

Radical Evil and the Infinite Other in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*

Don Adams♦

Abstract: Jim Thompson's harrowing novel, *The Killer Inside Me*, in which the psychopathic narrator himself dies at the end of the story, operates as an allegorical embodiment and expression of inexplicable evil resulting in useless suffering. The metaphysical implication and fictive logic of transforming the novel's horrific and yet materialistically mundane narrative into a posthumous confession transforms this existential life-trap into an ethical indictment of radical evil. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Thompson's contemporary, which focuses upon the inextinguishable reality of the Other, to which we each individually owe an infinite responsibility that precedes our birth and survives our death, allows us to make metaphysical sense of Thompson's confounding narrative conclusion, while providing us a critical ethical perspective from which to appreciate and benefit from Thompson's prophetic cautionary tale.

Keywords: Allegory, Confession, Ethics, Evil, Infinity, Levinas, Other, Responsibility, Testimony.

Jim Thompson's 1952 novel, *The Killer Inside Me*, is one of the most powerfully disturbing stories in modern fiction. Thompson is a prototypical American author and yet he is hard to situate within conventional fictive genres. He typically is discussed within the purview of detective and/or crime fiction, although his novels only include incidental portraits of detectives, and the committing and discovery of crimes in his novels is not the focal point of his best and most original work. Rather it is the mind, and one might even hazard to say *soul*, of the criminal that is the

♦**Dr Don Adams** is Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University and has been a Senior Fulbright Scholar in India and Vietnam. He has published extensively on modern literature and intellectual history.

subject of Thompson's unflinching expressionist portrayals of psychopathology, the most harrowing of which are presented to the reader from the killer's first-person narrative perspective, as in *The Killer Inside Me*, in a remarkable feat of "psychopathic ventriloquism," in the words of Robert Polito. In his fine 1995 biography of Thompson, Polito quotes novelist R. V. Cassill's assessment that Thompson "is exactly what the French enthusiasts for existential American violence were looking for in the work of Dashiell Hammett, Horace McCoy, and Raymond Chandler. None of those men ever wrote a book within miles of Thompson's."¹ Indeed in the series of first-person psychopathic narratives Thompson wrote in the astounding two-year spurt of creativity between 1952 and 1954 that produced twelve novels and his finest work, Thompson crafted a fictive genre of his own that is aesthetically, ethically, and metaphysically distinctive from the conventional detective and crime fiction of his peers. These first-person psychopathic novels conflate psychological confession, sociological anatomy, and ethical prophecy in narratives that both dramatically express and implicitly condemn the nihilism of modernity.

In a brief vignette in *The Killer Inside Me*, the first and most shockingly emblematic of Thompson's psychopathic first-person novels, the narrator, Lou Ford, recounts the story of a successful businessman who had a loving family and a beautiful mistress with no desire to break up his happy home, and who one day murdered all of them before committing suicide. Ford concludes wryly, "He had everything and somehow nothing was better."² Such is the savage economy of nihilism in which nothing, which is assumed by the nihilist to be metaphysically ultimate, is in that fundamentalist sense always somehow "better" than something. In *The Killer Inside Me*, Thompson portrays an amoral narrator who mows a murderous swath through his community while placing his life's bet on the metaphysical ultimacy and

¹Robert Polito, *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson*, New York: Knopf, 1995, 373-3.

²Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, New York: Mulholland Books, 2011, 155.

existential release of nothingness, only to lose the wager at the narrative's end. The manner in which Thompson portrays this existential drama and conclusion is narratively ingenious and metaphysically startling and confounding, for the story concludes with the death of the narrator as told in the voice of the narrator, leading us to the inevitable question of from what perspective such a subject could be speaking.

In this essay I draw upon the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Thompson's contemporary, in making the argument that Levinas's conception of the transcendent other, to which we each individually owe an infinite responsibility that precedes our birth and survives our death, will allow us to make metaphysical sense of Thompson's confounding narrative conclusion, while providing us a critical ethical perspective from which to appreciate and benefit from Thompson's ventriloquistic portrayal of radical evil and the useless suffering that it inflicts. Levinas considered his philosophy to be an attempt to discover whether "we can speak of morality after the failure of morality" in a place like "Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted," for "if God was absent in the extermination camps, the devil was very obviously present in them."³ Levinas argued that the enormity of the "useless suffering" of the Twentieth-Century, with its "profound articulation of absurdity,"⁴ effectively brought an end to Western civilization's sincere attempts at theodicy, the effort to account for evil in rational terms according to the natural economy of being. For natural being is amoral through and through – "Being persisting in being, that is nature"⁵ – allowing of all manner of murderous means to satisfy its primary survivalist end, so that in ethical

³Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," tran. Richard Cohen, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, New York: Routledge, 2014, 155-167, 164.

⁴Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 157.

⁵Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," tran. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, New York: Routledge, 2014, 168-179, 176.

terms, “The law of evil is the law of being. Evil is, in this sense, very powerful.”⁶ If the ethical story of human life ultimately is limited by the law of being that is the law of evil, then “there is no reason for morality and hence it can be concluded that everyone should act like the Nazis,” persisting in their being however they choose, limited only by the power of one’s force: “It is a question of might.”⁷

But Levinas in his ethical philosophy questions and critiques the ultimacy of being as a human end. “The aim of being is being itself. However, with the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal.”⁸ Man is unreasonable because he is self-conscious and so can comprehend the pointlessness of a life that, however great its happiness and success, can only end in the absurdity of one’s wholly individual death. “Mortality renders senseless any concerns that the ego would have for its existence and its destiny. It would be but an evasion in a world without issue, and always ridiculous.”⁹ From the point of view of life understood as persistence in being, there is no exit except through the absurd end of life in death. But if one accepts Levinas’ contention that the life of the other is more important than my own and that one has a responsibility for the other that precedes and succeeds my life into transcendent Infinity, then

life is no longer measured by being, and death can no longer introduce the absurd into it.... No one is so hypocritical as to claim that he has taken from death its sting, not even the promises of religions. But we can have the responsibilities and attachments through which death takes on a meaning.

⁶Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 175.

⁷Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 176.

⁸Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 172.

⁹Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tran. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne UP, 1998, 129.

That is because, from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves.¹⁰

Throughout his philosophy Levinas distinguishes between a finite individual ego that arises with consciousness and subsides into the senselessness of death and a pre and post-conscious ethical self that is tied to the Transcendent Infinite in its responsibility for the other and testimony to the Good beyond being "despite ourselves."¹¹ This ethically responsible self is not bounded by ontological being, "Responsibility for the other is extraordinary, and is not prevented from floating over the waters of ontology."¹² When we commit ourselves to a responsibility for the other that Levinas contends is implicit in our very humanity, we make "a rupture with nature" in a "moment of generosity...where someone plays without winning."¹³ In this gratuitous commitment to the being of the other over that of ourselves, "the idea of freedom prevails,"¹⁴ freedom from the absurdity of a life that can end only in death and from the concomitant savage economy of nihilism in which nothing somehow always is better than something.

When I teach Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, I always ask the students to consider from what perspective the narrator is speaking whose story ends with his own death and it is a question that never fails to confound because the situation Thompson presents us is unreasonable. But as "unreasonable animal[s],"¹⁵ we can commit ourselves gratuitously beyond our own being to the being of the other and so to "a *future* beyond what happens to me, beyond what for an *I*, is to come. Thus we have not gone to the end of thought and meaningfulness in dying! The meaningful continues beyond my death."¹⁶ So it is that Thompson's ego-maniacal narrator, who has murderously

¹⁰Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 129.

¹¹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 129.

¹²Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 141.

¹³Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 176.

¹⁴Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 176.

¹⁵Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 172.

¹⁶Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 174.

wagered his all on nothing, finds himself at life's absurd end in the unreasonable transcendent ethical realm from which he presents his gratuitous gift to the reader of his shocking true crime confession, in which his nihilistic ego-driven life is transformed into an ethical cautionary tale and prophetic "testimony" to the "glory" of the "Infinite."¹⁷

The most difficult concept to comprehend in Levinas' complex philosophy is the relationship between the Transcendent Infinite and the finite being of our mutable lives. Levinas describes the necessary "enigma" and "ambiguity"¹⁸ of a transcendence that "cannot be assembled into a present, and refuses being recollected."¹⁹

Transcendence would vanish in the very proof we would like to give of it.... Transcendence is obliged to interrupt the essence of being, to reach the world even while signifying the beyond of being. It needs ambiguity – a frontier at once ineffaceable and finer than the outline of an ideal line.²⁰

Thompson's posthumous narrator speaks fictively from just such an ambiguous and ineffaceable frontier, pointing us toward a Transcendent Infinite that cannot be represented or recollected, but the trace of which may be signified nevertheless through what Levinas calls the "testimony" of "prophecy."²¹ Prophecy in Levinas's usage is "not the last resort of a lame revelation,"²² but is the testimony of our non-egoistic ethical self to that which is transcendentally "beyond being"²³ and is better than being, which Levinas, after Plato, labels the "Good."²⁴ The Good exists

¹⁷Emmanuel Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Perperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Bloomington, In: Indiana UP, 2008, 97-108, 104, 107.

¹⁸Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," 107.

¹⁹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 151.

²⁰Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," 107.

²¹Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," 103, 107.

²²Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," 107.

²³Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11.

²⁴Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 19.

in our mutable world as an infinite appeal from and obligation to the other that manifests in the possibility of an altruistic "saintly" sacrificing of our egoistic self in favour of the other's being. As a human value, Levinas contends, saintliness is beyond reproof, for its possibility and appeal is that which makes us human,²⁵ and it is the free gift of one's individual self in a sacrificial "substitution" for the Other that anarchically upsets the strict accounting of being.²⁶ Acknowledging one's infinite responsibility for the other in testimony to the transcendent Good paradoxically "frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out."²⁷ When, on the other hand, we misguidedly seek to "reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history," we "nullify goodness" and become trapped in the existential double-gotcha of nihilism, in which we are damned to meaningless lives and absurd deaths.²⁸

The transcendent Good gives our life both purpose and meaning in its assignation to us of a task of responsibility that is over and beyond us and that reduces our good and ill fortune in our finite lives to secondary concerns rather than primary ends. Levinas cites the Biblical character of Job as an ethical exemplar whose ultimate triumph is his steadfast refusal to account for his good and ill fortune according to the cause and effect of mutable values and concerns, to being's "calculations and its history."²⁹ Although Job cannot reasonably account for his fate, by his refusal to pass judgment on it, he implicitly accepts responsibility for and in creation:

Job does not have at his disposal all that is required for deliberating in matters of justice. Entering too late into a world created without him, he is responsible over and above

²⁵Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 177.

²⁶Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 151.

²⁷Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 124.

²⁸Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 18.

²⁹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 18.

what he experiences. And yet, in the same way, he is *better* for not being a mere effect of this world.³⁰

Thompson's murderous first-person psychopathic narrator, Lou Ford, is far from being ethically exemplary in the long-suffering manner of Job, and yet his unreasonable fictive fate as a posthumous confessor bears testimony nevertheless to the Good beyond being and to the transcendent ethical obligation to the other that he strives to fulfil, despite himself, by giving the reader the free gift of his nihilistic life's cautionary ethical tale. In telling his tale from beyond being, Ford serves as a modern-day prophet, testifying to the reality of the infinite ethical self that his ego-driven life had sought to deny and giving the lie to his violent life's nihilistic assumption that nothingness is metaphysically ultimate.

It is intriguing to think of Thompson, a life-long avowed atheist, as a modern-day ethical prophet testifying to the transcendent metaphysical reality of the infinite Good beyond being. In his 1942 autobiographical novel *Now and on Earth*, written a decade before *The Killer Inside Me*, the first-person narrator is an acknowledged alcoholic beset by recurring life crises that threaten the health and welfare of his large family dependent upon him as breadwinner. In his desperate straits, he makes an appeal to the two alternative emblems of purported ethical and metaphysical order in his world, to the secular prophet of modern progress, Karl Marx, and to the traditional Judeo-Christian heavenly god, asking that they provide a *reason* for his suffering and that of his family and world:

Why? I ask, why is it like this? Not... for myself; but for all of us.

Why, Karl? And what will you do about it? Not twenty years from now when... a plague spreads across the land, and brother slays brother.

Not then, when it is too late, but now!

³⁰Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Perperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Bloomington, In: Indiana UP, 2008, 79-96, 93.

And you, God? What have you to offer? Sweet music? Pie in the sky? Yes. But, on earth...?

Now and on Earth?³¹

In this most rawly autobiographical of his novels, Thompson offers a blanket condemnation in the form of a frantic appeal to the Father-God figure of eschatological religion and to the modern prophet of utopian humanist progress, in both of whose names have preached popular purveyors of a promised "happy end" that is meant to make human suffering now and on earth endurable by making it metaphysically reasonable – "comprehensible" in theodicean terms.³² Thompson's most radical anarchistic rejoinder to such happy-end consolations, explanations, and conclusions assumes the form of his take-no-prisoners first-person psychopathic narrative in *The Killer Inside Me*.

Thompson was an unlikely and perhaps unwitting prophet and his 1952-4 rage of creativity, resulting in the composition of twelve novels in nineteen months – half of his life's entire production³³ – seemed to express the urgent necessity of a revelation. Perhaps the condition that most fittingly prepared him to be the vehicle of such violent and disturbing envisionings was his life history of hard-knocks in combination with his readily affected soft-heartedness, as attested to by his sister Freddy, who conducted much of the research for Thompson's true crime writing in the 1930s and 40s:

You wouldn't gather this from anything he's written but he was very sensitive. He couldn't stand to read anything in the paper that was a horror story – the murders and the other things that happened, they just made him cringe... He'd get so nervous and upset hearing those things. Jimmie took it all very personally, like, I don't know, it was something that involved *him*.³⁴

³¹Jim Thompson, *Now and On Earth*, New York: Mulholland Books, 2012, 103.

³²Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," 176.

³³Polito, *Savage Art*, 338.

³⁴Polito, *Savage Art*, 188.

During his many years of relative failure as a writer before the publication of *A Killer Inside Me* in 1952 at the age of forty-six, Thompson scratched out a living by writing for the True Crime magazines that fed on the ample material afforded by America's violent society. Polito observed that Thompson's fourteen-year "apprenticeship inside the more lurid lowlife of real-life murder inescapably stamped his mature work,"³⁵ and he noted that "the freshest and most prophetic passages in Thompson's writing for the pulps" involved his imaginative effort to put himself and his reader "in the position of the person who has had the experience."³⁶

Thompson practiced and perfected his psychological ventriloquism in these true-crime tales to the point at which his expressionist portrayals of psychopathic narrators in all too recognizable hells on earth seem luridly real and emotionally authentic. In the typical first-person fictive narrative, the narrator is in some manner egoistically flattering of the author, but not in Thompson's. Thompson's ability empathically to embody a detestable narrator is a remarkable counter-egoistic feat and bespeaks of an enormous capacity for being affected, despite himself, as one might imagine. His editor at Signet Books, Marc Jaffee, observed that Thompson as an author was absolutely *sui generis*. He wasn't like anybody else. He did not attempt to develop an image as a writer. Jim was a big bear of a man, but very easygoing. Considering the kind of books he wrote, his personality was 180 degrees opposite. He seemed to hold everything down.³⁷

No doubt this was a psychological necessity for Thompson, who seems to have "possessed no gift for introspection."³⁸ His two outright autobiographies, *Bad Boy* and *Roughneck*, reveal strikingly little capacity for therapeutic analysis and cathartic understanding of a life of bad breaks and hard knocks that seemed to cry out for explanation. These grimly bemused hard-

³⁵Polito, *Savage Art*, 191.

³⁶Polito, *Savage Art*, 183.

³⁷Polito, *Savage Art*, 411.

³⁸Polito, *Savage Art*, 385.

luck stories are weak tea indeed in contrast to the white lightning of his fictive indictment of existence itself in *The Killer Inside Me*, which operates as an allegorical embodiment and expression of inexplicable evil resulting in useless suffering.

The metaphysical implication and fictive logic of transforming the novel's horrific and yet materialistically mundane narrative into a posthumous confession transforms this existential life-trap into an ethical indictment of radical evil and parablistic cautionary tale. Almost all of Thompson's novels are concerned allegorically in some way with the various manners in which humans transform terrestrial life into hells on earth. Polito observed that, "Thompson conceived about as many different kinds of hell as novels."³⁹ But I would argue that *The Killer Inside Me* demonstrably is the most hellish story in Thompson's body of work, as it perceives evil not only in a brazen fictive dramatization, but in a caustic first-person expression that insidiously becomes our own voice as we imaginatively enable Lou Ford's murderous narrative. Ethically this audacious, unflinching novel works to identify and indict the potential killer inside all of us.

I was first introduced to Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* in graduate school by a classmate who was a keenly sensitive reader and who loaned me the novel with the cautionary caveat, "This is the book that destroyed my life." Allowing for the hyperbole of youth, my classmate's point is well taken, as it is hard to think of another modern novel with the capacity so to disturb. Stephen King wrote of the novel in his introduction for *Black Lizard*, "*The Killer Inside Me* is an American classic... Thompson's other books are either good or almost great, but all of them pale before the horrifying, mesmerizing story of Lou Ford."⁴⁰ Lou Ford as narrator of his own horror show is indeed a mesmerist. His voice is familiar, comfortable, confiding, confidential, humorous, lulling, and intimate. He is the most likeable of Thompson's first-person narrator psychopaths and

³⁹Polito, *Savage Art*, 142.

⁴⁰Stephen King, "Introduction," *The Killer Inside Me*, by Jim Thompson, New York: Mulholland Books, 2011, i-xvii, viii.

the most dangerous to those around him who like and love him, including himself, and by extension the reader. Polito writes of the novel that it is “probably [Thompsons’s] most interior fiction. Yet narrator Ford ... could not be more alarmingly self-estranged.”⁴¹ With Lou Ford’s compellingly down-home and yet terrifyingly schizoid, humorous yet horrifying narrative, Thompson embodied in convincing fashion for a disbelieving, distracted secular world the archetypal, personified voice of evil itself. Polito noted that “Many of Ford’s recent admirers have wondered what it must have been like to grab *The Killer Inside Me* from a subway newsstand in 1952, seduced by the tawdry cover and blurb ... into the anticipation of escapist kicks, only to board an express train to hell.”⁴² Thompson’s most remarkable accomplishment in the novel is to seduce the reader’s imagination and attention to the point at which Ford’s intensely interiorized and intermittently shockingly violent narrative seems to be coming from our own heads. King noted that Thompson in this novel “creates first a sense of catharsis with and then empathy... for a lunatic,” a feat King hails as “one of the most difficult tasks a fiction writer can hope to perform.”⁴³

Thompson accomplishes this sympathetic narrative feat through the manipulation of viewpoint and voice. It is the absence of this eerily authentic, cajoling and convincing narrative voice that makes the film versions of the novel so unsuccessful in their dramatic rendering of what appears in mere plot form to be a series of senseless violent killings. But Lou Ford is never without his reasons and he never pauses in his darkly humorous and harrowing narrative effort to explain them to us and to others. Mid-way through his confessional narrative Lou alerts us to the fact that he has decided that he has to kill his fiancée Amy Stanton, but he keeps forgetting why he has to do so:

I knew I had to kill Amy; I could put the reason into words. But every time I thought about it, I had to stop and think why

⁴¹Polito, *Savage Art*, 344.

⁴²Polito, *Savage Art*, 350-1.

⁴³King, “Introduction,” xv.

again. I'd be doing something, reading a book or something, or maybe I'd be with her. And all of a sudden it would come over me that I was going to kill her, and the idea seemed so crazy that I'd almost laugh out loud. Then, I'd start thinking and I'd see it, see that it had to be done, and...

It was like being asleep when you were awake and awake when you were asleep. I'd pinch myself, figuratively speaking—I had to keep pinching myself. Then I'd wake up kind of in reverse; I'd go back into the nightmare I had to live in. And everything would be clear and reasonable.⁴⁴

In this novel Thompson renders so convincingly an infernal vision of reality in which clarity and reason are the hallmarks of a fiendish, nightmarish world that we begin to question our predilection in favour of such a rationally explained existence. Lou Ford is preternaturally intelligent, but all of his efforts to analyze and comprehend his motivations and behaviour ultimately are failures. His special-pleading ratiocination is that he is psychologically sick, having been traumatized by a sexually violent encounter with a housemaid as a child, to which his hypocritical sadomasochistic father overreacted, resulting in feelings of guilt and persecution, which have been reinforced by life in a particularly narrow-minded and sanctimonious rural American community. But Lou is too honest an analyst and too urgently in existential panic finally to be taken in by his own self-serving rationalizations.

Near his confession's end, Lou Ford finally manages to put his metaphysical investigator's finger upon the root of his existential dilemma, just as he is preparing to make an exit from the world with as many companions as he can compel into his holocaust. As he waits for the authorities to arrive to confront him with the one witness that can prove his guilt, the prostitute Joyce Lakeland he thought he had murdered but had only murderously maimed, Lou spreads medical alcohol left over from his father's family practice throughout his old inherited childhood home and places lit candles in it, turning the whole

⁴⁴Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 146.

rambling structure into a time bomb, and then he sits and waits, and the intervening moments seem emblematic of his entire life and of human existence itself:

You've got no time at all, but it seems like you've got forever. You've got nothing to do, but it seems like you've got everything ... You've got forever, but that's no time at all ...

You go into the office and take a book or two from the shelves. You read a few lines, like your life depended on reading 'em right. But you know your life doesn't depend on anything that makes sense, and you wonder where in the hell you got the idea it did; and you begin to get sore.⁴⁵

The last sentence encapsulates the nihilistic argument of this novel, exposing all attempts at theodicy as hypocritical, self-deluding rationalizations. Indeed, according to the logic of nihilism, Lou Ford's behaviour is entirely rational as he vengefully expresses his will to power and inclination to annihilate existence itself in response to the absurdity of a life that can end only in the nothingness of death. As Levinas observed in *Totality and Infinity*,

We approach death as nothingness in the passion for murder. The spontaneous intentionality of this passion aims at annihilation. The identifying of death with nothingness befits the death of the other in murder.⁴⁶

Elsewhere Levinas argued that the logic of death as murder – of the *right* of the one with the stronger might to take the life of the weaker as he chooses – is implicit in an understanding of existence that is wholly ontological in nature: “The law of evil is the law of being.”⁴⁷ It is the logic of Cain defending himself before God's interrogation as to the whereabouts of the brother he has murdered by asking if he is his brother's keeper. Levinas comments, “We must not take Cain's answer as if he were mocking god or as if he were answering as a little boy: ‘It isn't me, it's the other one.’ Cain's answer is sincere. Ethics is the only

⁴⁵Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 224.

⁴⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tran. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne UP, 1969, 232.

⁴⁷Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 175.

thing lacking in his answer; there's only ontology: I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings."⁴⁸

But ontology is not metaphysically ultimate according to Levinas, for one's ego, which comes into creation with consciousness and is allied with one's mortal biological being, is preceded and succeeded by one's ethical self, which is infinitely older, and is dependent upon and responsible to the transcendent Good that is otherwise than being. Unlike the wilful ego that is self-created and recreated throughout our conscious lives, "The oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity. In this sense it is the victim of a persecution that paralyzes any assumption that could awaken in it, so that it would posit itself for itself."⁴⁹ Lou Ford's sudden shift into the second person in the novel's concluding soliloquy, "You've got no time at all,"⁵⁰ indicates an achieved awareness on his part of the ultimate reality of a self for which he cannot account egoistically, a self that was founded without his conscious assent as an "irreducible singularity... with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace [him] and from which no one can release [him]."⁵¹ He alludes to this understanding of an ethically ordained, unchosen, preconscious self further along in his soliloquy as he awaits the ignition of the holocaust he has prepared for his friends and co-workers and the opportunity to re-murder Joyce Lakeland:

You wonder if you've done things right, so's there'll be nothing left of something that shouldn't ever have been, and you know everything has been done right. You know, because you planned this moment before eternity way back yonder someplace.⁵²

Lou's "before eternity way back yonder someplace" anticipates Levinas' description of a "oneself" that "comes from a past that

⁴⁸Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, tran. Michael B. Smith, New York: Columbia UP, 2000, 110.

⁴⁹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 104.

⁵⁰Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 224.

⁵¹Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.

⁵²Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 225.

could not be remembered ... because the oneself, incommensurate with consciousness which is always equal to itself, is not 'made' for the present."⁵³

The existential and ethical tragedy of Lou Ford's narrative and that which makes him a demoniacal figure, and not just a pathetic victim of psychosis, is that he is consciously aware of the ultimate reality of an ethical self with an infinite obligation to and responsibility for the other, but chooses to deny that responsibility with all of the egoistic force of his nihilistic will. He is the archetypal spirit that denies and his denial increases in vehemence and violence with his increasing awareness of his "unshirkable" obligation as an ethical actor and religious creature.⁵⁴ As Levinas comments:

Why does the other concern me?... Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the "prehistory" of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self.⁵⁵

Lou Ford is granted his life's wish not to be, but only in an egoistic, biological sense. In terms of his ethical self, he has missed his opportunity to substitute himself sacrificially in responsibility for the other and thus is doomed like the Ancient Mariner to repeat his story of failure in confession as a cautionary tale to his enthralled, appalled reader, who is the other existential witness being addressed directly in Lou Ford's second-person soliloquy. As Lou prophetically cautions his listener, "You've got forever, but that's no time at all."⁵⁶ For as Levinas admonishes *his* reader, infinity transcends "the horrible

⁵³Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 107.

⁵⁴Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.

⁵⁵Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

⁵⁶Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 224.

eternity at the bottom of essence,"⁵⁷ so that there truly is no escaping one's infinite obligation to the other, a responsibility that Lou Ford fulfils in unlikely fashion in a postscript to his serial killer confessional narrative, which concludes with his successful murdering of Joyce Lakeland and the explosion of his house that presumably takes everyone present along with it out of this mortal existence:

And they all lived happily ever after, I guess, and I guess—that's—all.

Yeah, I reckon that's all unless our kind gets another chance in the Next Place. Our kind. Us people.

All of us that started the game with a crooked cue, that wanted so much and got so little, that meant so good and did so bad. All us folks. Me and Joyce Lakeland, and Johnnie Pappas and Bob Maples and big ol' Elmer Conway and little ol' Amy Stanton. All of us.⁵⁸

This benedictory afterword is the strangest turn in this uncanny novel. In presuming to speak for the existential wrong done to all of his victims in concluding his narrative, Lou Ford expresses and exemplifies the "otherwise than being" that is not "measured by duration"; rather "this going beyond death is produced ... in the pluralist relation, in the goodness of being for the Other, in justice."⁵⁹ Lou Ford's passionate advocate's insistence upon an ultimate justice for "all of us" existential creatures born to die in whatever tragic fashion transforms this psychopathic villain into an ethical exemplar endorsing Levinas' contention that the existence which Lou in his mortal life nihilistically believed "shouldn't ever have been"⁶⁰ is nevertheless good, a goodness to which Lou prophetically testifies despite his overt mortal failure by offering himself transcendently as advocate substitute for "all of us" in a willing sacrifice that only an ethical "I" that has acknowledged its infinity responsibility to the other, in justice, can make:

⁵⁷Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 176.

⁵⁸Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 229.

⁵⁹Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 301-2.

⁶⁰Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, 225.

“Responsibility for the other... is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom ... The I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others. Nothing is a game. Thus being is transcended.”⁶¹

⁶¹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.