

# **Evil After Postmodernism**

Histories, Narratives, and Ethics

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## 6 Others and Aliens

### Between Good and Evil

*Richard Kearney*

#### I

I propose to explore here the question of alterity in terms of two main approaches. On the one hand, an *aporetics of hospitality* represented by Derridean deconstruction. On the other, an *ethics of judgement* inspired by Ricoeurian hermeneutics. While the former privileges an unconditional welcome to the undecidable other (*hostis/hospis*), the latter recommends a conditional openness to otherness based on the need for some hermeneutic discernment between good and evil.

I will try to show how these approaches respond in turn to two main categories of evil: involuntary and voluntary. Involuntary evil is traditionally associated with non-human origins – cosmological, theological, terratological. Here we might list natural calamities such as earthquakes, illness or pestilence, demon possession, and, in more recent times, alien invasion. Here humans are not considered responsible for evil, and the appropriate response is deemed to be one of lament or acquiescence. (There is literally nothing to be done but to suffer what befalls us.) The second category, “voluntary evil,” attributes the origin of evil largely to humans and lays responsibility for evil happenings accordingly on human beings. Here we are dealing with anthropological evil, entailing the attribution of moral accountability.

In this essay I will focus on that liminal interface between others and aliens which, I submit, haunts our postmodern unconscious. I take the term “other” – as frequently invoked by contemporary continental theory – to refer to an alterity worthy of reverence, esteem, and welcome (hospitality). I take the term “alien,” by contrast, to refer to that experience of alterity associated with selection (as in immigration policy and other acts of differentiating between natives and strangers) or sometimes with suspicion (as in UFOs). My argument here is that we need a “deconstructive-hermeneutic” capable of addressing the dialectic of others and aliens by means of a practical wisdom that enables us to take ethical decisions and actions without succumbing to the logic of sectarian exclusion. While deconstruction is needed to acknowledge the other in the alien and the alien in the other – upsetting hard-and-fast prejudices – critical hermeneutics helps us to discern

between benign and malign strangers, reminding us that not every other is innocent, just as not every alien is evil. My question is basically this: How can we relate the perennial enigma of evil to the equally perennial enigma of alterity? My hypothesis is that these two enigmas overlap in the phenomenon of the "alien."

Let me begin with some observations from popular culture. It is surely not insignificant that sites concerning "aliens" are among those that receive the most frequent number of "hits" on the Internet. These include websites dealing with paranormal events as various as extraterrestrial landings, UFO sightings, alien abductions, Roswell spacecrafts, Area 21 leaks, Heavensgate, the Waco Massacre (Koresh's Branch Davidians referred to New Jerusalem as a "Space Ship"), MJ-12 conspiracies, and other cover-ups of paranormal phenomena, mainly along the Mexican border.

What's being played out on the Web is paralleled in the media generally and on TV and in cinema in particular. The hysteria and paranoia associated with alienology are best evidenced in the visual media. These serve both to screen (display) and screen off (conceal) our unconscious fears. They function as a phantasmagoria of our collective imagination, showing and hiding our deepest anxieties at one and the same time. Concerning TV, one might mention here the extraordinary success of the *X Files*, with its tantalizing leitmotif "there's something out there," and the enduringly popular *Star Trek* series. Film-wise, we could cite the recent spate of Hollywood box-office hits dealing with alien monsters and invasions – *Men in Black*, *Independence Day*, *Mars Attack*, *Contact*, *Sphere*, *Spawn*, *Alien Resurrection*, *The Fifth Element*, *Star Wars* revivals, and so on. While each of these films merits an analysis in itself, suffice it to note here that most evince a common preoccupation with alien figures who invade and assume the appearance of a human self. This usually results in the enigmatic scenario of outsider as insider. The self becomes host, often unbeknownst to itself, to some extraterrestrial alterity. The ego undergoes an experience of abduction, possession, or invasion from without. Nowhere is this more graphically displayed than in the *Alien* series, where Lieutenant Ripley is inhabited by the monster who grows inside her until it eventually bursts through her torso. Like Freud's "uncanny," the unfamiliar returns under the guise of the familiar. The stranger surprises us through the visage of the local, homely, domestic, and normal.<sup>1</sup>

This enigma of the uncanny is, as Freud noted, basic to the human psyche at all times, but what I'm suggesting here is that the uncanny phenomenon of alien-invasion is at the present time dramatically foregrounded in the collective imaginary of our postmodern culture. The present time is a very specific one as we begin the second millennium with its apocalyptic overtones, and as the external enemies that served our scapegoating needs in recent decades begin to dissolve and disappear – the Soviet Bloc, South-East Asia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, Libya, and Iraq. In other words, aliens proliferate where anxieties loom as to who we are and how we demarcate ourselves from

others (who are not us). Alien-ation, as a postmodern phenomenon, is inseparable from the them-and-us syndrome.

Perhaps nowhere is this identity crisis more obvious than in the most Western of all Western nations, America. Here we have the phenomenon of *mondalienation* (to juggle with a phrase of Derrida's) writ large – and in large white letters on a shining hill called Hollywood. If America is indeed the unconscious of Europe, as Wim Wenders argued, then California is the unconscious of America: the last refuge of the exiled dreams and desires that made this nation what it is. There's nowhere else to go once you get to the West Coast, the westernmost extreme of the Western world, the final extremity. And Hollywood is, finally, the unconscious of that unconscious, the silver screen where the repressed returns to haunt and fascinate us.

As we begin the new millennium, more and more of us are becoming "men-in-black" invigilating each other's innocuous visages for traces of alien invasion – as in the opening sequence of the film of that name, where the FBI agents hit upon extraterrestrial aliens as they check on immigrant aliens along the Mexican border. Perhaps the fear is that we won't be able to detect the uncanny stranger until it is too late, like the unsuspecting wife – also in *Men in Black* – who welcomes her husband back after an alien abduction only to discover his face disintegrating as the alien within him makes its presence felt. But the most terrifying discovery is that the alien is not just within our family and friends but *within ourselves*. The foreigner haunts the sanctuary of the self. Our own double.

## II

Before taking a closer look at the genesis of this contemporary drama of *identity*, intimately linked to the drama of *legitimation*, let me return to the philosophical discussions of evil.

One of the oldest conundrums of human thought is: *unde malum?* Where does evil come from? What are the origins of evil – human, natural, supernatural? What is the character of evil – sin, suffering, catastrophe, death? Deconstruction cautions against a rush to judgement. While not for a moment denying that evil exists, Derrida and certain other postmodern thinkers counsel vigilance. The tendency of our media society, so prone to hysteria, is to anathematize anything that is unfamiliar as "evil." The other thus becomes the alien, the stranger the scapegoat, the dissenter the devil. And it is this proclivity to demonize alterity as a threat to our collective identity that so easily issues in paranoid fantasies about invading enemies. Any threat to "national security" is met with immediate defense-attack mechanisms. One thinks of McCarthy's blacklists and Reagan's Star Wars, the Soviet show trials and gulags, Mao's cultural revolution and Tiananmen Square, the embargo of Cuba and the mining of Managua, the bombing of Cambodia and the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, Bloody Sunday and

the introduction of internment without trial in Ulster, *Kristallnacht* and Auschwitz, Satilla and Chabrilla, Sarajevo and Kosovo. The list is interminable.

Most nation-states bent on preserving their body politic from alien viruses seek to pathologize and purge their adversaries. Faced with a threatening outsider, the best mode of defense becomes attack. Again and again the national *we* is defined over and against the alien *them*. That's one reason borders exist, with nationals "in" and aliens "out." You can, of course, cross the border with the right passport and become an alien resident (like myself). But to be truly *nationalized*, you need more – not always readily available if you happen to be arriving from beneath the Rio Grande or beyond the Gaza strip. National security draws a *cordon sanitaire* around the nation-state, protecting it from alien trespassers. Like the line drawn in sand at the Alamo. Or the Mason–Dixon line. Or other lines separating north and south – in Vietnam, in Korea, in Lebanon, in Ireland.

It is in the context of such partitioning and polarizing that Derrida has pursued the question of justice and hospitality in recent years. Every nation-state is logocentric to the extent that it excludes those who do not conform (non-a) to its identity logic (a is a). This is necessary up to a point, as even the cosmopolitan Kant recognized when he accepted the need to issue conditions for refugee visitors to a state (e.g., that their sojourn be temporary, law-abiding, and non-divisive).<sup>2</sup> The world belongs to everyone, yes, but within the borders of nation-states, it belongs to some more than others. Granted, some form of immigration/emigration laws are inevitable. That's the law and Derrida accepts this; but he goes on to argue that there's something beyond the law: namely, justice. And justice demands more: unconditional hospitality to the alien. Hospitality is only truly just, this argument goes, when it resists the temptation to discriminate between good or evil others, that is, between the hostile enemy (*hostis*) and the benign host (*hospis*).

Derrida has much to say about such alienology in his book, *De l'hospitalité*.<sup>3</sup> As we generally understand it, the subject of hospitality is a generous host who decides, as master *chez lui*, whom to invite into his home. But it is precisely because of such sovereign self-possession that the host comes to fear certain others who threaten to invade his house, transforming him from a host into a hostage. The laws of hospitality thus reserve the right of each host to evaluate, select, and choose those he wishes to include or exclude – that is, to discriminate. Such discrimination, indispensable to the "law of hospitality" (*hospitalité en droit*), requires that each visitor identify and name him/herself before entering one's home. And this identification process involves at least some degree of violence. Derrida comments astutely on this paradox:

There can be no sovereignty in the classic sense without the sovereignty of the self in its own home, but since there is no hospitality without

finitude, sovereignty can only operate by filtering, choosing and therefore excluding and doing violence. A certain injustice . . . is present from the outset, at the very threshold of the right to hospitality. This collusion between the violence of power or the force of law (*Gewalt*) on the one hand, and hospitality on the other, seems to be radically integral to the very inscription of hospitality as a right.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida goes on to link this inclusive/exclusive law of hospitality with ethics in the more general sense. The paradox of the stranger (*xenos/hostis*) as either invader-alien or welcome-other “extends from the circumscribed field of *ethos* or ethics, of habitation or visitation as *ethos*, of *Sittlichkeit*, of objective morality as specifically identified in Hegel’s threefold determination of right and the philosophy of right: *family*, *society* (civil or bourgeois) and *state* (or nation-state).”<sup>5</sup> Derrida sums up the aporia of the alien-other thus: “the outsider (*hostis*) received as host or as enemy. Hospitality, hostility, *hospitality*.”<sup>6</sup> Fully cognizant of the way this undecidable dialectic confounds our ethical conventions, Derrida affirms the priority of a hospitality of justice – open to the absolute other as another without name. Here we supersede the hospitality of law. What distinguishes the absolute other is that he is without distinction, that is, without name or proper name. And the absolute or unconditional hospitality that he deserves marks a break with everyday conventions of hospitality governed by rights, contracts, duties, and pacts. Absolute hospitality, argues Derrida,

requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the stranger (furnished with a family name and the social status of a stranger, etc.) but to the absolute other, unknown and anonymous; and that I give place (*donne lieu*), let come, arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him, without demanding that he give his name or enter into some reciprocal pact.<sup>7</sup>

If absolute hospitality requires us to break with the accredited hospitality of right, this doesn’t mean repudiating the latter out of hand; it may even mean, concedes Derrida, preserving it in a state of perpetual progress and mutation. What it does mean, however, is that absolute hospitality is as heterogeneous to conditional hospitality as justice is to the law of right with which it is tied.<sup>8</sup>

But Derrida adds a telling coda to this dazzling deconstruction of the “right of hospitality.” The other is not just the alien stranger, utterly external to home, family, nation, or state. That would be to relegate the other to absolute exteriority – barbarous, savage, precultural, and prejuridical. No, in order that hospitality be just, we must allow some way for the absolute other to enter our home, family, nation, state. And that is why justice can never dispense with the law of right: “The relation to the alien/stranger (*l’étranger*) is regulated by the law of right (*le droit*), by the becoming-right of justice.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty with this analysis of hospitality is that it seems to preclude our need to differentiate between good and evil aliens, between benign and malign strangers, between saints and psychopaths (though admittedly 99 per cent of us fall somewhere between the two). If hospitality is to remain absolutely just and true, all incoming others must remain unidentifiable and undecidable. Derrida appears to claim as much when he declares that

for pure hospitality or pure gift to occur there must be absolute surprise . . . an opening without horizon of expectation . . . to the newcomer whoever that may be. The newcomer may be good or evil, but if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house, if you want to control this and exclude this terrible possibility in advance, there is no hospitality. . . . The other, like the Messiah, must arrive whenever he or she wants.<sup>10</sup>

For Derrida, aliens only come in the dark (like thieves in the night), and we are always in the dark when they come. We are never sure who or what they are; we cannot even be sure if we are hallucinating or not. For the absolute other is without name and without face, an “impossible, unimaginable, unforeseeable, unbelievable, absolute surprise.”<sup>11</sup> The best we can do is try to read between the lines and make a leap of faith, an impossible leap of faith, like Abraham, like Kierkegaard. But why not add – and here’s my difficulty with the undecidable – “like Jim Jones or David Koresh” or other figures of mystical madness who believe they are recipients of messianic messages from some Other they call God?

If all reading is reading in the dark, how can we discern between holy and unholy spirits, how distinguish between the deities of peace and justice and those of horror and destruction? Joseph Campbell, for one, has much to say about messianic monsters in *The Power of Myth*, a cautionary reminder (it seems to me) of the need for some kind of ethical decision: “By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all your standards for harmony, order and ethical conduct. . . . That’s God in the role of destroyer. Such experiences go past ethical judgements. Ethics is wiped out . . . God is horrific.”<sup>12</sup>

To be absolutely hospitable is to suspend all criteria of ethical or juridical discrimination. And in such non-discriminate openness to alterity we find ourselves unable to differentiate between good and evil, which is a fine lesson in tolerance but not necessarily in moral judgement. If there *is* a difference between Jesus and Jim Jones, between Saint Francis and Stalin, between Melena and Mengele, between Siddhartha and the Marquis de Sade – and I think most of us would want to say there is – then some further philosophical reflections are needed to supplement the deconstructive gesture of hospitality. Deconstructive non-judgementalism needs to be supplemented, I suggest, with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom.



## III

Deconstruction is not the only postmodern response to the challenge of evil. While I grant that it is a necessary condition of postmodern wisdom, I do not believe it is a sufficient one. There is also the need for a critical hermeneutics of action. For if deconstruction makes us more intellectually sensitive to the complex and often interchangeable nature of others and aliens, alerting us to the irreducible alterity of all incomers, hermeneutics addresses the need for critically informed ethico-political judgement. It's not enough to be open to the other (though this is essential to ethics); one must also be careful to discern, in some provisional fashion at least, between good and evil.

In an essay entitled, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," Paul Ricoeur offers a hermeneutic critique of different discursive responses to evil: lament and blame, myth, wisdom, and theodicy.<sup>13</sup>

The first discursive response – *lament and blame* (witnessed in the Hebrew Bible, for example) – differentiates between evil as suffering and evil as wrongdoing. Lament refers to an evil that befalls us from outside. By contrast, blame refers to evil that arises from within us and for which we are responsible. Or to put it another way, if lament sees us as victims, blame makes culprits of us.<sup>14</sup> The fact is, of course, that these two categories are almost always intertwined. We can feel guilty for committing an evil act while simultaneously experiencing seduction, or invasion, by an overwhelming force outside of us. But for the moment, we'll let the distinction stand.

The next discursive genre – *myth* – allows for the incorporation of evil into "great narratives of origin" (Mircea Eliade). These genealogical narratives seek to explain the origin of evil in terms of the genesis of the cosmos (cosmogony). They offer a "plot" which configures the monstrosity of evil, explaining the source of the obscene and thereby taking some of the shock out of it. Such mythic spectacles make the foreign curiously familiar, the unbearable bearable, the outrageous accessible.<sup>15</sup> In mythological legends, considerations of human moral choice are inextricably linked to cosmological cycles of fate, destiny, or predestination. The evil figure is the alienated figure, that is, a self determined by some force beyond itself.

Myth proceeds towards *wisdom* – our next discursive category – to the extent that we not only recount the origins of evil but also seek to justify why such is the case for each one of us. In short, while myth narrates, wisdom argues.<sup>16</sup> It seeks to address the question not only of *why* but *why me?* The wisdom genre turns lament into a legal complaint. It tries to make moral sense of the monstrous. An exemplary case here is the Book of Job, where God and man engage in dialogue about the nature of creation and covenant. With such wisdom literature, the enigma of evil becomes less a matter of metaphysical givenness than of interpersonal relations (human-human or human-divine). In the conclusion to Job, arguments about retribution and justice are ultimately turned to a contemplative wisdom of

love: Job learns to love Yahweh “for naught” in defiance of Satan’s wager at the outset of the story.

Wisdom discourse gives way to “speculative” discourse with the development of Christian theology. Augustine is the first great advocate of this position in his answer to the gnostics. In order to show that evil is not a substance implanted in the universe but a punishment (*poena*) for human sin (*peccatum*), Augustine invents a new category, “nothingness” (*nihil*). Evil is now construed as a deficiency in being which amounts to a privation of goodness (*privatio boni*). If there is evil in the world, therefore, it can only be the result of human action – that is, an act of turning away from the good being of God towards a lack of being. Augustine thus proposes a radically moral vision of evil which replaces the genealogical question, *Unde malum?*, with the question of willful human wrongdoing, *Unde malum faciamus?* The cause of evil is not to be found in cosmology but in some form of willed action – the sins of the “bad will.” This leads in turn, of course, to a penal view of history where no one suffers unjustly. Everyone gets his or her reward, and all pain is a recompense for sin.

The difficulty for Augustine and subsequent theology was how to reconcile this extreme hypothesis of moral evil with the need to give sin a “supraindividual” and historical-generic account in order to explain how suffering is not always justly apportioned as a retribution for individual sins. In countless cases it is clearly excessive. In other words, if evil is something we as humans do, it is also *done to us*: something we inherit, something already there. Augustine thus sought to reinterpret the *Genesis* tale of original sin in order to rationalize this apparently irrational paradox: namely, we are responsible but not *entirely* responsible for the evil we commit or endure.

It was but a short step from these Augustinian speculations on original sin to the fully-fledged theories of Western onto-theology. Thus we find Leibniz, for example, invoking the principle of Sufficient Reason to account for the judicious balancing of good with evil in the “best of all possible worlds.” And if this balancing act of retribution and compensation is attributed to the infinite mind of God by Leibniz, it is dialectically humanized by Hegel and the German Idealists. Hegel’s “cunning of reason” silences the scandal of suffering by subsuming the tragic into a triumphant logic where all that is real is rational. Here the hubris of systematic speculation reaches its untenable extreme: “The more the system flourishes, the more its victims are marginalized. The success of the system is its failure. Suffering, as what is expressed by the voices of lamentation, is what the system excludes.”<sup>17</sup>

But neither version of theodicy – Leibnizian or Hegelian – can provide a convincing answer to the protest of unjust suffering: *Why me?* This protest rightly and righteously continues to echo through the memoirs of evil from Job and Gethsemane to Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Nor can theodicy resist the debunking of “rational theology” in part three of Kant’s *Critique of Pure*

*Reason.* Indeed the greatness of Kant was to recognize the need to pass from a purely “theoretical” explanation of evil to a more “practical” one. This move from speculative explanation to moral-political action liberates the insight that evil is something that ought not to be and needs to be struggled against. By de-alienating evil and making it a matter of contingency rather than necessity (cosmogonic, theological, metaphysical, or historical), Kant brought us face to face with the responsibility of action.

I might add here that if Kant freed us from the excess of rationalist speculation on evil, he also warned against the opposite extreme of drunken irrationalism (what he called *Schwärmerei*), the sort of mystical madness which submits to evil as an alien power that invades and overwhelms us at a whim. This latter view typifies not only belief in demonic possession but also the mystical profession of the “dark side of God” running from the gnostics and Bruno to Boehme, Schelling, and Jung (e.g., *Answer to Job*). By taking the mystique out of evil, Kant removed some of its captivating power. He enabled us to see that evil is not a property of some external demon or deity but a phenomenon deeply bound up with the anthropological condition. Evil ceases to be a matter of paranoid projection and sacrificial scapegoating and becomes instead an affair of human responsibility. Absolutist dualities are overcome. One’s self becomes oneself-as-another and one’s other becomes another-as-onself.

But even Kant could not totally ignore the aporetic character of evil. For if he clearly called for a response within the limits of practical human reason, he could never completely deny some residual inscrutability (*Unerforschbarkeit*) of evil. At one point, Kant states that there may be “no conceivable ground from which the moral evil in us could originally have come.”<sup>18</sup> The lament of *Why? Why me? Why my beloved child?* remains as troublingly enigmatic as ever. Victims of evil cannot be silenced with either rational explanation (theodicy) or irrational submission (mysticism). Their stories cry out for other responses capable of addressing both the alterity and the humanity of evil.

But do such responses exist? How may we acknowledge the enigma of evil, laid bare by our detour through Western genres of thought, while addressing Tolstoy’s question: *What is to be done?* Taking a further cue from Ricoeur’s hermeneutic reading, I will propose a two-fold approach: practical understanding (*phronesis-mimesis-praxis*) and working-through (*catharsis-Durcharbeitung*).

“Practical understanding” is the name I give to that limited capacity of the human mind to *think* the enigma of evil. I draw here from such varied models as biblical “wisdom” (discussed above), Aristotle’s “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*), Kant’s “practical reason” (indeterminate judgement), and Ricoeur’s “narrative understanding.” What each of these models has in common is an ability to transfer the aporia of evil from the sphere of theory (*theoria*) – proper to the exact knowledge criteria of logic, science, and speculative metaphysics – to the sphere of a more practical art of under-

standing (*technelpraxis*), which allows for an approximative grasp of phenomena: what Aristotle calls “the flexible rule of the architect.” Where speculative theory, epitomized by theodicy, explained evil in terms of ultimate causal or creationist origins, practical understanding is geared towards a more hermeneutic comprehension of the indeterminate, contingent, and singular characteristics of evil – while not abandoning all claim to quasi-universal criteria (that would account for at least a minimally shared sense of evil). Such practical understanding borrows from action the conviction that evil is something that ought not to be and must be struggled against. In that sense, it resists the fatalism of archeologies of evil – mythical and theodical – in favor of a future-oriented praxis. The response (though by no means the solution) offered by practical understanding is to act against evil. Instead of acquiescing in the face of an origin that precedes us, action turns our understanding towards the future “by the idea of a *task* to be accomplished.” The moral-political requirement to act does not therefore abandon the legitimate quest for some minimal model of reasonable discernment; it in fact demands it. For how could we act against evil if we could not identify it, that is, if we could not critically discern between good and evil? In this respect, the genuine struggle against evil presupposes a critical hermeneutic of suspicion. And such hermeneutic understanding retains Kant’s insistence on a practical reason that seeks to think somehow the unthinkable. And to do so with the “sobriety of a thinking always careful not to transgress the limits of knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>

Our critical understanding of evil may never surpass the provisional nature of Kant’s indeterminate (that is, “aesthetic reflective”) judgement. But it at least judges, and in a manner alert to both the singular alterity of evil and to its quasi-universal character as grasped by the *sensus communis*. Not exact or adequate judgement but a form of judgement for all that, based on the practical wisdom conveyed by narratives and driven by moral justice. We may say, accordingly, that practical judgement is not only “phronetic” but “narrative” in character. An overlapping of *phronesis* (Aristotle) and judgement (Kant) neatly captured in Ricoeur’s account of the ethical role of narrative:

Ethics as Aristotle conceived it, and as it can still be conceived today, speaks abstractly of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness. It is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune. By means of poetry we learn how reversals of fortune result from this or that conduct, as this is constructed by the plot in the narrative. It is due to the familiarity we have with the types of plot received from our culture that we learn to relate virtues, or rather forms of excellence, with happiness or unhappiness. These “lessons” of poetry

constitute the “universals” of which Aristotle spoke; but these are universals that are of a lower degree than those of logic and theoretical thought. We must none the less speak of understanding but in the sense that Aristotle gave to *phronesis*. . . . In this sense I am prepared to speak of phronetic understanding in order to contrast it with theoretical understanding. Narrative belongs to the former and not to the latter.<sup>20</sup>

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it is also (as noted above) something we undergo. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering. It is also to underestimate that irreducible alterity of evil which myth and theodicy tend to overestimate. One of the wisest responses to evil is, on this count, to acknowledge its traumatizing effects and work-them-through (*durcharbeiten*) as best we can. Practical understanding can only redirect us toward action if it has already recognized that an element of alterity almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe, or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil, we are never prepared enough. That is why the “work of mourning” is so important as a way of not allowing the inhuman nature of suffering to result in a complete “loss of self” (what Freud called “melancholia”). Some kind of catharsis is necessary to prevent the slide into fatalism that all too often issues in despairing self-destruction. The critical detachment brought about by cathartic mourning elicits a wisdom that turns *passive lament* into the possibility of *active complaint*, that is, *protest*.<sup>21</sup>

The role played by narrative testimonies is crucial in this respect, whether it be those of survivors of the Holocaust or of trauma-abuse. For such narrative rememberings invite the victim to escape the alienation of evil, that is, to move from a position of mute helplessness to speech-acts of revolt and (where possible) self-renewal. Some kind of narrative working-through is necessary, it seems, for survivors of evil not to feel crippled by grief or guilt (about the death of others and their own survival) nor to succumb to the game of the “expiatory victim.” What the catharsis of mourning-narrative allows is that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered*. It detaches us from the obsessional repetitions and repressions of the past and frees us for a future. For only thus can we escape the disabling cycles of retribution, fate, and destiny: cycles which *estrangle* us from our power to act by instilling the view that evil is overpoweringly alien – that is, irresistible. Working-through the experience of evil – narratively, practically, cathartically – enables us to take the allure out of evil so that we can begin to distinguish between possible and impossible modes of protest and resistance. Working-through is central to a hermeneutics of action. It makes evil resistible.

In sum, by transforming the alienation and victimization of lament into a moral response of just struggle, the hermeneutics of action offers, I submit, an answer (if not a solution) to the challenge of evil.

## IV

Let me return, finally, to the question of aliens in our postmodern culture. The postmodern paranoia around aliens is not adventitious. It is, I believe, a symptom informing the current anxiety about identity-questions – Who are we? What is our nation? Why us? This crisis of *identity* is inseparable (as noted) from a crisis of *legitimation*. This is, of course, a world-wide phenomenon, but it is especially acute, I believe, in the Western world, and nowhere more so than in the “cultural unconscious” of the Western world – America.<sup>22</sup>

If philosophy is to address this postmodern drama of identity and legitimation, I would suggest it might begin by, first, deconstructing all hard and fast polarizations between others and aliens (and, by extension, others and selves); and, second, conducting hermeneutic analyses of the principal discourses used to represent the alterity of evil and advancing new modes of recognition and renewal. For if it is true that we need an aporetics of alterity, we also need an ethics of judgement. It is not enough to interpret our strange world, we must also take action to change it.

## Notes

- 1 S. Freud, “The Uncanny,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, London, Hogarth Press, 1955.
- 2 See I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. T. Humphrey, Cambridge, Hackett, 1983.
- 3 J. Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1997. All translations from the French are my own.
- 4 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 53.
- 5 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 44.
- 6 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 45.
- 7 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 29.
- 8 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 29.
- 9 Derrida, *De L'hospitalité*, p. 69.
- 10 UCD Round Table, 1997, *Questioning Ethics*, R. Kearney and M. Dooley (eds), London, Routledge, 1998.
- 11 J. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 73; see also M. Dooley, “The Politics of Exodus: Derrida, Kierkegaard and Levinas on ‘Hospitality,’” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, R. Perkins (ed.), Macon, Mercer University Press, 1999.
- 12 J. Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, New York, Doubleday, 1988, p. 222.
- 13 P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Indianapolis, Fortress Press, 1995.
- 14 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 250.
- 15 As Aristotle noted in *Poetics*, Dent, London, 1963, III, 4–iv, 3: “There is the enjoyment people always get from representations . . . we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, such as obscene beasts and corpses.”
- 16 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 252; see also P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967.

- 17 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 257.
- 18 I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1960, p. 38. Cited by Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 258-9.
- 19 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 259.
- 20 P. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, David Wood (ed.), London, Routledge, 1991, p. 23.
- 21 See S. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12.
- 22 I discuss this dialectic of "otherness" in the constitution of British, Irish, and European identities in my *Postnationalist Ireland*, London, Routledge, 1997. See also the theological relation between sacrificial scapegoating, legitimization narratives, and national identity analyzed by Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1997.