Cormacmccarthy.com, "the official Web site of the Cormac McCarthy society," is indeed a very elaborate, systematically updated site, with links to McCarthy's works and biography, to a comprehensive list of resources regarding his books, such as a thorough bibliography, reviews, articles, and translations of the Spanish fragments of his novels, as well as to the Cormac McCarthy journal, society, bookshop, and forum. The last one, whose visitors were praised by Dwight Garner as "smarter, and definitely more laid-back, than [the fans] of just about any other living writer,"[8] comprises numerous threads regarding topics related not only to McCarthy's novels (many of them being discussions on a highly academic level), but also to everything that is going on in the world of the media and show business that is in any way related to McCarthy's work or to his

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[6] Michael Conlon, "Writer Cormac McCarthy confides in Oprah Winfrey," *Reuters*, June 5, 2007. Accessed May 6, 2009. http://uk.news.yahoo.com/rtrs/20070605/ten-uk-mccarthy-91c27f7.html.

[7] Paper Cuts, a blog about books, *New York Times,* July 25, 2007. Accessed May 7, 2009. http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/14/the-fighting-cormackians/.

[8] Dwight Garner, "Inside the List," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2006. Accessed July 27, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/books/review/15tbr.html?_r=2&ref=review&oref=slogin&oref=slogin.

person.[9] They share useful links, exchange intricate insights, and speculate about the most meticulous details of the novels' settings.

Apart from the rather scholarly forum at cormacmccarthy.com, there are numerous other, less serious and definitely more light-hearted blogs featuring McCarthy's name.[10] On profile.myspace.com, Cormac, obviously the "virtual" one, actually appears as one of the official contributors. And again, many bloggers tellingly mistake him for the real writer (although there is a small note at the bottom of the page stating, "PLEASE NOTE**:** The real Cormac McCarthy does not manage or check this profile. It exists only for promotion and to keep fans updated on McCarthy news"), while others sincerely doubt if there truly is any substantial reality behind his online profile. Nevertheless, this skepticism does not deter them from deeply emotional disclosures such as:

> I wish you were real. You are my favorite literary recluse. Excepting Emily Dickinson, of course.
>
> I love Cormac McCarthy's books so much. I wish this were him actually inviting me to be a friend. I would probably flip out.
>
> Mr. McCarthy, your books are actually physically painful to read, yet I keep coming back. You'd think after being ripped apart emotionally after Cities of the Plain, I'd pass on The Road. Wrong. Thank You for your books. You are truly the greatest living American writer. Though It's hard for me to imagine Cormac McCarthy checking his Myspace page...
>
> Hey! If only the real Cormac wanted to be my buddy . . . heh.[11]

Is it at all possible that this "doubleness," this existence on the world wide web as a construct that is wholly independent, detached, and unfettered from the flesh-and-blood McCarthy, has any influence on his novel writing as such? Obviously, it would be difficult, not to mention somewhat risky and naïve, to make such speculations, the more so because there is a substantially high probability that McCarthy is actually totally unaware of the elaborate existence of his virtual double.

Those readers of McCarthy's fiction who are the most active in sharing their ideas, doubts, and conjectures both about the books themselves and

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[9] When I searched the forum for themes related to *The Road*, I have found 201 threads, each containing from 8 to 145 exchanges–I am quoting these numbers just to give an idea of the abundance of the forum's content.

[10] Recently, the first Polish website devoted entirely to McCarthy's writing has been established and is frequently visited by the growing circle of his readers in Poland (http://www.cormacmccarthy.pl/).

[11] *MySpace,* "Cormac." Accessed July 27, 2007. http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=161785678.

about their author, are certainly highly dependent upon technology, the net being their major means of communication and source of information. McCarthy, on the other hand, is said to even avoid using a computer since he prefers to write his novels on a classical typewriter. One of the characteristic features of the plot of those books is a practically absolute absence of any technology. McCarthy's protagonists, regardless of whether the events they experience are set in the nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty first century, do not use phones, do not listen to the radio or watch television, do not wash their clothes in washing machines, do not iron their shirts or vacuum their carpets. The most highly developed equipment they utilize are gas stoves, pistols, and pick-up trucks. This conspicuous lack of technology in McCarthy's novels, apparent especially in *The Road* which uses the circumstances of a technological disaster, seems to highlight a puzzling clash with the increasingly "technologized" virtual reality of his readers, virtually communicating with and applauding McCarthy's virtual self. I assume that this distinctive "doubleness" may be regarded as another paradoxical feature of McCarthy's writing and person, underscoring his propensity to escape all definite categorizations and neatly ordered arrangements.

Major Trends in McCarthian Criticism

McCarthy has been receiving substantial critical attention since the 1980s. The first book-length study concerning his writing, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* by Vereen Bell, appeared in 1988 and hailed the novelist as a profoundly nihilistic author, whose "characters are almost without thoughts" and whose vision is a "dark parody" of reality presented as "an incoherent and unrationalized gestalt of mass and process, without design or purpose."[12] Since that time, six major monographs and collections of essays have been published,[13] and numerous journals have

[12] Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988), 4, 38.

[13] Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne Luce, eds, *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999); W. Hall and R. Wallach, eds, *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso, Texas: Western Press, 1995); Robert L. Jarret, *Cormac McCarthy* (NY: Twayne, 1997); Barceley Owens, *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2000); Rick Wallach, ed, *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000); Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne Luce, eds, *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy* (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 2001).

printed independent articles on McCarthy's work.[14] While nearly all of them unanimously agree that his books are genuine masterpieces in terms of style and form, there is no similar agreement as to the basic message they are meant to convey. In 1995, Nell Sullivan remarked that "since Cormac McCarthy arrived on the literary scene almost thirty years ago, the critics have been at a loss about how to view his texts."[15]

With a certain degree of simplification, we may, following Dana Phillips, divide most critical works on McCarthy into two "camps, which . . . can be distinguished geographically." Those who view McCarthy as a predominantly Southern writer (and a follower of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor), "tend to want to find in each of his novels something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries . . . of a Christian or Gnostic variety." On the other hand, those who consider McCarthy as a rather Western author, "see in the trajectory of [his] career a move toward wider relevance and a broader worldview," that is an acknowledgment of Western tradition as a whole, with such figures as Dostoevski, Conrad, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. His "nihilism" would therefore be precisely "what one would expect from a writer who has fed on such corrosive, demystifying influences."[16]

This disagreement may be aptly illustrated by two quotations referring to one and the same novel by McCarthy. While Leo Daugherty asserts that his

> reading of *Blood Meridian*–particularly its epilogue–causes [him] to conclude that it is redemptionist (…), and that those who consider McCarthy a nihilist are off the track, although it is not difficult to see how they got there,[17]

Steven Shaviro maintains that

[14] A complete bibliography (regularly revised and updated by Dianne Luce) can be found at www.cormacmccarthy.com.

[15] Nell Sullivan, "Cormac McCarthy and the Text of Jouissance," in *Sacred Violence*, Hall and Wallach, eds., 115.

[16] Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian,*" *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 434-35. Among the "Southern" critics he lists such names as Terence Moran, Walter Sullivan, Edwin T. Arnold, and Leo Daugherty, while the "Western" camp is represented by Vereen Bell, Steven Shaviro, John Lewis Lonley, Jr., and, obviously, Dana Phillips himself.

[17] Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," *Southern Quarterly 30* (1992): 133.

> Everything in *Blood Meridian* is violence and blood, dying and destruction . . . . And for all its exacerbated sense of fatality, its tenor is profoundly anticlimactic and anticathartic.[18]

McCarthian criticism is abounding with such contradictory statements, which, more than anything, testify to the textual richness and profound ambiguity of his novelistic output.

With regard to the theoretical approaches that the texts on McCarthy tend to adopt, we may point to a whole variety of methodologies, ranging from Marxist criticism,[19] references to the pastoral tradition,[20] to Gnostic theology,[21] or to cowboy codes of the American Western,[22] feminist[23] and eco-critical approaches,[24] finally to theological existentialist readings.[25] My own analysis draws predominantly on broadly understood Western philosophy and theology (I use the writings of, among others, St. Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emmanuel Levinas, Georges Bataille, and Jean Baudrillard) as well as on the Christian Bible as a major source

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[18] Steven Shaviro, "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," *The Southern Quarterly* 30:4 (1992): 120, 119.

[19] Dana Phillips, for example, adopts Georg Lukács as his major theoretical source.

[20] See for instance John Grammer**,** "A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in McCarthy's South," *Southern Quarterly* 30.4 (Summer 1992): 19-30 or George Guillemin, "'As of some site where life had not succeeded': Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," in *Companion,* Arnold and Luce, eds., 92-130.

[21] Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True…"

[22] See for instance Phillip A. Snyder, "Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," in *Companion,* Arnold and Luce, eds., 198-228.

[23] Nell Sullivan, "Boys Will Be Boys and Girls Will Be Gone: The Circuit of Male Desire in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," *Southern Quarterly* 38.3 (Spring 2000): 167-85; "The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God,*" in *Myth*, Wallach, ed, 68-77.

[24] For instance, Jacqueline Scoones, "Ethics and Evolution in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," in *Companion,* Arnold and Luce, eds.*,*131-160.

[25] Edwin T. Arnold, "Blood & Grace: The Fiction of Cormac McCarthy," *Commonweal* 121 (4 Nov. 1994): 11-16; "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing,*" in *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions,* James D. Lilley, ed. *(*Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2002), 215-38; "'Go to sleep': Dreams and Visions in the Border Trilogy," *Southern Quarterly* 38.3 (Spring 2000): 34-58; "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables,"*Southern Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1992): 31-50; Douglas J. Canfield, "The Border of Becoming: Theodicy in *Blood Meridian,*" in *Mavericks on the Border: The Early Southwest in Historical Fiction and Film* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2001), 37-48; "Crossing from the Wasteland into the Exotic in McCarthy's Border Trilogy," in *Companion,* Arnold and Luce, eds*.,* 256-69.

for and influence on McCarthy's novels. I also refer to contemporary research carried out by social psychologists since I consider their results and assumptions as the most representative of the now commonly accepted notion of evil and wrongdoing.

The Main Influences on McCarthy's Work

The broad, sweeping vision of McCarthy's writing, especially of the novels preceding the Border Trilogy, has caused many critics to point to the most fundamental works of Western literature as his potential sources of influence. The long list comprises not only The Bible, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare, but also Conrad, Joyce, de Sade, Melville, and Poe. Nevertheless, most reviewers agree that the two authors whose work bears the closest affinities to McCarthy's writing are William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor.

Southern American literature (of which Faulkner and O'Connor are undoubtedly the most conspicuous paradigm representatives) typically tends to be characterized as obsessed with the past, focused on evil (often associated with blackness and femininity), committed to the notion of bravura and artifice, fond of rhetoric, and deeply embedded in the regional background of family and local community.[26] Above all, to quote a recent book by Martyn Bone, "a truth universally acknowledged among southern literary scholars" is that "'the South' and 'southern literature' have been characterized by a 'sense of place.'"[27] McCarthy's writing only partially fits this categorization, and regionalism is in his novels confronted with a kind of anonymity of time and location–despite the conspicuous focus on the past, the events are rarely situated in a particular historical period, the setting most often remains unspecified, and even the protagonists themselves are quite frequently devoid of a name or a characteristic set of features. Their upbringing and family environment are either altogether disregarded or else have a marginal influence on their choices and actions. The notions of nobility and honor, so crucial for many typically Southern protagonists (such as Thomas Sutpen or Quentin Compson) are totally outside the scope of interest of most of the characters who appear in McCarthy's novels. In fact, they are customarily so strongly concentrated on their own needs and deficiencies that they are wholly alienated and

[26] See for instance Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).
[27] Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State UP, 2005), vii.

estranged from one another, viewing all people as hostile strangers and potential enemies.

Nevertheless, McCarthy's links with William Faulkner, that roaring "Dixie Limited" of Southern literature,[28] are quite obvious. The writings of both of these authors share an exquisite style, with elaborate sentences frequently devoid of punctuation marks, with refined and intricate vocabulary, with lyrical and minutely detailed depictions of the surroundings, and with a non-linear progression of the plot. Harold Bloom notes that McCarthy's "language, like Melville's and Faulkner's, is deliberately archaic," a distinction that he says "so contextualizes the sentence that the amazing contrast between its high gestures and the murderous thugs who evoke the splendor is not ironic but tragic."[29] Despite these noticeable similarities, there are some equally plain differences: McCarthy does not convey the thoughts and emotions of his protagonists, nor is he interested in abrupt changes of focalization or nebulous streams of consciousness so recurrently employed by Faulkner. What is more, for all their ornate intricacy, McCarthy's plots are told with a simplicity and economy which critics compare to the phraseology of folk tales or parables.[30]

The thematic associations between McCarthy and Faulkner are similarly dubious. On the one hand, both of them have a penchant for dealing with grave matters of life and death, both seem to suggest that those who are generally considered to be deranged are the ones who are the closest to the most profound truths about man and the surrounding reality, and both display a distinctive interest in the past. We can also draw parallels between such protagonists as Lena Grove and Joe Christmas from *Light in August* and Rinthy and Culla Holme from *Outer Dark*, or look for similar scenes and motives, like the suicide by jumping from a bridge in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *Suttree*, the longish monologues of Miss Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* and of the Dueña Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*, or the theme of bear slaying in "The Bear" and in the conclusion of *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy's vision, however, seems to

[28] A memorable phrase used by Flannery O'Connor with reference to the difficulty of going beyond Faulkner which is experienced by every Southern American writer.

[29] Harold Bloom, "Introduction to: Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West,*" in *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2001), xi.

[30] See John Ditsky, "Further Into Darkness: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy," *Hollins Critic* 18 (Apr. 1981): 1.

go beyond Faulkner, "further into darkness," as John Ditsky phrased it.[31] The sincerity and soundness of Faulkner's moral vision cannot be doubted or questioned; like Flannery O'Connor, he employs violent means only to render his message about our obligation to remain faithful to our human dignity more manifest and compelling. In the words of O'Connor, "to the hard of hearing you shout, and to the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."[32] It will suffice to recall Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech to make it plain that the moral obligation underlying his writing is equally potent and formidable:

> I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.[33]

Needless to say, McCarthy's moral vision is far from being this distinct or transparent. If his books indeed help us to "endure and prevail," it is only by negating all our comfortable assertions about reality and about ourselves and proposing instead an intimidating and foul darkness which bewilders us with its total lack of any discernible rules and guidelines.

Outline of the Study

I begin my study with a possibly thorough (and roughly chronological) presentation of those philosophical and theological theories regarding the notion of evil that proved to be the most influential in the broadly understood Western culture. The thinkers whose ideas I examine (among others: St. Augustine, Paul Ricoeur, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Alan Badiou) consider certain fundamental queries. Is evil merely a lack of the good, or does it possess its own autonomous ontological identity? Is evil a metaphysical category, or should it be regarded only with reference to its purely external, material

[31] Ditsky, "Further Into Darkness," 1.
[32] Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *The Living Novel: A Symposium*, Granville Hicks, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 162-63.
[33] William Faulkner, Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Accessed February 21, 2012. http://www.rjgeib.com/thoughts/faulkner/faulkner.html.

outcomes? Is suffering in itself evil? Can we speak of an evil that is pure and absolute, perpetuated for its own sake, only and precisely *because* it is evil? All these ruminations are meant to delineate a theoretical background which would provide tools necessary for a substantiated discussion of the problem of evil in the novels of Cormac McCarthy.

The arrangement of the subsequent chapters of my book was planned so as to exemplify delving into a more and more in-depth analysis of the issue in question. Chapter Two, "Evil as Excess: Visualizing Violence," deals with the purely visual presentations of violence in McCarthy's landmark *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, which is unparalleled in its hyperrealist imagery and minutely detailed descriptions of the most gruesome human acts. Initially, I attempt to account for the cultural circumstances in which the novel was written and point to analogies between the images it contains and the scenes of violence present in current news items about the Vietnam War. I then regard the vision of the West that *Blood Meridian* conveys and demonstrate how far it deviates from the highly mythologized ideas deeply rooted in American culture. Another issue I discuss is the concept of representation and of the relation between originals and their copies as it is exemplified in the imagery of *Blood Meridian*. Finally, I employ the notion of the grotesque as a key tool in the analysis of the novel's visualizations of violence. I conclude the chapter with a presentation of those scenes and episodes from McCarthy's books that testify to his deep skepticism about the role of the sense of sight in an authentic cognition of reality. Hence the need to go beyond the purely visual and external, beyond the mere appearance of things.

Chapter Three, "Evil as Fate," deals not so much with what is seen but with what is experienced, told, and spoken. It appears that those of McCarthian protagonists who have a deeper sense of self-awareness and a need for more intent reflection tend to view their own past, present, and future as closely interconnected and determined by forces outside of human control. Referring to the perspective adopted by Kant and Ricoeur, I therefore examine evil experienced as an external compulsion, as a thing "already there," always preceding our conscious decision. I then mention a number of figures which populate McCarthy's novels and, with some degree of simplification, categorize them into "active" and "passive" protagonists. The second part of the chapter regards the notions of repetitiveness, circularity, and cyclical forms which are presented as ideas exemplifying the assertion that human fate is not only inescapable and irrefutable but also invariably linked to evil and suffering. I round up

Chapter Three with the concept of evil as the most atavistic and primeval alternative which we tend to choose in our instinctive and mindless acts.

Chapter Four, "Evil as the Legacy of Metaphysical Desire," is an attempt to take the analysis another step deeper by accounting for the metaphysical references present in McCarthy's work and directly facing the question of the nature of evil they regard. I first describe the approach adopted by contemporary social psychology as a stance that seems to be the closest to our common understanding of the problem of evil and its manifestations in everyday life. In their analyses of wrongdoing, social psychologists tend to focus not so much on the personality and disposition of the individual but on the external circumstances and the vaguely defined "system" as the sources of evil. I subsequently juxtapose this perspective with the presentation of evil that is proposed in McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*. I also once more recall Alan Badiou's distinction between evil as "a possible dimension of truths," belonging to the sphere of the ethical or spiritual, and evil as "the violence that the human animal employs to persevere in its being," as a set of purely instinctive and thoughtless behaviors.[34] Another concept I refer to in Chapter Four is René Girard's stimulating idea of mimetic violence and of the close links between the notions of desire, divinity, and precisely violence. I also mention his theory of the sacrificial "all-against-one" mechanism which is, as Girard claims, employed by Satan to play a key role in the process of the origination of evil. I then apply the concepts of both Badiou and Girard to the analysis of several of McCarthy's novels, most notably of his masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*.

The final chapter of my book, entitled "Glimpses of the Metaphysical: Biblical Themes in Cormac McCarthy's Novels," endeavors to trace the most crucial biblical motifs and allusions that are dispersed throughout all of McCarthy's writing. I predominantly focus on the theme of the relation between father and son, which I examine first with reference to the Bible and subsequently with regard to several of McCarthy's novels. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze *Outer Dark* and its rooting in the parables told by Jesus, as well as *The Road*, viewing it as an example of apocalyptic prose, akin to the visions depicted by St. John the Evangelist.

[34] Alan Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil,* trans. Peter Hallward (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 60, 61,66.

ABBREVIATIONS

AP	*All the Pretty Horses*
BM	*Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*
CG	*Child of God*
COP	*Cities of the Plain*
TC	*The Crossing*
NCFOM	*No Country for Old Men*
OK	*The Orchard Keeper*
OD	*Outer Dark*
TR	*The Road*
S	*Suttree*

CHAPTER ONE

FROM AUGUSTINE TO BADIOU: GRAPPLING WITH THE CONCEPT OF EVIL

Before I go on to a systematic analysis of different interpretations of the phenomenon of evil, I must, at the very outset, clarify one absolutely basic issue. Theoretical pondering on evil somewhat resembles an academic study of the problem of ideology. For scholars preoccupied with either of these issues, it is very tempting, even seemingly imperative, to place themselves outside, beyond the scope of their ascendancy, therefore obtaining the necessary "detached" and "disinterested" perspective.[1] I wish to express my strong suspicion towards this kind of "detachment" and assert a willingness to examine the subject from *within*, openly acknowledging my immutable, though exceedingly "*un*academic" entanglement. Obviously, there is *no other way*, yet I believe it makes a considerable difference if such a pronouncement is consciously and openly verbalized.

Nevertheless, despite the skepticism of a number of thinkers,[2] I do believe that a purely theoretical discussion of the problem of evil–of its ontological status, its discernible manifestations and literary expressions– is possible and not altogether futile; that it can, without aspiring to expound and clarify evil in its whole multiformity or to pronounce its universal, systematic definition, lead to a more conscious awareness of a phenomenon that is as commonly experienced as it is reluctantly stipulated.

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[1] Compare Bercovitch's exhortation to stay within the problem of ideology and cease the attempts to analyze it from without: Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 376.

[2] See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *Zło: Wyzwanie Rzucone Filozofii i Teologii* [*Evil: a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*], trans. Ewa Burska (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1992) or Jacek Filek, "Zło, które czynimy" ["The Evil that We Do"], *Znak* 5 (1998): 79-83.

"Evil" is obviously a metaphysical category, and, therefore, quite commonly pronounced *passé*. It tends to be not only relativized and viewed as utterly subjective, but also otherwise termed and defined solely through its specifically contextualized (i.e. *practical*) manifestations. This is the first and most fundamental impediment one stumbles upon when attempting to theorize about evil. And yet the experience of evil as something external, a reality existing outside and, to some extent, *despite* the individual, is quite commonplace and familiar. Such an experience is, obviously, by definition subjective, though in itself it does render evil's very existence as, in a sense, *ob*jective.

This section of my study, presenting a variety of theoretical conceptualizations of evil, proceeds in a roughly chronological order. It begins with an explication of the Augustinian tradition and its definition of evil as privation of being and of the good, which, in time, came to be an assumption widely accepted in mainstream Christian thought. I then go on to a discussion of the output of Paul Ricoeur and his insistence on the need to commence not from abstract intellectual expositions but from evil as it is presented in ancient myths and symbols. And the evil that emerges from these inconceivably rich and multidimensional illustrations of the kernel of our tradition not only functions as a substantial embodiment of an outer force, but it also compels us to consider the undeniably tragic note that permeates the myths Ricoeur analyses. Next, I attempt to deal with chosen texts of Friedrich Nietzsche, presenting his concept of the "death of God" and his summons to a "transvaluation" as a kind of caesura, after which the discussion of evil as a metaphysical notion became especially problematic. I then proceed to an intentionally thorough demonstration of Georges Bataille's highly metaphysical (though extremely mystifying) ideas of "pure Evil" as a genuine mystical experience and the highest point of all moral searching. I also mention Jean Baudrillard's latest attempts to "remythologize" evil in the context of terrorism and globalization, presenting his peculiar concept of the necessary equilibrium between Good and Evil. What follows is a discussion of Emmanuel Levinas's theory of the malignant sublime as well as of his problematic equation of evil with the suffering of the Other and therefore of the Other with a victim. Finally, I consider Alan Badiou's partial answer to the Levinasian concept of evil (and of ethics in general), presenting his own theory as an attempt to reconcile the idea of a universal nature of evil (as well as of good and of truth) with an insistence on its decidedly situational character.

What this whole theoretical variety is to serve, is to ensure a comprehensive background for the discussion of evil as it is presented in the novels of Cormac McCarthy. It seems that in most of them evil is one

of the major concepts underlying the narrative structure, and yet it is never mentioned by name, never defined, or ascribed to a particular character, event, or action. Still, evil here is so basic, exhaustive, and all-embracing, that each of the theories presented below may at some point claim to have found in McCarthy its perfectly relevant illustration.

Evil as Privatio Boni: the Augustinian Tradition

> Evil "is perfectly superficial, totally hollow,
> 'nihil', vacous in every respect (…).
> Evil offers no purchase for reflection;
> it is wholly frictionless to thought."[3]

Within the mainstream Christian paradigm, derived from the Augustinian tradition, evil is ontologically conceptualized as nothing more than a lack, a *privation* of being and goodness. The roots, origins of evil are, on the other hand, traced back to the sinful *perversion* of human's good nature, leading to a formulation of an anthropology in which man alone is burdened with the responsibility for his thorough corruption. With regard to the Augustinian ontological project, which is of more relevance at this point, the argument is as follows: Since all beings are derived from goodness, evil cannot be a being, it cannot be an existing thing but rather the absence of existence, an "ontological shortcoming."[4] Within this classically metaphysical perspective evil is an inadvertent void, a kind of accidental flaw in the otherwise circumspect process of becoming, of being. Therefore, the more good is within us, the more we ourselves exist, and to the extent that we are evil, to that extent we exist less.[5] For Dionysus the Areopagite, who carried the argument even further, evil is neither a being nor a *non*being, since nonbeings *do* exist: God, wholly transcendent and beyond all existence, all which can be thought, imagined, or comprehended, cannot be dependent upon being and therefore is by Dionysus termed precisely a *nonbeing*.

This purely abstract theological concept of evil as privation has at least one crucial and very tangible implication: the only possibility for evil to somehow participate in existence is by its association with goodness. Therefore, all the evil we ourselves may participate in is not *wholly* evil,

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[3] Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 237.
[4] Mathewes, *Evil,* 6.
[5] See Jacek Salij OP, *Rozmowy ze Świętym Augustynem* [*Conversations with St. Augustine*] (Poznań: W drodze, 1997), 34.

but, at least in part, good–the wheat inevitably grows along with the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). Even such traits as "irrational rage, thoughtless lust, or precarious delusions" cannot be "evil by nature," since they may, for instance, serve animals by enabling their survival.[6] From this premise highlighting evil as devoid of any objective existence, it does not seem far to an assertion of its purely subjective, relative, and strongly contextualized interpretation.

Charles Mathewes, in his exceedingly systematic account of the Augustinian tradition in relation to the problem of evil, points to two basic counterarguments against Augustine's concept of evil as *privatio boni*.[7] The first one, which he terms "optimist" and associates with the "Irenaean" position, claims that the said notion puts a limit on God's omnipotence by removing evil from the range of His sovereignty and viewing it rather as an "accident" than a "necessary aspect of God's providential order."[8] For these "optimists," whose stance is most clearly expounded by John Hick,[9] evil is not against the will of God, but should be viewed as part of His perfectly, if illegibly, designed plan. Being in the end converted by His grace into an even greater good, evil serves our spiritual maturation and final salvation. This perspective is close to the conviction expressed by Spinoza, stating that what we perceive as evil is merely an illusory effect of our inexorably fragmentary and limited comprehension of reality; what we view as chaos, absurdity, and uselessness in fact composes a perfectly sensible, harmonically ordered whole.[10]

The "pessimists," on the contrary, defy the Augustinian proposals because of their assertive intellectualism which can only lead to an illusion of theoretical mastery over the reality of evil. In truth, they maintain, "evil is so profoundly, troublingly vexing that it inevitably frustrates our intellectual attempts at control."[11] These "pessimists" therefore, on the one hand, advocate a more practical approach to the problem of evil, demanding a radical transformation in the disposition of the scholar who probes into it, a fundamental conversion from self-centered thought to a renunciation of this kind of egocentrism and to disinterested and sacrificial

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[6] Dionysus the Areopagite, *Pisma Teologiczne* [*Theological Writings*], trans. Maria Dzielska, (Cracow: Znak, 2005), 266; trans. into English HB-M.
[7] See Mathewes, *Evil,* 92-100.
[8] Mathewes, *Evil,* 94.
[9] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London : Macmillan, 1966).
[10]Max Scheler, *Problemy Religii* [*The Quandaries of Religion*], trans. Adam Węgrzecki (Cracow: Znak, 1995), 190.
[11] Mathewes, *Evil,* 96.

action. On the other hand, expressing their scepticism towards traditionally ontological classifications of evil, they turn to alternative, more descriptive and subject-oriented methods.

One of the most insightful texts qualified by Mathewes as representative of the "pessimist" stance had been presented by Paul Ricoeur. His observations concerning evil, comprised in the study *The Symbolism of Evil* as well as in the essay (issued in book form) *Evil: a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, are by many considered to belong to the best philosophical analyses of the subject.[12] They therefore require a more detailed discussion.

Paul Ricoeur: from Symbols of Evil to Its Experience

"Evil is not nothing, it is not a common error,
lack of order; it is a dark power
that is 'constituted' by something."[13]

Questioning the possibilities of traditional logic and purely rational analysis in confrontation with the radicalism of evil (always indissolubly linked to suffering[14]), Ricoeur still expresses a basic trust in the semantic potential of language. Since he believes all language, even in its most colloquial, "demythologized" forms, to be fundamentally symbolic, he postulates a turning toward "creative interpretation" of the "significance" of symbols. Although at the cost of "severing reflective continuity," this kind of persuasive hermeneutics, according to Ricoeur, leads to a "secondary directness" of experience and to an understanding which, although necessarily fragmentary and always provisional, may become the "postcritical equivalent of precritical hierophany."[15] We should therefore not only attempt to comprehend symbols in their relevant archaic forms, but also individually adopt a personal, engaged, and critical stance towards each; only then are we bound to enter the "hermeneutic circle" leading

[12] See for instance Elżbieta Wolicka, "Zło Wyobrażone–Zło Rzeczywiste" ["Imagined Evil–Real Evil"], *Znak* 5 (1998): 41.
[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła* [*Symbols of Evil*], trans. Stanisław Cichowicz and Maria Schab (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1986), 147; trans. into English HB-M.
[14] On the relation of evil to suffering and the ambiguous differentiation between the perpetrator and the victim, see Ricoeur, *Zło: Wyzwanie rzucone filozofii i teologii* [*Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*], trans. Ewa Burska (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1992), 15-16.
[15] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 12, 328-329, trans. HB-M..

from understanding to faith and *vice versa*. This line of thought, with its origins in symbols and notional archetypes, is indigenously religious, it therefore inevitably leads to a confrontation with the equally disconcerting and mystifying idea of the Absolute and its status with regard to the existence of evil.

Resigning futile deliberations on questions such as man's personal responsibility for evil or evil's ontological status (questions that can be qualified as typical aporias, that is, necessarily remaining in suspension), Ricoeur by way of meticulous analysis of archaic symbols present within the Mediterranean tradition distinguishes four "morphological types" of mythical images of evil.

The first type is connected with cosmogonic myths, in which evil appears as a correlative in the "drama of creation," as an element of chaos in opposition to and constantly opposing the element of order and hierarchy. This archetype of cosmological evil, present in the Accadian myth of Sumerian-Babylonian culture, presents evil as primary to good and its origins as identical to the beginnings of creation as such. "The creative gesture is inseparable from crime," since creation necessarily corresponds to destruction.[16] Various elements of the Cosmos are formed from the mutilated corpse of a murdered goddess, the primordial mother Tiamat, whereas man is brought into being with the use of the blood of a slaughtered god.

The second type is best represented by Greek tragedy, which came to be a classical expression of the archetype of tragic human destiny. Here again, as in the case of the Accadian myth, the principle of evil is equally primary as the principle of good, yet tragedy locates both of these principles in one and the same representative of divine power. The polarization into good and evil fails to take place and the same deity becomes both the source of good advice and the dictum of man's destruction. Tragedy, in its proper signification, appears only when this predestination towards evil is confronted with man's invincible will and his heroic grandness.[17]

The third morphological type distinguished by Ricoeur is associated with the myth of the "soul in exile." As in the cosmic symbolism of the "drama of creation," in this case we are also dealing with a kind of dualistic scheme of endless cyclic repetition (evil-good; creation-destruction). In its platonic transformations the myth of the "soul in exile" is embedded in the idea of "secondary evil," of which man is both the

[16] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 168, 172, trans. HB-M.
[17] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 201-205.

perpetrator and the victim (as in the Greek myth of Sisyphus or, in a sense, the biblical story of Job).[18]

The fourth type, illustrated in the biblical myth of the fall, is of special interest not only because of its cultural prevalence and religious momentousness in the tradition of the West but also due to its own unique archetypal quality, which lies in its potential to revalorize all the remaining types of symbolism of evil. In the story of Adam and Eve evil is neither the outcome of the scheming of some malicious demiurge nor is it autonomously initiated by man, who eventually submits to its lure. In contrast to the previously mentioned types of mythological accounts of the origins of evil, the Bible makes a radical division between the "history of evil" and the "history of creation": "The intention of this myth was to grant cohesion to the *radical* source of evil, which would be something other than the more *primary* source of the good being of all things." Since Yahweh is wholly Good and absolutely Divine, evil had to enter the world in consequence of some "catastrophe in the very bosom of creation."[19] Evil therefore begins with the history of man, yet the drama involves a third party: the mysterious snake–the Tempter. The role of the human is ambiguously both active and passive: the evil to which he submits *deliberately* is initiated by a patently external source and has consequences which, as such, he could neither expect nor desire. The mechanism of the luring entails a transposition of the commandment which hitherto functioned as a guidepost, an indicator of the required direction, into an "Other" to human will and freedom, a hostile negativity which must be discarded ("Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"[20]). As such it implies an unbearable "finiteness" the human painfully yearns to surpass, thereby acceding to the snake's promise of autonomy and infinity, which turns out to be the infinity of evil. This promise in a way marks the beginnings of the lot of humanity which is from then on constantly led from one illusion to another in a vicious circle of the *pseudo*.[21]

From the Biblical myth of the fall Ricoeur derives the paradoxical notion of "unfree will," a notion that is in itself inconceivable, impossible to think or to endure, since "will" is, by definition, self-governing and autonomous. And yet, because the choice of our will is frequently prior to cognition, that is (as in the case of Adam and Eve) we learn about what we have chosen *ex post*, after the decision was already made, we perpetually

[18] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 264-274.
[19] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 220, 226, trans. HB-M.
[20] Book of Genesis 3,1 (Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).
[21] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 239-241.

choose as if against ourselves and end up with solutions we never actually wished for. The impenetrable gap between the order of expected goals and the achieved effects, between intentions and the outcomes of our undertakings, between our desires and their fulfillment, or rather a constant *lack* of fulfillment, will forever haunt us as an experience of intransgressible confines and insurmountable limitations.

In fact, Ricoeur detects the symbol of unfree will in myths more archaic than the Biblical story of the fall and concludes its analysis with an explication of its consequences for the understanding of evil. Therefore, unfree will presumes, first and foremost, the "positivity" of evil: evil is not *nihil*, it is neither a simple error nor a lack of order, but a substantial power of darkness, something that needs to be "taken away" ("Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world"). Secondly, evil is an *external* force, an "Other" to my freedom, man is therefore always a secondary figure in the schema of evil; he is "led into temptation." From this premise of externality, Kant derives the conviction that man cannot be considered evil in absolute terms–he cannot be the embodiment of evil. What is more, evil is always experienced as something "given," something "already there," of which no one ever was an absolute beginning. "Evil is a thing prior to itself, as if it always and forever preceded itself; as if it were something that everyone finds and continues, beginning anew."[22] And finally, the notion of unfree will presents evil as self-constraining, as a punishment in itself. And yet, it is not a power symmetrical to the force of good, it is not equally primary (the myth of the fall reveals its plainly "historical" character) and cannot function as the equivalent of good. It has no potential to destroy humanity, since in the end it "cannot make of man anything other than man himself."[23]

Evil therefore does, for Ricoeur, have substance and an independent existence, though in no way proportional or commensurate to goodness. This incompatibility is not necessarily rooted in differences concerning the ontological status of the two concepts (as was established by the Augustinian tradition) but rather in distinctions extending to their individual reception, to tangible experience embedded in archaic symbols and mythical stories. Nevertheless, both the notion of the essentiality of evil as well as that of "unfree will" confer a marked tragic note on Ricoeur's thought. Man is "destined" to good but "prone" to evil. And yet a tragic theology which would acknowledge evil as an inexorable constituent of the wretchedness of our very condition is inconceivable,

[22] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 244, trans. HB-M.
[23] Ricoeur, *Symbolika Zła*, 149, trans. HB-M.