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**HERMENEUTICAL EXORCISM AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION:  
A BRIEF STUDY ON THE PROBLEM OF MEANING AND  
AN EXISTENTIALIST INTERPRETATION OF *THE EXORCIST* (1971)**

**PORTO ALEGRE**

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**2010**

I dedicate this dissertation to:  
my son Davi, my *lapis philosophorum*;  
my parents, Eduardo e Enilda, to whom I will  
need an entire life to thank;  
my wife, Cris, for her patience and care.

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“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?  
Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not  
willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing?  
Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing?  
Then why call him God?”

Epicurus (?)

“Some things happen of necessity, others by  
chance, others through our own agency.”

Epicurus

“Facts is precisely what there is not,  
only interpretations.”

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

## RESUMO

Interpretar sempre implicará uma grande jornada. Não é por acaso que esta prática esteja associada à figura mitológica de Hermes. O próprio ato reflexivo em torno da questão ‘o que significa significar’ envolve uma longa viagem. É dividindo a interpretação em dois momentos, ao qual nos referiremos amplamente apenas por ‘ontológico’ e ‘prático’, que esta dissertação adquire sua forma. Num primeiro momento, há uma problematização sobre a questão do significado numa perspectiva hermenêutica. Partindo da discussão engendrada na obra *Politics of Interpretation* (1983), e passando pela argumentação sobre ‘intencionalidade’ em interpretação textual, especificamente caracterizada na obra de E. D. Hirsch Jr. *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), busca-se um estudo introdutório sobre a questão do significado do texto literário em relação a um outro problema que é denominado como ‘o narcisismo do leitor’, para enfim culminar na proposta hermenêutica de Ricoeur. Ou seja, antes de especificamente lidar com a interpretação de *O Exorcista* (1971), busca-se uma abordagem teórica sobre a questão do significado. Num segundo momento, que não implica numa aplicação da teoria exposta, pois partimos do princípio que não há divisão entre teoria e prática, passamos à interpretação da obra *The Exorcist* (1971) de William Peter Blatty. Aborda-se esta obra por constituir-se um problema hermenêutico. Porém, a virada existencialista desta obra proposta por esta dissertação será precedida por uma releitura tanto do autor como um texto e sua conseqüente relação com a interpretação do romance, quanto por uma abordagem relacional entre não só a recepção crítica desta obra, assim como em relação aos demais romances do autor, na tentativa, primeiro, de demonstrar a insuficiência de caracterizações da obra como ‘horror’ e ‘teodicéia’, para, finalmente, propor a abertura da obra em direção a uma perspectiva existencialista.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *O Exorcista*; Hermenêutica; Significado; Literatura de Horror; Existencialismo.

## ABSTRACT

Interpreting will always implicate a long journey. It is not by chance that this practice is associated to the mythological figure of Hermes. The very reflexive act about the question of ‘what it means to mean’ involves a long travel. It is by dividing interpretation in two moments, which will be referred to merely as ‘ontological’ and ‘practical’, that this dissertation achieves its form. In a first moment, there is a problematization about the issue of meaning in a hermeneutical perspective. Beginning from a discussion engendered in the work *Politics of Interpretation* (1983), and passing through an argumentation about ‘intentionality’ in textual interpretation, more specifically characterized in E. D. Hirsch Jr.’s *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), we search an introductory study about the meaning of a literary text in relation to another problem which is denominated as ‘the narcissism of the reader’, in order to finally culminate in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical proposal. It means that, before specifically dealing with the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971), we seek a theoretical approach to the question of meaning. In a second moment, which does not implicate in the application of the exposed theory, since we follow the principle that there is no division between theory and practice, we develop an interpretation of William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* (1971). This work is approached because it configures a hermeneutical problem. However, the existentialist shift in this work proposed by this dissertation will be preceded by a reading of the author as a text and its consequent relation to the interpretation of the novel, as well as a relational approach not only to the specific critical reception of the mentioned title, but also in relation to the author’s other works, in the attempt, first, to demonstrate the insufficiency of the characterization of the novel as ‘horror’ or ‘theodicy’, and, finally, to propose the opening of the work in the direction of an existentialist perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Exorcist*; Hermeneutics; Meaning; Horror Literature; Existentialism.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AE – SZUMSKYJ, Benjamin (Ed.). *American Exorcist: critical essays on William Peter Blatty*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008.

CI – RICOEUR, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretations: essays in hermeneutics*. Ed. Don Ihde, Trans. Willis Domingo et al. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985.

FM – RICOEUR, Paul. *Fallible Man*. New York, Fordham University Press, 1986a.

FT – KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Garden City: Doubleday, 1954.<sup>1</sup>

HHS – RICOEUR, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Ed., Trans. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

IT – RICOEUR, Paul. *Interpretation Theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.

OA – RICOEUR, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.

SE – RICOEUR, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York: Beacon Press, 1986b.

SUD – KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Garden City: Doubleday, 1954.<sup>1</sup>

TE – BLATTY, William Peter. *The Exorcist*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

TN1 – RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative – Vol.1*. Paperback Ed. Transl. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990a.

TN2 – RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative – Vol.2*. Paperback Ed. Transl. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990b.

TN3 – RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative – Vol.3*. Paperback Ed. Transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990c.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a volume which contains both books.



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## 1 FOREWORD

According to Ricoeur (1985), “an introduction will have fulfilled its task if it permits the reader to better question, read, and think the book he is about to take up.” (p.377) Therefore, allow me to call this dissertation “embryotic”. I will explain. Unavoidably, the reader will find two lines of argumentation here, because what was supposed to be merely introductory ended up becoming half of the text. At first, this scared me. However, I am one of those persons who may easily consider theoretically the question of abortion, but who will never effectively agree with an affirmative option. I was not able to suppress what was coming up.

This text is, more than anything else, a hermeneutical journey. Basically, it poses the question ‘what does it mean?’ to a novel called *The Exorcist* (1971)<sup>2</sup>. However, I was not satisfied in starting right away with the text proper. I then decided to include as an *introduction*<sup>3</sup> to my dissertation a very *brief* research on the subject of what it means to ask ‘what does it mean?’ to a literary text. The result was that it almost became the entire dissertation. This is why I call it embryotic. I am aware that this fact may mar the main purpose of the text. However, I still take the risk of keeping the original chapter without many cuts. This is the first warning to the reader: there are two moments in my argumentation.

The first moment, which I call ‘Meaning the Issue (Prologue)’, is divided in three parts. I used this title because it consists in an attempt to provide a very brief reflection on what the question ‘what does it mean?’ means. Initially, it should be basically an introduction to Ricoeur’s theory on hermeneutics. However, in order to emphasize the question described

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, I will always include the year in order to emphasize that I am talking about the novel. This insistence is due to the prevalence that the cinematic adaptation has received.

<sup>3</sup> From now on, whenever I use inverted commas ( ‘ ’ ), the word between them must be taken in a broad sense; in similar system, whenever I use the words in *italics*, without any additional note, it will indicate that the word is being used in a very literal sense.

by the French philosopher as “the narcissism of the reader” (RICOEUR, 1981, p.191), I decided to include an essay on one of the references used by Ricoeur. I opted for this because I was surprised when I asked one of my professors<sup>4</sup>, even before having an advisor for this dissertation, and she suggested me exactly the book that I was very interested in reading, namely, E. D. Hirsch’s *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). There were two other books on this list, but only one of them was valuable for my argumentation – W. T. J. Mitchell’s *The Politics of Interpretation* (1982). The two books mentioned actually form the two first sections of the first chapter in this dissertation. Afterwards, I realized that, in a sense, I am addicted to what is broadly called *close reading*. Thus, what was supposed to be an introduction ended up becoming two essays. The third section, and the most important one, is then left to the approach of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical phenomenology. Thus, if the reader can forgive me for the recommendation, the first chapter is supposed to be an argumentation on the problem of what I may call *the ascription of meaning*. It is an attempt to show that categories such as reader, author, and text cannot have a privileged position in the matter, because all of them form what in Ricoeur’s (1981) words can be called “the mode of being-in-the-world” of the text (p.192). However, an additional warning is also necessary: this is supposed to be only the raising of a problem, not the proposal of a solution.

I know it may be deceptive for those interested in my interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) to have to struggle with this theoretical argumentation. This is precisely the main purpose of my dissertation, the part which is properly dedicated to answer the question ‘what does it mean’ posed to the novel. However, this is the part of my text which also has its detours. The first is through William Peter Blatty as a text. It is amazing to hear from Stephen King that, in a way, Blatty is his ‘father’ (WINTER, 1985). In my interpretation, to deconstruct Blatty as a ‘horror writer’ is the first step in order to do the same to the novel.

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Ph.D. Rita Teresinha Schmidt for her suggestions.

This is why I call this section ‘The Beginning’, but also as a parallel to the names of chapters in *The Exorcist* (1971). The next section is another detour, this time through essays on Blatty’s bibliography. I take this procedure in order to show that it is possible to observe, through what is understood in his other books, that what *The Exorcist* (1971) is proposing is not actually ‘horror’. I call this section ‘The Edge’ in order to show that these works, and the commentaries made on them, actually form the contours of the novel; though they remain as fragile and thin as the skin is to our bodies. Finally, it is only in the last section of the second chapter that I start the existentialist interpretation properly. This choice has a purpose: to show that interpretation is always achieved too late, and it is only through the detour through other texts that meaning is performed. Meaning, in the end, is not an object, but a relation. This is what the reader is supposed to find along the following lines. Thus, it is not by chance that I call this last section ‘The Abyss’, exactly because in meaning we can never see the end; perhaps only if we throw ourselves in.

Therefore, what the second chapter is trying to show is that the label ‘horror’ is much more an influence caused by its cinematic adaptation on the interpretation of the novel than what a closer reading of latter can provide. Secondly, the second chapter is also an attempt to escape the easy resource of interpreting the novel as a kind of catechism, or rather, as I prefer to say, theodicy. Finally, this is an endeavor to open the novel to one of its possible modes of being in the world, not because this is the most correct one, but because literary texts should always be open for more interpretations, to conflict. It would be very easy to do this with a literary text which is normally open to different interpretations. This is one aspect that reinforces my insistence in interpreting exactly *The Exorcist* (1971). Curiously, this book is not my favorite<sup>5</sup>, despite having made my final paper for my undergraduate course on the same book (a paper which had a strong bias towards psychology). Therefore, the purpose of

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<sup>5</sup> I think there will hardly be a book to replace Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on the top of my list.

this dissertation is truly hermeneutical. The insistence on calling *The Exorcist* a horror story has always amazed me. It is acceptable to call it a ‘supernatural thriller’ or ‘theological literature’. However, I still wanted to depart from the obvious. This is how I come to existentialism. In fact, while I was seeking in philosophy an argumentation on the subject of ‘evil’ and ‘faith’, I found Ricoeur’s texts. Surprisingly, his *Interpretation Theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (1976), and his philosophy in general, attracted my attention with such strength that I decided to take him not only as a source for the approach to ‘evil’ and ‘faith’, but also as a theoretical basis for interpretation.

However, there was still another name to be involved in this dissertation as a surprise: Kierkegaard. This philosopher, on its turn, was inevitable; not only because he is an explicit influence on Ricoeur, but exactly because of the relevance of his religious philosophy as an intertextuality for *The Exorcist* (1971). It will not be rare to find in my interpretation many moments when I use direct quotations from these authors as if they were comments on the novel. I took this ‘libertinage’<sup>6</sup> exactly to reinforce my position that the latter has a great potential to be taken as existentialist novel. Finally, ‘Issuing the Meaning’ is my attempt to put the ineffability of a relation (meaning) into the concreteness of the word (text).

I would like to close this introduction by asking the reader: what is there between the ‘prologue’ and the ‘epilogue’ of a story? In this way, one may have the answer for my choice of naming the two chapters of this dissertation as ‘Prologue’ and ‘Epilogue’.

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<sup>6</sup> Pun intended.

## 2 MEANING THE ISSUE (PROLOGUE)

This first chapter of my dissertation is a brief research on the question of ‘meaning’. It started with the *naïve* question ‘what does it mean?’, which is supposed to work as a central question to my object of study, namely, *The Exorcist* (1971). This word receives inverted commas in order to call attention to the imprecise character it may initially present, and also, to the diverse areas of study which have taken it as their focus of scrutiny. This more general term is present in the title of this dissertation exactly to scope a number of other terms which will also be relevant throughout this text (just to name a few of them – interpretation, understanding, explication, criticism, etc). It would be a totally different choice if this dissertation were written in Portuguese, or German (in which there are “significado” and “sentido” in the first, and “Bedeutung” and “Sinn” in the second, while in English there are meaning, sense and signified). I am not claiming here that one language is more or less favorable or problematic to the question. The purpose is just to show an initial indecision, without an intention of finding a solution by the end of this study, but that can be problematized as it progresses. I believe this is, or at least should be, a crucial concern for anybody involved in literary studies.

I also give emphasis to the word ‘naïve’. I decided to refer to the question in this way because of the etymology of the word, which means, in one of its original acceptances, “just born” (HARPER, 2001). In this sense, it does not have anything to do with the commonsense association it has with ‘silly’ or ‘innocent’. It has more to do with what E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1967) refers to as “a general type”<sup>7</sup>. After formulating this introductory question, during my reading on Ricoeur, I realized that this same question could also be called ‘ontological’, if by

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<sup>7</sup> An concept which will be properly approached in the section of this chapter dedicated to this author.

ontological I only refer to the general idea of the term, which means ‘the study of being’. Thus, while I try to construe a/the meaning of *The Exorcist* (1971), I also try to think about the meaning of ‘meaning’ itself.

This first chapter is divided into three sections, which correspond to three different moments of my research on meaning. The first moment, which will be the last section, is concerned with what I could formulate about the subject from Ricoeur’s thought, starting from his lectures at the University of Texas organized and published in a book titled *Interpretation Theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (1976), and then explored in many of his other books. The second section, which was the second moment of my research, is concerned with E. D. Hirsch’s book *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). Finally, the last moment of my study on the subject of meaning, and the first section of this chapter, comes from a collection of essays organized by W. T. J. Mitchell under the title *The Politics of Interpretation* (1983), an outcome from an initial special issue of *Critical Inquiry* based on a symposium of the same name held at the University of Chicago’s Center for Continuing Education, October 30, 31, and November 1 of 1981.

I decided to set this disposition of sections in the chapter because of my personal position toward these three perspectives. I start from what I may call a *kaleidoscopic* perspective on the issue of interpretation. I define *The Politics of Interpretation* this way in order to characterize it as something beautiful, fragmented and hypnotic. With ‘beautiful’, I allude to the great names of scholars the book was able to gather under the same compilation of texts. With ‘fragmented’, I mean the ample diversity of directions that the subject of interpretation took in the hands of these varied perspectives. Finally, with ‘hypnotic’, I intend to mean how appealing all of them are. In its turn, the second step is dedicated to Hirsch’s book *Validity in Interpretation* in order to keep under discussion an issue started by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and which I think is far from concluded, namely, the question of

‘objectivity’ in interpretation. Finally, the last approach to the subject is dedicated to a brief study of Ricoeur’s philosophy, more specifically the sections concerned with textual interpretation. At first, I decided to include in the provisory<sup>8</sup> title of my dissertation (*Literary Exorcism: meaning The Exorcist*) the following words: *through hermeneutics*. Certainly, the field of hermeneutics is very broad, and to make reference to it approaching only one branch of this epistemological area may be a controversial attitude. However, I insist on maintaining this reference only under the word ‘hermeneutics’ because this is also what is at issue both in *The Politics of Interpretation* (1982) and in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). My position towards the subject may be made more evident by the fact of leaving Ricoeur for the last section. Nevertheless, his name is not in the title, not because he does not deserve to be: on the contrary, his philosophy seemed much more attractive to me than other postmodern mainstream thinkers. I regret not having enough time to develop the issue of hermeneutics a little further, since many other names would deserve such a place. One of them, and I insist on giving this credit, is the name of Hans-Georg Gadamer. His *Truth and Method* (1960) is a contemporary authority in the subject of hermeneutics until today. Despite this feeling of debt, I do feel a little relieved from this burden since Hirsch and Ricoeur provide enough information through their approaches to Gadamer. If a thorough approach to his text was not possible, at least an indirect relation could be made.

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<sup>8</sup> The way the body of the dissertation took shape along its composition demanded that I reformulate the title in order to better indicate what is at issue in this study. The weight that the theoretical part assumed is the reason for allowing more emphasis on the word ‘hermeneutics’.



## 2.1 The Politics of Interpretation

*Critical Inquiry* is a journal in the humanities concerned with questions on critical theory. Founded in 1974 by Wayne Booth, Arthur Heiserman and Sheldon Sacks, nowadays the journal is edited by W. T. J. Mitchell and is published by the University of Chicago Press. One of its issues, more precisely vol.9, no.1 September 1982, is a collection of essays by participants in a symposium under the same name organized by and held at the University of Chicago. The book, issued in 1983, shows a good introductory perspective on the question of ‘interpretation’. Its title, *The Politics of Interpretation*, represents adequately the tone of the essays published there. Though Mitchell says in the introduction for this book that “interpretation is politics by other means” (p.1)<sup>9</sup>, his following characterization, “interpretation as *war* by other means” (ibid), more appropriately represents the way the discussion is led. I do not interpret this conflict negatively; on the contrary, such a ‘conflict’ is very positive. In my opinion, interpretation, and politics, too, implies taking a position, as well as a call to action. Assuming a position is at the same time unavoidable and dangerous; this is the way I understand Mitchell’s observation that “politics is an uncomfortable topic for intellectuals”. (p.2) In this sense, I may conjecture that action is always a step into the unknown. I think that this is the proximity of politics, interpretation and life; all of them are essentially decision making. This reminds me of what I once read in a banner for the celebration of librarian’s day: “books do not change the world; books change people and people change the world”. It is in this sense that I agree with Mitchell when he says that “interpretation is itself a way of changing the world”. (p.3) This brief remark provides arguments for me to start to believe in hermeneutics as a fundamental human practice.

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<sup>9</sup> From now on, since all quotations are taken from *The Politics of Interpretation* (MITCHELL, 1983), I will only mention the page where they are taken from.

I think that the general tone of the book cannot escape being characterized as a battle between those who *adjudicate* meaning to the author and those who do to the reader. Mitchell gives a different characterization to this in the introduction: “Advocates of interpretive determinacy and objectivity are characterized as authoritarian, puritanical, and fascistic; explorers of interpretive indeterminacy and ‘freeplay’ (...) are stigmatized as escapists, obfuscationists, nihilists...” (ibid) In the following lines, I will try to provide my reader with what the authors of these essays have to say about it. I may at times agree or disagree with some points, but I must highlight here that this does not mean I intend these to be representative of one of the sides. I can only say that my position is on the reader’s side, though, after this study, I will always take into consideration the author’s side, as well as the autonomy of the text.

In my approach to *The Politics of Interpretation*, I will follow the editorial organization of the sequence of essays. According to this methodology, I start my study with Edward Said’s *Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community*. In this text, the author approaches the topic, the politics of interpretation, as a call to denounce the hermetic situation of professional literary criticism, which, in his own words, he defines as a “proliferation of private critical language”. (p.29) In order to approximate his text to the reader-author argument, I highlight a passage at the beginning where he says that “no one writes simply for oneself”, and that there is always an “Other” in this process which makes interpretation “a social activity”. (p.9) I think it is not implausible to characterize him as being on the reader’s side, or rather, against the author’s - one thing is to champion one side, but it is quite another to denounce the other side. I think the author-reader matter becomes more explicit when Said says that “no single explanation sending one back immediately to a single origin is adequate”, and that “heterogeneity of human involvement is therefore equivalent to heterogeneity of results, as well as of interpretive skills and techniques.” (p.18) Since I am not in the position

of contesting this author, I would only like to mention that both reader and author *can* occupy this position of the 'Other'. If it is problematic to position the author and his intended meaning as the center, then it must also be as controversial to allow the reader to occupy this position. I do not want to concentrate my reflection on this essay, but at this point I would only like to acknowledge the importance that Said gives to the question "Who?", something which will also be fundamental in Ricoeur's reflection about language and identity.

In a certain way, despite some textual friction between them, Donald Davie's following essay traces the line of argument explored by Said, when he places the question: "Is it not at least possible that some political power is interested in ensuring that we pass our time in this<sup>10</sup> rather than in anything more pointed, more urgent, and more consequential?" (p.48), and before that when he asks "which is the political motivation which impels deconstructionists and other interpreters to insist that reliable interpretation of even apparently limpid texts can take place only in seminar rooms or in the pages of learned journals?" (p.45) However, what I would like to point out in his essay is when he parallels the "liberation from authority, from the authority of the text and of the 'classic' author of the text" with the "liberation from civic and political responsibility, from citizenship and what it entails." (p.47) The title of his essay, *Poet: Patriot: Interpreter*, is better understood when the author says that "poets and painters are 'interpreters', no less than the scholar-critic who subsequently undertakes to 'interpret' their interpretations. [...] A poem is a little of criticism of life as a burning brand is a criticism of fire." (p.44) From this perspective, the accused 'origin' of the author as *the* source of the meaning of the text can be approached differently from the perspective of his/her 'originality' as just another competing entity for the meaning of the text. Thus, construing the verbal intention of an author through his/her text would be as valid

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<sup>10</sup> He refers to the theoretical discussion about literary interpretation.

as inferring some unintended meaning. The author, under this perspective, would not die, but only lose his/her throne.

Davie's "Liberation" and "Patriotism" are good terms to establish a link to the next essay, *Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism*, written by Wayne Booth. Here again the question "Who?" is fundamental in a sequence of interrogations: "Who utters them? In what circumstances? In what tone? With what qualification by other utterances? What is the quality of our emotional responses?" (p.65) Despite its relevance, my concern at this point is more focused specifically when the author says that "what we shall want to grapple with is not words or propositions in isolation but the total 'act of discourse' that the author commits" (p.63), and later on when he says that "there is no escape then from the task, difficult as it is, of appraising the quality of the response invited by the whole work: what will it do with or to us if we surrender our imaginations to its paths?" (p.65) The problem of *who is being 'responsible' for that 'message'*, who is being *ascribed* to that, is brought to the forefront in this essay when Booth says that

To wrench [...] out [...] their moments and then blame them<sup>11</sup> for not seeing the world my way is to risk violating not only their integrity but my own as well. Everything I know about trying to understand someone requires me to suppress my "local" biases and enter as intimately as possible into the alien moment. (p.77)

In this sense, my question 'what does it mean?' is very much in frequency with what Booth says about what he "constantly strives for", which is "[to attempt] to discover what any work of art *is* (or, in another critical language, what it is '*attempting to do to me*<sup>12</sup>')." (p.78) Thus, discovering what a work of art is entails an ethical practice, because, as Booth himself acknowledges, "any ethical criticism we try to develop in a systematic way must take into

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<sup>11</sup> He refers to those who utter the message.

<sup>12</sup> Italics mine.

account an ethics of the reader as well as an ethics of what is written.” (p.79) In this sense, the question above must take into account not only what is meant through a text, but also what is meant by the person who wrote the text. This may be appropriately linked to what later Hirsch (1967) will call the impossibility of a message meaning for itself. Moreover, it may also be related to one of the main positions in Ricoeur’s thought, which is to take *language* not as a system, but to place it at the level of *discourse* (RICOEUR, 1976).

The fourth essay of *The Politics of Interpretation* is Julia Kristeva’s *Psychoanalysis and The Polis*. In this text, the author talks about “the desire to *give meaning*”, which is described as “the subject’s need to reassure himself of his image and his identity faced with an object – the obsessive quest for A Meaning – one meaning, an uncriticizable ultimate Meaning.” (p.84) This quest is identified by her as “an example of political delirium in avant-garde writing.” (p.84-5) She also calls attention to the fact that in the “confrontation between the object and the subject of interpretation [...], the object may succumb to the interpretive intentions of the interpreter [...], [or] the object may reveal to the interpreter the unknown of his theory and permit the constitution of a new theory.” (p.86) Following the argument, she also says that

The contemporary interpreter renounces the game of *indebtedness*, *proximity*, and *presence* hidden within the connotations of the concept of interpretation. [...] The modern interpreter avoids the presentness of subjects to themselves and to things. [...] Breaking out of the enclosure of the presentness of meaning, the *new* “interpreter” no longer interprets: he speaks, he “associates”, because there is no longer an object to interpret. (ibid)

Kristeva also adds that “perceptual and knowing apprehension of the original object is only a theoretical, albeit undoubtedly indispensable [...], already marked by a lack [...], it shelters within its very being the nonsignifiable, the nonsymbolized.” (p.87) This is what I call a considerable blow against the author’s side, and a relative weight for the reader. However, I think that this blow is not complete, because it still leaves a thin line to the

possibility of *objective* meaning when she says: “I interpret because Meaning exists. But my interpretation is infinite because Meaning is made infinite by desire. [...] I am subject to Meaning, a non-Total Meaning, which escapes me.” (p.92) Meaning may not be a metaphysical unchangeable essence, but it is something which, despite all variability, still keeps ‘traces’ of its ‘character’<sup>13</sup>. Kristeva does not deny the possibility of meaning; she merely opens it to the possibility of continuing meaning through different languages and times. In parallel to what is said above<sup>14</sup> about meaning, she says that “the subject rediscovers, if not his origin, at least his originality.” (p.95) In order to abbreviate it and avoid an excessive attention to this text, I would only like to mention Kristeva’s following words:

It is the fascination with the wandering and elusive other, who attracts, repels, puts one literally beside oneself. This other, before being another subject, is an object of discourse, a nonobject, an abject. This abject awakens in the one who speaks archaic conflicts with his own improper objects, his ab-jects, at the edge of meaning, at the limits of the interpretable. And it arouses the paranoid rage to dominate those objects, to transform them, to exterminate them. (p.97)

I think that this paranoia to dominate, or transform, may carry the danger of exterminating the possibility of the text *to be*. Under this perspective, I only dare to say at this point that the privilege of the reader’s side is as problematical as that of the author.

I think that a great contribution to the subject is made by Stephen Toulmin’s *The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Post-Modern Science*. The first sentence which I would like to quote is when he says that “the doctrines of the natural sciences are critical interpretations of their subject matter, no less than those of the humanities.” (p.101) He notices that the developments both in natural and human sciences brought changes in the concept of ‘objectivity’. Besides, for him, interpretation is inseparable from ethics and politics (p.105). He acknowledges a multiplicity of readings when he says that “alternative styles of

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<sup>13</sup> This is a metaphorical allusion to Ricoeur and Levinas.

<sup>14</sup> See the paragraph about Said’s essay above.

interpretation within an established scientific discipline reflect the fact that alternative interpretive standpoints are available within the science, each with its own scope and justification.” (p.108) However, he still keeps the concept of validity under consideration when he observes that “different critical standpoints may be relevant to the same work, whether or not they are truly central to understanding that work.” (p.109) Moreover, he notices that “there are no genuinely incorrect standpoints, only idiosyncratic, ideologically biased, or otherwise unusual ones.” (p.110) Then, when he talks about a “*disinterested way*” (p.112), he is not talking about the much criticized aspect of being ‘neutral’ in relation to the observed object, but about the *recognition* of the ‘Other’. What he criticizes, and I agree with him on this point, is some “[exaggeration] in the role of interpretation and subjectivity in the humanities”. (p.116)

Validity and objectivity in interpretation in literature can be seen in parallel with validity and objectivity in history. This is one of Ricoeur’s main arguments in *Time and Narrative - Vol.3*<sup>15</sup> (1985). One reference he uses in his argumentation is exactly the author of the following essay in focus now: Hayden White’s *The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation*. Initially, I would like to highlight White’s concern with distinguishing understanding and explanation. For him, “man, society, and culture are to be objects of disciplined inquiry, the disciplines should aim at ‘understanding’ these objects, not at explaining them.” (p.121-2) In accordance with this line of thought, the author adds that

Historians also often claim to explain their objects of study by providing a proper understanding of them. The means by which this understanding is provided is “interpretation”. “Narration” is both the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented. (p.122)

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<sup>15</sup> Specially Section 2: Poetics of Narrative: History, Fiction, Time.

His observation that it is through narration that we achieve interpretation is crucial to my position that it is through interpretation that we *perform* meaning. At the beginning of White's essay, in a footnote, he observes that "the activity of interpreting becomes political at the point where a given interpreter claims authority over rival interpreters." (p.120) Though he may be very relativistic in general, I think he makes a great contribution to the reflection about meaning when he says that

An interpretation falls into the category of a lie when it denies the reality of the events of which it treats and into the category of an untruth when it draws false conclusions from reflection on events whose reality remains attestable on the level of "positive" historical inquiry. (p.139)

Another point that I would like to highlight is a quotation White makes of Vidal-Naquet when the latter asks: "What are we going to do with this memory that, while it is our memory, is not that of everybody?"<sup>16</sup> (VIDAL-NAQUET apud MITCHELL, 1983, p.140) This is parallel to what I think any interpreter of any literary work should worry about, that is, what am I going to do with this 'narration' brought to my 'own' text, while it is now my text, but still written by someone else? Since a historical fact cannot mean whatever 'we' want it to mean, a literary text cannot say whatever 'we' want it to say. I think this is the point where interpretation and criticism split, bringing the issue closer to what will later be approached in Ricoeur's and Hirsch's texts.

In *The Politics of Interpretation* there is a critical exchange made between Ronald Dworkin and Stanley Fish, and complemented by Gerald L. Bruns, which is very relevant for this discussion<sup>17</sup>. It is interesting that Dworkin brings from law the same discussion I am exploring here, which argues whether a law is what its 'original' author(s) meant it to mean, or what judges take it to mean now. First of all, applying this 'intentionalist' argument equally

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<sup>16</sup> The quotation is taken from Vidal-Naquet's *Un Eichman de Papier* in *Les Assassins de la Memoire* (Paris: La Decouverte, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> In order to make this section more concise, I decided to remove the paragraphs I wrote about the essays which appear between this critical exchange and Hayden White's essay. Despite their considerable contribution, the reflections developed there would only reinforce what has been discussed in this section.



to a law and to a literary work is almost claiming that both are the same thing, which seems absurd to me. The conditions of construing a law are totally different from those of construing a literary work. However, there are some relevant aspects to highlight from this discussion. Initially, I have to make clear that Dworkin defines himself against what he calls “personal politics or ideal political morality”, saying that “neither is plausible”. (p.250) Another relevant aspect which he points to is that he is not interested in finding the meaning of a specific passage or word, but the message as a whole. (p.252) This is parallel to Ricoeur’s position of considering a literary work as a whole (though fragmentary or disputable the sense of whole may be for both). Dworkin also claims for a clear distinction between interpretation and criticism, even though they share some features. (p.253) According to him, “a theory of interpretation must contain a subtheory about identity of a work of art in order to be able to tell the difference between interpreting and changing a work.” (ibid) By making this difference explicit, both interpretation and criticism stop competing for the center in the pursuit of meaning and become both fundamental parts, divided only for cognitive and structural reasons, but still ontologically the same thing under the concept of ‘understanding’. This author-reader dispute is well expressed when Dworkin says that “a good interpretation will focus on what the author intended, because communication is not successful unless it expresses what a speaker wants it to express”, and he counterpoints by saying that “interpretation will place the reader in the foreground” if expressed in another “sense” (another sense, another meaning, another *Sinn*, another *Bedeutung*, another *sentido*, another *significado*). This raises another question: are tautologies possible? Are there ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ tautologies? Are there cognitive creative tautologies and/or similar-representative tautologies? What are tautologies at all? However, Dworkin still keeps the problem open when he says that this distinction between interpretation and criticism is “no longer a flat distinction between interpretation, conceived as discovering the real meaning of a work of art,

and criticism, conceived as evaluating its success or importance.” (p.256) He denies the possibility of a final truth (or meaning) for a work of art, but keeps the political aspect that a decision has to be made among competitors attempting at the best answer for the question ‘What does it mean?’. Dworkin also acknowledges a problematic idea, which I have already stated as my concern in exploring the subject of meaning, and which he presents in the following sentence: “interpretation creates the text”. (p.257) Though he criticizes those whom he calls “intentionalists”, his characterization of them contributes very much to the discussion. In relation to this, he says that,

their theory of interpretation is not an account of what is valuable in a book or poem or play but only an account of what any particular book or poem or play means and that that we must understand what something means before we can decide whether it is valuable and where its value lies. (p.258)

And though he argues ‘against’ Hirsch, he ends up coming to the same conclusion when he exemplifies that,

Any full description of what Fowles ‘intended’ when he set out to write *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* must include *the intention to produce something capable of being treated that way, by himself and by others, (...) something independent from his intentions*<sup>18</sup>. (p.261)

Thus, reflecting on the juridical perspective of Dworkin, I may say that a/the meaning is practicable, though it must struggle at claiming to be more valid than the others. Moreover, I must not, altogether, discard the possibility of reconstruing the whole text in another shorter and more explicit text about its meaning. This text, in its turn, would also be a unique event, which took place in a specific time and place, and which was uttered by a specific person. The construction of meaning must pass and acknowledge that this person meant something capable of being objectified. Otherwise, language itself would be impossible.

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<sup>18</sup> Italics mine.

In his reply to Dworkin's essay, Stanley Fish raises once more the insistent and repetitive discussion under study in this chapter, which the latter puts in the following words: "The field is divided, in short, between those who believe that interpretation is grounded in objectivity and those who believe that interpreters are free, for all intents and purposes, free." (p.271) I apologize if this topic has started to become repetitive and tedious, but my insistence on it comes from the fact that the main point of argument in the book is 'the politics of interpretation'. Moreover, this political struggle seems to me not about what politics or what interpretation is, but more about being partisans of the author's side or of the reader's (which could also be characterized as intentionalists versus nonintentionalists, normative vs. rhetoric, objectivists vs. relativists, etc.) - or even those who suppose they take both or none of the sides (which for me is more dangerous than 'assumed' partisans). Though I may place Fish on the reader's side, I must acknowledge that his position is of a dialectical sort, because, while he fights two extremist situations, characterized by him as "reifying the mind in its freedom and the text in its independence" (p.278), he puts the decision in the reader's side. However, as Dworkin and many others have also acknowledged, this decision is not exempt from many constraints. An important one is the constraint of what a specific person meant at one specific time and context in one specific object, the place of convergence of all these vectors. As Fish himself says, the interpreter is "as free as anyone else", but at the same time "as constrained as anyone else". (p.275) He makes another relevant observation when he says that "information only comes in an interpreted form (it does not announce itself)." (p.274) However, it must also be acknowledged that some of them are more indirect than others. One thing is to be ambiguous, but it is quite another to intend to be ambiguous. The question is not if meaning can be 'directly' achieved, but if it can be, even though indirectly, achieved/construed/performed at all. This argument is corroborated by Fish in the following sentence:

The similarity is “arguable” which means that it must be argued *for*; similarity is not something one finds but something one must establish. [...] Similarity, in short, is not a property of texts (similarities do not announce themselves) but a property conferred by a relational argument [...]. (p.277)

I think that from this point on the metaphor I used in the provisory title for this dissertation may make a little more sense. Literary exorcism may be metaphorically understood as a *confrontation* with this chaotic experience of signs, where meaning would be a kind of ‘evil’ that *possesses* something, and that the *expelling* of this chaos through the exercise of a spell, that is, the bringing to language, would be its *pharmakon*. It is in this sense that I agree with Fish when he says that “the distinction between a found history and an invented one is finally nothing more than a distinction between a persuasive interpretation and one that has failed to convince.” (p.278) Thus, the reader’s meaning and the author’s meaning are equally competitors for the meaning of the work. The only thing which cannot be maintained is that a text speaks for itself independently and in soliloquy. My insistence on being so cautious about the reader’s side is parallel to what Fish says in this sentence:

Readers don’t just “decide” to recharacterize a text; there has to be some reason why it would occur to someone to treat a work identified as a member of one genre as possible member of another; there must already be in place ways of thinking that will enable the recharacterization to become a project, and there must be conditions in the institution such that the prosecution of that project seems attractive and potentially rewarding. (p.279)

The abstract distinction between explaining and changing a text is problematized by Fish when he says that,

To explain a work is to point out something about it that had not been attributed to it before and therefore to change it by challenging other explanations that were once changes in their turn. Explaining and changing cannot be opposed activities because they are the same activities. (p.281)

However, it still may be possible to argue about the concept of ‘change’ from this proposition. Can something change while still being the same? This is a question about

‘identity’ which, in my opinion, Ricoeur explores in a satisfactory way. He sets identity as an ongoing dialectics which allows us, despite all changes, to be identified as the same under the concept of “character”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, talking about meaning is talking about this perspective on the identity of a text. In this sense, Fish’s essay contributes to give a turn to the concept of ‘intention’. In this respect, the latter says that

This will seem curious if intentions are thought of as unique psychological events; but if intentions are thought as forms of possible conventional behavior that are to be conventionally “read”, then one can just as well reread his own intentions as he can reread the intentions of another. (p.283)

To emphasize even more this argument, and to definitely place Fish on the reader’s side, though with a resounding acknowledgment of the author’s intention, I include the following passage of his essay where he says that

One cannot read or reread independently of intention. [...] marks or sounds produced by an intentional being, a being situated in some enterprise in relation to which he has a purpose or a point of view. This is not an assumption that one adds to an already construed sense in order to stabilize it but an assumption without which the construing of sense could not occur. One cannot understand an utterance without *at the same time* hearing or reading it as the utterance of someone with more or less specific concerns, interests, and desires, someone with an intention. (p.283)

Despite all the argumentation about how they misunderstood each other, Fish and Dworkin keep the dispute between author and reader when they claim that the other misunderstood or inverted what one had ‘really’ said. This may be an endless discussion, but I also want to include some more observations made by Dworkin in his counter-reply to Fish. The first is when Dworking says that,

People interpret texts and statutes and cases and pictures. [...] Interpreters for the most part assume that interpreting a text is different from changing it into a new text, that one interpretation may be better than another even when

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<sup>19</sup> I intend to further explore this perspective in the section dedicated to Ricoeur.

this is controversial, that arguments exist for and against interpretations [...] (p.289)

This only emphasizes the fundamentality which I claimed above to hermeneutics, not only as a field of study, but as a transversal field of study. Despite Dworkin's insightful answer, I will skip his response to Fish and Michaels in order to go straight to his final observation about the subject, where he says that "everyone who interprets is actually seeking the author's intention no matter what he says he is seeking, including those who propose interpretations the author could not possibly have intended in the ordinary sense, even subconsciously" (p.313) - a statement that only corroborates the argument which Hirsch will develop in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967).

A last argument to be added to this textual dialogue between Fish and Dworkin is Gerald L. Bruns's *Law as Hermeneutics: A Response to Ronald Dworkin*. Despite having little to quote from this essay, what I have to highlight from it is extremely relevant. First, Bruns says that "between a written text, [there is] the history of the understanding of it, and the question currently to be decided." (p.317) In this sense, the meaning of a text is only 'a power-to-be'. Secondly, it is also important to highlight when he says:

How a text becomes binding upon a community that the subject of politics and interpretation begins to emerge with proper clarity and as a substantive issue. [...] The conditions that enable a text to become forceful and to hold a community in its power (p.319)

This may also reinforce the idea that *the meaner cannot make a text mean whatever he takes it to mean*, since any interpretation must acknowledge itself as a member of a community. Finally, Bruns also says that "texts do not come down to us on their own but belong to traditions of understanding that underwrite these texts in ways that we have not examined." (p.320) The echoes of Gadamer are obvious here. However, I will not explore his theory here for reasons which were already mentioned.

The last critical exchange in *The Politics of Interpretation* is a textual debate among many different authors. The first one, who is the author of the book in focus in the next section of this dissertation, is H. D. Hirsch Jr., and the title of his essay is *The Politics of Theories of Interpretation*. First of all, I would like to highlight that I agree with him when he says that “interpretation is the central activity of cognition.” (p.322) There is also an important aspect of communication in this essay which is fundamental to mention, which says:

We always perceive (construct) something other than the language through which we know that thing. [...] a space of uncertainty exists between the vehicle and the meanings interpreted from it. This gap, which cannot be overcome, is a space in which different interpretations can be played out. Hence there is always an element of uncertainty in every possible sphere of interpretation. (ibid)

After this comment, he criticizes the “theories of apriorism” which claim that anything we mean is already “a priori” predetermined by ideological, social and language constraints. For him, “the impossibility of refuting the a priori also means the impossibility of confirming it.” (p.323) He mentions that a probable counter argument for this would claim that “in the light of multiple vectors of evidence, and continual revision, we might sometimes achieve an accurate reconstruction, despite our cultural predispositions.” (p.324) In this sense, Hirsch proposes that disagreement in interpretation is “disagreement about the nature of an historical event”. (ibid) According to him, we actually have a choice between referring an interpretation to an original author or an original code or convention system. (p.325) In his opinion, this is “the ultimate political question in interpretation”, namely, “the locus of authority”. (ibid) In this way, he distinguishes between choosing the “a priori” convention (the reader chooses his/her own present time cypher key) and the “historical” one (the reader chooses to accept someone’s past choice of a cypher key). He calls this distinction respectively as “autocratic” and “allocartic”. (p.326) However, in his opinion, both would

remain “a posteriori investigations” of “an historical event”. (ibid) He summarizes the idea in the following paragraph:

First, the politics of interpretation resides in the choice between the autocratic and allocratic norm. Under the autocratic norm, authority resides in the reader, while under the allocratic norm, the reader delegates authority to the reconstructed historical act of another person or community. Second, autocratic interpretation is not in principle revisable except by accidental change of preference, whereas allocratic interpretation is revisable ex post facto on the basis of changing theories and evidences about a determinative historical event. Hence the autocratic norm is a priori and incorrigible; the allocratic norm is a posteriori and revisable. (p.327-8)

He complements right after by saying that,

Those who claim that all interpretations are prestructured by cultural schemas may be called “idealists”. [...] In this view, interpretation is always already autocratic, that is, always constituted by the reader’s predetermining schemas [...]. The contrasting view, that interpretation can be either autocratic or allocratic, assumes that the truth about an historical event [...] is something that might be objectively known *despite*<sup>20</sup> the influence of cultural schemas (“realists”). (p.328)

He justifies his position for the allocratic when he says that,

Allocratic interpretation is the only sort that can in principle be revised, and thus make practical use of scholarship, evidence, logical argument, and could even look to the possibility of empirical progress. [...] [it] offers the possibility of being wrong. Autocratic interpretation is always right or, more exactly, could be neither wrong or right; it offers itself no external standard with respect to which it could be one or the other. (p.330)

Then, he finishes his argument by claiming that

Interpretation is intellectually interesting inside the academy mainly when it is trying to determine some objective historical truth. It is politically significant outside the academy *only* when it is trying to determine some objective historical truth. Whether or not an interpretation *is* telling the historical truth is a question that nobody can answer. Nonetheless, the interpreter’s decision to try to tell this truth is a genuine political decision, too important to be yielded by default to the rhetoricity of interpretive theories. (p.333)

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<sup>20</sup> Italics mine.



I understand Hirsch in the sense that denying the possibility of being ‘objective’ in interpretation, of being wrong or right, opens up to indeterminacy, which implies impossibility of meaning, of communication and all its constraints. This, in its turn, ends up allowing us to say that *the meaning of something is whatever we want it to mean*, making us all Humpty-Dumpties<sup>21</sup>. The issue is complex; this is why it is still necessary to raise these questions.

It is interesting to notice that the concept of politics has been in close relation with the concept of decision since the first essay of *The Politics of Interpretation*. A search into the etymology of the word ‘politics’ makes these ideas even more proximate, since it has to do with the Greek word for ‘polis’. Decision is the aspect under concern in the next essay *Is There a Politics of Interpretation?*, written by Walter Benn Michaels. His initial and final argument, which is rhetorically expressed in the title of the essay, is that interpretations are not “free”, and therefore there is no “politics of interpretation”. Instead of opening to a radical gap, where we all would become Humpty-Dumpties, he takes the concept of “choice” to an aporia moment between choosing and believing. (p.336) He contests White (Dworkin and Hirsch included) by arguing that “at the heart of his argument is thus the sense that really nothing seems true”, and later on he adds that “nothing about the conditions of our knowing things guarantees that we really do know them correctly.” (p.340) For him, “conceiving interpretations as chosen is incoherent.” (p.344) His position, reinforced by his co-authored text *Against Theory* (1982), is that “our understanding of what a text means and what its author intends it to mean are the same thing and that interpretation is just a matter of trying to figure out this intention.” (p.344) Moreover, Michaels says that “every interpreter is always an intentionalist, that language can be rightly understood only as a set of intentional acts, and

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<sup>21</sup> This folkloric literary character, used by Lewis Carroll in his *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), is borrowed by Hirsch as an example of the semantic discussion under study in this chapter.

hence that to use language at all is to acknowledge the centrality of intention.” (ibid) I think that with this position he becomes even more radical than Hirsch in favor of the author as the authority for the meaning of the text. Still counterbalanced by the reader’s perspective, I think that this ‘originality’ is always open by the unbridgeable fissure made by the distance between the reader and the author, or between sign and signified, but which is made possible by a “leap” of “faith”<sup>22</sup> made through language. I think this is the point where actually choosing and believing coincide.

‘Choice’ and ‘leaping’ are good words to lead to the next essay, namely, *The Politics of Interpretations*, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. From this text, I would like to highlight the following passage:

One cannot of course “choose” to step out of ideology. The most responsible “choice” seems to be to know it as best one can, recognize it as best one can, and, through one’s necessarily inadequate interpretation, to work to change it, to acknowledge the challenge of. (p.351)

This essay shows a particular concern in regards to the term “ideology”. However, when Spivak talks about undoing “the oppositions between determinism and free will and between conscious choice and unconscious reflex”, I cannot help thinking ‘meaning’ in these terms. To be able to think that way, I would rather leave her essay aside and approach two concepts from Derrida for the question of meaning: *supplement* and *hauntology*. The first comes from *Of Grammatology* (1967), and, to put it as briefly as possible, it means that the origin has no initial originality, the original sign will always be another sign, the supplement of a supplement. A supplement is a substitute for something else that is unable to be present. Thus, I take meaning in this dissertation to be a supplement for the text, which in its turn is always in the need of a supplement, while at the same time it adds something to the text,

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<sup>22</sup> The term ‘leap’ is normally associated to Kierkegaard (1980), but here the expression is used more symbolically than conceptually, since the connection between ‘faith’ and ‘language’ is something also made by Schlegel (1847).

which is a kind of surplus<sup>23</sup>. It is neither something opposed nor equivalent to the text. Another term which I would like to approach here is derived from *Spectres of Marx* (1994), namely, *hauntology*. It means the paradoxical state of being and nonbeing, like a ghost haunting something. I think this term exemplifies the relation between meaning and text, and definitely reaches the argument proposed in the provisory title of this dissertation: *literary exorcism*. I made this excuse of going beyond the essay because this is the ‘fissure’ I found in the dichotomy brought up to here between author and reader as the origin of meaning. That is why I kept these terms. However, I have to cut this comment here in order to conclude with this argument, in order not to extend it too much.

The last essay which I would like to mention is a reply to Spivak made by Stanley Cavell. It is the shortest one, and it deals with very precise observations made by Spivak on Cavell’s text. I would like only to quote two passages, without much comment on them. In the first one, Cavell says: “I am – I suppose we all are – always looking for ways to distrust words.” (p.367) In my case, I am distrusting ‘meaning’. Secondly, he says that “every text stands at the level of professional journal articles, open for disposal.” (p.370) With this observation, he wants to criticize the way some texts are considered ‘sacred’. In this sense, ‘all’ texts would be open to ‘all’ possibilities of interpretation, but the fact is that some of them would be ‘less’ open. It directly goes against the ‘freeplay’ or ‘independence’ of the reader in his ‘freedom’ to understand the text, as if it were ‘empty’, or just ‘waiting’ for the reader to fill it in.

I want to confess now that this section was longer than I expected. However, I insist on this aspect in order to convince my reader that the question ‘What does it mean?’ is not as simple as it may initially seem. Far from naïve, the question is not only pertinent, but fundamental to any excursion on the interpretation of literary works. Now, I would like to

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<sup>23</sup> I refer here at the term used by Ricoeur (1976).

shift the matter from ‘What is meaning?’ and turn it to the question: ‘Is it possible to achieve meaning objectively?’ If the answer is always evanescent, should we give up the challenge and silence ourselves? This is what I will explore in the next section, which is about a book dedicated to this task. In regards to *The Politics of Interpretation*, I hope to have made it clear that the author-reader struggle for the ascription of meaning is a valid and also a fruitful debate. Even after Barthes and Foucault<sup>24</sup>, I think we should not give the issue up.

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<sup>24</sup> I refer to two seminal essays on the issue written by these two authors, namely, Roland Barthes’s *The Death of the Author* (1988) and Michel Foucault’s *What is an author?* (1999).

## 2.2 A defense of the author?

The last section was dedicated to a book that, in my opinion, shows that the issue of the author-reader dispute for the meaning of the text is far from resolved or surpassed. The next section is concerned with a counterpointing perspective on the issue. Despite all my conviction that the ‘final’ word of a text is that of its reader, I am still intrigued with this *something* that keeps *resounding* from a text, this ‘residue’ which echoes in different ears and still preserves an element which can be flatly called ‘meaning’. The author may be dead, but the meaning of the text remains like a ghost that insists on haunting it. Hirsch’s perspective, as I understood it, is an attempt to show that, despite all divergence and diversity of readings, we (readers or authors?) must not be entrapped by the pitfalls of the axiom that, in the author’s own words, says: “The meaning of a literary text is *what it means to us today*”. (HIRSCH, 1967, p.viii)<sup>25</sup> Although he is considered a defender of the author as an authority (and most trustful competitor) of the meaning of the text, and despite alleged discrepancies between him and advocates of the reader’s side, he does not deny the openness of the text to possibilities of reading, but champions (more) argumentative validity of one interpretation over the others. In this section, I do not aim at being a defender of his ideas, though I agree with quite many of them. Instead, I want to lead my reader from this perspective to the one which, in my opinion, holds the best arguments on the issue of meaning, namely, Ricouer’s hermeneutical phenomenology.

I cannot see Hirsch’s position as contrary or opposite to what has been called up to now the ‘reader’s side’ of meaning. Actually, I see his book more as a pondering on the exaggeration of the text’s autonomy to mean and the freedom of the reader to make it say

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<sup>25</sup> From now on along this section, all quotations from this book will have only the reference to its page.

whatever he/she wants it to mean. The first chapter of *Validity in Interpretation* is called “A Defense of The Author”, and I think this is why critics, already armed with Barthes’s and Foucault’s perspectives<sup>26</sup> on the subject, normally, and too quickly, reject any validity of what Hirsch has to say. I disagree, though not completely, when Hirsch says that “if a theorist wants to save the ideal of validity he has to save the author as well” (p.6), not because of a defense of the author, but as a suspicion about the reader’s claim to authority. As Hirsch notices, “when critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place.” (p.5) In this sense, if what has been questioned is the privilege given to something so fragmented, unstable and arbitrarily constructed as the category of the author, this same argument should be applied to another fragmented, unstable and arbitrarily constructed category, that of the reader. What has been accomplished is not a deconstruction of the authority of the author over the meaning of the text, but only a displacement of this authority to another entity called ‘reader’.

The next four sections of the first chapter of Hirsch’s book are concerned with the discussion of four axioms normally used as arguments against the possibility of the author to be a candidate as valid as the reader. The first of these axioms is the title of the second section, namely, “The meaning of a text changes – even for the author”. (p.7) On this stance, Hirsch starts a series of many fundamental distinctions that need to be acknowledged during his argumentation. The first one is what he calls the distinction between “meaning” and “significance”<sup>27</sup>. His argument, in this section, is that what changes is not meaning, but signification. One of the questions he poses is that if we can infer that an author “changed” his own “response” to a text, it does not imply that the “original” meaning changed, but that a new one, improved or revised, has been established. Besides, if the “initial” one can be revised, it is evidence that this shift occurred under the parameter of a comparison of

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<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit.

<sup>27</sup> A split normally adjudicated to Frege’s famous article *On Sense and Reference* (1892).

something established earlier. Under this distinction, Hirsch proposes the differentiation between two distinct situations, which he will call “the verbal meaning of a text” and “the reader’s response to that”. (p.7)

The second axiom to be contested by Hirsch is: “It does not matter what an author means – only what his text means”. (p.10) First of all, what Hirsch proposes in this section is not “transparency” of meaning, neither a direct and safe passage from signifier to signified<sup>28</sup>, but the impossibility of meaningful expressions. For him, “it is a permissible task to attempt to discover what [the author] meant.” (p.11) He adds that “textual meaning is a public affair.” (p.11) Thus, a final intentionality, and now it does not matter if it is the author’s or the reader’s, is defended under the argument that “signs can be variously construed, and until they are construed the text ‘says’ nothing at all.” (p.14) This view can be seen as the proximity between Ricoeur’s concept of “referentiality” and Hirsch’s defense of the “intentionality” of meaning.

The third axiom to be discussed by Hirsch is: “The author’s meaning is inaccessible”. (p.14) Against this axiom, Hirsch confronts the distinction that “it is a logical mistake to confuse the impossibility of certainty in understanding with the impossibility of understanding.” (p.17) For him, “the irreproducibility of meaning experiences is not the same as the irreproducibility of meaning. The psychologistic identification of textual meaning with a meaning experience is inadmissible.” (p.16) Thus, for Hirsch, meaning is that part of communication which can be recuperated, shared. This holds strongly to the idea that a text *means something about something in the world*, a position much sustained by Ricoeur.

The last axiom approached by Hirsch is: “The author often does not know what he means.” (p.20) This is the second time Hirsch claims that “meaning is an affair of consciousness” (p.22)<sup>29</sup>. If this sounds phenomenological, it is because phenomenology is one

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<sup>28</sup> To make reference to the well-known distinction made by Saussure, a reference reevaluated by Hirsch.

<sup>29</sup> The first was in the first section of the first chapter (Section A).

of his main arguments in his defense of the correspondence between the verbal meaning of a text and authorial intention as a verbal construction. It is this reference that brings him close to Ricoeur's philosophical argumentation on textual meaning. Hirsch's contestation of the axiom is clearly defined in this passage: "How can an author mean something he did not mean? It is not possible to mean what one does not mean, though it is very possible to mean what one is not conscious of meaning." (ibid)

These five axioms, as far as I could read them, do not restore the concept of meaning as what the author *had in mind when he wrote the text*<sup>30</sup>, but contest a different implication associated to the advocates of the reader's side. According to Hirsch, "what has been denied [...] is that linguistic signs can somehow speak their own meaning." (p.23) This is the point where Hirsch and Ricoeur break their proximity, mostly, I believe, because the former is still less critical towards Husserl.

The second chapter of Hirsch's book is called "Meaning and Implication". Here, he specifies the problematic and ambiguous term "meaning" into his proposed term for *that something which can be recuperated from communication*, which is referred by the term "verbal meaning". It is also in this chapter that he approaches the issue of "implication", which, in his opinion, is "the knottiest problem of interpretation". (p.27)

His initial argument in favor of the possibility of achieving verbal meaning can be observed when he says that "when somebody does in fact use a particular word sequence, his verbal meaning cannot be *anything*<sup>31</sup> he might wish it to be." (p.30) This questioning, for him, leads to the "principle of sharability" (p.31), which he champions by arguing that "verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs." (p.31)

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<sup>30</sup> A perspective normally associated to Schleiermacher, and one which Hirsch himself disagrees with.

<sup>31</sup> Italics mine. If we use Frege's terminology, it implies not confusing 'sense' and 'reference'; if we use Austin's terminology, it implies not confusing 'illocutionary' with 'perlocutionary'; it is important to mention that these references do not entail any correspondence among the terms.



This “reproducibility” is the key term of the second section of the second chapter. His argumentation in defense of this reproducibility is supported by a phenomenological approach to intentionality. In reference to this subject, Hirsch says that “the same meaning can be intended by different intentional acts of one person at different moments in time<sup>32</sup>.” (p.39) He also adds to it that “the same meaning can be intended by different intentional acts of different persons.” (p.39) Therefore, according to him, if verbal meaning can be shared and reproduced, although not perfectly reproduced (immediacy of meaning, language or intention is something he rejects), it is sufficient to prove that “meaning exists” (p.40) This way, verbal meaning is Hirsch’s solution for what he calls the “psychologicistic objections”.

Hirsch also comments on the objection against the possibility of achieving verbal meaning historically, a perspective he calls “the historicist objection”. He contests the perspective which, according to him, says that the “meaning of the past is intrinsically alien to us.” (p.40) For him, “the radical historicist is rather sentimentally attached to the belief that only our own cultural entities have ‘authentic’ immediacy for us.” (p.43) His argument, clearly phenomenological, is that neither past nor present are immediate.<sup>33</sup> If the ‘presentness’ of meaning is something construed, then the ‘past’ of this meaning is also something to be accomplished through a construction. In Hirsch’s opinion, meaning, like understanding, is not a given, but something to be constructed. (ibid)

In this sense, Hirsch argues, “reproducibility is a quality of verbal meaning that makes interpretation possible.” (p.44) In the fourth section of the second chapter, Hirsch approaches the issue by the categories of “identity”, “determinacy” and “will”. In his opinion, “determinacy first of all means self-identity.” (p.45) However, as he notices, “determinacy of verbal meaning requires an act of will.” (p.47) He also highlights the role of “context” as a

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<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur provides an interesting perspective from a phenomenological point of view about this issue in *Time and Narrative – Vol. 3* (1985).

<sup>33</sup> For an interesting perspective about the issue of time, see Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative – Vol. 1* (1985).

filtering which prevents the reader from making the text *mean whatever he/she wants to make it to mean*. For Hirsch, “determination is a choice.” (p.48) It is after this argumentation that he comes to a more specific definition of what “verbal meaning” is: “now verbal meaning can be defined more particularly as a willed type<sup>34</sup> which an author expresses by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols.” (p.49)

One of the contestations of “intended meaning”, for the author, is a result of the advent of psychoanalysis as an influential and powerful theoretical ground. Hirsch approaches the issue of meaning, of that part of meaning which is associated to the unconscious, by calling it “symptomatic meaning”. In order to reinforce the possibility of “objective meaning”, he establishes a differentiation between sign and symptom. For him, “sign is voluntary and conventional; symptom is involuntary and independent of convention.” (p.52) He does not deny that the author may have meant something which he was not conscious of, but he demands a split between interpretation and criticism, between verbal meaning and symptomatic meaning, between sign and symptom. Thus, his goal in his argumentation is the effort to make critics “[...] recognize that verbal meaning is determinate, whereas significance and the possibilities of legitimate criticism are boundless [...].” (p.57) In this sense, “determinacy”, for him, does not mean “definiteness” and/or “precision”. (p.44) Moreover, although he has demanded a split between criticism and interpretation, this split is much more an abstract and cognitive process. Actually, in accordance with Ricoeur, Hirsch admits that “criticism and interpretation are not autonomous.” (p.63)

The last section of chapter two is dedicated to the issue of “implication”. For Hirsch, “an implication belongs to a meaning as a trait belongs to a type.” (p.66) This relation between “verbal meaning” and “implication” is what Hirsch considers the minimum requirement for communication. (p.45) His question to the issue of meaning is: “How does

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed study of “types”, see Hirsch’s Appendix III – *An Excursion on Types* (p.265)

one meaning 'contain' the other?" (p.65) Like Ricoeur, despite all contingencies, Hirsch defends the possibility of 'effective' communication, and that this 'effectiveness' is made possible through what he calls "types". In his opinion, "verbal meaning is both a willed type and a shared type." (p.67)

Hirsch's next approached topic is "genre", a term he brings from studies in logic. What is important to highlight in the introduction for that chapter is when he says that "speech is not simply the expression of meaning but also the interpretation of meaning" (p.68); besides, it is the category of "type" that makes a "bridge between instances". (p.71) The first section of the third chapter is called "Genre and the idea of the whole". In this part, Hirsch begins to acknowledge that the reader already approaches the text with "meaning expectations". (p.72) In his opinion, "an interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands, and that this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered." (p.74) According to him, this generic type is what binds the text in the idea of a whole. However, for Hirsch, the categories of "part" and "whole" are not adequate ones because they "cloud some of the processes of understanding in unnecessary paradox." (p.76) His suggestion is for the terms "genre" and "traits", despite other contingencies they may carry.

However, the genre of a text is not an immanent given but something construed by the reader. For Hirsch, "the interpreter has to make a guess." (p.78) A genre, in this sense, becomes a parameter to which traits will be relevant or discarded. But he also calls attention to the fact that this "controlling conception must be generic rather than unique." (p.80) From this idea of a generic type, Hirsch develops the concept of "intrinsic genre", which he defines as "that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy." (p.86) In his opinion, a determinant part in this construction by the reader is provided by the construction of the "context". For him, the reader "begins with a type idea

which is vaguer and broader than the intrinsic idea of the utterance and, in the course of interpretation, merely narrows this idea and makes it more explicit.” (p.88)

From the question of the intrinsic genre, Hirsch formulates the question of “implication” in the third section of chapter three. For him, this is where hermeneutic theory is indebted to logic. (p.90) In his opinion, the problem is that there is “relative degree of attention that should be paid to an implication”, which raises the question: “how much emphasis should an implication receive?”(p.99) His answer is that “to determine relative emphasis we must have reference to something else that makes the function important.” (ibid) For him, a key term for this answer is “purpose”. For him, “purpose is the most important unifying and discriminating principle in genres.” (p.100) He adds to that, in a footnote, that “the purpose of a genre is the communicable purpose of a particular speaker.” (p.101)

Hirsch reinforces the ‘divinatory’ character of interpretation when he refers to the definition of a type as a “hypothetical tyro”, an “imaginative leap”. (p.104) For him, the perception of analogies is not something to be merely equated, but something to be created. (p.105) His example for this is the creative aspect of metaphors (instead of being merely decorative)<sup>35</sup>.

To sum up, I would like to call attention to his final considerations in the third chapter, when he approaches the question of validity. There he says that “valid interpretation is always governed by valid inference about genre.” (p.113) For him, “the variability of possible implications is the very fact that requires a theory of interpretation and validity.” (p.123) He adds to this that “the principle for including or excluding implications is not what the author is aware of, but whether or not the implications belong to the type of meaning that

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<sup>35</sup> This is another point which brings him closer to Ricoeur, particularly in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975).

he wills<sup>36 37</sup>.” (p.124) At this point, Hirsch and Ricoeur explicitly become antagonists, exactly at the point where the former declares that,

Validity requires a norm – a meaning that is stable and determinate no matter how broad its range of implication and application. A stable and determinate meaning requires an author’s determining will. [...] All valid interpretation of all sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant. (p.126)

I think it would be a great mistake to stop the reading of Hirsch, and leave the matter at this point. The quotation above, read in isolation, really leads one to misinterpret the important contribution that Hirsch brings to the question of literary interpretation. I think that what Barthes (1988), Foucault (1999), and mainly Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954), have correctly claimed is that literary ‘interpretation’ cannot be subordinated to such a problematic category as that of the author. However, as will be possible to verify, Hirsch does not deny this aspect of literary criticism. On the contrary, he champions it, only for the matter of what he calls “signification”. This is the topic of the fourth chapter, which is titled “Understanding, Interpretation, and Criticism”.

In my opinion, chapter four is Hirsch’s most significant contribution to literary criticism. It is in this chapter that he develops the distinction between *meaning* and *significance*, which he defines as the “distinction between the meaning of an interpretation and the constructions of meaning to which the interpretation refers.” (p.129) For the understanding of this distinction, another is also necessary: the one he makes between “different” and “disparate” interpretations. Related to the first distinction, he says that “the fact that all interpretations are different warrants neither the sanguine belief that all plausible interpretations are helpful and compatible nor the hopeless proposition that all interpretations

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<sup>36</sup> Remember, not what he has in mind, but the verbal meaning of his intended utterance, the sharable aspect of his communication.

<sup>37</sup> Hirsch also develops his phenomenological approach to this matter in Appendix I (to be referred later).

are personal, temporal, and incommensurable.” (p.128-9) In relation to the second, he says that “two different interpretations are not necessarily disparate, for all the interpretations are different, and if not two of them could be identified, then there could be no discipline of interpretation.” (p.130-1) In this sense, for him, criticism and interpretation are “distinct functions with distinct requirements and aims” (p.133), although he acknowledges they are “entangled and co-dependent”. (p.132)

His next step is concerned with the relation among interpretation, understanding and history. There, he puts the problem of validity in the following terms: “the appropriate subject for this discussion, therefore, is not how to understand but how to judge and criticize what one does understand. [For him,] The problem is to decide whether one’s understanding is probably correct.” (p.134) For Hirsch, “the historicity of interpretation is quite distinct from the timelessness of understanding.” (p.137) It is relevant to add to this his phenomenological perspective in an earlier paragraph where he says that “a translation or paraphrase tries to render the meaning in new terms; an explanation tries to point to the meaning in new terms.” (p.136) It reminds me of the word *Sinn* from Deutsch, which also refers to “direction”. Thus, ‘meaning’ may be thought of as ‘pointing to’ instead of ‘coming from’, avoiding, in this way, the dangers of turning it into an immanence, an everlasting essence, a metaphysical concept. In any case, this is not the place to develop such a thesis.

It may seem unacceptable for Continental Philosophy, or what may be vaguely called “post-modern” thought, that someone like Hirsch claim that “the limitation of verbal meaning to what an author meant and the definition of understanding as the construction of that meaning does not [...] constitute a narrow and purist notion of meaning.” (p.139) The whole point which Hirsch refers to will be misunderstood if not supplemented by his observation that

When we construe another's meaning we are not free agents. So long as the meaning of his utterance is our object, we are completely subservient to his will, because the meaning of his utterance is the meaning he wills to convey. Once we have construed his meaning, however, we are quite independent of his will. (p.142)

Under this distinction (not separation) between interpretation and criticism, Hirsch develops another concept: intrinsic criticism. For him, intrinsic criticism is a "special preferred context" (p.146), "the least interesting form of judgment" (p.153), in which wish must be contrasted to the deed, and not confused (ibid). His critique of criticism is that "the literary criticism of literature has often been conducted under a too narrowly formalistic or aesthetic conception of 'literary'". (p.154) In this sense, he considers that judging is quite a different thing from interpretation. In his opinion, "freedom" is associated to the former. That is why the last section of chapter four is titled "Critical Freedom and Interpretive Constraint". He places such a distinction due to another, the one between "appropriateness of context and appropriateness of value judgment." (p.157) Returning to the topic of *the banishment of the author*, Hirsch champions that

The critic may disagree with the author's purposes and hierarchy of purposes, with his taste and methods, but always takes those purposes into consideration. He judges with respect to *some* of the purposes and values entertained by the author and does not simply ignore the conventions, aims, and systems of expectation under which the work was composed. (p.159)

In this sense, the rehabilitation of the category of the author as an important vector in the construction of meaning is corroborated, in Hirsch's words, by the argument that "to disagree with purposes the author did not entertain or to praise him for meanings he did not mean is to invite misunderstanding." (p.161) For Hirsch, "valid criticism is dependent on valid interpretation", so that "a meaning has to be construed before anything can be said about its wider relationships or values." (p.162) In this respect, it is not the restoration of the

author's psychological content, nor the "free" *jouissance*<sup>38</sup> of the reader of his own text in his own text, but the possibility of the text to be autonomous from both of them and have an expression of its own<sup>39</sup>.

Chapter five in Hirsch's book is his argumentation on the question of "validity". His initial approach is to the problem of "certainty". In this respect, he claims that "the fact that certainty is always unattainable is a limitation which interpretation shares with many other disciplines." (p.164) For him, certainty lies in the better providing of evidences among conflicting constructions of meaning. In this sense, he says that "to dream that all expert interpretations are ultimately members of one happy family is to abandon critical thinking altogether." (p.167) For him, "every written interpretation with which I am familiar is implicitly or explicitly an argument that attempts to convince a reader" (p.168), which he complements by saying that "the attempt to win adherents to an interpretive theory by means of validation is generally an implicit attempt to convince readers that other theories should be rejected or modified." (ibid) In a very general way, this sense of "certainty" can be generally related to what Toulmin said about "objectivity" in his article mentioned above<sup>40</sup>.

Thus, for Hirsch, "validation has the more ambitious goal of showing not only that an interpretation is legitimate but that its likelihood of being correct is greater than or equal to that of any other known hypothesis about the text." (p.169) In relation to understanding, he says that it "achieves a construction of meaning; the job of validation is to evaluate the disparate constructions which understanding has brought forward." (p.170) His escape from "empirical objectivism" is given by the discernment between validation and verification. He distinguishes them this way: "to verify is to show that a conclusion is true; to validate is to show that a conclusion is probably true on the basis of what is known." (p.171) In relation to

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<sup>38</sup> An allusion to Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973).

<sup>39</sup> A position to be championed by Ricoeur and later approached in this dissertation.

<sup>40</sup> See Page 21-22 in this dissertation.



the general accepted axiom that “meaning” is not something given, immanent, but something construed, Hirsch says that “interpretation is implicitly a progressive discipline” (ibid), in the sense that “the aim of validation is not necessarily to denominate an individual victor, but rather to reach an objective conclusion about relative probabilities.” (p.172) His position that “correctness” in interpretation is not a “period” in argumentation, or the culmination of an essence, but, on the contrary, an opening for more interpretation, an everlasting “under construction” construct, the actual displacement of the ‘presentness’ of the essence, can be validated by his argument which says that “this distinction between the present validity of an interpretation and its ultimate correctness is not, however, an implicit admission that correct interpretation is impossible. Correctness is precisely the goal of interpretation.” (p.173)

Therefore, interpretation bears some historicity. I may dare to say, from Hirsch’s perspective, that interpretation does not start from the text to be interpreted; it permeates it. At the same time, unlike what New Criticism generally considers, the meaning of a text is not restricted to the text itself; the text is always being rewritten in its interpretations. I say so in order to make Hirsch’s claim that “textual interpretation – the construction of meaning from a text embraces elements already construed and accepted for the moment as being known, and other elements acknowledged to be unknown which are the objects of our construing” (p.177) support my choice of construing this dissertation starting from what has been said about my object of study, and only after that undergoing my own construal.

Hirsch’s position of relating the meaning of a text to the verbal meaning intended by the written text of the author does not restore a Dilthean psychologistic restoration of an essence. On the contrary, it claims that validation relies on the logic of probability, and that “probability judgment is always a guess about the unknown traits of a partly known instance” (p.183); but this “guess” is in a certain way constrained by the social aspect of interpretation, that “an interpretive hypothesis is ultimately a probability judgment that is supported by

evidence.” (p.180) Besides, he says that “any written interpretation is a hypothesis implying a number of subhypotheses, all of which are open to examination.” (p.206) Thus, his position for the defense of the author is championed by him under the claim that “despite its practical correctness and variability, the root problem of interpretation is always the same – to guess what the author meant” (p.207), or, put in other words, “what, in all probability, did the author mean to convey” (ibid).

Appendixes in Hirsch’s book work as a supplement, in the Derridian sense. There are three in *Validity in Interpretation*. The first, concerned with “Objectivity in Interpretation”, reinforces the distinction between the disparate but complementary categories of *interpretation* and *criticism*, both part of a more comprehensive category, that of *understanding*; in the same sense, it also corroborates the distinction between *meaning* and *significance*. In this section of his book, Hirsch restates his position “against certain modern theories which hamper the establishment of normative principles in interpretation and which thereby encourage the subjectivism and individualism which have for many students discredited the analytical movement.” (p.212) He also declares himself to be against what he calls a “life theory” of meaning (p.213), which, in his own words, is “the metaphorical doctrine that a text leads a life of its own”, and which “is used by modern theorists to express the idea that textual meaning changes in the course of time.” (p.212) This would imply, in his opinion, in the fusion of interpretation and criticism. He defends his position by claiming that

The significance of textual meaning has no foundation and no objectivity unless meaning itself is unchanging. To fuse meaning and significance, or interpretation and criticism, by the conception of an autonomous, living, changing meaning does not really free the reader from the shackles of historicism; it simply destroys the basis both for any agreement among readers and for any objective study whatever. (p.214)

Altogether, he follows Husserl in the sense of avoiding identification between verbal meaning with a psychic event<sup>41</sup>. The phenomenological argument for the possibility of reproducibility of verbal meaning is provided by Hirsch when he recurs to Husserl to claim that “all events of consciousness, not simply those involving visual perception and memory, are characterized by the mind’s ability to make modally and temporally different acts of awareness refer to the same object of awareness.” (p.217) Thus, there is an approximation between *meaning* and *intentional object*. For Hirsch, “verbal meaning is *that aspect of a speaker’s ‘intention’ which, under linguistic conventions, may be shared by others*”<sup>42</sup>.” (p.218) He develops, then, a clear definition of what he means by *verbal meaning*:

Verbal meaning, being an intentional object, is unchanging, that is, it may be reproduced by different intentional acts and remains self-identical through all these reproductions. Verbal meaning is sharable content of the speaker’s intentional object. (p.219)

Another important characterization in this respect is about interpretation. For Hirsch, “the interpreter must distinguish those meanings which belong to that verbal intention from those which do not belong.” (ibid) Besides, “the interpreter has to distinguish what a text implies from what it does not imply.” (ibid) For Hirsch, the problem arises when readers come to the point of “determining” implicit or “unsaid” meanings. In this regard, Hirsch proposes another important distinction, the one “between the author’s verbal intention and the meanings of which he was explicitly conscious.” (p.221)

Hirsch, then, uses two other concepts, clearly related to Gadamer, which he calls the “inner” and “outer” horizons of the text. The former refers to interpretation and has a limiting character (that of the author’s verbal intention). On the other hand, the latter leads to criticism, which, in its turn, “unlimits” the possibilities of the text. Therefore, his argument does not

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<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to notice that a similar review of Husserl’s ideas about the topic is also endeavored by Ricoeur, though disparate and/or conflicting Ricoeur and Hirsch may be.

<sup>42</sup> Hirsch’s Italics.

entail the highly contested Dilthean psychologistic approach. Actually, Hirsch is much closer to Ricoeur when he says that “the object of interpretation is not the author but his text. This plausible argument assumes that the text automatically has a meaning simply because it represents an unalterable sequence of words.” (p.224) In this sense, the defense of the author is proposed under the claim that “the array of possibilities only begins to become more selective [...] when [...] we also posit a speaker who very likely means something.” (p.225)

Hirsch’s argumentation relies on the following point:

The text is viewed as representing not a determinate meaning, but rather a system of meaning potentials specified not by a meaner but by the vital potency of language itself. (...) The danger of the view is that it opens the door to subjectivism and relativism, since linguistic norms may be invoked to support *any*<sup>43</sup> verbally possible meaning. (p.226)

His position is confluent with Ricoeur’s in the sense of taking language as discourse, and not as a system. In relation to this point, Hirsch says that,

For the interpreter the text is at first the source of numerous possible interpretations. (...) A written composition is not a mere locus of verbal possibilities, but a record of a verbal actuality. The interpreter’s job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities. (p.231)

Hirsch poses a question which seems, in a certain way, related to the discussion held in *The Politics of Interpretation*: “Does the text mean what the author wanted it to mean or does it mean what the speech community at large takes it to mean?” (p.233) For him, “meaning requires a meaner.” (p.234) However, meaning is not an immediate given. According to Hirsch, “a text represents the determinate verbal meaning of an author, but it is quite another to discover what that meaning is.” (p.235)

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<sup>43</sup> Italics mine.

Again, interpretation is more associated to what Hirsch understands by “validity” than the normally contested “objective verification”. In this sense, Hirsch says that “the interpreter’s goal is simply to show that a given reading is more probable than others.” (p.236) Right after, he adds that, “in hermeneutics, verification is a process of establishing relative probabilities.” (ibid) Thus, according to the author, legitimacy of reading requires coherence and context. For him, coherence is only achieved by showing that one reading is more probable than the other (reconstruction of the author’s verbal intention). It is not a matter of “finding”, but of *adjudicating*. Moreover, “instead of projecting his own attitudes and instead of positing a “universal matrix” of human attitudes, [the interpreter must] reconstruct the author’s probable attitudes so far as these are relevant in specifying the poem’s meaning.” (p.240) So, Hirsch claims that “extrinsic data” are relevant in the act of reconstructing meaning. Therefore, for him, validity in interpretation means that “to verify a text is simply to establish that the author probably meant what we construe his text to mean.” (p.242) His reflection about the act of “lying” is very important in his defense of an author’s verbal intention in a text. In this respect, he says that

My secret awareness that I am lying is irrelevant to the verbal meaning of my utterance. The only correct interpretation of my lie is, paradoxically, to view it as being a true statement, since this is the only correct construction of my verbal intention. It is only when my listener has *understood* my meaning that he can *judge* it to be a lie. (p.243)

Finally, verbal meaning is not a mental aspect, but a verbal aspect. According to Hirsch, “verbal meaning is that aspect of an author’s meaning which is interpersonally communicable; under linguistic norms, one *can* understand, even if one must sometimes work hard to do so.” (ibid)

In the introduction of this chapter, I mentioned my consternation for not having enough time to scrutinize Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960). But I will pay my debt by at least referring Hirsch's appendix on this book. "Appendix II – Gadamer's Theory of Interpretation" acknowledges the German philosopher's protest against methodology in textual interpretation. (p.245) However, Hirsch remains suspicious of the radical historicism derived from Heidegger, which says, according to Hirsch, that "what is rehabilitated from an alien past is not the original." (p.247) Phenomenologically, the present itself is not an immediate. At least this is Ricoeur's position in *Time and Narrative – Vol 3* (1985). To be as brief as possible, Hirsch acknowledges that Gadamer's "primary concern is to attack the premise that textual meaning is the same as the author's meaning" (ibid), which is considered by the latter as "pure romantic *Psychologismus*"<sup>44</sup> (ibid). What Hirsch fights in this theory, and something which would also position him against Ricoeur, is the autonomy of the text in relation to the author. Actually, I think that what Ricoeur and Gadamer criticize is a substantial dependence of the author's intention (now clearly related to the correlation of mental acts and verbal intentions, which is something Hirsch is also against) to the achievement of the text's meaning. However, if we reconsider this autonomy as a total independence from the referential world and from the discursive aspect of language, besides the dependence of a text's interpretation on the history of its interpretation, of its tradition, then I think that Hirsch would not be contrary to Gadamer and Ricoeur, but disparate in some aspects (since the phenomenological perspective is correlated to all of them). Thus, Hirsch's insistence is that

If the language of a text is not speech but rather language speaking its own meaning, then whatever that language says to us is its meaning. It means

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<sup>44</sup> Since the aim of this section is Hirsch's approach to Gadamer's *Warheit und Method* (1960), and since all Gadamer's quotations are translated by Hirsch himself, any quotation or expression from Gadamer will relate to Hirsch's translation, available in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), Appendix II; therefore, any page reference will be from Hirsch's book. Furthermore, Gadamer's translated words will be written in italics.

whatever we take it to mean. Reduced to its intelligible significance, the doctrine of the autonomy of a written text is the doctrine of the indeterminacy of textual meaning. (p.249)

For Gadamer, “*the meaning of a text goes beyond its author not just sometimes but always. Understanding is not a reproductive but always a productive activity*”. (ibid) If we take the distinction made by Hirsch between *interpretation* and *criticism*, and that both are not a split, but two aspects of a continuum called *understanding* (which would also be in agreement with Ricoeur’s perspective), then Gadamer can be in agreement with Hirsch, because the latter also acknowledges the openness of the process of reading as criticism, and generally as understanding, in a broader sense. Hirsch is only against a *total ineffability of a verbal intention*<sup>45</sup>. Hirsch defines his position in the following argument:

To view the text as an autonomous piece of language and interpretation as an infinite process is really to deny that the text has *any*<sup>46</sup> determinate meaning, for a determinate entity is what it is and not another thing, but an inexhaustible array of possibilities is a hypostatization that is nothing in particular at all. (ibid)

This would lead to the absurd situation of the meaninglessness of meaning, which Hirsch refers to by saying that “without a genuinely stable norm we cannot even in principle make a valid choice between two differing interpretations, and we are left with the consequence that a text means nothing in particular at all.” (p.251) Hirsch places the question in an ironical sense: “if we cannot enunciate a principle for distinguishing between an interpretation that is valid and one that is not, there is little point in writing books about texts or about hermeneutic theory” (ibid), which contrasts with Gadamer’s statement that,

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<sup>45</sup> Italics mine; my expression, too.

<sup>46</sup> Hirsch’s italics.

*If a work is not complete in itself how can we have a standard against which to measure the validity of our perception and understanding? [...] All must be left to the perceiver to make what he can out of what lies before him. [...] There is no criterion for validity. [...] each encounter with the work ranks as a new creation<sup>47</sup>. (ibid)*

Hirsch points to a contradiction in a later statement by Gadamer which says that

*The meaning of a written sign is in principle identifiable and repeatable. Only that which is identical in each repetition is that which was really laid down in the written sign. Yet it is at once clear that here 'repetition' cannot be taken in a strict sense. It does not mean a referring back to some primal original in which something was said or written. The understanding of a written text is not repetition of something past, but participation in a present meaning. (p.251-2)*

In this respect, according to Hirsch, the contradiction lies in the fact that “the meaning of the text is self-identical and repeatable, and in the next breath, that repetition is not really a repetition and the identity not really an identity.” (p.252) Beyond a contradiction, I think this aporia is satisfactorily approached by Ricoeur’s dual character of identity in his concept of “narrative identity”. The question for Hirsch, then, is “what constitutes a valid interpretation” (ibid)

Hirsch’s approach to the problem relies on a concept brought from Gadamer himself, the concept of “fusion of horizons”. Hirsch puts the problem in the following question: “how can an interpreter fuse two perspectives – his own and that of the text – unless he has somehow appropriated the original perspective and amalgamated it with his own?” (p.254) Hirsch’s critique is that Gadamer is more “conciliatory to the ideal of valid interpretation”, because, since the interpreter is “really bound by his own historicity, he cannot break out of it into some halfway house where past and present are merged.” (ibid) Hirsch also adds that “at

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<sup>47</sup> Hirsch’s italics. They indicate Gadamer’s words.



best he can only gather up the leftover, unspeaking inscriptions from the past and wring from them, or impose on them, some meaning in terms of his own historical perspective.” (ibid)

Hirsch observes in the discussion about the “fusion of horizons” what he calls “an interesting common feature”, “an attempt to fuse together the past and the present while still acknowledging their incompatible separateness.”<sup>48</sup> (ibid) Thus, Gadamer’s problem, in Hirsch’s opinion, is that the former equates *meaning* with *significance*, something “which does not change”, with something “which changes”. (p.255) Hirsch’s general position can be summarized in the following statement:

The meaning of a text is that which the author meant by his use of particular linguistic symbols. Being linguistic, this meaning is communal, that is, self-identical and reproducible in more than one consciousness. Being reproducible, it is the same whenever and wherever it is understood by another. However, each time this meaning is construed, its meaning to the construer (its significance) is different. [...] It is precisely because the meaning of the text is always the same that its relationship to a different situation is a different relationship. (p.255)

Therefore, once more, Hirsch restates that “an interpreter can construe the original meaning of a past text”, reinforcing that what he denies “is not the fact of difference but the asserted impossibility of sameness in the construing of textual meaning.” (p.256) His critique is pointed against a radical historicism influenced by Heidegger. In this respect, he says that,

The less skeptical position is more probable primarily because it coheres with the rest of experience while the radically historicistic position does not. If we believe from experience that linguistic communication through texts past or present has *ever* occurred, then the dogma of radical historicity is rendered improbable. [...] If the historicist wishes to emphasize the possibility of communication within a given period, he had better not insist that time itself is the decisive differentiating factor that distinguishes one “period” from another. (p.257)

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<sup>48</sup> Again, in my opinion, Ricoeur’s perspective on the subject gives a much more satisfactory answer to the problem in *Time and Narrative*.

Hirsch's last approach to Gadamer's work is made with the concept of *prejudice*. It is in this section of Hirsch's book that he reassesses the question of the "hermeneutic circle", which he defines as follows:

The meaning of a text (or anything else) is a complex of submeanings or parts which hang together; [...] not a merely mechanical collocation, but a relational unity in which the relations of the parts to one another and to the whole constitute an essential aspect of their character as parts. [...] the meaning of a part as a part is determined by its relationship to the whole. Thus, the nature of a partial meaning is dependent on the nature of the whole meaning to which it belongs. [...] we cannot perceive the meaning of a part until after we have grasped the meaning of the whole [...]. (p.258)

For him (a position which seems much in agreement with Ricoeur), "once the dialectic has begun, neither side is totally determined by the other." (p.259)

In this respect, "our understanding of a text is always governed by a pre-understanding." (ibid) Therefore, according to Hirsch, *pre-understanding* is a vague hypothesis, which becomes valid as long as it provides argumentative evidence that the interpreter has grasped the author's verbal intention, which, in its turn, relies in the author's conviction that "a single linguistic sign can represent an identical meaning for two persons because its possible meanings have been limited by convention." (p.262)

Finally, the author's meaning is something governed by conventions which the interpreter can share. (p.263) It is always governed by a guess. From this point on, the question, for Hirsch, is to ask which interpretations are more valid than others, and the parameter for this answer will rely on another guess, the one which presents better evidence on what the author intended through his text, the text's meaning.

The final Appendix in Hirsch's book is called "An Excursus on Types". It is very short and I will now make only one or two final observations. First, that the possibility of

meaning to be recognized and identified in different times, places, by different people, and through different sequences of verbal signs (oral or written), that is, the possibility of effective communication, relies on the concept of “type”. According to Hirsch, “typification precedes similarity judgments; the type enforces a prior identification of the two instances, despite their incommensurability as particulars.” (p.268) Thus, any identification remains an analogical movement, in the sense approached by Ricoeur in his study of the analogical aspect in the act of predicating.<sup>49</sup> Second, also related to the last sentence, Hirsch says that defining types is “not simply a process of identifying certain explicit traits; it also entails a structure of expectations [...] of the unexamined or unattended traits in the new experience will be the same as traits characteristic of previous experience.” (p.270)

I hope that, with this extensive selection of quotations from Hirsch’s *Validity in Interpretation*, I may have provided a reflexive break in an assumed axiom which says that *the meaning of a text is whatever any meaner makes it to mean*. Secondly, I hope the arguments here exposed do not bring up the author as the only authority for the meaning of the text, something for which Barthes, Foucault, Wimsatt and Beardsley have already provided enough of a shovel to keep psychologism in its proper place, that is, two centuries ago. However, I understand that Hirsch’s position is not in that direction. Instead, he is against the complete transference of this authority to the reader, since it would lead to a radical nihilism, and in this respect I agree with him. The incomplete and fragmentary character of meaning, in a confluent perspective between mine and his, would not lead to meaninglessness, but to an everlasting revision of that meaning; which, in its turn, does not deny that at least for some time, and for some people, this meaning could be *sustained*. I also expect to provide in the next section a satisfactory answer to the problem provided by Paul Ricoeur’s *hermeneutical phenomenology*.

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<sup>49</sup> See Paul Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor: the creation of meaning in language*, Study Six – The Work of Resemblance, Section 1 – Substitution and resemblance.

### 2.3 Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Phenomenology

My initial question, 'What does it mean?', which could be reformulated as 'What is its meaning?', directed to my object of study, namely *The Exorcist*, a novel written by William Peter Blatty and first published in 1971, seemed, at least to me, to need another fundamental question, one which was already resounding in my ears after I read de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1983). In the introduction of this book, Wlad Godzich states that "if there is anything that de Man's work has been asserting with a quiet but insistent resolve, it is that we do not know what reading is." (xvi) In this sense, I tried not to avoid an important and fundamental moment of literary interpretation, the moment of asking what it means to ask 'what does it mean?'; or rather, the question in de Man's own words:

The systematic avoidance of the problem of reading, of the interpretive or hermeneutic moment, is a general symptom shared by all methods of literary analysis, whether they be structural or thematic, formalist or referential, American or European, apolitical or socially committed. (DE MAN, 1983, p.282)

There seems to be, in my opinion, a fundamentality of hermeneutics in literary studies, a perspective which I could satisfactorily find support in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. It was in his *Interpretation Theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (1976) that I started to find, if not a solution, at least an interesting position to the matter of meaning. It was in the following question that I found resonance to my own: "what is it to understand a discourse when that discourse is a text or a literary work? How do we make sense of written discourse?" (RICOEUR, 1976, p.71)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> From now on to be referred to as IT.

He also provides a perspective which I had previously applied to the construction of the metaphor used in the provisory title of this dissertation, namely, “literary exorcism”. With this metaphor, I initially proposed meaning not as something immanent, or rather, something which would not be grasped already in the work itself, but as something which came to ‘possess’ the work, something which can eventually become the thing itself, but which can also be ‘expelled’ (deconstructed). Thus, I came to another fundamental position in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, which says that “to understand is not merely to repeat the speech event in a similar event, it is to generate a new event beginning from the text in which the initial event has been objectified.” (IT, p.75), and which he complements in the last article of *Interpretation Theory* by saying that “it goes beyond the mere function of pointing out and showing what already exists [...]. Here showing is at the same time creating a new mode of being.” (IT, p.88) In this sense, interpretation is not bringing out the soul of the work. For Ricoeur, “interpretation, philosophically understood, is nothing else than an attempt to make estrangement and distanciation productive.” (IT, p.44)

Another perspective which was confluent with my initial conjunctures about this subject was the one against the ‘hidden’ character of meaning, that the text was always ‘deceiving’, and that, even for the author, it was always an enigma to be deciphered. It sounded very close to what Ricoeur states when he says: “the sense of the text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed.” (IT, p.87) However, another problem appeared to me, which has already been exposed in this dissertation. The problem can be described this way: if the text does not have an immanent meaning, then it might mean whatever any reader makes it to mean; which was something I could not accept either. If this were so, we would fall into the humpty-dumpty problem referred by Hirsch in his essay in *The Politics of Interpretation*<sup>51</sup>. Thus, the place of the reader

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<sup>51</sup> See Page 32 above in this dissertation.

could not be that of the ‘master’ of the meaning, and it could not be that of the author either. It would have to be constructed by the reader, but could not be the reader’s own saying. The meaning of the text had to become, in a way, autonomous from both reader and author. According to Ricoeur, on the one hand, “what the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it” (IT, p.30); on the other hand, “it is not the reader who primarily projects himself. The reader rather is enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself.” (IT, p.94) Thus, I can put a preliminary answer for what Ricoeur understands by reading:

Reading is the *pharmakon*, the ‘remedy’, by which the meaning of the text is ‘rescued’ from the estrangement of distanciation and put in a new proximity, a proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness. (IT, p.43)

However, this must be taken as a starting position, which deserves closer attention. The perspective I will develop has as its references the following titles by Ricoeur: *The Conflict of Interpretations*, *The Rule of Metaphor*, *Time and Narrative – Vol.1, Vol.2*, and *Vol.3, Oneself as Another*, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. This selection comprehends what Dauenhauer (2005) called “Ricoeur’s linguistic turn”<sup>52</sup>.

Reading is thus released from the boundaries of ‘literacy’, the mere capacity to deal with codified signs (i.e., the alphabet). It is, on another hand, due to its semantic comprehensiveness, taken to an ontological level. Reading is not any longer the ability to *identify* the alphabet and to *identify* words – for Ricoeur, “the text cannot be purely and

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<sup>52</sup> Which could also include other books; this restricted selection was made due to my selection of quotations which could better provide a perspective on the issue of meaning.

simply identified with writing.” (RICOEUR, 1981, p.132)<sup>53</sup> It is a hermeneutical activity, where the immediacy of signs has been denied. Language is not *langue*<sup>54</sup> anymore; in Ricoeur’s perspective, language is discourse<sup>55</sup>. In his own words: “language is not an object, but mediation.” (RICOEUR, 1974, p.84-5)<sup>56</sup> In this sense, since there is no ‘immediacy’ of language, which is itself a medium, the hermeneutical task becomes fundamental, because then all texts<sup>57</sup> need to be interpreted. Thus, Ricoeur proposes a new use of hermeneutics, which he describes as “no longer edification, the construction of a spiritual meaning on the literal meaning, but a boring under the literal meaning, a de-struction, that is to say, a de-construction, of the letter itself.” (CI, p.389) This quotation is still much closer to his initial developments in hermeneutics, but it already displays traces of what is more linguistically approached in his following works. It is already a prolegomena to his following *Interpretation Theory* when he says that:

To understand it is necessary to believe; to believe it is necessary to understand. [...] There is a circle because the exegete is not his own master. What he wants to understand is what the text says; the task of understanding is therefore governed by what is at issue in the text itself. (CI, p.389)

He complements this idea by saying that “to understand the text, it is necessary to believe in what the text announces to me; but what the text announces to me is given nowhere but in the text.” (CI, p.390) The text *qua* event, as a manifestation of discourse, that is, a *phenomenon*, is part of two fundamental perspectives which permeate Ricoeur’s reflection, which are: ontology, on the part of Heidegger, and phenomenology, on the part of Husserl.

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<sup>53</sup> It is actually a collection of essays organized by John B. Thompson, which is used because it groups the main texts of the French philosopher up to 1980. From now on, it will be referred to as HHS.

<sup>54</sup> To refer to Saussure’s traditional distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

<sup>55</sup> A perspective brought from Benveniste.

<sup>56</sup> From now on to be referred to as CI.

<sup>57</sup> Since my concern here is about literary works, and in spite of all the controversies this concept may engender, I will restrict this concept to what may also be called “written fiction”, trying to apply it as loosely as possible. In any case, Ricoeur’s philosophy does not restrict the concept of ‘text’ only to ‘written discourse’. For him, action itself can be taken as a text. For further reading, see his *From Text to Action* (1991).

More than ‘de-codifying’ a text, which Ricoeur correlates to Structural Analysis, hermeneutics is concerned with ‘*re*-configuring’ the text. For him,

The very work of interpretation reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text which has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself. (CI, p.4)

It is this dual moment of meaning which concerns him, this paradox where meaning has to be ‘grasped’ to be shared, which itself carries a fissure, an opening which prevents it from being closed. In his own words,

It is the objectivity of the text, understood as content – bearer of meaning and demand for meaning – that begins the existential movement of appropriation. Without such a conception of meaning, of its objectivity and even of its ideality, no textual criticism is possible. Therefore, the semantic moment, the moment of objective meaning, must precede the existential moment, the moment of personal decision, in a hermeneutics concerned with doing justice to both the objectivity of meaning and the historicity of personal decision. [...] If there is no objective meaning, then the text no longer says anything at all; without existential appropriation, what the text does say is no longer living speech. (CI, p.397-8)

A general concept of hermeneutics can be found in Ricoeur’s essay ‘The Task of Hermeneutics’, where he says that “hermeneutics is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.” (HHS, p.43) But this is only a vague generalization. However, it is enough to place literary interpretation under a fundamental hermeneutical practice. Contemporary hermeneutics aims at avoiding one of the crucial problems of Traditional Hermeneutics, which Ricoeur associates to the works of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. For Ricoeur,

The meaning of a text is rendered autonomous with respect to the subjective intention of its author, the essential question is not to recover, behind the text, the lost intention, but to unfold, in front of the text, the ‘world’ which it opens up and discloses. (HHS, p.111)



It is important to remind the reader that two of the most famous adages of hermeneutics come from Schleiermacher. According to Ricoeur, one says that “there is hermeneutics where there is misunderstanding.” (HHS, p.46/83) The other says that the hermeneutical task is “to understand an author as well as and even better than he understood himself.” (SCHLEIERMACHER, 1998, p.33) Dilthey, in his turn, took a step forward and established that it was not texts that should be interpreted, but life itself. His philosophical concern was related to the problem of the intelligibility of the historical as such, in epistemological terms.

Thus, Ricoeur’s critique to this traditional hermeneutical approach can be summarized in the following sentence: “the text must be unfolded, no longer towards its author, but towards its immanent sense and towards the world which it opens up and discloses.” (HHS, p.53) This is also the turn operated by Heidegger and Gadamer in their response to Schleiermacher and Dilthey. From Heidegger, Ricoeur brings the following interpretation: “to understand a text is not to find a lifeless sense which is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text.” (HHS, p.56) From Gadamer, he adopts the concept of ‘the matter-of-the-text’, which, for Ricoeur, is “what enables us to communicate at distance [...], which belongs neither to its author nor to its reader.” (HHS, p.62)

From the last citation I highlight one of the most fundamental terms in Ricoeur’s reflection, namely, ‘distanciation’. This term is important to understand Ricoeur’s concepts of ‘text’ and ‘autonomy of the text’. For Ricoeur, “the text is much more than a particular case of intersubjective communication: it is the paradigm of distanciation in communication.” (HHS, p.131) It points to the crucial difference between ‘speaking’ and ‘writing’. In other words, the text is the fundament which splits them. In his approach, Ricoeur says that “a text is really a

text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when instead it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means.” (HHS, p.146) In addition, he says that,

The book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication. The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading. The text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer. (HHS, p.146-7)

It may sound strange to say that ‘there is no communication’ between writer and reader. In order to avoid misunderstandings, what Ricoeur means here is what he later complements, by saying that,

To read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. For it is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete and, as it were, intact. The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work. (HHS, p.147)<sup>58</sup>

De Man’s concern, which was my own, was in some degree relieved, at least for me, by Ricoeur’s conceptualization of ‘text’ and ‘reading’. Following what the French philosopher says,

The text, as writing, awaits and calls for a reading. If reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things. To read is, on any hypothesis, to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text... an original capacity for renewal... Interpretation is the concrete outcome of conjunction and renewal. (HHS, p.158)

To recall once again what was said above, reading is not ‘recovering’, but ‘unfolding’. However, it is important not to plunge too hastily into the truthfulness of the

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<sup>58</sup> Any resemblance to Barthes’s *The Death of The Author* (1967) is not mere coincidence.

‘death of the author’. I think that Hirsch certainly provides respectful considerations on the matter. Ricoeur himself sometimes seems close to some of Hirsch’s arguments. To make the subject as clear as possible, it is important to pay attention to some considerations made by Ricoeur. One of them says that:

The moment of distanciation is implied by fixation in writing and by all comparable phenomena in the sphere of the transmission of discourse. Writing is not simply a matter of the fixation of discourse; for fixation is the condition of a much more fundamental phenomenon, that of the autonomy of the text: with respect to the intention of the author; with respect to the cultural situation and all the sociological conditions of the production of the text, and with respect to the original addressee. What the text *signifies*<sup>59</sup> no longer coincides with what the author meant; *verbal meaning*<sup>60</sup> and mental meaning have different destinies. [It] implies the possibility that ‘the matter of the text’ may escape from the author’s restricted intentional horizon, and that the world of the text may explode the world of its author. (HHS, p.91)

From this citation, I highlight two important but almost imperceptible terms: “signifies” and “verbal meaning”. I think that Hirsch’s distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘signification’ is confluent with what Ricoeur says above. If this is so, Hirsch’s position in defining ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation’ as related to the author’s verbal intended meaning through a text, in contrast with ‘signification’ and the ‘free-play’ made possible by the distanciation engendered by the text, only reinforces both the objectivity of meaning and the openness of interpretation (however ambiguous or misplaced these terms may sometimes be if we compare the authors’ terminologies). This problematizing maintains Ricoeur’s concern against Traditional Hermeneutics: “the hermeneutical task is to discern the ‘matter’ of the text and not the psychology of the author” (HHS, p.111). My only objection is that ‘autonomy’ must not be confused with ‘independence’. Certainly the point here is not ‘reification of the authorial intention’ but ‘the displacement of the author as the only constituent of the text’s

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<sup>59</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>60</sup> Idem.

meaning'. Against a New Criticism hermeticism, my opinion is that *who wrote* and *when it was written* is still of much relevance to understand the text. As Ricoeur himself points out, "this subordination of signification to the universal notion of meaning, under the guidance of the concept of intentionality, in no way implies that a transcendental subjectivity has sovereign mastery of the meaning towards which it orients itself." (HHS, p.116) Therefore, intentionality has nothing to do with 'mental meaning'. It has to do with a general assumption which is transversal<sup>61</sup> in Ricoeur's work: *to say something about something*, a fundamental function of language as discourse.

Subsequent to the elaboration of concepts for 'reading' and 'text' associated to the concept of 'distanciation' is another important term which is part of this dialectics, namely, 'approximation'. In this sense, "to interpret is to render near what is far." (HHS, p.111) In addition to that, Ricoeur also says that "interpretation is the reply to the fundamental distanciation constituted by the objectification of man in works of discourse." (HHS, p.138) For him, "the text must be able to 'decontextualise' itself in such a way that it can be 'recontextulized' in a new situation, by the act of reading." (HHS, p.139) Therefore, "distanciation is not the product of methodology and hence something superfluous and parasitical; rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing. At the same time, it is the condition of interpretation." (HHS, p.139) This reflection is important to understand the concept of the 'autonomy of the text' not as an end, but as a moment of 'understanding'. The text stops being an end in itself, and, as language, it becomes medium, "a medium through which we understand ourselves." (HHS, p.142) In this sense, "appropriation is quite the contrary of contemporaneousness and congeniality." (HHS, p.143) Again, the process of interpretation is seen more like a *telos* than an *arché*; or rather, a *telos* through/from *arché*.

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<sup>61</sup> See "Structure, Word, Event" in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, "The Case Against Reference" in *The Rule of Metaphor*, "Narrativity and Reference" in *Time and Narrative (Vol.1)*, and "Meaning as 'Sense' and 'Reference'" in *Interpretation Theory* in which the 'referentiality of discourse' is championed by the author.

Thus, understanding becomes ‘self-understanding in front of the work’<sup>62</sup>. As Ricoeur defines the matter,

What I appropriate is a proposed world. [...] not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it and enlarged self. (HHS, p.143)

In my opinion, besides refuting the ‘reification’ of the author, it also resists the ‘sovereignty’ of the *ego*, but now that of the reader’s *ego*. The text does not need a master, a center. It is not the text which needs reading, but we ourselves who are caught up in the circuit of symbols. Literature is not an empirical object waiting to be ‘interpreted’ anymore; it interpellates us. As Ricoeur himself questions:

We understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works. What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and, in general, of all that we call the *self*, if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature? (Ibid)

Thus, ‘meaning’ is not an end, but something sought in order to open up possibilities of reading the world, that is, reading ourselves. Consequently, the concept of ‘appropriation’ is defined by Ricoeur when he says: “the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself.” (HHS, p.158)

The dialectics of distanciation-appropriation, in a certain way, inevitably alerted me to the concept of ‘interpretation’. For Hirsch, there is a clear separation between

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<sup>62</sup> This is the title of section V in Ricoeur’s essay *The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation*. (HHS, p.142)

‘interpretation’ and ‘criticism’. The first is objective and always seeks to rely on the author’s verbal meaning intended through his/her work. If I am allowed a very brief analogy, only for the sake of exemplification, it could be said that ‘interpretation’ is very close to the ‘identification’ of the ‘illocutionary act’ of the text<sup>63</sup>. On the other hand, there is the ‘perlocutionary force’, which would carry the interpreter’s ‘judgment’<sup>64</sup> (which, for Hirsch, would be the case of criticism). Still, for Ricoeur, interpretation is not a particular case of ‘understanding’. It is not seen as an object, but as a “process”, that is, “the dynamic of interpretive reading”. (IT, p.74) In his perspective, the separation made between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ is only “an abstraction, an artifact of methodology” (IT, p.75). Even though it may seem clear that the authors deal differently with the question of the ‘author’s intended meaning’, I think they end up quite in agreement. For Hirsch, the author’s verbal intention is a guess. The point is that Ricoeur also acknowledges the same. Compare: Ricoeur – “we have to *guess*<sup>65</sup> the meaning of the text because the author’s intention is beyond our reach” (IT, p.87); Hirsch – “despite its practical correctness and variability, the root problem of interpretation is always the same – to *guess*<sup>66</sup> what the author meant.” (HIRSCH, 1967, p.207) The argument becomes even more explicit when Ricoeur states that “what comes to writing is discourse as intention-to-say and that writing is a direct inscription of this intention.” (HHS, p.147) I think this happens because both have a similar orienting basis – Husserl. As Ricoeur himself explains Husserl’s definition for meaning: “the ‘meaning’ of a statement constitutes an ‘ideality’ which exists neither in mundane reality nor in psychic reality: it is a pure unity of meaning without a real localization.” (HHS, p.152) This may

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<sup>63</sup> A similar analogy is made with ‘meaning’ by Ricoeur in HHS, p.200.

<sup>64</sup> Despite the controversy that these terms have brought forward since they were used by Austin in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), I apply them here in a more shallow and restricted way, meaning only ‘probable intended meaning in a specific situation’ for ‘illocutionary’, and ‘response’, which in its turn could also be referred as ‘interpretation’ or ‘judgment’, for ‘perlocutionary’. For further reading on the issue, see Holdcroft’s *Words and Deeds* (1978).

<sup>65</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>66</sup> Idem.

support the association I made between Derrida's concept *Hauntology* and 'meaning', bringing up the metaphor of 'meaning' as a 'ghost'.

The image of considering 'meaning' not as an object but as a process releases it from being either on the side of 'interpretation' or 'criticism', in Hirsch's terminology, either on the side of 'explanation' or 'understanding', in Ricoeur. Thus, 'meaning' passes from the epistemological level to the ontological level. This shift carries other changes on the side of 'interpretation'. For Ricoeur, "interpretation 'brings together', 'equalizes', renders 'contemporary and similar', thus genuinely making one's *own* what was initially *alien*." (HHS, p.159) However, it is only part of the whole process of understanding. He also says that "the objectification of meaning is a necessary mediation between the writer and the reader. But as mediation, it calls for a complementary act of a more existential character which [he calls] the appropriation of meaning." (HHS, p.185) It is exactly the same as Hirsch has claimed in *Validity in Interpretation*. Certainly, the text is not resumed to the author's intended meaning. The text is the provider of what the author meant, not the author himself. I think this is actually what both authors have been claiming. It brings another relevant issue, one that is clearly championed by Hirsch and which is also referred briefly by Ricoeur: words do not mean by themselves. However, their split is sustained by Ricoeur's insistence that "depth semantics of the text is not what the author intended to say." (HHS, p.218) In his conception of the author's intention, he says that,

To understand a text is not to rejoin the author. The disjunction of the meaning and the intention creates an absolutely original situation which engenders the dialectic of *erklären*<sup>67</sup> and *verstehen*<sup>68</sup>. If the objective meaning is something other than the subjective intention of the author, it may be construed in various ways. The problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author. (HHS, p.210-1)

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<sup>67</sup> Translated from Deutsch: to explain. (WordReference, 1999)

<sup>68</sup> Translated from Deutsch: to understand. (WordReference, 1999)

Under the arguments exposed above, I insist on saying that they end up ‘meaning’ the same. First, both argue against a reconstruction of a ‘mental act’. Second, both agree that the construction of meaning springs from the text. Third, both acknowledge that the meaning of a text does not end in its explicatory moment (in Ricoeur’s perspective) or in the interpretative moment (in Hirsch). I think that the only difference is that the former does not associate this ‘objective’ first moment in ‘understanding’ as an analogue to the author’s intention, whereas the latter does, but refers to it as ‘the author’s verbal meaning’, that is, the meaning he/she might have attempted to convey by the verbal signs deposited in his text. In any case, both refer to it as a ‘guess’. Ricoeur even acknowledges that Hirsch is right in calling interpretation a “guess” (IT, p.78). In order to conclude this paragraph, I would like to select just one more interesting citation which can link interpretation to what was said above about reading: “only interpretation is the ‘remedy’ for the weakness of discourse which its author can no longer ‘save’.” (HHS, p.201)

From this point on, I am going to turn my focus to another referential topic in Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation: the concept of ‘work’. Foucault has already provided convincing arguments against the closure operated by the category of the author in his essay *What is an author?*. However, I think that Ricoeur’s conceptual laboring on the concept of ‘work’ provides meaningful and positive considerations to the present discussion about meaning. Yet, another adjoining aspect is Ricoeur’s association between discourse and event. In his own words: “if all discourse is realized as event, all discourse is understood as meaning. What we wish to understand is not the fleeting event, but rather the meaning which endures.” (HHS, p.134) In addition, he also says that:

Discourse, by entering the process of understanding, surpasses itself as event and becomes meaning. The surpassing by the event by the meaning is characteristic of discourse as such. It attests to the very intentionality of



language [...]. If language is a meaningful intention, it is precisely in virtue of the surpassing of the event by the meaning. (Ibid)

If it is not clear yet in my argument that Hirsch and Ricoeur are closer than they might seem, or rather that their discrepancies are not that great, I believe the following statement made by the latter can reinforce the argument: “I therefore give the word ‘meaning’ a very broad connotation that covers all aspects and levels of the *intentional exteriorization*, which, in turn, renders possible the exteriorization of discourse in writing and in the work.” (HHS, p.135-6)

This relation between meaning and event is extremely important for Ricoeur’s concept of ‘work’, in relation to what he calls the “paradox of event and meaning” (HHS, p.137). According to him, “discourse is realized as event but understood as meaning. The notion of work appears as a practical mediation between the irrationality of the event and the rationality of meaning. (ibid) Moreover, in another essay, he returns to the topic in order to reinforce this perspective, where he says that,

Discourse *qua* event has a fleeting existence: it appears and disappears. But at the same time it can be identified and reidentified as the same. This ‘sameness’ is what we call, in a broad sense, its meaning. All discourse is realized as event but understood as meaning. Meaning is supported by a specific structure, that of the proposition. (HHS, p.167)

In this sense, he claims that “all texts are discourses”, but he also acknowledges that “it must be something more in order to be a work; but it is at least a set of sentences, and consequently a discourse.” (HHS, p.169) Thus, the concept of work meets the concept of text when Ricoeur states that,

The text is not only something written but is a work, that is, a singular totality. [...] [It] cannot be reduced to a sequence of sentences which are individually intelligible; rather, it is an architecture of themes and purposes

which can be constructed in several ways. [...] The presupposition of a certain whole precedes the discernment of a determinate arrangement of parts; and it is by constructing the details that we build up the whole. [...] a text is a kind of individual. [...] Its singularity can be regained, therefore, only by progressively rectifying generic concepts which concern the class of texts, the literary genre and the various structures which intersect in this singular text. (HHS, p.175)

However, this whole, this totality, is not immanent. This also has to be ‘guessed’ upon the evidence ‘gathered’ by the reader. This is what actually opens the univocity of the text to the variability of readings. Depending on how this ‘evidence’ is ‘selected’ and ‘organized’, the univocity of the text *may* change drastically. This is, in a certain way, what Ricoeur refers to when he says that “the localization and the individualization of this unique text is still a guess.” (HHS, p.211) “Therefore”, as the author complements, “the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectivist aspect similar to that of perception.” (HHS, p.212) However, as it is approached by him in *Time and Narrative – Vol. 2*, ‘emplotment’ is already an attempt to utter a meaning, a sense (in the directional sense of the German word *Sinn*, or the Portuguese word *sentido*)<sup>69</sup>, to point to somewhere, because, as Ricoeur says, “a text is more than a linear succession of sentences. It is a cumulative, holistic process.” (HHS, p.212) A text, as I attempt to formulate from the perspectives presented in this dissertation, does not ‘have’, or ‘contain’ an univocity; it is actually interpretation which impels us to scope a range of possible univocit(y/ies). As Ricoeur observes, “the text is a limited field of possible constructions.” (Ibid) Besides, as Hirsch (1967) affirms, a text can mean possible things, but not all or any of the things in the world; not because a text has a limited scope of possibilities, but only by the mere constraint of discourse to bring language to the level of uniqueness while situating it in place and time. Thus, a text can have possible meanings, but not “all” or “any” meaning. That is why both Hirsch and Ricoeur relate the guessing of interpretation to the ‘judicatory’ aspect of validation. Thus, once again, Ricoeur ends up

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<sup>69</sup> According to Ricoeur’s own words: “the text seeks to place us in its meaning, that is, in the same direction.” (HHS, p.161)

having a similar position to Hirsch when he says that “in front of the court, the plurivocity common to texts and to actions is exhibited on the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a *verdict*<sup>70</sup> to which it is possible to make appeal.” (HHS, p.215) Thus, to claim that a text means ‘this’ and not ‘that’ is more related to the level of validity of competing arguments than to the immanence of its meaning. Sometimes, competing interpretations may bring us to a moment of indecision, opening up a moment of paradox. I believe, in agreement with Hirsch, that to interpret a work is to claim more validity to this ‘reading’ than all the other competing ones, or then, in a more *derridian* sense, to dismantle those who claim or ‘apparently’ seem to be the only possible one, which would lead us to Deconstruction.

This reflection is what led me to investigate the aspect of an ‘identity’ of the text under Ricoeur’s proposal of the dual character of identity. But before approaching this topic, I would rather select some of Ricoeur’s reflections about ‘narrativity’, ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’, which are extremely relevant for this dissertation and inevitable for the understanding of his concept of “narrative identity”. I start by bringing up some of Ricoeur’s remarks about what he understands by *literature*. In his perspective, “literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval and condemnation through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics.” (RICOEUR, 1994, p.115)<sup>71</sup> He also characterizes literature as “an immense laboratory for thought experiments in which this connection [between literature and life] is submitted to an endless number of imaginative variations.” (OA, p.159) With these two remarks, I would like to call attention to the privilege function designated to literature which is fundamental in its specification from other modes of discourse. I am not claiming here that there are clearly defined boundaries among modes of discourse. Actually, what I would like to point out here is Ricoeur’s reactivation of literature

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<sup>70</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>71</sup> From now on to be referred to as OA.

as a cognitively positive way of intelligibility, that is, which is far from being a ‘representation’ of a course of action, but rather a new and different way of thinking<sup>72</sup>. This leads us to Ricoeur’s reinterpretation of *mimesis* in the Aristotelian sense. According to the French philosopher,

The Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* already encompasses all of the paradoxes of reference. It expresses a world of human actions which is already there (human reality, the tragedy of life); but *mimesis* does not mean the duplication of reality; *mimesis* is not a copy: *mimesis* is *poiesis*, that is, construction, creation. (HHS, p.179-80)

This is the supporting argument for his reactivation of metaphor as a cognitively creative process. In its turn, this is also the support for the concept of “imaginative variations”, which the invention of plots engenders. In this sense, it is important to complement, according to Ricoeur’s own words, that,

What *mimesis* imitates is not the effectivity of events but their logical structure, their meaning. *Mimesis* is so little a reduplication of reality that tragedy ‘seeks to represent men as better than they are in reality’. Tragic *mimesis* reactivates reality [...]. *Mimesis* is a kind of metaphor of reality. Like metaphor, it places before our eyes, it shows by ‘signifying the thing in activity’. [...] Fictional narrative as well is an iconic augmentation of the human world of action. (HHS, p.292)

Since there is no copy, no reduplication of reality, literature is the place where reality comes to be reality, but still in an adjacent way, in a ‘quasi-reality<sup>73</sup>’. With this we can see that the traditional accommodation of ‘literature’ in the Aristotelian triad poetry-drama-epic permeates Ricoeur’s discourse. Consequently, it is inevitable to predicate literature with “fictional inventiveness”. Nevertheless, it is also important to consider some reflections that Ricoeur makes about ‘fiction’. First of all, it is essential to highlight his remark that “fiction

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<sup>72</sup> This position is initially developed in *The Rule of Metaphor* when Ricoeur claims that a metaphor is not an ornament for language; for him, it is a cognitively new way of thinking. The same procedure is applied to the constructions of fictional narratives in *Time and Narrative*, and also in his study of personal identity and narrative identity in *Oneself as Another*.

<sup>73</sup> The allusion here is to Ricoeur’s “quasi-present”. This prefix is also applied by the author to other words, but always under this sense of ‘aiming’ at something, but never becoming a full ‘presence’.

and representation of reality do not exclude one another.” (HHS, p.291) In addition to this, he says: “fiction is not an instance of reproductive imagination, but a productive imagination. As such, it refers to reality not in order to copy it, but in order to prescribe a new reading.” (HHS, p.292-3) Thus, more than lacking ‘epistemological’ weight, of saying things that are not ‘true’ or ‘real’, but ‘invented’, ‘created’, fiction overflows ‘ontologically’ from this reduction. This shift in the level of intelligibility is also remarked by Ricoeur. According to him, “fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be.” (HHS, p.142) Therefore, fiction is not a verbal description of reality. Actually, it is because life itself is an evanescent event that we need the support from fictional narratives as a way of being, as a way of understanding ourselves.

In order not to remain so much in these propaedeutic terms, I would like now to bring up some remarks made by Ricoeur about ‘narrativity’. Still in a scope of thought provided by the categories of ‘literature’ and ‘fiction’, which may be considered in Ricoeur’s perspective more like a way of being than a way of representing, narrative itself functions as a mode of “interrupting lived experience in order to signify it.” (HHS, p.116) However, narrative is only plainly understood if accompanied by the concept of “plot”, because, according to Ricoeur, it is only plot that “gives a contour” to actions, which permit them to become intelligible. (RICOEUR, 1990a, p.39)<sup>74</sup> In this sense, *telling* is already *explaining*, or as in the author’s own words, “to narrate a story is already ‘to reflect upon’ the event narrated.” (RICOEUR, 1990b, p.61)<sup>75</sup> This perspective is brought from O. Mink; for the latter, stories are not lived but told<sup>76</sup>. Thus, the importance of plot for Ricoeur comes from the fact that “the configurational arrangement transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole which is the correlate of the act of assembling the events together and

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<sup>74</sup> From now on to be referred to as TN1.

<sup>75</sup> From now on to be referred to as TN2.

<sup>76</sup> This is an important reference for Ricoeur both in *Time and Narrative – Vol.1* and *Oneself as Another*. For further reading: O. Mink’s *Historical Understanding*.

which makes the story followable.” (TN1, p.67) In this sense, following the perspective of Arthur Danto, Ricoeur states that “a simple narrative does more than report events in their order of appearance.” (TN1, p.148) Moreover, considering that plot is organization of the story in order to make it intelligible, it also transforms the organization of the sequence of events into the *choice* of what is going to be placed as parts of this sequence. Thus, according to Ricoeur, “*emplotment*” is “*configuration*”. It ceases to be a ‘representation’, a ‘copy’ of reality, and starts to be understood as *reality as it can be thought*, as a way of *responding* to the evanescent aspect of reality. As the French philosopher states, “narrative puts consonance where there was only dissonance. [...] narrative gives form to what is unformed.” (TN1, p.72)

Therefore, if narration imposes an arrangement to action, if it attempts to give ‘order’ to the ‘chaos of life’, it is not in order to reproduce reality. What it actually does is to search for concordance where there is only discordance, as Ricoeur observes. (TN2, p.28) It is interesting also to remark Ricoeur’s reflection on the “de-chronolization” of modern narrative. For the author, the modern Romance may actually wish to be as ‘realistic’ as Realism itself; its attempt, in the author’s opinion, may be seen as an attempt to be as *close* as possible to reality – in the sense that if reality is not chronological, then narration must not be either. According to Ricoeur, “the struggle against the linear representation of time does not necessarily have as its sole outcome the turning of narrative into ‘logic’, but rather may deepen its temporality.” (TN1, p.30) In its turn, it does not efface the pretension of a text to aspire to a reference, to say something about something, to *ask for a sense*. Thus, in relation to what has already been approached above, Ricoeur says that,

Language’s capacity for reference was not exhausted by descriptive discourse and that poetic works referred to the world in their own specific way, that of metaphorical reference. [...] Poetic texts, too, speak *of* the world, even though they may not do so in a descriptive fashion. [...] The world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved. To understand these texts is to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all those meanings that,

from a simple environment, make a world. [...] Far from producing only weakened images of reality, [...] literary works depict reality by *augmenting* it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment. (TN1, p.80)

These reflections above lead back to what may be called the objectivity of the text, to its possibility as communication. I think that one important step made by Ricoeur was to first take texts to the level of discourse, but only through the dialectic mediation of a structural reading and a reader's response to that text. Thus, interpretation ceases to be the closure of the text to the univocity intended by the author's verbal intention as well as the indeterminacy of the potentialities of readings a text can have due to the infinite readers it can have. In this sense, I dare to make Hirsch and Ricoeur converge by saying that interpreting a text starts from the reconstruction of its communicative proposal through all the material evidence that it provides plus a reconfiguration of what was assumed as said into another saying. By reconstructing the text with other words, the reader does not 'reproduce' it; instead, he/she, through an operation of predicament, makes it *visible*, they bring, *in front of the eyes*, what was *distant, invisible* to the reach of the eye. This step may reactivate the author's verbal intention (as in Hirsch's perspective), insofar as this be restricted to a *reconstruction* by the approximation of terms which may give a sense of identity, of univocity for the text. However, it will remain in the level of *a competing reading among others which attempts to provide more evidence than these in order to claim to be ascribed as the best reconstruction brought forth so far*. Those responsible for this judicatory act, in my opinion, are those involved in the community which gravitates around the text under objectification. Acknowledging the sameness of a text's identity is allowing it to have more than one reading (different from saying that it has none due to its many readings). Many different readers are thus able to build the text in infinite ways. However, all of them, admittedly or not, will be attempting to do one thing: to say what the text 'really' says. This is the point in which one

should remember what was already quoted from Ricoeur: that a text *proposes a world*. Certainly, the function of this reconstruction will be left to the reader. Yet, it does not prevent the very author of that text to be its reader; or even reading him as a ‘text’, which would turn him into an *intertext*. In case the author is not satisfied with his previous reading, he will rewrite it under a new interpretation<sup>77</sup>.

These considerations led me to approach Ricoeur’s concepts of identity in *Oneself as Another*. Considering that interpretation passes through the *construction* of a text’s proposal, of what it aims to say, its verbal intended meaning<sup>78</sup>, then it can also be assumed that the *construction of this proposal* may refer to the ‘identity’ of the text. In this sense, the *meaning* of a text would implicate in the construction of its identity, which, in its turn, could only be achieved through the operations of a narrative. Thus, the meaning of a text would be its “narrative identity”. In order to understand this suggestion, it is necessary to make reference to what Ricoeur says about this issue.

Initially, I would like to start this path towards what is suggested above by approaching Ricoeur’s “Conclusions” in *Time and Narrative – Vol.3*. It is also important to remind the reader that what is at issue in this trilogy is not meaning, but time. The hypothesis that permeates Ricoeur’s thesis, according to the author, is that “temporality cannot be spoken of in the direct discourse of phenomenology, but rather requires the mediation of indirect discourse of narration.” (RICOEUR, 1990c, p.241)<sup>79</sup> This hypothesis served as basis for the proposal which I am attempting to develop in this dissertation, namely, that the meaning of a

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<sup>77</sup> A good example for this situation would be William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931). In this case, the author made modifications to the first draft which ended up in the printed version of the novel; a fact which, in its turn, generated controversies about which of them would be “the best”. The case became controversial much because of Faulkner’s own opinion about the book, saying that it was “a cheap idea, because it was deliberately conceived to make money”. For further reading, see MILLGATE, Michael. ‘A Fair Job’: a study of Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*. In: *Reviewing of English Literature*. London. Vol. 4, n. 4 (Oct 1963), p. 47-62.

<sup>78</sup> Or even in a theory of speech-acts (Austin) under the terminology of “illocutionary force”. It is also important to remind the reader that all these terms are not ‘equivalent’ or ‘substitutable’; by being part of different philosophical traditions, they are paralleled here only as a matter of approximation under the general-type of *meaning*.

<sup>79</sup> From now on to be referred to as TN3.



literary work cannot be achieved directly through an abbreviation of it in a basic axiomatic proposition which would *encompass* what was narrated (though I do not deny it as a fundamental initial step – which, in its turn, would be relegated to the level of a “conjecture”). Thus, the *meaning* of a literary work would rather aim at returning to this initial predication in order to recognize it only after the detour engendered by the narration which ascribes itself the challenge of ethically<sup>80</sup> narrating a character. I am going to interrupt this reflection abruptly because I think that these conjectures can only be responsibly just if they take the detour of Ricoeur’s reflections.

Returning to *Time and Narrative*, the term “narrative identity” stems from the “interweaving” of fiction and history towards the “assignment of an individual or a community of a *specific*<sup>81</sup> identity that we can call their narrative identity.” (TN3, p.246) First of all, the text needs<sup>82</sup> our recognition of it as an individual. After that, the process of *construing its meaning* would no longer be to ‘find’ a correlative shortened text which would rejoin the ‘original’ text to its ‘essence’. The challenge now lies, by answering the question ‘what does it mean’, in ultimately answering the question ‘who’. It may sound strange to apply this question to an entity which is normally taken as an object. However, after the *autonomization* of the text proposed by Ricoeur (1976), I think that the implications of ascribing a name and a position of subject for this entity in a sentence like “The Exorcist *means* such and such” allows us this possibility. This is also reinforced by Ricoeur’s observation that

Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antinomy with no solution. Either we must posit a subject identical with itself through the diversity of its different states, or, following Hume and Nietzsche, we must hold that this identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion, whose elimination merely brings to light a pure manifold of cognitions, emotions, and volitions. (ibid.)

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<sup>80</sup> Ethics is a hard topic to be abruptly introduced here; however, I insist on keeping this term in reference to the importance Ricoeur gives to the subject in chapters 7, 8, and 9 in *Oneself as Another*, besides his other publications on the subject of ‘law’. For further reading, see *The Just*, and *Reflections on the Just*.

<sup>81</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>82</sup> In this sense, this unity of the text is not intrinsic, but something that we do to them.

However, this reflection can only be properly approached if accompanied by the shift operated by Ricoeur in the concept of ‘identity’. As the author continues right after what was said above,

The dilemma disappears if we substitute for identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same [*soi-même*] (*ipse*). The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity. Self-sameness, “self-constancy”, can escape the dilemma of the Same and the Other to the extent that its identity rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text. The self characterized by self-sameness may then be said to be refigured by the reflective application of such narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one life time. [...] This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told. (*ibid.*)

In this sense, it is also important to mention some limits of narrative identity as a solution for the aporia of time, which is useful to the aporia of *meaning*. As Ricoeur acknowledges, “narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity.” (TN3, p.248) Moreover, “narrative identity does not exhaust the question of self-constancy of a subject.” (TN3, p.249)

The question of self-constancy is what makes Ricoeur’s reflections about ‘identity’ intrinsically correlative to the question of ‘meaning’. They are what *linger* in an individual. This *permanence in time* is the pivotal aspect which led Ricoeur to his formulation of identity, and in consequence, led me to my application of this notion to the category of ‘meaning’. For Ricoeur, “sameness is a concept of relation and a relation of relations.” (OA, p.116) This assertion is accompanied by what the author calls the three components of the notion of identity. First, there is “numerical identity”, where there are not two different things but one and the same thing. Second, there is “qualitative identity”, which bears extreme resemblance. Finally, there is “uninterrupted continuity”, which “rests upon the ordered series of small

changes, which, taken one by one, threaten resemblance without destroying it.” (OA, p.117) However, all of these remarks still belong to the author’s concept of identity as ‘sameness’.

On the other hand, Ricoeur asks himself: “Does the selfhood of the self imply a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum, [...] a form of permanence in time which is not simply the schema of the category of substance?” (OA, p.118) For the author, to speak of ourselves as permanence in time, there are two expressions: “character” and “keeping one’s word”. The former would encompass *idem* and *ipse* identities. The later would mark the intrinsic gap of identity as a ‘promise’ and ‘it sustenance’. The concept of character is very important because it also participates in the *characterization* of the concept of ‘meaning’. In relation to character, Ricoeur initially says that,

By “character” I understand the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same. By the descriptive features that will be given, the individual compounds numerical identity and qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time. In this way, the sameness of the person is designated emblematically. (OA, p.119)

In complementation to this definition, the author also says that,

Character, I would say today, designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. In this way character is able to constitute the limit point where the problematic of *ipse* becomes indiscernible from that of *idem*, and where one is inclined not to distinguish one from another. (OA, p.121)

It is important to remind the reader that the author talks about “identity” in the sphere of “person”, and that I am transferring these considerations from this scope to the scope of “fictional narrative” only as a step in order to think *differently* about the question of meaning. I explicitly assume here, as a work hypothesis, that ‘meaning’, like ‘time’ in Ricoeur’s perspective, cannot be immediately grasped; instead, they need the mediation of narrative (if it is also assumed that ‘meaning’ must be treated as ‘the identity of a text’, which, in its turn,

is another hypothetical step). In this sense, the ‘meaning’ of a text would oscillate between sedimentation and innovation, in the same manner as “identity” in Ricoeur’s approach. In this respect, the author says that,

It will be the task of a reflection on narrative identity to balance, on one side, the immutable traits which this identity owes to the anchoring of the history of a life in a character and, on the other, those traits which tend to separate the identity of the self from the sameness of character. (OA, pp.123)

Thus, according to the author, the narrative of an identity would encompass a ‘descriptive’ and a ‘prescriptive’ moment. (OA, p.115) In my opinion, if the proximity to Hirsch’s differentiation between ‘interpretation’ and ‘criticism’ is not immediately evident, then I suggest such an approximation. In the constitution of identity, of *an other’s* identity, a dialectical movement must be pursued in order to avoid ‘the authoritative sovereignty’ of the *sender* and ‘the narcissism’ of the *receiver*. In the dialectics of *appropriation* mentioned by Ricoeur, I think we must detour the *repulsion* caused by *the corpse of the dead author* by the *mourning of its character*.<sup>83</sup> I think that it is indeed the reader who constructs the text’s meaning. However, there is an ethical dimension implicit in reconstructing the identity of the text, i.e. its meaning, which relies in our *effort* to overcome the ‘presentness’ of the text in its *openness*, in its explicitness, in its lack of unity, in its lack of rationality, which, in its turn, leads us, not to open what is already open, but to linger it in a memory as if it were not going to evanesce again. In this sense, between a writer who ‘writes’, and a reader who ‘reads’, there is a “text<sup>84</sup>” which marks this non-place of *meaning*. Thus, it forces me to repeat a quotation already made:

Reading is the *pharmakon*, the ‘remedy’, by which the meaning of the text is ‘rescued’ from the estrangement of distanciation and put in a new proximity,

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<sup>83</sup> This is a metaphorical allusion to Julia Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror*.

<sup>84</sup> By “text” I do not imply the distinction between speech and writing. For me, both are considered as text. For further reading, see Jonathan Culler’s “Writing and Logocentrism” in *On Deconstruction*.

a proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness. (IT, p.43)

Under this perspective, what I can see is that in the movement from the *recognition* of what is said towards the *opening* of what is meant, from the author's verbal intention to the reader's reconfiguration, there is no logical cause, not even an empirical hierarchy. What I can see is that not recognizing an "I" in the other is to deny the same possibility to myself. That is the way I interpret Ricoeur's shift in hermeneutics. As the author says:

Hermeneutics can no longer be defined as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text. What is to be interpreted in the text is a proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my ownmost possibilities. (HHS, p.112)

In the same sense, he also says: "In reading, 'I unrealise myself'" (HHS, p.94). Then, in another moment<sup>85</sup>, he reinforces this by saying that "as reader, I find myself only by losing myself." (HHS, p.144) As I said above, I do not aim at coming to a solution to the *ascription* of *meaning*. By placing *meaning* as a *non-place*, as a 'ghost', what I am proposing is the recognition of this aporia, of the undecidability of who the 'owner' of the 'meaning' is, or, in other terms, where its 'center' is. How could I do this without denying or recognizing both, reader and writer, as indispensable categories in the construction of the meaning of the text? How could I escape the determinism of univocity and the indeterminism of plurivocity? How could I avoid the author's *ego* without falling into the reader's *narcissism*? I see this in the possibility of talking about *meaning* as the *narrative identity of a text*, assuming the *idem-ipse* duality proposed by Ricoeur (but also denying a hierarchical privilege to *idem* identity), as a practical relief of this inevitable tension. Certainly, the tumbling down of the wall of the *polis* called 'meaning' would imply the dissolution of this place. Whether it is something to be sought or not, I still do not have an answer to. As a provisory measure, I decided to include

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<sup>85</sup> The first is from *Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology*. The second is from *The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation*. Both are present in HHS.

both inside the walls of 'meaning'. As Ricoeur acknowledges, "meaning is not drawn from anywhere." (HHS, p.173) In this sense, the material condition of meaning is the text itself. However, the conditions of meaning must not be confused with closure or openness of meaning. Once again, I restate: the question is far from solved; maybe thankfully it will never be.

Thus, these reflections lead me back to a text that motivated this search, which confirm what this starting motivation actually proposed. In Culler's own words:

As should now be clear, deconstruction is not a theory that defines meaning in order to tell you how to find it. As a critical undoing of the hierarchical oppositions on which theories depend, it demonstrates the difficulties of any theory that would define meaning in a univocal way: as what an author intends, what conventions determine, what a reader experiences." (CULLER, 2007, pp.131)

This observation was what led me not to *recover* the author as an authority, but rather not to fall in the presumption that meaning was left all by itself to the mastery of the reader. However, I still pursue an attempt to keep on talking about meaning. I found in Ricoeur's text a hypothesis of work for this aporia, i.e. narrative identity. Time and Meaning may be ineffable; it does not imply that they cannot be pursued.

## 2. ISSUING THE MEANING (EPILOGUE)

I hope, and here I include the Online Etymology Dictionary<sup>86</sup> observation that this word might be related to “hop”, in the sense of “leaping in expectation”, that, from *skipping* among the triad which guided the first chapter, namely, author-reader-text, I am able to provide an aporia which must be highlighted instead of being solved. With what has been said up to here, I intend to show that it is crucial for the interpretation of any literary work a parallel reflection on the issue of interpretation, meaning, criticism, or whatever other branch of studies related to it. I must also acknowledge here that last chapter became longer than it was expected to be. However, I think it will prove itself to be very useful.

In any case, there must be a question lingering in the mind of whoever is reading this dissertation: what does *The Exorcist* (1971) have to do with all that I have written? Again, a hop, a *leap of faith* is necessary in order to turn this thin thread into something perceptible. First of all, I have to say that any justification for this hermeneutical meddling with Blatty’s narrative is haunted by the mere and plain circumstance of an obsession (mine). But, as rational beings that we are supposed to be, I will attempt to work out some ‘reasons’ for this choice. Certainly, this commentary has the weight of a bias toward a concept of a subject that is not such a master of his own choices. In this sense, I may symbolically say that *we do not choose books; they choose us*.

Back to ‘reason’, one of the first drives which led me to engage in this project, previous to any argumentative state, was the fact that, having already watched the movie *The Exorcist*<sup>87</sup> (1973), and later having read the novel (1971), the first impression was not fear or

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<sup>86</sup> [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

<sup>87</sup> A 1973 film directed by William Friedkin, and written by the same author of the novel.

horror, as it is assumed in common sense and through media, but amusement<sup>88</sup>. First, because it was explicitly a theological narrative; moreover, it was so full of what may be provisionally called ‘comicality’ that these two simple and still subjective reactions set me off in a pursuit of what I metaphorically came to name as *literary exorcism*. My initial ‘reason’ for seeking a different interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) was this startling discomfort of seeing this work being ‘literarily’ *possessed* by the *spirit* of horror, most probably due to its filmic adaptation. I am not claiming here, as a departure perspective, that this work is *not* horror. However, there was so much unsaid, or at least not properly divulged, that leaving this lack unfulfilled would only lead to a mystification, or, in a worse direction, to a *mortification* of a literary work which, even though aesthetically may never figure among Dostoevsky’s and Shakespeare’s akin, deserves a better place among academic studies in literature. A lot has already been done, but, as it is assumed by specialists in the subject (AMORTH 1994), sometimes the ritual of exorcism must be repeated in order to successfully accomplish the expected result, that of saving the *soul of the possessed*.

This first ‘reasoning’ could only entail a subjacent one, which seems to fuse both book and movie up to a point of almost confusing one for the other. It is a fact that both strayed to totally different ways: the book had as its sequence Blatty’s other two titles – *The Ninth Configuration*<sup>89</sup> (1978) and *Legion*<sup>90</sup>; while the movie was followed by the well known failure *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977), which has no relation to Blatty, and by *The Exorcist III* (1990)<sup>91</sup>, written and directed by him. Thus, I came to the hypothesis that any interpretation about the book is *haunted* by what is supposed to be its shadow, the movie; or, as Winter observes: “its immensely popular motion picture adaptation – in whose shadow the

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<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, this was the same sensation Blatty described to have had when he first heard about the case which inspired him to write the novel.

<sup>89</sup> Actually an adaptation for his previous novel *Twinkle, Twinkle, “Killer” Kane* (1966).

<sup>90</sup> To mention, of course, not all his other books, but only those strictly related to *The Exorcist* (1971).

<sup>91</sup> Not to mention the most recent releases titled *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004) and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* (2005)



novel has languished.” (1996, p.84) Therefore, above all, what I found in this case was an interpretation problem, even before dealing with hermeneutics. I had before me two interrogations: the question of the meaning of *The Exorcist* (1971), and the issue of meaning in general. That is why I first set to pursue what I have called at the beginning of this study as “a brief” investigation. In this sense, my purpose in this interpretation is much more in the direction of de-characterizing some propagated *addendum* which has accompanied the novel than of providing a more ‘correct’ or ‘central’ meaning (even though I attempt a reading through a different perspective). In a way, though a little uneasily, I still have to agree with Harold Bloom (1975) when he says that any act of reading is a misreading.

In this sense, the following argumentation will take three steps in order to attempt to accomplish the basic fundament of this dissertation, namely, the exorcism of a perennial and stinging characterization of a work which deserves a different situation than that of being merely a cluster of gore and pornographic images, or else of dogmatic and feverish *catechism*. Instead of this negative perspective, this is a move in the direction to open the novel to a more existentialist perspective. Therefore, I insist on the central role of thinkers like Ricoeur and Kierkegaard in the support for this different approach. However, this will be the last section of this chapter. Before that, as an introductory item, I intend to provide a brief biography of the author, his bibliography, and some information about horror as a genre, and some other information which is interesting and relevant to *The Exorcist* (1971). Then, intermediary to these two sections, I will provide an investigation on articles dedicated to Blatty and his main works (specially focusing on *The Exorcist*). With these three steps, I hope to provide argumentation enough not to found a new and more ‘correct’ interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971), but, by providing a different and challenging one, to *blow a new spirit through it*. As Ricoeur properly observes, “the symbol gives rise to thought.” (RICOEUR, 1986, p.19)<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> From now on to be referred to as SE.

Nevertheless, what does this have to do with *The Politics of Interpretation*, with Hirsch's defense of the author, and with Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory*? For me, it can be formulated this way: Blatty admittedly wrote his story with an assumed ideological bias; among the many directions that the work's reception took, there are still those who agree or disagree with that, and those who almost completely lead to a position out of this dichotomy. Thus, beyond any epistemological problem of founding the most appropriate 'source', or 'origin' of meaning, there is still the problem of *ascribing* meaning to something. Meaning does not need to be exclusively something that the author 'intends', something that the reader 'does', or something that the text 'opens up to'. In my humble perspective, I venture to say that, much more than mutually excluding each other, these three categories should be more dialectical than self-assured. In this sense, *The Exorcist* is a good exercise in hermeneutics.

In order not to be led astray and take too long on what is supposed to be a brief acknowledgment, I will take the risk of leaving too much unsaid and mention a brief passage by Gadamer, which can also be linked with what I am, in a certain way, championing here: "there is no being-in-itself that is increasingly revealed [...] but [...] something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself." (GADAMER, 1989, p.462) I hope my metaphor, namely, "literary exorcism", may become more meaningful from now on. Perhaps, it is not a matter of *bringing something out of the book*. As Ricoeur proposes, and has already been quoted above, but which I think is worth repeating: "the sense of the text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed." (IT, p.87) Or, perhaps, in an even more existential tone, the real target of interpretation is not the text, but the interpreter. Maybe, it is not the text what the interpreter is attempting to understand, but him/herself. As Father Merrin reflects on Karras's questioning about the purpose of the possession, in *The Exorcist* (1971):

Who can really hope to know? [...] I think the demon's target is not the possessed; it is us [...] I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien: to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly, unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. (*The Exorcist*, p.351)

## 2.1 The Beginning

1971 was a year just like any other. Iraq was still under Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr's presidency, Richard Nixon was at the head of the White House, and Brazil had its own Emílio Garrastazu Médici. Beyond and above that, Apollo 14 realized the third landing on the moon. In the same year, the Russian Salyut1 was launched as the first space station of any kind. In the Vatican, Paul VI, Giovanni Battista Enrico Antonio Maria Montini, was in the middle of his reign. Georgina Rizk, a Lebanese woman, was elected Miss Universe. Walt Disney World was inaugurated. This year also had, as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Pablo Neruda (NOBELWEB, 2009). As for the Pulitzer, in Drama, Paul Zindel won with his *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*; in poetry, William S. Merwin won with his *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970); for prose, that year no writer was awarded<sup>93</sup>. According to Fischer (1994), Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles*, Saul Below's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and Joyce Carol Oates' *The Wheel of Love* were all rejected by the committee board for not accomplishing the required standards. But life went on, as if nothing was happening. Or, as Blatty wrote in the beginning of the first chapter in *The Exorcist* (1971): "like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on blind men's eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed." (p.11) However, 1971 is not a good year to start telling a brief history of a phenomenon called *The Exorcist*. Maybe the author's birth date is not, either. But let us pick this one for the lack of a better one.

William Peter Blatty, the fifth son of Lebanese parents, was born on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1928. When Blatty was six years old, his father, Peter Blatty, a carpenter, abandoned the family. Although Blatty was brought up in poverty – according to Winter (1996), in a space of

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<sup>93</sup> I would like to declare explicitly here that I am not suggesting, by any means, that Blatty should have won. His honorable contribution is exclusively to Horror in particular. Besides, he won an Oscar in 1974 for best Screenplay of *The Exorcist* (1973), and also a Golden Globe in 1981 for his *The Ninth Configuration* (1980).

ten years Blatty and his mother lived in 28 different addresses -, his miserable childhood is something he does not regret (WINTER, 1985). Because of his mother, Mary Blatty<sup>94</sup>, he had a very rigorous and Roman Catholic upbringing. He attended Catholic Grammar School, and there he was always considered an outsider. He said in an interview that he wished he could be Irish so that he could blend in (ibid). It is interesting to point out right now that ‘identity’ is a constant concern in all of his works. Continuing with his short biography, even though he had won a literary contest when he was only 10 years old, receiving \$ 5.00 from *Captain Future* comic books (Ibid), his literary career was something that would start much later. Following his school formation, he also went to St Stephen's in New York, Brooklyn Preparatory, a Jesuit High School (LIUKKONEN, [2000-2007]). After that, he attended Georgetown University, another Jesuit institution, under a scholarship, where he got his B.A. in 1950. Following, he got his M.A. in literature from George Washington University (BAER, 2008). Before properly earning money from writing, he previously had driven beer trucks for Gunther Brewing Company and sold vacuum cleaners door to door for Electrolux (FILMREFERENCE, [2007-2009]). Having joined the Air Force in 1951 for the Psychological Warfare Division, he remained there until 1954. After that, he entered the foreign service in 1955 and was sent to Beirut, Lebanon, due to his “Lebanese looks and passing fluency in Arabic” (WINTER, 1985, p.39), to work for the U.S. Information Agency, being editor of a weekly magazine called *News Review* up to 1957. Then, he returned to Los Angeles to become publicity director at USC (University of Southern California), during one year, and, right after, became public relations director at Loyola University (now Loyola Marymount University) until 1960. He also wrote articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* and

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<sup>94</sup> Single surname Mouakad. There is an interesting reference to her in Guita Hourani (2007):

Women like Mary Mouakad, the mother of Exorcist author William Peter Blatty, and the grandmother of another novelist, Vance Bourjaily, 21, were also peddlers and, like 'Aqlah, they worked for their families, their independence, and their survival. These women, who went against cultural norms and faced all kinds of challenges, can only be admired for their courage in the face of overwhelming odds. By remembering them and writing about them, we rescue them from oblivion and give them the honor that they so richly deserve. (p.52)

for *Coronet*, which called the attention of the editor of McGraw-Hill. That was how he wrote the first 150-page draft for his first book, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959). However, nothing so prosperous resulted from that. Then, while at USC, he received an invitation to work as a ghost writer. He himself confessed that the story he wrote as ghostwriter was a success, while his own novel was not. After that, he got on the Jack Paar Show (actually known as *The Tonight Show*), where he was seen by the wife of a producer from Columbia. She pointed out to her husband how funny Blatty was. The rest of the story is what follows.

It was in 1962 that his career as a writer would have a first significant push, when he wrote a screenplay for TV, namely, *The Man from the Diner's Club* (1963), a comedy movie where “an employee at Diner's Club issues a credit card to a well-known mobster and has to retrieve it in order to keep his job.” (IMDB, [1990-2010]). This opened his way to be a successful and leading screenplay writer in Hollywood. He had already written the screenplay for *Promise her Anything* (1965), but it ended being released on screen only after his second screenplay. The latter is a romantic comedy, in which a widowed young lady decides to marry a psychologist in order to find a father for her child, but to get what she wants she hides the child with an upstairs neighbor (CROOK, [1990-2010]). Going on with the timeline, in 1963, he wrote the screenplay for his second novel *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!* (1963) – a film released in 1965. Then, in 1964, he wrote what he would be most remembered for at the time, a screenplay, which later would be a co-written official piece, for *A Shot in the Dark* (1964), the second movie in the Pink Panther series. The following year, 1965, he wrote another piece for the screen - *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966), a war comedy in which a captain is ordered to capture a village in Italy, but the Italian soldiers will only be willing to surrender if they can have a festival first. Because of aerial reconnaissance, however, they must look like they are fighting (CHANDLER, [1990-2010]). In 1965 he also wrote his third novel *I, Billy Shakespeare*. Up to this point, Blatty was considered more a

screenplay writer than a novelist since his three first novels had not achieved the praise he was already receiving for his works for the screen. However, 1966 is the year Blatty publishes his first slightly praised novel, *Twinkle, Twinkle, "Killer" Kane*. Martin Levin wrote in his review for the book in the *New York Times* that “nobody can write funnier lines than William Peter Blatty” (BAER 2008). Actually, this can be seen as a prolegomena for the years to come. Following this course, 1967 was to be a ‘full’ year in Blatty’s life. First, because he wrote two scripts, one for *The Great Bank Robbery* (1969), a western comedy in which a group of church leaders attempts to rob a bank in 1880’s Texas (IMDB, [1990-2010]); and another for *Gunn* (1967), a mystery in which Peter Gunn investigates the murder of a gangster (ibid). Secondly, because 1967 was the year of the death of Blatty’s mother, something which can be identified as a turning point in his literary perspective. This can be seen in the next screenplay he wrote the following year, 1968, *Darling Lili* (1970), a musical war drama about a German female spy who falls in love with the man she is investigating. However, in a mixture of grief for his mother’s death, and certain disillusionment with Hollywood, increased by a general disinterest in comedy, “fallen off as moneymakers”, Blatty becomes unemployed, due to the dwindling of opportunities (BAER, 2008). At this point, his interest in writing a book about exorcism was raised again.

However, the most significant event of 1967 that would change the course of Blatty’s life (and not only that of his career as a writer) was a New Year’s dinner party which he was invited to by Burton Wohl, whose *A Cold Wind in August* (1968) Blatty says to admire (WINTER, 1985). Despite his dislike for this kind of meeting, that night he decided to go in order to escape from his feeling of loneliness (BAER, 2008). At the party he met Marc Jaffe, the editor in chief at Bantam at the time. While commenting that he was looking for screen work to do, Blatty also mentioned his intention to write a book about possession, and surprisingly Jaffe offered to publish it. Despite being a little suspicious about Blatty writing a

serious novel (by that time he was stigmatized as comedy writer), and after a little hesitation, four months after the New Year's dinner, Jaffe sent Blatty a contract and some money in advance<sup>95</sup>. That was when he decided, in an "Emersonian" inspiration (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, p.16), to rent an isolated cabin in Incline Village, Nevada, near Lake Tahoe, to write his dusted project. He says to have spent six weeks alone there without finishing the first paragraph (WINTER, 1985). He kept changing dates, the day the rapping sounds started to be heard in the story, from April 11<sup>th</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, then to April 1<sup>st</sup>, and back to April 11<sup>th</sup>. Then one day the phone rang and another job was offered to him. "It was a screenplay for a Paul Newman film that never got made", said Blatty, confessing his relief for that call (BAER, 2008). It was only after finishing that new job that he realized that he could not go on with the story because he was beginning it in the wrong place (Ibid). This is the story of how he decided to set the beginning of *The Exorcist* (1971) in Iraq. It was only then that he could set off to really write his novel inspired by a supposedly genuine case reported by the *Washington Post* in 1949. But this is another story to be told later. Now, let me follow with Blatty's subsequent career.

Despite the inspiration for the novel having a history of its own, the way to its publication is itself an interesting story. The novel itself, according to Blatty, had no outline in the beginning (BAER, 2008). Proving his comical 'accent', he remarks in an interview that "people think that [he] landed on this planet with the manuscript of *The Exorcist* under [his] arm" (WINTER, 1985, p.37). All he knew was that it was to be a story about a possessed "girl"<sup>96</sup>, this change from a boy to a girl occurring at the request of one of the priests involved in the actual case in order to preserve the family's privacy. He himself admitted having projected the success of the novel, which, according to his own words, had "a commercial future" (Ibid). His next step was to go after one of the priests involved in the case, Father

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<sup>95</sup> US\$ 85,000 (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974)

<sup>96</sup> It is interesting that with this statement we can interpret that the author himself misunderstood his text even before writing it.



William Bowdern. Initially, Blatty was interested in the documentary aspect of the story. He even suggested Bowdern himself write about the case. The latter immediately dismissed the idea, just asking Blatty not to make any reference to the real people involved (Ibid). Blatty himself thought about the possibility of something more *realistic*, but also dismissed the challenge. Bowdern, however, also saw the positive relevance that the story could bring to Catholicism. As Blatty remarked (WINTER, 1985), Bowdern even attempted to establish contact between the novelist and the family of the case, but was refuted both by the latter and by the priest's superior. Thus, in order not to lead to any associations, Blatty changed his idea from something like a documentary into novelization, and the abovementioned modification of the character from a boy to a girl. However, as soon as the book was issued, *Newsweek* was at the priest's door to talk about the subject (BAER, 2008).

Before publishing the novel, Blatty had shown a draft to Bill Bloom, a producer from Columbia Pictures, who became even more impressed when Blatty offered to tell him what would happen afterwards. The answer was: "You can't do that to your reader. It's too emotionally draining." (Ibidem, p.183) That is how he decided to finish the story and stop where he did. Initially, the novel did not hit immediate success. According to the author, nobody was buying the book in the first five or six weeks (the book was first issued in hardcover exactly because normally books initially printed that way would sell more). There is a very interesting anecdote about this almost failure. As told by Blatty (Ibid), at B. Altman's, a famous New York department store, a clerk prevented the author from signing the book because it would make it improper for return. The real turn for success can be attributed to *The Dick Cavett Show*, a famous ABC TV show that, according to Blatty himself, was 'the' TV talk show to promote a book (Ibid). First, he got on a pre-audition, but without receiving much expectation from the producers. Then, one afternoon, he received a call confirming his presence (actually, because someone had canceled and they had nobody else). He rushed to

the studio. He would have only six minutes, at the end of the show. But, because of the other guests (one was boring, the other drunk) he ended up using the time of all three interviews. Cavett himself admitted he had not read the book; thus, Blatty was all by himself to promote his own book. At the airport, back to Los Angeles, to his surprise, Blatty saw on *Time* magazine that his book was number four on the best-seller list<sup>97</sup> (Ibid).

Blatty himself says in an interview that at one point some producers were thinking about a new comedy and one of them suggested Blatty's name. Then, another one, with amusement, answered: "Blatty? Comedy?" (WINTER, 1985, p.41)<sup>98</sup>. After *The Exorcist* (1971) started selling millions of copies<sup>99</sup>, Blatty sold the screen rights to Paul Monash (a famous American screenwriter and producer). The initial sum was US\$ 400,000, but it turned into US\$ 641,000, because Blatty ended up becoming the sole producer and screenwriter for the adaptation of his own book – Monash started suggesting too many alterations which Blatty did not like (Ibid). The screenplay for his own novel, obviously, would not be Blatty's concern. His major preoccupation, then, was actually convincing the executives at Warner to accept William Friedkin as a director. According to Blatty, it was as difficult as convincing Bowdern to write about the 1949 case (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, pp.22). Some names were put on a list and Friedkin's name was insistently left aside by Warner executives. One of the names suggested was Stanley Kubrick<sup>100</sup>, who did not accept and was also refuted by Blatty because Kubrick demanded full control over the adaptation. This *impasse* lasted until *The French Connection* (1971), directed by Friedkin, was released. But the solution was not so amiable. Warner already had selected a director, Mark Rydell. By phone, Blatty threatened the executives and hung up. After consulting his lawyers, Blatty called again, this time for

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<sup>97</sup> It remained up there for sixty weeks. (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974)

<sup>98</sup> The success of *The Exorcist* (1971) definitely eclipsed Blatty's previous stigma as a comedy writer.

<sup>99</sup> Before the movie began to be produced, the number of copies sold achieved the mark of 12 million (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974)

<sup>100</sup> It is important to remember that *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) had already been on the screen.

apologies, but reinforced his accusation by threatening to go to public press and also get an “injunction” against the studio for violating his contract – Blatty was bluffing. Nevertheless, all this was not enough to settle the issue. It was finally a clause in the contract about a deadline, which would eventually return all the rights to Blatty if the project was not started, that made the Warner executives end up yielding. Besides, the good reception *The French Connection* received from critics helped Blatty to get the director he wanted. He had already written a draft of the screenplay even before knowing he would end up developing that function. However, Friedkin himself suggested a new one.

Though the relation between Blatty and Friedkin in the production of *The Exorcist* for the big screen provided a considerable number of pages of Travers & Reiff’s book, I will skip this part of the story in order to follow Blatty’s subsequent career. Between the filming and the opening of *The Exorcist* in 1973, Blatty set himself to write another book, which was dedicated to the death of his mother, titled *I’ll Tell Them I Remember You* (1973). What followed afterwards was dealing with the repercussion that the movie triggered, including legal disputes, censorship, criticism (pros and cons), and, later on, what can only be referred to as a ‘phenomenon’. Since the concern here is literature and not cinema, I will skip straight to what Blatty published after *The Exorcist*.

In 1974, Blatty published his first non-fiction work, *William Peter Blatty on “The Exorcist”: from novel to film*, in which he provides his readers with the original screenplay, containing scenes that had been removed from the film, and also the story about his novelization and screenplay adaptation. After this, a four-year space of time elapsed until his next publication, *The Ninth Configuration* (1978), actually a screenplay adaptation from his previous novel *Twinkle, Twinkle, “Killer” Kane* (1966) – which later would become another awarded movie. Again, the task of accomplishing these other projects was not easy. After being refused by two major filming companies, Columbia Pictures and Universal Pictures,

Blatty had to arrange a deal with PepsiCo and film in Hungary for financial reasons (MCCABE, 1999). *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) did not profit as much as *The Exorcist* (1973). However, the film is far from being considered a failure, like *The Exorcist II: the heretic* (1977), directed by John Boorman, and written by William Goodhart, which has no association with Blatty. The former won a Golden Globe for best screenplay, and also a nomination for best film in drama. Besides, it can be considered “a cult classic that continues to provoke either apostolic devotion or baffled dismissal 20 years on” (KERMODE, 1999). It is considered by Blatty as a sequence to *The Exorcist* (1973), and part of a trilogy completed by *The Exorcist III* (1990), based on his novel *Legion* (1983). It is with the publication of the latter that Blatty would attempt an answer to the problem of evil explored in *The Exorcist* (1971) and the mystery of goodness proposed in *The Ninth Configuration* (1978). The 1990 film, directed and written by Blatty himself, seemed to tie the final knot in the author’s *oeuvre*. However, there are some other inclusions in this list, which are normally forgotten – *If There Were Demons Then Perhaps There Were Angels* (1978) and two screenplays for the Christian TV program *Insight* – one which would receive a Gabriel Award and the American Film Festival blue ribbon in 1969 (FILMREFERENCE, [2007-2009]). Thus, from 1959, with *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*, up to *The Exorcist III* (1990), we can identify a tortuous path which mingles comedy, metaphysics, theology, thriller, satire, detective story, theodicy, occultism, all dispersed in thirteen screenplays and eight novels. As if this were not enough to provide food for thought, two final titles finish Blatty’s bibliography in a funny – not to say odd – way: *Demons Five*, *Exorcists Nothing: a fable* (1996) and *Elsewhere* (1999).

With all that has been said up to this point about the author, I hope to have provided the reader with enough material to prove not only the oddity of Blatty’s works as a whole, but also the strangeness that it may cause in an interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971). This introductory part is supposed to work as a prolegomena to another weird and interesting

aspect of the phenomenon called “The Exorcist”, namely, the divergent and conflicting interpretations the work has received. However, in order to make things even stranger, I believe it is necessary to the understanding of the ‘meaning’ of *The Exorcist* (1971) - the ghost that has been haunting it - a brief investigation of the topics, plots, characters and themes that are most relevant in the author’s novels. Blatty has not only written *The Exorcist* (1971), but *The Exorcist* has written Blatty. Blatty has not only become, after that, a horror writer, but horror itself has been stigmatized by Blatty’s name. By showing a little of what his other works also have to say, I hope not only that these works speak more, but also that *The Exorcist* may speak differently.

Following a chronological order, let us make a brief account about *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959) - Blatty’s debut in literature. Before that, the author had already attempted to publish poetry, but with no success (WINTER, 1985). One of his articles written for the *Saturday Evening Post*, where he depicts himself posing beside King Saud as his son, would become the prototype for his first novelization. According to Goodrich (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.18), “it is difficult to form an objective opinion about [this novel]”. Nevertheless, it can be considered a “fictionalized autobiography”. (Ibid) However, as Goodrich points out, “a more modern encounter with this comedy is [...] tinged with a sense of tragedy” (Ibidem, p.19) Later, the critic also remarks that “[it] could have easily been categorized as neocolonialist condescension of Arabs and the Middle East generally *if*<sup>101</sup> Blatty did not skewer virtually everyone that is mentioned in this book.” (Ibidem, p.20) The book narrates the author’s childhood in America and his experience in the US Foreign Service. According to Goodrich, the narrative is “light and fast-paced”. (Ibid) Despite the comic tone, the powerful influence that the character of his mother has in the story, plus his infancy divided as the son of two cultures, Goodrich observes, in the end, that the text “reveals the human condition”

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<sup>101</sup> Italics mine.

(Ibidem, p.21). Moreover, the critic also mentions that it depicts both American and Arab cultures as “preposterous, [but] able to communicate and even coexist” (Ibid). The critic also infers from this novel that,

[t]he only reason two cultures are able to communicate at all is due to the people who work at the intersection of both, despite the best efforts of the respective cultures, and that those who stand at a distance and make policy are usually those least suited to making such decisions. (Ibid)

Even though *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959) is a very different book than *The Exorcist* (1971), it still allows us some connections. It is already in this first novel that some recurrent themes begin to take shape: the theme of the clash of identities, of hope in the coexistence of disparate realities, and of individual struggle in the pursuit of identity. However, it is also important to mention Simpson’s opposite and critical remark about the novel in which he says that Blatty has a “strong sense of identification” and a “conflicted sense of political and ethnic identity”. (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.27) In this sense, Ludescher (2007, pp.102) also observes that “by making himself ridiculous, Blatty can appear less frightening and alien to his all-American audience.” *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959), which Goodrich describes as a “fictionalized autobiography” (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.19), is an important narrative which, exactly because it is something completely different from *The Exorcist* (1971), ends up providing us with a slight sense of direction in how to interpret the latter.

Blatty’s following published novel, *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!* (1963), according to Goodrich (Ibidem, p.21), is a “broadly-drawn farce, combining Notre Dame’s unstoppable football program with the U-2 accident of 1960.” It is the story of a football player who always makes a touchdown in his own end-zone. After graduation, he enters the U-2 program, is shot down in mission and ends up landing in the fictitious “Fawzi Arabia”. There, he becomes responsible for a victory in football against the famous Notre Dame team.

The interesting detail about this book is that there was an injunction attempting to stop both book and film from release because Notre Dame University accused it of damaging the school's reputation (BROCK-SERVAIS, 2000). According to Goodrich, "virtually nothing in this book would lead the reader to suspect that this was the same writer who chilled millions with *The Exorcist*." (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.22) Despite the distance between the two novels, what remains in relating each other is the existential aspect of the *disrelationship of the self*, which later will be approached through Kierkegaard's texts. In any case, the novel remains, as Goodrich remarks, "a very little insight into the human condition, cultural understanding, or even the writer himself." (Ibidem, p.22) Perhaps, for Blatty, human condition, despite its tragic dimension, its existential orientation, can never be totally separated from its comic aspects (*The Exorcist* (1971) presents many comical reliefs as one of its narrative strategy).

Finally, the last book to form the comedic triad in Blatty's literary career is *I, Billy Shakespeare* (1965). Being the least famous of the three, Goodrich characterizes it as "an uncomfortable mixture of erudition and comedy". (Ibid) It tells the story of people who, by dealing with occultism and recording spirits' voices on tape, come to experience Shakespeare's own words. Mixing fact and fiction, Blatty satirizes the controversy over Shakespeare's authorship and modern day screen-writing. The political atmosphere is provided by the presence of Fidel Castro requesting Shakespeare's spirit to write propaganda. The correlation of this work with *The Exorcist* (1971) is quite precise. The recording of voice is a very well known passage in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971), and is a reference to the author's alleged experience with the supernatural through tape recording (BLATTY, 1974). In any case, according to Goodrich, the three works taken together can only, and must be only appraised for what they really are: "light entertaining novels" (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.24).

*The Exorcist* (1971) is normally associated as the turning point in Blatty's career, which is not completely untrue. However, when seen a little closer, *Twinkle, Twinkle,*

“*Killer*” *Kane!* (1966) proves to be an even greater shift in Blatty’s bibliography. In this sense, I particularly disagree with critics like Briggs (SZUMSKYJ, 2008) who see the latter as a mere “reflection”, a “mirror” to *The Exorcist* (1971). First of all, it is the basis for what would later become an awarded film production called *The Ninth Configuration* (1980). More than that, it is the predecessor of *The Exorcist* (1971). Basically, it is the story of doctor Hudson Kane who becomes responsible for deciding whether soldiers with psychological disorders are faking their own madness or not. Another important character in the story is the astronaut Cutshaw, who becomes an intern of the asylum after he unreasonably refuses to get on board the spaceship right before being launched into space. In addition, there is Dr. Fell, who is never clearly a doctor or an intern. The novel at a certain point depicts Cutshaw and Kane’s discussion about the existence or not of God. The novel ends with the apparently inexplicable suicide of Kane, who had actually been more an intern of the asylum than a doctor. The novel is considered by many critics as superior to *The Exorcist* (SZUMSKYJ, 2008). It was later revised and republished under the title *The Ninth Configuration* (1978), which became a movie under the same title, previously also released under the title of the 1966 original novel. Being the second in the trilogy of Blatty’s supernatural thrillers, this novel deals with what the author himself calls “the mystery of goodness” (WINTER, 1985). It is not only a novel which shares many similarities with *The Exorcist* (1971), but could be characterized as the “other” of the latter. Perhaps, if *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) had been released previously to *The Exorcist* (1973), the story would have taken a totally different direction. In this case, watching and reading these works are fundamental if one really wishes to be ‘exorcized’ from the ‘evil’ that Friedkin’s adaptation caused to the novel.

The last novel to complete Blatty’s *theodicy* trilogy is *Legion* (1983), which later would become the true sequel to the 1971 version of *The Exorcist* – actually a “pharmakon”, in the platonic sense, since Blatty himself was to be both the writer and director. *The Exorcist*



*III* (1990), also referred to as *Legion*, is much more subtle and less shocking than Friedkin's meddling with Hollywood. The novel resumes two characters from *The Exorcist* (1971), lieutenant Kinderman and Father Dyer. This time, the protagonist is the detective who had been a marginal character in the previous novel. In his investigation of a little boy's murder, the possibility that a disappeared serial killer may be back into scene is mixed with the detective's speculation into metaphysical concerns. Karras, the priest who supposedly committed suicide in the previous novel, is brought back as the possibility of a reincarnation. The novel not only establishes Blatty's reputation as a writer of the supernatural, but it definitely opens a huge fissure in *The Exorcist's* 'identity'.

The transition from comedy to metaphysics itself is something that could be endlessly argued about. As if this were not enough, Blatty still had something up his sleeve to shock even more unprepared readers. The title *Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing: a fable* (1996) speaks for itself. Considered by Garret as a "parody satirizing in semi-autobiographical fashion [Blatty's] dabbling in the cult of Hollywood" (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.134), it marks the author's return to comedy (something that in my opinion he had never left completely). This is the story of Jason Hazard, who later will become a sort of fictionalized Blatty, in his attempt to produce his project *The Satanist*, and who also is blackmailed by his psychiatrist who needs money to buy Freud's garter-belt. Once more, the boundaries between sanity and insanity remain a constant in Blatty's writing. Again, the individual's struggle to make sense of an apparently farcical and meaningless existence re-emerges. Once more, Blatty's other works become, instead of narratives possessed by *The Exorcist* (1973), stories that start to reverse the influence of the latter on them. Instead of establishing himself as a comedy or "ghostly" writer – as he preferred to be called (WINTER, 1985) – Blatty still remains his own person as fictionalized in *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959): in other words, someone always in-between.

Before approaching Blatty's last appearance in the literary arena, it is interesting to reserve a little space to other two minor works in the author's bibliography. The first is his *I'll Tell Them I Remember You* (1974), a book he wrote while Friedkin finished the cuts in *The Exorcist* (1973) – cuts that would leave scars never to be forgotten. This very short book is a description of the author's childhood and a dedication to the struggles undergone by his mother in order to raise five children alone and in poverty. The second reference to be made is *If There Were Demons Then Perhaps There Were Angels* (1978), where the author tells of his experience in the research and composition of *The Exorcist* (1971), and his belief in the supernatural.

Finally, Blatty's last endeavor in literature is provided by a story, initially part of a collection edited by Al Sarrantonio titled *999:twenty-nine original tales of horror and suspense* (2001), and later a single book titled *Elsewhere* (2009), about a haunted house where the characters realize that they are the ghosts haunting the house, and that the ghosts are actually people trying to "exorcize" it. Any relation to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) may not be mere coincidence.

The intention of this brief *parcours*<sup>102</sup> through Blatty's novelizations is to work as a prolegomena to what is discussed in the next topic. It is an attempt to show that the 'author', as well as his bibliography, considered as 'texts', are relevant information in the pursuit of a certain 'validity' in the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971). It is also supposed to help in the re-evaluation of labels such as 'horror' and 'theodicy' that have been associated to the novel.

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<sup>102</sup> This term refers specifically to Ricoeur's *The Course of Recognition* (2005).

## 2.2 The Edge

I am going to start this second topic - which is an account of some of the ‘meanings’ *The Exorcist* (1971) has received, that is, some texts which attempt to put into words what this literary work is *trying to say* – not properly with what specific readers said about it, but with what was the subject matter that led Blatty to write the novel. This part of the dissertation deals with *the story ‘before’ the novel*.

It is widely known by those who are interested in *The Exorcist* that the idea for the story came from a newspaper article which Blatty read for a class task he had to accomplish in oratory during his junior year at Georgetown University. The article was about an alleged ‘genuine’ case of possession. The story is told in Blatty’s *If There Were Demons Then Perhaps There Were Angels: William Peter Blatty’s own story of The Exorcist* (1999), actually first published as the introduction to *William Peter Blatty on The Exorcist: from novel to film* (1974). Blatty says that his inspiration came from an article by Bill Brinkley at *The Washington Post*, dated from August 20<sup>th</sup> 1949, describing a supposed case of real possession<sup>103</sup>. Briefly, it tells of a 14-year-old boy from Mount Rainier, Maryland, son of protestant parents, who became the center of strange phenomena that surrounded him, like moving objects and odd behavior. Luther Miles Schulze, the minister of the church attended by the boy’s parents, observed the youth for many days and nights, and finally advised the family that this was a case that could only be solved by a Catholic priest<sup>104</sup> (OPSASNICK, 1999). However, before the decision to perform the traditional ritual was taken, the boy received the attention of two medical institutions (Georgetown University Hospital and St. Louis University – by chance, both Jesuit) which, “unable to cure the boy through natural

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<sup>103</sup> The whole article is available in Blatty (1974;1999), as well as in Traver and Reiff (1974).

<sup>104</sup> The case was closely investigated by Thomas B. Allen in his book *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism* (2000) – which later would be questioned by Opsasnick (1999).

means” (BLATTY, 1999, p.2), admitted spiritual resource as a last option. According to the article, it was only after 20 or 30 performances, both in Mount Rainier and in St. Louis, that the evil spirit was said to have left his body. Also, according to the article, the case was studied by Dr. Joseph Banks Rhine, the director and founder of the parapsychology laboratory at Duke University. (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, p.19)

Initially, Blatty’s concern was not literary, but theological. This article would have aroused in him the personal thesis that “if there were demons, there were angels and probably a God and a life everlasting.” (BLATTY, 1974b, p.4) The idea to turn this into a novel would come much later, specifically in 1963 (Ibidem, p.5). It is important to add that the author had already considered becoming a Jesuit during his years in Georgetown, but the idea ended up seeming “unattainable and ludicrous in the extreme, since [...] [his] nearest superiors are asps.” (Ibid) This affirmation may clarify another made in which he declares himself a “relaxed Catholic”. (WINTER, 1985, p. 37)

The case was actually first mentioned to Blatty by Father William Gallagher, a Jesuit priest and his professor at Georgetown, in a New Testament class. Father Gallagher told his students about an “allegedly possession case” which was taking place around Georgetown. However, Blatty would discover later that the case had occurred in Cottage City, Maryland, instead of in the nearby town of Mt. Rainier (BAER, 2008, p.180). Gallagher knew about the case because one of the priests involved was staying at Georgetown campus and had talked about the subject with him (Ibid). Therefore, Blatty in fact knew about the case even before the newspaper article. Nevertheless, in *The Story Behind The Exorcist* (1974), Peter Travers and Stephanie Reiff inform that it was Father Thomas Bermingham who advised Blatty to explore “into the phenomenon of demonic possession as fulfillment for an oratorical assignment.” (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, p.16) The author’s initial interest was more in a documentary sense than a literary one. He confesses that his first step was only to become

acquainted as much as possible with the theological and medical information on the subject (Ibid).

However, the story was to become as unreliable as the phenomenon itself. In his book, *The Real Story Behind The Exorcist: a study of the haunted boy and other true-life horror legends from around the nation's capital* (2006)<sup>105</sup>, Mark Opsasnick, while seeking information for his book *Capitol Rock* (2002), about the blues-rock guitar Roy Buchanan, discovered through interviews with old residents that the case had not actually taken place in Mt Rainier, and that, according to him (1999), everything was merely “sensational material” divulged by the press years after the issue of the original article in the Washington Post. Opsasnick investigates the articles previous to the one which inspired Blatty, starting on August 10<sup>th</sup> in 1949, and also those issued after the publication of Blatty’s novel. In his investigation, Opsasnick ends up finding mismatching information, and discovering that much of the legend about the wrong address of the haunted boy started after an article from January 1975 of *Fate* magazine, in which pieces of the supposed diary of one of the priests involved in the 1949 case was published, along with additional information without any source. The legend, according to Opsasnick, was augmented by two other unreliable articles, both from *The Prince George's Sentinel*, one from 1981 and authored by Spencer Gordon, the other from 1983 and authored by Brenda Caggiano. According to Opsasnick, the legend crystallized as a fabricated fact finally with Allen’s book, first issued in 1993 by Doubleday in hardback, and the next year in paperback by Bantam. There was a subsequent TV production by Henninger Media Development Inc. for the *Discovery Channel* titled *In The Grip of Evil* (1997)<sup>106</sup>.

The most significant misguiding information refers to the site of the house of the supposed possessed boy. Opsasnick discovered that in 1949 the speculated address, which

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<sup>105</sup> The part concerned with the 1949 possession case is also available on-line at <http://www.strangemag.com/exorcistpage1.html>

<sup>106</sup> With the participation of Mr. Allen and an interview with William Friedkin.

was mentioned for the first time in the articles from the *Sentinel* in the early 80's, was actually the residence of a couple who had never had children. Further investigation on the address only unmasked one more urban myth. Revising the articles from 1949 and the one from 1975, Opsasnick came to a possible name and address to be checked, this time from Cottage City. There, he interviewed many people who knew about the story (and about the wrong address), and he eventually had a personal contact with a classmate and a close friend of the supposed haunted boy in 1949. The testimonies collected and published by Opsasnick, even though his sources are always omitted in order to protect their privacy, only testify that the case was not a genuine possession, but rather a psychological problem. Opsasnick finally got in contact with the boy involved in the case and also with the assistant priest who attended the exorcism in St Louis. From the boy, he could not get much information; from the latter, only details that nothing “supernatural” was happening. Opsasnick’s conclusion is that:

Personally, I do not believe Rob Doe was possessed. There is simply too much evidence that indicates that as a boy he had serious emotional problems stemming from his home life. There is not one shred of hard evidence to support the notion of demonic possession. The facts show that he was a spoiled and disturbed only child with a very overprotective mother and a non-responsive father. To me his behavior was indicative of an outcast youth who desperately wanted out of Bladensburg Junior High School at any cost. He wanted attention and he wanted to leave the area and go to St. Louis. Throwing tantrums was the answer. He began to play his concocted game. For his efforts he got a collection of priests (who had no previous exorcism experience) who doted over him as he lay strapped to a bed. His response was that of any normal child—he reacted with rage, he wanted out. Without delving into the dynamics of psychosomatic illness, there is no question there was something wrong with Rob Doe prior to January 1949, something that modern-era psychiatry might have best addressed. Rob Doe was just another normal teenage boy.

Each of the parties involved in this case approached it from its own frame of reference. To psychiatrists, Rob Doe suffered from mental illness. To priests this was a case of demonic possession. To writers and film/video producers this was a great story to exploit for profit. Those involved saw what they were trained to see. Each purported to look at the facts but just the opposite was true—in actuality they manipulated the facts and emphasized information that fit their own agendas. (OPSASNICK, 1999, part V)

This preliminary study of the *facticity* of the 1949 case, provided by Opsasnick, only testifies that *The Exorcist* (1971) is so entangled in the myth generated by its initial publication and the *potentiation* caused by its filmic adaptation that the 1949 article practically became a key element in the interpretation of the novel. This only confirms my hermeneutical concerns about the book: much attention has been focused on the real (im)possibility of the existence of ‘evil spirits’ that the literary aspects of the narration (plotment, narrator, characters, denouement, etc.) and its critical reception became blurred and overshadowed. Therefore, this “demythologization”, appropriating a term used by Ricoeur, that is, the exclusion of “the myth’s etiological intention” (SE, p.5), is supposed to work as a vaccine against any further reading of *The Exorcist* (1971) as a documentary novelization, or rather, as a novelization with documentary purposes. First, as any literary work, it uses and amply explores the “imaginative variations” (OA, 1994) peculiar to fictionalized narrations, whose purpose is to give rise to new thoughts and possibilities. Thus, in order not to incur in the same pitfall as Joshi (2001), who blames Blatty more than the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) for being too theological, my purpose in the following lines is, to a certain measure, to ‘recognize’<sup>107</sup> and assume the author’s perspective not only as valid<sup>108</sup>, but also acknowledged by many critics. In other words, that the text also embraces the category of the ‘author’. It is exactly because the ‘author’ is dead (BARTHES, 1977) that we must pay our homage to him/her. It is in his/her respect that we have to *assume* his/her words as our own, to distance ourselves from our roles as readers, the disseminators of meaning, and play our part as *listeners*, in an attempt to ‘leap’<sup>109</sup> over the infinite *gap/hymen* that there will always be between author and reader, the latter and the text, and finally between words and references, or even between words and other words. It is this dialectics of distanciation and approximation from/towards ourselves and the others that actually puts

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<sup>107</sup> This word has a direct allusion to Ricoeur’s *The Course of Recognition* (2005).

<sup>108</sup> This time the allusion is to Hirsch’s *Validity in Interpretation* (1967).

<sup>109</sup> Following the sequence of allusions, this time it refers to Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* (1981).

meaning into motion. Thus, recurring to Ricoeur, we must assume the category of the author, of a verbal intention inscribed in a text, as “a positive component of being for the text [...], not contrary [to it] but its condition.” (HHS, p.91)

From this point on, I will apply a sort of cacophonous and detoured method of interpretation. I will attempt to form a *patch-work* of the ‘meaning’ of *The Exorcist* (1971) through the *weaving* of the line of thought which says that the novel is not a work of horror, but, as a momentary step, a theological fictional narrative. From the first time I read the book, long after I watched the movie for the first time, I perceived that the immense gap between them was not due to the differences of *medium*, but an explicit divergence between *messages* – something that is corroborated by critical reception. Many commentators on this dissertation may infer that I could be blaming Friedkin for damaging Blatty’s work, which is absolutely not true. Friedkin has already been blamed and praised for his adaptation. What I have been trying to *bring forth* in the discussion around the novel is that it is not a matter of being better or worse, but of being different. A fact that cannot be denied is that *The Exorcist* (1971) – the novel - has always survived as a shadow of *The Exorcist* (1973) – the movie; moreover, much interpretation has been given under the hastily assumed supposition that both deal with horror. Secondly, much of what has been said against them is actually a secular revolt against a work so explicitly ‘Gnostic’. Thus, what follows from this point on is not an attempt to depreciate the novel’s filmic adaptation, but to actually *exorcize* the latter’s *spirit* from the former. Both the author’s opinions about the reception of his work, his next novelizations, directly connected to the one under study in this dissertation, and any kind of critical reception or adaptation to any *medium* will always fall in the category of *misreading* (BLOOM, 1975). It is exactly because of this that all of these ‘misreadings’ must be taken as *grafts* to *The Exorcist* (1971), all of them always deferring the ‘meaning’ of the work exactly because of their attempts to *make it appear*. Finally, it is also because I believe in dialogue, in the manner



of Gadamer and Ricoeur, that I believe it is possible to *achieve* the meaning of a work, not in a sense of recovering the original intention, which would only lead us back to Scheleiermacher and Delthey<sup>110</sup>, but in the prospect of a speculative conversation among a community of members bound by a text. Thus, what follows from now on, though the task has already been started, is the pursuit of what can result from the question ‘what does it mean?’ made towards *The Exorcist* (1971). It is exactly because the novel *said* something that we have, maybe not the epistemological certainty, but the ethical responsibility of assuming what we say while we also recognize what the other is *trying* to say. It is not because the text is “autonomous”, as Ricoeur (1981) properly emphasizes, that we will turn it into something independent and endlessly unattainable and hermetic.

It is a sense of belonging that leads me to *dialogue* with the texts, by many different authors, in Benjamin Szumskyj’s *American Exorcist: Critical Essays on William Peter Blatty* (2008). It is interesting to see myself being characterized, among my classmates and in academic events which I participated in, as the ‘*Exorcist* guy’. Maybe it is not exactly me who is *making* the book, but the other way around. In the same form, perhaps it was not Blatty who wrote the novel, but the novel who turned the evanescent Lebanese descendent into both a comic and horror writer.

Not all the essays in Szumskyj’s book deal specifically with *The Exorcist* (1971). Actually, the additional subtitle of the book *Critical Essays on William Peter Blatty* denounces that it is concerned with the category of the author. However, this only confirms my perspective, which focuses on the necessity of insisting on the *exorcism* of the novel. The task has already begun, but it is still far from finished.

For the very reason of being ‘cacophonous’, I will follow the sequence of the essays edited by Szumskyj. This arrangement follows the chronological order of the main works

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<sup>110</sup> Their contribution is much beyond the mar of romantic hermeneutics.

published by Blatty. However, it is also because these essays inevitably always start a dialogue with *The Exorcist* (1971) that the order is maintained. Therefore, according to the methodology proposed, however simplistic it may be, the first essay to be approached is the short preface and introduction by Szumskyj. It is in the preface that I found an opinion that was common to mine. There, Szumskyj perceives that essays about *The Exorcist* had a predominant focus on the cinematic interpretation (SZUMSKYJ, 2008, p.1)<sup>111</sup>. His disappointment was the same as mine: the shortage of essays “that sought to study [Blatty’s] novels in full.” (Ibid) Certainly, I also share his bias towards a more appreciative view of Blatty’s works than a depreciative one. This is not because I think everyone should believe and follow Blatty’s ‘relaxed’ Catholicism, even less because we should take it as a theological treatise; but actually because we should take it as it is – fiction. Similarly to Barthes’s division of texts into “readable” and “writable” in *S/Z* (1996), I think there are also *readable* and *writable* readings (or interpretations) of texts; that is, those which hasten too much and those which take the pleasure of lingering. Thus, it is because Szumskyj could perceive, like me, “many layers of psychological, philosophical, literary, historical, theological and autobiographical elements” (AE, p.2) in Blatty’s work that I decided to use his book as a guide for this part of my dissertation. In his introduction, Szumskyj observes that the purpose of Blatty’s texts explicitly derives from the author’s quest “to find the meaning of life”, which, in its turn, led him to provide a “sense of the world.” (AE, p.4) It makes me immediately remember Ricoeur’s remark that “the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves”<sup>112</sup>. In Szumskyj’s opinion, *The Exorcist* “is the re-evaluation of the relationship humanity has with God and the explanation of the concept of good and evil in a manner that does not purely rely on the sayings of an institution and its interpretation of reality.” (Ibid) This is one of the reasons why it is not only a misreading, but a mistake to

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<sup>111</sup> From now on to be referred to as AE.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. above p. 67.

interpret Blatty's work as 'horror'. In this sense, Szumskyj is right in saying that Blatty uses "the supernatural not as a means to merely entertain the audience but as a vehicle to promote the Christian ideology", and that he is "an example of coherent<sup>113</sup> Christianity" (Ibid).

This relation between horror and entertainment is the passageway which opens Scott Briggs's "*So Much Mystery...: The Fiction of William Peter Blatty*", the first essay in Szumskyj's book. According to Briggs, Blatty "approached the horror genre with thoughts of more than mere entertainment." (AE, p.9) This author also notices a "progression of philosophical thought [...] not content simply to create Gothic stories or fantasies." (AE, p.10) Even though I do not see properly a 'progression', but a persistence of perspective and themes, I agree that Blatty's purpose was beyond fear and uneasiness. Besides, it may be debatable to relegate Gothic and Fantasy, as well as Horror, as mere entertainment. In any case, he is right in characterizing Blatty as having "more in common with the mysteries of Thomas Harris than with Stephen King's brand of horror." (Ibid) Briggs also praises *The Exorcist* (1971) as a "hopeful [book] on a higher, spiritual level" (AE, p.13). For the critic, this indicates "the author's original intention" (Ibid). Despite all controversies the expression "original intention" may imply, I think there would be little change in substance, but a dramatic shift in its rhetoric, if Briggs had written "the text's rhetorical purpose", or then, "the text's verbal *Sinn*". In any case, what is important to highlight in this essay is the fact that Briggs is one of the critics interested in the misunderstandings of the novel's message. He is also responsible for identifying the novel's "existential perspective". (AE, p.14) Even though he makes a slight reference to this in a brief passage by Barret quoting Heidegger, this is enough to make a fissure in the existential egg inside *The Exorcist* (1971). Besides, Briggs uses both *Twinkle, Twinkle*, "*Killer*" *Kane* (1966) and *Legion* (1983) to corroborate his perspective on *The Exorcist* (1971). For him, and this is an important aspect of his essay, the

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<sup>113</sup> Even though this term may easily be contested, I think it is a proper affirmation.

latter's purpose "is not simply to horrify the reader, but also suggest a rationale for the evil" (AE, p.16) - which also serves as support to my preliminary perspective on the book as what I may refer to as 'theodicy literature'.

Although the next essay, by John Goodrich, deals specifically with the three comic novels prior to *Twinkle, Twinkle, "Killer" Kane* (1966), namely, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959), *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!* (1964), and *I, Billy Shakespeare* (1965), this text also refers to and reinforces what is actually part of *The Exorcist* (1971) and the other two works which complete Blatty's trilogy of faith, *The Ninth Configuration* (1978) and *Legion* (1983). Goodrich makes an important observation that there is a sort of "departure" from these two moments in Blatty's writings, which, according to the critic, is "not only in style, but also in voice" (AE, p.23). Another important remark is that Blatty "has been pigeonholed as a writer of religious thrillers", and "stereotyped by Hollywood as the master of religious horror" (Ibid). Even though Goodrich does not praise these initial works because he conclusively characterizes them as "light entertaining novels" (AE, p.24), he has a point in turning them into an inevitable "other" which *The Exorcist* (1971) will always have to face. It also helps to understand the constant jokes that come up throughout a work taken so seriously. Therefore, any aspect of horror in Blatty's fiction would always have to be put in relation to its comic side. Even though the three novels mentioned are comedies, they already share one important aspect with *The Exorcist* (1971): all of them are concerned with protagonists in the pursuit of the understanding of themselves. This search for the self always entails a drama. Blatty ends up developing, both in his thrillers and in his comedies, a tone of existentialism.

The third essay, which in my personal opinion is the most outstanding in Szumskyj's book, is Philip L. Simpson's *Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in The Exorcist*. His superb summary of *The Exorcist* in his first paragraph is not only a magnificent

characterization of the novel as well as of hundreds of other works in contemporary American popular and best-selling writings and films. It says:

Horror explodes in the capitol of the United States. An alien force from the Middle East has brought terror and murder to the formerly safe and secure home of American political power. Ordinary American citizens are helpless before the foreign enemy's capabilities and hostility toward life and cherished national values. The state apparatus – those law enforcement and medical institutions entrusted with our care – is equally ineffective against the terrorist threat. The motives and designs of the terrorist attacker are incomprehensible, beyond the experience of citizens and authorities alike. Without warning, the secular stronghold of the nation finds itself embroiled in a religious war it had not prepared for or even anticipated. The age-old spiritual conflict between the East and the West, the Arab and the Western world, has been brought to a home that is no longer, will never again be, safe. The clash of culture and indeed civilizations has begun. (AE, p.25)

Supported by a postcolonial perspective, this essay affirms that “the novel implies that foreign assimilation into American culture is fraught with peril for the survival of the culture.” (AE, p.26) Simpson’s conclusion is that “the narrative exploits a paranoid anxiety or fear of cultural assimilation”, which only allows the text to be a “supernatural melodrama of the impossibility of assimilation during a time when the urgency of bridging the differences between the cultures of the East and West is compelling and immediate.” (AE, p.42) However, it is important to call attention to the fact that what leads Simpson to this interpretation is both the fact that the prologue of the novel is set in Iraq and that the figure of evil is characterized in the image of the Assyrian myth of the demon Pazuzu. As a political essay, Simpson’s text is superb; under a theological perspective, it is as blind as any faith. In fact, it misunderstands something which would be easily and promptly recognized by any religious perspective<sup>114</sup>, that is, that the site referred to in the prologue has no relation to the present day geo-political boundaries of the Republic of Iraq, not even to the present cultural ‘clash’ admirably investigated by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). The basic function of

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<sup>114</sup> In my case, a self-assumed atheist, I was also able to perceive this aspect.

the prologue, in my perspective, is not political, but historical and theological. Since *The Exorcist* (1971) is a novel concerned with the theological question of evil, not only in the writer's opinion, but also as one shared by other critics, this is crucial to understand the novel. I think it becomes quite evident that the choice of this place, instead of other places like Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, North Korea, Nigeria, or even New Zealand, has to do with what can be referred to as the 'origin of evil'. The region that nowadays is called Iraq was actually the site of other political organizations, such as the Ottoman Empire as well as the British Empire. Besides, for history and archeology, it is also considered the 'cradle of civilization', the site for cultures such as the Akkadian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Hellenistic, the Roman, the Mongol, among others. Therefore, even though the political highlights made by Simpson in his essay are crucial for a contemporary perspective on the novel, it misses the most obvious and direct function of the prologue and the image of the demon Pazuzu: to understand evil and the silence of God before it is to understand that evil is as old as human kind, or perhaps that evil is actually one of the main distinguishing characteristics of any human being, devoid of his/her ethnicity. Furthermore, instead of "fear of assimilation" and the characterization of the foreign other as "evil", I hope that the following essays may support quite the contrary, that actually *The Exorcist* (1971) is an attempt to bring near what is still today supposed to be an antagonism, that is, religion and science. It should also defend the idea that fear may be, in an existentialist perspective, turned into desire and, if not of assimilation, at least of coexistence. Simpson, in a certain way, agrees with this perspective when he states that "the whole of the prologue argues that in the exotic land of Iraq, the distance between spirituality and material existence is not so great as it is in contemporary America." (AE, p.35) This essay is so rich that it could itself be the subject of an entire essay. In any case, I will not extend my approach to it, since I have already discussed the topic in this essay which was most relevant for my dissertation.

Therefore, in order to proceed with the approach to the other essays, I will focus now on a text written by John Langan, a comparative study between Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). Even though it is explicitly an appraisal of the latter, it is still a valuable approach to the former. It is by exploring their similarities and differences that the 'meaning' of *The Exorcist* emerges for Langan. First of all, he recognizes these two novels as symptomatic among many others of the late 60's and early 70's, "an explosion of novels of supernatural horror" (AE, p.45). Though this occurrence had the aid of their respective cinematic adaptations, what is important to notice, as Langan observes, is "the gap between the novel's publications and the film's [release]." (Ibid) In this sense, he highlights that "some of the observations that have been applied to the film seem to hold true for the novel, but in so general a way as to be of limited assistance in identifying its particular strengths." (AE, p.46) The first part of Langan's essay is dedicated to a brief history of the narratives concerned with the Devil, which, despite their origins, are normally associated with the Gospels. For him, the initial mark begins at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. What is important to highlight in this part is to what tradition *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* belong. Langan includes in this list names and titles such as Dante's *Inferno* (1321), Marlowe's *The Tragic History of Dr. Faustus* (1588?/1601), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674), Goethe's *Faust* (1808/1832), Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* (1835), Stevenson's *Thrawn Janet* (1881), Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), Benét's *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1937), Abbot's *Damn Yankees* (1955), culminating in Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971). Certainly this list is much longer than that, but the target in Langan's perspective is to trace the path of depictions of the character of the devil in a reviewed version. Despite all the interesting details that emerge from the author's comparative study, his purpose is to state that both Levin's and Blatty's novels belong to a "long and darkly-illustrious line of

representations of Satan”, and that “it is their particular triumph to have linked their portraits so well to their time and place”. (AE, p.68) Therefore, because film and novel belong to different lines of traditions, they can be easily recognized as disparate. The movies associated to the 1971 adaptation and the books which have a close relation the 1971 novel show how different novel and movie really are.

Following the sequence of essays, the next is J. W. Ocker’s *The Horror of The Exorcist: Its Presentation and Confrontation*. Despite being a very short paper, there are still some relevant observations to be highlighted. The first is that “there are a lot of horror movies that are gruesome and appalling and disturbing, but which still fall well short of what *The Exorcist* accomplished.” (AE, p.71) This essay is the only one to call it “a movie of abject<sup>115</sup> horror”. (AE, p.72) Even though it ends up dealing more with the movie than with the novel, only reinforcing my perspective that they are so entangled that it almost become imperceptible to notice when this occurs, this essay makes some remarks that help undo the negative reception that the novel received, besides stimulating the more positive ones. The most important among these is the remark that the story is not concerned with evil as an inevitable force, but with the question of hope. This essay corroborates the perspective which interprets *The Exorcist* (1971) as a novel which focuses more on the question of faith than on the problem of evil. Moreover, as Ocker also observes, in the narrative “there is no guarantee that good will triumph over evil” (AE, p.75). The situation is very different from the movie, where Karras is explicitly shown as possessed. In this sense, what the novel opens to interpretation, the film closes.

I have already mentioned the completely different directions that the Blatty novels after *The Exorcist* (1971) took in comparison to the movies that followed the novel’s cinematic adaptation. In this sense, Henrik Harksen’s reflections from his essay *Some*

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<sup>115</sup> My first impulse was to go after Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror* immediately. However, I still was reluctant not to make this dissertation a psychoanalytic biased perspective – not because it was not adequate, but because I was in the pursuit of something different and new in relation to *The Exorcist*.



*Thoughts on The Ninth Configuration* may be quite valuable. Initially, I agree with Harksen, and with Blatty himself, that *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) is the latter's best work. It is also important to mention Harksen's observation that "meaning" is a "key word" for *The Ninth Configuration*. I would rather say that this word is important not only for this specific work, but for all Blatty's works. According to Harksen, Blatty's fiction concentrates in "finding a sense of 'meaning' in an apparently meaningless world." (AE, p.79) In his interpretation of *The Ninth Configuration*, since it ends up with the supposed suicide by Kane<sup>116</sup>, the critic says that "meaning in life comes from compassion and helping other people, and sometimes to reach that goal you must do evil and actions that at a glance appear meaningless." (AE, p.87) This interpretation corroborates the idea that the novel should not be interpreted as an attempt to prove the veracity of possession by evil spirits; it merely reinforces the idea that Blatty's fiction, in general, is actually concerned with the question of faith. Harksen's final observation is important for the interpretation of both *The Ninth Configuration* (1978) and *The Exorcist* (1971); it says that "although the world is to a large extent meaningless we as human beings can actively *create meaning in it* [...] and that it is this compassion [for individual persons in it] that is essential to our very humanity." (AE, p.88) What is important, in Blatty's fiction in general, is not the materiality of evil, but *the metaphysics of hope*.

Ryan Streat's *Twinkle, Twinkle, "Killer" Kane! and The Ninth Configuration: a comparison* leads to a similar direction. In his comparison, Streat calls the attention to how "suicide is met with ambiguity" (AE, p.96) in the stories compared. My point about his observation is that it fits perfectly well for *The Exorcist* (1971). Karras's and Kane's suicides are the complicating factor in both novels. It has an explicit parallel relation to what Kierkegaard will call "the teleological suspension of the ethical" in *Fear and Trembling*

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<sup>116</sup> It is interesting to notice that both in this novel and in *The Exorcist* the solution by suicide is not explicit, but only sub-intended.

(1954)<sup>117</sup>. In his essay, Streat explores the importance and close relation between the characters of Kane (*Ninth Configuration*) and Karras (*The Exorcist*). In the critic's perspective, both have a dialectical relation of similarities and differences, but which end up leading to the religious message of the novels, that is, "love, hope, faith and the hereafter" (AE, p.97). In this sense, by showing a certain insistence that Blatty has in relation to these themes, I am attempting to show that *The Exorcist* (1971) takes a totally different direction in its interpretation if approached by a perspective which restricts its relation towards its cinematic adaptation in favor of a closer approximation to the other novels written by Blatty. Therefore, a comparison among *The Exorcist* (1971) and Blatty's other narratives offer better ways of interpreting the former rather than comparing it to its cinematic adaptation.

"Foot, You Are Wise!" – *The Apologetic Structure of The Ninth Configuration* by Geoffrey Reiter is an essay which only reinforces my opinion that *The Exorcist* (1971) is far from being Blatty's masterpiece, despite its importance. However, I decided to study this particular novel because my concern here is not aesthetics, but hermeneutics. In his essay, Geoffrey argues that Blatty's narrative is "an attempt to examine the problem of evil and suffering from a theological perspective, using the popular thriller as a medium to do so." (AE, p.99) The critic also observes that Blatty's trilogy of evil "serves an apologetic function, arguing for the existence of God to a skeptical audience." (Ibid) He complements this assertion by saying that *The Ninth Configuration* "dramatizes almost two thousand years' worth of thought in addressing the question of whether an omnipotent, all-good Creator God could exist in a world so clearly stained by suffering." (Ibid) These observations only reinforce my perspective that *The Exorcist* (1971), as well as Blatty's other two texts which complete his 'trilogy', are still much closer to the label of 'theodicy' than to 'horror'. In this sense, it is interesting to notice with Reiter that in *The Ninth Configuration* "the novel's

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<sup>117</sup> A discussion to be developed in the following section.

earliest speculations on the nature of suffering resemble the arguments made by church fathers to accommodate Christian doctrine to the Neo-Platonism fashionable in their days.” (AE, p.102) It is also remarkable to observe that any commentary on both *The Ninth Configuration* (1978) and *Legion* (1983) are all coextensive to *The Exorcist* (1971), as if they were actually chapters of one single book. Thus, what Reiter says about *The Ninth Configuration* fits perfectly well for the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971):

The deep meaning of *The Ninth Configuration* is really an attempt to find a solution to the problem of evil in the face of the incredible suffering of the innocent... *The Ninth Configuration* doesn't give an answer, but it gives an alternative mystery that you're forced to think about, namely the mystery of goodness. (AE, p.108)

Reiter also extends his interpretation by making an analogy to the characters of Kane and Karras in relation to Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and the latter's insistence on living his suffering at the face of his skeptical older brother's rationalizations. Reiter states that *The Ninth Configuration* “depicts from a Christian perspective the immense consequences of doubt” (AE, p.110). I believe that the same is applicable to *The Exorcist* (1971). However, the latter, as well as the other two narratives in the trilogy, can be interpreted as ‘theodicy’ narratives only as propaedeutics to its existentialist openness.

It is because *The Exorcist* (1971) will never be exempted from the complementing parts of Blatty's trilogy that these comparative studies become as important as any ‘direct’ reading on the novel. Therefore, it is time now to approach the other side of the story, the one concerned with *Legion* (1983), the final sequence of this assumed ‘trilogy’. Tim Kroenert, in his essay *The Exorcist and Legion: Religious Horrors*, begins by highlighting the two works' differences. First of all, he observes that the former is a “supernatural thriller”, while the latter entails much more a “gritty realism” inside a “police procedural” (AE, p.112). Secondly, Kroenert also remarks that both novels' protagonists start from different points in their belief,

but both follow a similar “journey”: one from an “assumed but struggling faith”, and the other from a “‘spiritually curious’ faithlessness” (AE, p.113). For Kroenert, the former is a work which “reinforces a most fundamental and literal interpretation of biblical and apocryphal scripture.” (Ibid) He also dedicates a special section to Karras in his essay, showing that *The Exorcist* (1971) is actually the story of a man “trying to convince himself”. (AE, p.117) However, I partly disagree with him when he says that Karras is after an “obsessive quest to prove that Regan is indeed possessed” (ibid). In my opinion, Karras’s “obsessive quest” is only an excursion of his inner struggle. Karras, as Kroenert himself observed, is actually much closer to being a tragic hero. The critic also estimates *Legion* as inferior to *The Exorcist* as a literary work, a position which I share. With a criticism about the character of Kinderman, supported by a comparison of styles in both narrations, Kroenert concludes that *Legion* is not a sequence but a “sibling” to *The Exorcist*. Actually, this evaluation results from Blatty’s exploring the comic aspect in Kinderman. This could be easily traced back to inspector Clouseau, a character that Blatty co-wrote for the screenplay of *A Shot in the Dark* (1964), if compared with the apparently more serious character of Karras. In this sense, a closer look at *The Exorcist*’s narrative allows the reader to observe many comic aspects in the construction of the latter, as, for example, when Father Dyer is removing Karras’s shoes and the latter, with closed eyes, jokes that the former is attempting to steal him. This is only one example among many dispersed not only in *Legion*, but also in *The Exorcist* and throughout all of the other Blatty’s books. Because *The Exorcist* (1971) is actually *bracketed* between two novels with more self-assumed comic biases, it is only through a comparative study that it becomes possible to perceive the comic aspects of *The Exorcist* (1971). The latter’s interpretations have been so ‘possessed’ by its cinematic adaptation that this long detour through comparative studies became almost inevitable.

Therefore, I will insist on this approach. In this sense, the next essay, the second concerned with *Legion* (1983), is a text by James Doig titled *The Devilish God: William Peter Blatty's Legion and The Problem of Evil*. Compared to the last essay, this one is much more positive towards *Legion* (1983). First of all, he calls it a “complex book”, and secondly because he considers it both “a supernatural thriller and a dissertation on the nature of evil in a theistic universe.” (AE, p.124) According to Doig, Blatty “points to our spiritual nature and is dismayed by the dominant materialist, empiricist world view in the modern world”. (AE, p.126) This is a perspective which, in its turn, makes the author seem to defend a sort of “return to spiritual values and beliefs.” (ibid) Therefore, for Doig, with *Legion*, Blatty is concerned with two issues: “the nature of God, and the problem of evil”. (AE, p.130) However, the most important remark is when Doig characterizes this millenary dispute (about the existence or non-existence of God) in today’s predominant and ruling mode of discourse, that is, science. For him, this battle can be represented by two contemporary scientists and their views on the subject. On the side of those who defend the non-existence of God, Doig mentions Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006). On the other hand, on the side of those who still argue for the existence of God, Doig mentions Francis Collins’s *The Language of God* (2006). It is quite obvious that Blatty tends towards the latter. Doig also mentions Blatty’s main references on the subject, namely, Teilhard de Chardin, G. K. Chesterton and Karl Jung. The first, and the most important for understanding Blatty’s texts, is known for defying the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and for amalgamating theological and scientific thesis about the origin of the universe<sup>118</sup>. Because of this, he had the publication of his books denied by the Vatican. Many of them were condemned by the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, a position to be reviewed by Pope Benedict XVI in his acknowledging of the value of de Chardin’s work (ALLEN, 2009). Finally, Doig concludes that in *The Exorcist*

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<sup>118</sup> For an introduction to de Chardin’s thought, see Kraft’s *A Reason to Hope* (1983). For de Chardin’s own view on the subject of creation and human condition, see his *The Phenomenon of Man* (1961).

“the existence of the demon is only accepted when all natural explanations have been exhausted.” (AE, p.131) Perhaps the word “accept” may be problematic, since what leads Karras to make a decision, if the interpretation of suicide as a measure to save Regan from possession is taken, is not ‘reason’ but ‘despair’. Therefore, more than a theological argumentation, the novel admirably entails an existentialist reflection.

Following Doig’s essay in Szumskyj’s book is Michael Garret’s *Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing – A Fable: The Theo-Illogical, Semi-Autobiographical Epic Film That Never Was*. Garret begins his text by calling Blatty a “novelist-cum-screenwriter/producer/director”, which only reinforces the idea that calling him a horror writer is somewhat odd. Garret also comments on Boorman’s failure in attempting a sequence to *The Exorcist* (1973) with his 1977 production. Garret infers that *Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing: A Fable* (1996) is a sort of disappointing reaction by Blatty against the way his books and the movies on his books deeply diverge. For Garret, *Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing: A Fable* (1996) is a work which marks Blatty’s return to comedy. Garret describes the book in a more comical way: a “parody satirizing in semi-autobiographical fashion [Blatty’s] dabbling in the cult of Hollywood” (AE, p.134). Once more, the theme of a possibly pretended insanity permeates the novel – a recurrent motif in Blatty’s fiction. Despite making an interesting presentation of Blatty’s 1996’s novel, Garret makes a relevant comment, which, in a certain way, describes my perspective before developing this dissertation. He says that “The Exorcist novel, like any other controversial work, has certainly faced its share of unholy criticism over the years, from people who for one reason or other have neglected even read the bloody thing.” (AE, p.141) *Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing* is also the story of a director who aims to develop a project towards one end and ends up having his work completely misunderstood. Thus, in a parallel between this plot and the repercussion to *The Exorcist* (1971), Garret comments that “people did not seem to see the film’s bigger

picture, its underlying message – that both good and evil are present in the world, and both exist symbiotically”. (AE, p.147) The critic mentions a remark by Friedkin saying that “people take out [of *The Exorcist*] what they bring into it.” (AE, p.148) Finally, Garret properly observes that the label of ‘horror’ attached to *The Exorcist* (1971) is actually the outcome of a “surface” reading. For Garret, “Blatty has always been a man of the comedic cloth, which many never knew or simply forgot, thanks to the overwhelming, compounding force of *The Exorcist* mania.” (Ibid) More than anything else, what this essay corroborates is the *misunderstanding* aspect that permeates Blatty’s narratives – at least most of them.

Blatty seemed to have departed from both cinema and literature in the late 90’s, but there was still a little more breath coming out of him. *Elsewhere* is a short novel first printed in a collection called *Twenty-Nine Original Tales of Horror and Suspense* (2000) and later published alone by Cemetery Dance Publications in 2009. In his article *It Ain’t Over Till the Fat Lady Sings: William Peter Blatty’s Elsewhere and the Haunted House Formula*, Davide Mana finally detaches one of Blatty’s novels from the stigma of *The Exorcist* (1973), making *Elsewhere* the first story to be actually “exorcized” from the *evil spirits of Hollywood*. It is amazing to remark that the critic never mentions the work which Blatty is most famous for, except in an introductory quotation from the latter about not being a horror writer, but rather, a “suspenseful supernatural detective story”<sup>119</sup>. This only reinforces how much the cinematic adaptation of *The Exorcist* impregnates not only the other novels, but also the very category of the author.

In this sense, Szumskyj’s book is a first step towards an ‘exorcism’ of *The Exorcist* (1971), besides a great contribution to literary interpretation theory and hermeneutics in general. Certainly, a text will always be open to an infinite range of possibilities of readings. However, more than that, a text only speaks when it is read. Therefore, the only way to keep

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Lucy Snyder for *Dark Planet* (1999).

stories alive is by telling them again. Interpretation, in this sense, is more than something done by the critic in relation to the text; it is actually the text itself speaking a language that an isolated figure like the author or the reader would never be able to perform. This is why I believe that it is only a tri-parted dialectics among categories like author, text, and reader that inclines us to think of meaning not as an object to be *uncovered* from behind the text, but, rather, a task that is infinitely pursued. The meaning of the text is always an answer to the basic and simple question 'what does it mean'. In this question lies a philosophical abyss which must be kept under scrutiny, not in order to get to its bottom, but in order to live better within it. Meaning is a Sisyphus' task; but nobody has ever remarked that we never roll the rock twice the same way. Moreover, with the help of other hands and their previous experience, we may roll it, if not better, at least differently. In this sense, interpreting *The Exorcist* (1971) cannot escape the interpretation of its interpretations, nor the world where it belongs. It cannot even escape reshaping this world by bringing in or straying with the other texts that surround it. My open position with this dissertation is, therefore, actually taking the text back to what it has always been, an autonomous being (just as Ricoeur proposed). Therefore, instead of choosing a book which is normally already a plurality of possibilities of readings, I decided to take one which apparently seems to be 'singular' in its meaning. I actually try to show, as Barthes (1996) admirably proposed when he formulated the distinction between the *readable* and the *writable*, that interpretation is what makes the text the former or the latter.

Regardless, this is a perspective which needs further systematic formulations. Since this is not the place to do this, I will approach some more interpretations on *The Exorcist* (1971) before I attempt my own. The last essay in Szumskyj's book is his own "exegesis" of Blatty's novel. *The Exegesis of William Peter Blatty: Catholicism, Exorcism and Pazuzu* clearly exposes the three main pillars of the novel. Szumskyj's three initial commentaries



explicitly show the appraisal bias that the entire book is supposed to support. First, he says, and this can be a justification for this dissertation in terms, that *The Exorcist* (1971) is “a work unlike anything that had been written before” (AE, p. 166). Another important point is his characterization of the narrative as a “spiritual odyssey” (Ibid). Finally, his initial appraisal can be categorized as an attempt to establish Blatty’s novel not only as distinct work of literature, but a good one – Szumskyj evaluates the novel as “a well researched and richly detailed tapestry, [...] full of historical, mythological, theological, philosophical and literary influences.” (Ibid) The critic starts his essay with a brief historical account of Catholicism. Based on Rhodes’s classification of the kinds of followers Catholicism has (Ultratraditionalists, Traditionalists, Liberal, Charismatic, Cultural, and Popular), Szumskyj says that Blatty is “possibly” a heterogeneous kind between Traditionalist and Cultural – the author has considered himself a “relaxed” Catholic (WINTER, 1985). Another important aspect highlighted by Szumskyj is the topic concerned with exorcism. His initial remark is actually an advice not to confuse this part of his essay (as well as Blatty’s narrative) as “a forum to discuss the truths or fallacies of exorcism” (AE, p.169) – which I extend to my own dissertation. Despite this topic occupying most of his text, it is enough for this dissertation to mention first Blatty’s extensive references on the subject, spread throughout his narrative, and, secondly, the Vatican’s decision to reformulate the ritual in 1999. Finally, the last topic of Szumskyj’s exegesis is concerned with the figure of the demon Pazuzu used by Blatty in his story, which, according to the critic, is “one of the most frustratingly enigmatic figures of mythology”, and which, as well, is the touchstone for the many “symbolic and allegorical interpretations” of the novel (Ibid). Interestingly, he observes from the descriptions of the mythological figure provided by The British Museum and from Heessel (an authority in the subject) that “what remains a problematic issue is whether Pazuzu was seen as a god, demon or both.” (AE, p.180) Reinforcing the political aspect of the novel, Szumskyj concludes his

essay by asserting that “Blatty’s use of Pazuzu, whether to be understood as a god or a demon, is intended to highlight both God and Satan’s involvement in this world.” (AE, p.183)

In addition to that, he concludes that,

Carefully chosen by Blatty, Pazuzu represents the author’s concern of supernatural forces not from God, but of an ancient time and culture that threatened the spiritual ancestry of Christianity and represent a threat towards what Blatty believes to be the one, true and only cosmic truth: Catholicism. (Ibid)

This is how Szumskyj’s book ends; and I believe this would be enough to start a *de-characterization* of *The Exorcist* (1971) as a classic horror novel. However, it may still be worth including some texts on the reception from the time the film was on the screens, available in Travers and Reiff (1974). It is interesting to notice these authors’ negative opinion at that time about what they call the “outpouring of media coverage which inexplicably chose to emphasize misconceptions about the film at the expense of the far more riveting facts.” (TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, p.10) Even though they do not make clear what they call “misconceptions” and “riveting facts”, I deliberately take them, and therefore interpret the novel, not as the empirical proof of possession, and consequently of the metaphysical entity called “devil”, but actually as an attempt to develop, through fictional narrative, or, to make reference to Ricoeur, *imaginative variations*, a kind of theodicy, which, in my opinion, failing as a theological study, ends up as an existential reflection about the question of faith. In any case, this is a topic that will be developed later. Their observation that “some viewers hate *The Exorcist* [1973] because of the unsettling feelings it arouses in them” is also interesting, while “others love it for precisely that reason.” (Ibidem, p.12) However, Travers and Reiff’s most striking remark is the following:

There are those who see it as a deeply religious film to be looked upon with reverence and awe. There are also those who see it as a profound victory for satanic forces and a giant leap back to the dark ages of Christianity. The only

reaction *The Exorcist* seems to have failed to elicit is indifference. (Ibidem, p.13)

Despite the book mainly being concerned with the filmic adaptation, much of it is coextensive and important to the novel. Besides, there is one particular topic which is fundamental to this part of my dissertation, and which discusses the reception the movie had after its release. In a chapter titled “The Critics: from ‘Classic’ to ‘Claptrap’”, Stephanie and Reiff present six reviews about the movie. The first one, a review by Vincent Canby, from *New York Times*, defines the movie as “the story of the attempts to save the life of the demonically possessed Regan” (CANBY, apud, TRAVERS; REIFF, 1974, p.150)<sup>120</sup>. What is *The Exorcist’s* story about? This is a question that has been the core of this study, and which makes it a hermeneutical enterprise. If the story is about a possessed girl, why did Blatty put the title of the book as an explicit reference to another character in the story? Why is it called *The Exorcist*? It is exactly because it is a story about ‘redemption’. Secondly, the protagonist of the novel, differently from the movie, is not the girl, but the priest. Therefore, this is the first and most important step in the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971): to make explicit that the novel and the film have different protagonists.

The same emphasis is given by Stanley Kauffman, from *The New Republic*, when he describes the movie as a story about “the diabolical possession of a 12-year-old girl” (Ibidem, p.152). However, his most important remark is when he says that “[he has not] read the book and certainly won’t [after the movie]” (Ibid). This only reinforces my conjecture that what has been read from the novel is mostly ‘possessed’ by the ‘devils’ unchained by the movie. Indirectly, Kauffman makes an important comparison that can be used for the study of a literary genre which has up to now not systematically studied (the genre of possession), when he mentions Anski’s play *The Dybbuk* (1914). Finally, the critic is intrigued by why the devil

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<sup>120</sup> Also available at:

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF1738E466BC4F51DFB4678388669EDE>

only does what it does at the end of the story. This is probably because the main part of the novel was cut off from the movie; the part when Merrin explains to Karras that the target of the devil is not the possessed, but those around them. This might have left the critic without a clue and points to a perspective that the movie not only created something new, but also something in opposition to the novel. Therefore, any interpretation of the novel which is not aware of these differences may fall not just in the category of *misreading*, in the sense proposed by Harold Bloom, but also in the category of *(in)validity* proposed by Hirsch.

The next review selected by Travers and Reiff was written by Andrew Sarris, from *The Village Voice*, whose perspective fits mine, because he could see in the movie what is not that clear in its representation, and which the book makes more explicit. It is in this sense that he properly observes that “it is ultimately not Regan who is the protagonist [...] but rather the young Greek Catholic priest” (TRAVERS, p.157). But what is important to highlight in his text, besides his under-evaluation of the movie as “a universal regression from the rational to the irrational” (Ibidem, p.154), is his following comment:

I wake up each morning with the idiosyncratically irrational conviction that I can change the course of history by acting as dynamically as possible in my humble capacity. We are all responsible and all that. Or are we? This is the question propounded by William Peter Blatty in his novel on demonic possession. (Ibid)

Nevertheless, most critics, more concerned in combating Blatty’s Catholicism than reading the novel, end up interpreting the story as an attempt to make us believe we are toys of God and the devil’s puppet strings. Hence, they neglect to notice that the veracity of the possession is sustained in the narrative by the perspective, provided by an omniscient narrator, of a priest with serious problems of depression, a mother under a strongly stressful situation, who has been advised by doctors to seek an exorcist (doctors who may have failed in their diagnosis), in addition to an assistant who is explicitly inclined to mysticism, besides an old priest who is supposed to be the actual exorcist and who trusts the diagnosis of the

priest who is much inclined to accept the dramatic decision of finally requesting the authorization for an exorcism, though he is more worried about it working as a *suggestive* cure than actually about being faithful to his creed. Perhaps this happens because interpretations were so concerned about the author's explicit religious belief that they did not notice that the narrative admittedly plays this game of doubt throughout the plot, to the point where Karras finally decides to conjure the devil into himself in a scene that, in the book, is only overheard, and which the movie dares to interpret and show, and which never makes really clear, or discards totally the up-to-then sustained hypothesis of *suggestive* possession. Nevertheless, even under Blatty's religious perspective, the story would still be more inclined to suggest active responsibility of individuals in the care of others, despite all the things in the world that are out of our hands. Thus, this story can also be read as an attempt to refrain the scientific perspective of its assurance of full knowledge and control. Regan's case may not perfectly represent those which we can see everyday on TV about people being 'freed' from 'evil spirits' in Protestant churches. It may represent those inexplicable cases where science, failing to accomplish what it is supposed to do, that is, to cure, resorts to prayer as the only *medicine* to relieve the pain of those who are about to lose someone dear<sup>121</sup>. In this sense, any interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) must be aware it needs to distinguish between mysticism and religiosity.

Interpretations of both the movie and the novel are so immense that what I provided up to this point still falls short of the amount of criticism it has received, both positive and negative. However, of the many I have read and which have not been included directly in quotation here, it became resoundingly clear that many of them insist on characterizing the novel as 'horror', while others prefer a perspective which I have denominated as 'theodicy'.

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<sup>121</sup> I have to apologize for the dramatic tone, but this is the tone which I see implied in Blatty's narrative.

In any case, *The Exorcist* (1971) has been misunderstood mainly due to the impact of its cinematic adaptation.

Finally, the purpose of this section was to pursue an interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) which was already happening. Szumskyj's book, as well as my introductory section dedicated to a short biography and bibliography of William Peter Blatty, aim at showing the lack of validity that adopts the interpretation of the novel as a 'horror' story. However, this section was not only dedicated to *deconstructing* this perspective. It must also serve to point out the aspect of 'theodicy' that the novel indicates not as an end, but as an opening to another perspective, namely, existentialism. Therefore, this section must be taken as a passage, which departs from the inadequacy of 'horror', passes through the characterization of the novel as theodicy, and aims at leading it to an existentialist interpretation. Thus, in a certain way, it indirectly assumes that *before* interpreting *The Exorcist* (1971), the detour through other texts is necessary. These other texts, in my opinion, are not only Blatty's other two books that complete his already mentioned 'trilogy', but all his other texts. It also entails that the interpreter take the author himself as a text, or rather, reading his biography as a valid intertextuality in the interpretation of his work. More than that, it is also a *decentering* of the text itself as a center of meaning. It is assuming meaning as a relationship among texts, and as a task to be pursued, in a dialogical relation. My perspective is that it is only through the detour of other texts that we should approach the one under interest. Certainly, I do not deny reading and interpreting this text *before* this detour, either. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the order of the task, it aims at validating this detour as necessary in this task. Thus, it is only after all these deviations that I finally direct my approach to the novel which is the main concern of this dissertation: *The Exorcist* (1971).

### 2.3 The Abyss

After the long detour of the first chapter, which can be provisionally called *the hermeneutical problem of ascription of meaning*, the initial question posed to *The Exorcist* (1971), namely, ‘what does it mean?’, dares to be narrated. However, it is only after another detour - the one about *reading* the meaning of this novel in and through other texts - that we finally get to what is supposed to be the ‘core’ of this investigation, that is, the task of talking about the meaning of a work. Ultimately, the aim of all of this is to say that this ‘core’ ends up being its “supplement”, to refer a little more to *Derridian* terms. In other words, by attempting to talk about one subject, one ends up talking about something else – which does not entail that we have deviated in a negative sense. Here, deviation takes a positive shift, that of *not being too hasty*. It does not mean doubting first what others *presuppose*, but rather not presupposing *too quickly*. The more superfluous this deviation becomes, the more its supplementary necessity is reinforced.

However difficult and distant (metaphorically saying, ‘thin’) it is to find the thread that links a novel which supposedly deals with the question of evil under a theological perspective to a hermeneutical problem, this is still a valid pursuit. But the question must be rehearsed: why the shift from the problem of meaning within hermeneutics to the problem of evil in literature? For the simple fact that both deal with the problem of ‘interpretation’. Why should theoretical discussions about hermeneutics concern a work that apparently deals so shallowly with the problem of evil? At this point I recur to Ricoeur to help me weave this very thin line.

First of all, it is necessary to understand this close relation between “evil” and “hermeneutics”. For Ricoeur, this relation lies in the touchstone of the symbolism of evil. (CI,

p.289) For him, the problem of evil is the paradigm case. (CI, p.300) It becomes a paradigm because, in his perspective, “the only access to the experience of evil itself is through symbolic expressions” (CI, p.315). ‘Evil’ is brought closer to hermeneutics due to the fact that “to undergo the experience of evil is also to express it in a language, but furthermore, to express it is already to interpret its symbolic expressions.” (CI, p.316) In this sense, he observes that “the hermeneutics of evil appears as a particular domain that lies at the heart of a general interpretation of religious symbolism”, which, in its turn, may constitute “the very source of the hermeneutical problem itself”. (CI, p. 317) This perspective must be understood in a broader general view where Ricoeur is seen as attempting to *reevaluate* the validity of the symbolical language, or rather, the positiveness of the symbol to reflection, in a religious and philosophical sense. It is at this point that his maxim becomes a helping tool in order to find/construe a certain validity in exploring the symbolical meaning of a literary work which was relegated to the ‘margins’ of literature (much of it because of its cinematic ‘interpretation’) for being too shallowly *instructive, inspiring*, or whatever terms designated to indicate that a work deserves reading. It is in this sense that I follow Ricoeur’s inspiring axiom which says: “the symbol gives rise to thought”. (1986b, p.19)<sup>122</sup>

I believe that the biggest mistake that led critics to condemning a work like *The Exorcist* (1971) as a literary piece which did not deserve academic attention (or even aesthetic appraisal) was its reading as a myth, or rather, to make use of *Ricoeurian* terms, its *mythologization*. Ricoeur defines *demythologization* as the act of excluding the myth’s etiological intention, that is, its ‘pretension’ to be an explanation. According to the latter, a myth, no longer ‘explanation’, is

not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of

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<sup>122</sup> From now on to be referred to as SE.



today, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in this world. (SE, p.5)

In this sense, *The Exorcist* (1971) is mistakenly read as *a story which pretentiously aims at convincing readers that exorcism exists*. It is one thing to relate this to the author's personal beliefs in the supernatural, but it is quite another to enclose this narrative within this boundary. If we really follow Ricoeur's suggestion of the 'autonomy' of the text in relation to its author (not to be confused with its 'independence'), and if this attempt is to shift this text from a negative *mythological* perspective towards a *demythologized* one, then, the only possible way to 'save' this text is through an *existentialist* interpretation.

Even though the term existentialism is considered to have been first coined by Gabriel Marcel in the 40's and later adopted by Sartre (FLYNN, 2006), the father of this philosophical movement, which can be referred to as a "non-formal account of what it means to be human [...], since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself" (CROWELL, 2008), is widely accepted to be Kierkegaard (Ibid). Therefore, the purpose of this final topic is to provide an interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) through the lenses of some representative works of this movement. For this task, I will have as a guiding thread Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1980), and *Fear and Trembling*<sup>123</sup> and *The Sickness Unto Death*<sup>124</sup> (1954), as well as Ricoeur's *Fallible Man* (1960a)<sup>125</sup>, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960b) and the section "The Symbolism of Evil Interpreted" in *The Conflict of Interpretations: essays in hermeneutics* (1985). The scope of texts and authors brought together under the single term of 'existentialism' is itself a problem when we consider that what is being provided is a perspective on a literary work such as the one under study in this dissertation. However, since *The Exorcist* (1971) is a religiously inspired narrative, and also because this novel entails a certain apologetics for Christianity, I believe it would be more coherent, for this dissertation,

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<sup>123</sup> From now on to be referred to as FT.

<sup>124</sup> From now on to be referred to as SUD.

<sup>125</sup> From now on to be referred to as FM.

to bring this literary work under the scope of philosophers who are more concerned with the religious realm: not because it is the most correct, but exactly because this is what is necessary in order to move away from the stigma of this novel as a horror classic<sup>126</sup>, passing through another typical critical reaction to *The Exorcist* (1971) as *merely* Roman Catholic *catechism* (and its consequent devaluation), until finally achieving the existentialist shift. *The Exorcist* (1971) may not be a masterpiece aesthetically or stylistically, but its potential for symbolic exploration still renders its study a worthy effort, in a *Spinozist* sense of effort to be. The biggest problem which Blatty's novel presents is not a matter of believing or not in exorcism or demonical possession; the issue which gives strength to the text is not metaphysical, but very anthropological. In other words, the major concern or the basic theme of the work is not evil, as it is generally regarded, but faith. In this sense, Kierkegaard falls perfectly into this shift in reading, because, for the latter, faith does not rely on rationality but on the absurd (FT). Transversely, what *The Exorcist* (1971) deals with is not scientific proof of evil possession, but the theological discussions on original sin, radical evil, fallibility, sin, and finally faith. I hope, and this word is very meaningful at this point, that, first of all, *The Exorcist* (1971) stops being labeled as 'horror', not because it is wrong, but merely because horror is what it least is. Secondly, the narrative must also make a *leap* from its pretension to be a theodicy, and in this aspect I agree with Ricoeur when he defines theodicy as "a mad project of justifying God." (CI, p.281) Finally, it is by taking the novel as a narrative which deals existentially with the question of faith that it will be possible to 'exorcize' it. It is interesting that this work has normally been criticized merely because people do not believe in exorcism – as if we should believe in witchcraft to talk about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Paulo Coelho's *Diário de um Mago*. Nevertheless, the novel still allows us to read Regan's possession as mental illness if we consider that most of what we know about what is

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<sup>126</sup> It must be reinforced that 'horror' does not make *The Exorcist* (1971) a kind of 'lower literature', or even that anything that is horror is 'negative'. On the contrary, the claim under discussion here is the inadequacy of the concept of horror and the classification of this work as a 'typical' representative of the genre.

happening in the story is through the perspective of an omniscient narrator which describes the perspective of characters who are under a very stressful situation, and who could perfectly be seeing more than what really was. My suggestion is not hastening too fast to conclude prematurely that the girl is possessed. It is actually paying more attention to what Karras is undergoing.

However, before putting this shift into motion, it is still necessary to detach the label of 'horror' as a stigma in *The Exorcist* (1971). Perhaps it was due to the short time between the novel's first print and the movie's premier that the latter, after its astonishing success, came to overshadow the former. In order to answer why *The Exorcist* (1971) should not be read as 'horror', it is necessary to follow Noël Carroll's reflections on the horror genre. Initially, the author makes a distinction between "natural horror" and "art-horror", which could be interpreted as horror in epistemological terms and horror in aesthetic terms. In the history of horror as a literary genre, the author observes that "the genre itself only begins to coalesce between the last half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth as a variation on the Gothic form in England and related developments in Germany." (CARROLL, 1990, p.13) Due to what he calls "fluid boundaries", horror as a genre is defined only in parallel with science fiction, because both have a common ground topic which works as their central aspect, namely, the existence of "the monster". Another important distinction, according to Carroll, is the one between horror and fantasy/fairy tales. In the latter, monsters are "part of the everyday furniture of the universe", while the former regards them as "abnormal, disturbances of the natural order." (ibidem, p.16) Therefore, for the author, the functional aspect which distinguishes horror is related to "affective responses of the positive human characters in the stories to the monsters that beleaguer them", as long as these "responses" run parallel to the "emotive reactions of the audience". (ibidem, p.17) However, this synchrony is not only a matter of fear, as the author points out, but also of "repulsion".

According to him, “the monsters are identified as impure and unclean.” (ibidem, p.23) There is no doubt that, if *The Exorcist* (1971) is to be regarded as ‘horror’, this is because of the character of Regan, or Regan while deprived of her sanity/body. Regan is the monster which characterizes the novel as horror literature.

This raises a particular question that must be highlighted and which is decisive before any interpretive journey through *The Exorcist* (1971). Let us initially consider that we may start answering the question ‘What is *The Exorcist* about?’ by posing two options: (a) it is a story about a girl who is possessed by the devil; or (b) it is a story about a priest who faces a supposedly genuine case of possession. What makes the novel be read as horror is exactly the option presented by (a); in case the perspective shifts to (b), the story does not focus so much on ‘the monster’ as it does on the ‘human’. According to Carroll, many stories may have monsters, but this aspect is not enough to configure them as ‘horror’. In his opinion, “horror involves essential reference to an entity, a monster, which then serves as the particular object of the emotion of art-horror.” (ibidem, p.41) If Regan were the central character of the novel, then its title could probably be changed to ‘The Possessed’ instead of ‘The Exorcist’. What the title indicates, in this sense, is that the story narrated is not about a girl but about a man. It is interesting to remember that the newspaper article which inspired Blatty had a boy as the possibly possessed person, and that the change in the character to a girl was merely a way to avoid resemblances between the novel and the case.

Another interesting characteristic of the horror genre identified by Carroll is what he calls “the emotion the creators of the genre have perennially sought to instill in their audiences” (ibidem, p.24). Can I, in this sense, classify the works of Michael Wigglesworth as horror? Can I call *Macbeth* a horror play? Far from intending to complicate horror as a genre, what I aim at with this observation is actually confirming Carroll’s characterization of horror, but also pointing out that *The Exorcist* (1971) resembles less these aspects than its cinematic

adaptation. It is interesting to notice that Carroll frequently refers to *The Exorcist* (1973) as a classic object of art-horror, but all his references are explicitly about the movie and not about the novel (he does not even mention any distinction between them). Thus, Carroll's requirements for art-horror in terms of threat and disgust can be easily contrasted to those of pity and anguish which are engendered by the character of Father Karras in the novel. Differently from books such as *Dracula* (1897) or *Frankenstein* (1818), or even a film like *Alien* (1979), *The Exorcist* (1971), in opposition to its cinematic adaptation, does not make the monster the protagonist. In my opinion, this is a decisive point which may start *disclosing* the label of horror from the novel.

Following Carroll's definition of art-horror, he also observes that another important aspect of the genre is the categorical interstitial situation of monsters in horror stories, their incompleteness, their contradictory and formless aspect (*ibidem*, p.32-3). In this sense, he notes that "monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge." (*ibidem*, p.34) What the author builds in this introduction to the horror genre is what he later breaks up as the "counterexamples to the definition of art-horror" (*ibidem*, p.35). With this section, he attempts to show how "fuzzy" and "insufficient" these conditions may be. Thus, his definition of monster, in order to avoid these problematic boundaries, is that of "beings that do not exist according to the lights of contemporary science." (*ibidem*, p.41) It is interesting to notice that *The Exorcist* (1971) actually does not define Regan's situation from the start as that of a 'monster', in other words, something improbable for scientific knowledge in the 70's. On the contrary, it tries to situate her plight between spiritual possession and mental illness, not for the sake of the reader, but for the *loss/fall* of the protagonist. The story is actually the priest's struggle to convince not only others but also himself that what is happening to the girl is not something 'supernatural'. It is interesting to notice that what makes Karras ask the permission of his superiors to go on

with an exorcism is not his belief in the possession, but his ‘hypothesis’ that only this ‘theatrical’ procedure could reverse the ‘self-suggestive’ demonical possession, since all medical attempts failed to do so.

In the conclusion of Carroll’s ‘introduction’, which is entitled “The Nature of Horror”, this author makes an interesting relation between Horror and Enlightenment. For him, “the horror novel represents something like the underside of the Enlightenment.” (ibidem, p.56) He also notices that “Enlightenment supplied the horror novel with the norm of nature needed to produce the right kind of monster”, and that it “made available the kind of conception of nature or the kind of cosmology needed to create a sense of horror.” (ibidem, p.57) Perhaps readers and critics are *disgusted* or *horrified* by *The Exorcist* (1971) not only because it depicts physical violence and vulgar language, but because it also engenders a marginal discourse, that of the ‘absurd’ – a discourse that assumes the possibility of a spiritual world is not only marginal in a secular society, but also *repulsive*. We may apparently be much more relieved and comfortable watching/reading works like *Clockwork Orange*<sup>127</sup> merely because they are much more representative of the discursive practices of science – a ‘mad’ scientific project of curing people of violent behavior by an excessive and negative exposure to it is more ‘acceptable’ than the possibility of spiritual manifestation. It is remarkable that the only way to bear the *abjection* of a discourse like *The Exorcist* (1971) is by a counter-discourse that would suspend Regan’s case not as being between possession and mental illness, but exclusively within the possibility of the latter. It is interesting to bring to the fore at this point Kierkegaard’s opinion in *Fear and Trembling* that the “absurd” is not a category of epistemology, but rather of faith. Monsters, in this case, would be a category to be dealt with under the more general category of the ‘impossible’, not of the ‘absurd’.

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<sup>127</sup> Reference to both the book, written in 1962 by Anthony Burgess, and the movie, written, directed and produced by Stanley Kubrick in 1971.

Another relevant distinction made by Carroll is in the composition of horrific beings, which he classifies between “fusion” and “fission”. The former is characterized by “the compounding of ordinarily disjoint or conflicting categories in an integral, spatio-temporally unified individual.” (ibidem, p.44) According to him, “many of the characters in possession stories are fusion figures.” (Ibid) It is noteworthy to point out that in *The Exorcist* (1971), although all these observations lead to Regan, the actual “fusion” figure is Father Karras, whose character concentrates the two contradictory categories, which Carroll calls “standing cultural categories”, of ‘priest’ and ‘scientist’, a character who is a kind of distorting mirror for another, that of Father Merrin. The latter, assumedly inspired by the famous anthropologist/Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, can be seen as an ‘intermediary’ being. In fact, ‘displacement’ is a general tone for most characters in the story: Chris MacNeil is an actress, but she behaves like a ‘director’; Regan is somewhere between possession and mental illness; Kinderman is the reason of logic, but also the speculation of a philosopher; Karl is the apparently cold and methodic servant who ends up being unveiled as ‘emotionally concerned’. Even the function of the exorcist is a kind of ambiguous figure for the Church, since it is at the same time a matter of shame and confirmation of dogma (WILKINSON, 2007). As one can notice from the short review of all Blatty’s literary work, this situation of ‘in betweenness’ of characters is a trademark of his writing. On the other side of Carroll’s division lies the figure of “fission”, which he describes as “contradictory elements [...] distributed over *different*, though metaphysically related, identities.” (ibidem, p.46) For him, “in this case, the animal and the human inhabit the same body” (Ibid). A figure in *The Exorcist* (1971) which fits this characterization is “Pazuzu”. This mythological figure, as well as Regan in her possessed state, is easily categorized under this label proposed by Carroll. For this author, these two major figures “are symbolic structures that facilitate – in different ways – the linkage of distinct and/or opposed categories, thereby providing vehicles for projecting

the themes of interstitiality” (ibidem, p.47). Adding to this categorization, he also proposes three other categories, which he calls “magnification”, “massification”, and “horrific metonymy”. Despite all the relevance these last three categories might have, I think the ones already mentioned are quite enough to render the interpretation that *The Exorcist* (1971) is not fundamentally ‘horror’, not because it does not include typical horror figures, but because these are secondary to a more potential *reading* of the story: one that is not interested in setting a definite line between human and non-human. On the contrary, Karras, as the central figure of the story, is actually a sort of characterization of what can be considered most human in humanity, that is, its fallibility. This is a point related to Ricoeur’s *Fallible Man* which will later be the guide for the development of this interpretation. So far, I can only comment that this shift in perspective is amply related to the novel’s cinematic adaptation, since the latter gives a higher importance to the depiction of impacting images rather than the subliminal theological indications of the former.

Another aspect which reinforces this perspective is Carroll’s definition of “art-horror” as opposed to “art-dread”, which “involves disgust as a central feature” (ibidem, p.42). These two words are perfect to establish a “fissure” between *The Exorcist* (1971) and *The Exorcist* (1973), wherein the former would be much more inclined to *dread*, while the latter would be to *horror*. It is remarkable that the choice between “angst” and “dread” was a crucial factor in the translation of Kierkegaard’s work<sup>128</sup>. This shift from horror to dread can be exemplified in Carroll’s book when he makes an interesting commentary on the character of Norman Bates in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), another emblematic cinematic adaptation from literature. Carroll does not relate Bates to the horror genre since the protagonist of the story does not fit the monster schema developed in his typical schema for the “monster” of horror stories. Because in *The Exorcist* (1971) the ‘solution’ for possession is in a way

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<sup>128</sup> Walter Lowrie makes a note on this in his translation.



suspended along the narrative, while Father Karras always finds a ‘natural’ explanation for Regan’s situation, and also because Karras’s decision to proceed with the requirement for exorcism is motivated by a scientific possibility (that of cure by self-suggestion), I am much in favor of making Regan, at least until the *dénouement* of the story, a character much more related to Norman Bates than to monsters such as those found in Lovecraft’s stories. Karras maintained hypothesis that what Regan is having is not ‘evil possession’ functions as a suspension of definitely characterizing the girl as a ‘monster’. Her physical appearance is only the result of something beyond scientific knowledge and control. It is here that I reinforce my suggestion that reading *The Exorcist* (1971) as horror is actually due to a superimposition of an interpretation over an interpretation, that is, we normally read what we have already watched. Even though the monstrous aspect of the possessed Regan remains fitfully reliable in the narrative, what really impels interpretation to change direction is the same shift provided by the cameras. Because we ‘watch’ the priest more than the girl, in the novel, this ‘labeling’ as horror is suggested as misleading.

If ‘horror’ must be assumed as an unsatisfactory, or at least a less probable guiding-type<sup>129</sup>, which other word or concept could, in a certain way, ‘relieve’ this insufficiency? A frequent tendency in the *readings* on *The Exorcist* (1971) is provided by critics who make an effort to see a ‘good’ side in the novel, those who believe in its positive message (normally tending toward a more religious reading of the novel). According to this group, we could fit the book under the label of ‘theodicy’.

I decided to call ‘theodicy’ this tendency to read the story as a sort of catechism due to Blatty’s logic exposed in his axiom: *if there were demons then perhaps there were angels* (BLATTY, 2001). This explicitly attests the author’s intention of making his novel a theological narrative. In interviews (WINTER, 1985; BAER, 2008; SNYDER, 1999), Blatty

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<sup>129</sup> An allusion to Hirsch’s “general type”. See section two in the first chapter of this dissertation.

declares that *The Exorcist* (1971) is part of a trilogy, something which will be reinforced in many articles about his books (SZUMSKYJ, 2008). In fact, his other book *If There Were Demons Then Perhaps There Were Angels* (2001) is what engenders such a formula. As already mentioned, *The Exorcist* (1971) would deal with ‘the problem of evil’, *The Ninth Configuration* (1978) with ‘the mystery of goodness’, while *Legion* (1983) would be a kind of ‘solution’, though, according to Blatty himself (SNYDER, 1999), the latter would specifically deal with the question of “the suffering of the innocent”. All this only leads us to reading *The Exorcist* (1971) more as a ‘leap’ into theodicy than as a precursor of modern horror. Nevertheless, I still consider this as one interpretation among others, since the text is always a possibility to openness, and our task as readers/interpreters is to ‘enclose’ it into a new ‘enclosure’ (actually, the only escape to closeness is through more closeness, just as the way to *explain* a word is only through another word, and eventually a text with another text – an endless chain of supplements), not in order to *close* it, but to save it from being forever enclosed. In this sense, my task here was first to review how *The Exorcist* (1971) has been interpreted up to now, and challenge these interpretations into a *different* one, not for the purpose of debunking them, but for the sake of saving the meaning – meaning taken as a task, and not as an object.

However, before we endeavor through this ‘new’ enterprise, it is important to highlight some of the abovementioned concepts. First of all, what is a theodicy? According to Kempf (1912), it means “the justification of God”, and was first introduced by Leibniz in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (1710). In this essay, Leibniz develops the argument, against Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702), that, despite all evil, all suffering, something which, according to Bayle, would contradict the idea of a good and omnipotent God, this world is the best of all possible worlds. It may be an odd comparison, but the kind of ‘objectivity’ sought by Leibniz to the

problem of evil, in a certain way, though it is a very distant and strange one, can be compared to what Schleiermacher, and later Dilthey, tried to carry out with the problem of hermeneutics. Once more, the peculiar association of hermeneutics to evil makes the effort a little less unusual. Nevertheless, the question of evil is not new. Epicurus, in ancient Greece, had already proposed a theory of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ based on his principles of “pain” and “pleasure” (KONSTAN, 2009). Still, this is not a problem only for ancient times. Alvin Plantinga’s *God, Freedom, and Evil* (2002) is an example that makes it clear that we are far from exempted from such a task. Names like William Rowe and Paul Draper only enlarge the list of contemporary thinker who dedicate their efforts to the problem of evil. It is interesting to notice that theodicy comes from joining two Greek words, *θεός* (*theós*, "god") and *δίκη* (*díkē*, "justice") (KEMPF, 1912). The problem may lie in distinguishing how much ‘justice’ is confirmation of innocence or confirmation of guilt, and how much one could be an ‘accomplice’ for the other. Perhaps the problem of evil is not so much a question that can be resolved by theodicy; for the heart of the problem is not about ‘who’ is guilty of evil, but *whence comes evil*, the ancient and very known problem posed by Gnosticism. In this sense, the problem of *The Exorcist* (1971), proposed by its own author as ‘the problem of evil’, is actually the lack of awareness of those who read it, in the sense that nobody has ever pointed out this aspect, that the novel is less a ‘defense’ of God than a Gnosis. According to Ricoeur (1985), Gnosis is a simulacrum of reason, and the problem of evil constitutes the bridge between Myth and Gnosis, much before speculation was put into movement by philosophy. Because of this intermediary position, according to Ricoeur, “evil offers at the same time the most considerable challenge to think and the most deceptive invitation to talk nonsense, as if evil were an always premature problem where the ends of reason always exceed its means.” (SE, p.165) Thus, evil is not so much ‘what’ possesses Regan, but what ‘happens’ to her.

Hence, evil constitutes a challenge<sup>130</sup>. The narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971), as I will attempt to re-interpret, is not so much in favor of resolving Regan's problem in favor of possession and against the dismissing of mental illness, as it is the relation to the problem of 'original sin', that is, if evil is *cosmogonic* or *anthropogonic*. In this sense, I hope to develop the argument that the text tends much more to an existential reflection about 'free will' than to its already *superimposed* reading as 'theodicy'.

Because I have delayed for too long dealing straight with the lines that compose *The Exorcist* (1971) in order, first of all, to 'take a detour' through the problem of ascription of meaning through the use of the 'function' of the author as a guideline to reading the book for what it is not, I think it is time to face up to this task and finally carry out what has been promised. The methodology applied is not actually one that is master of what it does, but more of a kind that *strives*, that *pursues* more as a drive and less as an awareness, one that stumbles more, which is more prone to be contradictory than foreseeing from the start what it wishes to find. It does not intend to be modeled by, but surely is intrigued by, a reading methodology like the one applied by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1996). In this sense, this reading does not *look for* an existential 'spirit' immanent in the novel. What it will do is actually reconstruct the text, fragment by fragment, as if this existential 'spirit' were already there.

The first<sup>131</sup> thing to notice in *The Exorcist* (1971) is the title itself. Who is the 'exorcist' of the story? It may seem easy and evident, but the question can be deceiving. Initially, we have two options: Father Karras and Father Merrin. The former is the priest who asks his bishops permission to perform the exorcism, but he is only the priest-psychiatrist who is supposed to distinguish between mental illness and genuine possession. It is interesting to notice that, first of all, he is not an 'expert' on the subject of exorcism, but on psychiatry. It is

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<sup>130</sup> An allusion to an essay published by Ricoeur (2007).

<sup>131</sup> I will assume, however dangerous it may be, the position of an interpretation that does not start with a 'summary' of the story, because this 'summary' would already provide the closure of an interpretation from the start. Therefore, what follows is much more for those who have already read the novel.

only after page 300 that Karras, overwhelmed by his impotence to help Regan, both physically and spiritually, and still haunted by his guilt for not having been able to provide support for his mother, still convinced that the case tended more towards a self-suggestion than the unbearable conviction of genuine possession, with his faith shaken, decides, as a last resource, everything else having failed and all 'reason' forsaken, to ask for an exorcism. Therefore, it is 'despair' and not 'reason' that leads him to take this decision. It is guilt and not diagnosis that impels him to proceed with the request. It is so evident that he is not the exorcist that his superiors end up calling Father Merrin to perform the ritual, leaving Karras only as a support for the former. However, the latter is the one who cannot stand it, who dies and leaves Karras all by himself, showing him the truth that he has been so afraid to admit, the one which almost all existentialists would agree upon: that we are all left by ourselves, under the burden of loneliness. More important than deciding who the exorcist of the title is, is to open the interpretation of the text by acknowledging that this is a narrative concerned not with the 'naturalist' struggle for life, but a story about the struggle for 'meaning', for 'existence'. In order to *save* this text from 'mediocrity', from being merely 'a proof that evil spirits exist', the presupposition to be assumed from now on is that it is actually a narrative that tries to show that the way to reach faith is not through 'reason' but through *despair*. That is why the 'logic' to be followed is the one suggested by Kierkegaard, which says that faith is despair. *The Exorcist* (1971) is more an epic journey toward faith than the descriptive facticity of a possession. Thus, the first and most basic assertion to be made by this interpretation is that *The Exorcist* (1971), unlike its cinematic interpretation *The Exorcist* (1973), is not the story of a teenager possessed by the devil, but of a man who actually depicts our most basic human condition, that is, our fallibility. Perhaps, in allusion to Barbara Creed (2005), it is not so much the misreading of the 'feminine' but the misguiding of the 'camera' toward Linda Blair (Regan) that causes us to forget all about Jason Miller (Father Karras).

The novel starts with three epigraphs: one from the Bible, more precisely Luke 8:27-30, which describes one of Jesus' exorcisms in the New Testament; the second is a FBI wire trap of the Cosanostra, the famous American Mafia; and the third is a passage from Thomas Dooley, the humanist physician who worked in refugee-camps in Vietnam in the 50's, and who later would be expelled for being a homosexual (SHILTS, 1994). I do not disagree with Frans Ilkka Mäyrä (1999) when he says that "*The Exorcist* can be read as a relentless exploration of evil, and as an argument advocating religious interpretation of it: evil as a supernatural, malevolent power that is actively operating in our world." (p.143) Mäyrä is right as well by noticing the temporal connection among these epigraphs and the dialectical relation that they engender when he observes that,

The overall effect of this opening to the novel is twofold: it establishes the religious position and brings the dilemma of evil into a contemporary and realistic context. On the other hand, the gesture works also in the other direction: contemporary horrors are also made mythical and alien. The criminals and Communists are grouped with Nazis to evoke the mythical figure of the opponent, the demonised Other of Christianity. (ibidem, p.144)

By giving emphasis to the 'materiality', or quasi-materiality of evil, that is, by interpreting these epigraphs as a kind of *proof* that evil exists, by taking them as manifestations of it, what is missed is the 'temporality' of evil, that is, whether it is prior to mankind or was started by it. What is at stake with these epigraphs is not so much 'substantial' evil, but the problem of original sin. Despite Mäyrä's interpretation that "its starting point, the existence and influence of non-human evil, was dismissed as intellectually un-acceptable, and [therefore] critics refused to discuss the film on its own terms" (ibidem, p.146), which can be characterized as an *anti-Gnostic* perspective, what seems to have been missed is what Ricoeur observes about the problem of what he calls the "pseudo-concept" of "original sin", by noticing that, in Augustinian tradition, "evil is not something that exists, [it] has no being, no nature, because it comes from us, because it is the work of freedom." (CI,

p.272) Thus, instead of traditionally interpreting the novel as a narrative that employs a concept of evil which presupposes it as a ‘substance’ and a complete ‘exteriority’, what it actually suggests is the indefinite entanglement of evil within and outside of man, already there and commenced by him. In this sense, the novel is permeated, from beginning to end, by the myth of Adam’s Fall. As Ricoeur interprets it, the story of the Fall represents “an affirmation that man is, if not absolute origin, at least the point where evil emerges on the world.” (CI, p.273) That is why the opening of the novel in the distant excavations in Iraq is so symbolically meaningful. In addition, what connects the three epigraphs is not so much the idea that evil is ‘exterior’, ‘material’, but that it is at the same time prior to and commenced by man.

Before going on with this interpretation, it is relevant to recur once more to Ricoeur’s philosophical reflections about *meaning*. In his text *The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation* (1981), he says that,

If we can no longer define hermeneutics in terms of the search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed *behind* the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted? I shall say: to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text. (HHS, p.141)

In this sense, this is what allows Ricoeur to say in *What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding*, when referring to reading as “the recovery of meaning”, that,

The intended meaning of the text is not essentially the presumed intention of the author, the lived experience of the writer, but rather what the text means for whoever complies with its injunction. The text seeks to place us in its meaning, that is, in the same direction. (HHS, p.161)

For him, “to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text” (HHS, p.162). Thus, I follow, in this interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971), Ricoeur’s remark that “what the interpreter says is a re-saying which reactivates what is said by the text.” (HHS,

p.164) Therefore, the perspective which I call “the narcissism of the reader” is brought from the definition Ricoeur gives in his essay *Appropriation*, that is, “to find only oneself in a text, to impose and rediscover oneself” (HHS, p.190) In relation to this, he ponders:

Do we not place the meaning of the text under the domination of the subject who interprets? This objection can be dismissed by observing that what is ‘made our own’ is not something mental, not the intention of another subject, nor some design supposedly hidden behind the text; rather, it is the projection of a world, the proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references. (HHS, p.192)

It might seem incoherent on my part, then, to include and start an interpretation with an observation made by its author, that is, by taking *The Exorcist* (1971) as a novel concerned with the “problem of evil”. However, this incoherence can be easily removed if Blatty is turned into just another interpreter of his own text. In order to take the author’s comments as a point to start from, and, by comparison, noticing that they are shared by a reading community, then all that the author has to say about his work, as well as any interpreter, is only another text which will start a dialectical relation in order to further supplement its *narrative identity*, turning the author into one point among others to start from. Even though it may be a long leap, Ricoeur’s question becomes even more meaningful under this new context, when he asks: “should not the equivocalness of the author’s position be preserved rather than dissipated?” (OA, p.162) Thus, the world of the text is one in which I participate, but which I do not possess. In this sense, it is remarkable when Ricoeur says that “appropriation ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of [...], it implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic *ego*.” (HHS, p.192) By the mere title and by the brief epigraph of *The Exorcist* (1971), I am already able to re-construct it as something autonomous from the author as well as from me – autonomous, but not independent.



The narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) opens with a prologue entitled “Northern Iraq”. I have already mentioned in the last section how it has been the subject of many controversies and disputes over how it would work as a general negative aspect for the text. I have also mentioned how it has been misread under a geopolitical perspective, depriving it from its theological bias. However, there are still more relevant things to be said about it. Briefly, it describes Father Merrin’s finding of the statue of the Assyrian demon Pazuzu. What has been normally associated with this image is the Gnostic antagonism of Good versus Evil. However, what seems to have been missed is what Szumskyj (2008) noticed in his essay, that is, the ambiguous character of Pazuzu. According to him, it “represents the author’s concern of supernatural forces not from God, but of an ancient time and culture that threatened the spiritual ancestry of Christianity and represent a threat towards what Blatty believes to be the one, true and only cosmic truth: Catholicism.” (AE, p.183) However, if we depart from theodicy towards existentialism, what is gained is the hybrid character of this mythological entity. As the curator of antiquities of Mosul says to Merrin, it is “evil against evil” (*The Exorcist*, p.6). According to Heeßel (2006, p.1), Pazuzu is a “hybrid Mesopotamian demon”, and “represents a ferocious wind that brings destruction to cultivated land, cattle and humans.” Louvre’s website describes it as “one of the demon-gods of the underworld, although he was sometimes invoked to beneficial ends.” In addition, the museum also informs that Pazuzu, “a demon from the hellish underworld, had the power of repelling other demons”. (Ibid) One possible reading about the presence of this mythological figure in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is that it merely emphasizes the Gnostic aspect of conflict between two antagonistic forces in the universe. But, if we take an existentialist interpretation of evil, for example, such as when Ricoeur says in the introduction to *Fallible Man* (1986a) that “even if evil came to man from another source which contaminates him, this other source would still be accessible to us only through its relation to us, only through the state of

temptation, aberration, or blindness whereby we would be affected” (FM, p.xlvi), it is possible to operate this departure from Gnosticism. In addition, Ricoeur also observes that “evil comes into the world insofar as man posits it, but man posits it only because he yields to the siege of the adversary.” (FM, p.xlix) In his interpretation, freedom is “the author of evil without being the radical source of it.” (FM, p.xlviii) Thus, even though Blatty and many of his interpreters have assumed a Gnostic perspective, the figure of Pazuzu is what makes possible the collapse of the very interpretation that it engenders. In this sense, Pazuzu does not represent exclusively evil. What this figure actually entails is actually the reciprocity and complementarity between good and evil.

However, the general tone of this opening seems much more concerned in setting the atmosphere of ‘premonition’. There are some interesting passages that deserve comment. The first, which describes Merrin’s encounter with the Kurd who was serving him tea, says: “Once he could not have loved this man.” (*The Exorcist*, p.4)<sup>132</sup>; the second, “He had never found it difficult to love this man.” (TE, p.7) What makes them distinct is not only the shift in position in ‘love’, between the particularity of ‘love’ and its ‘transcendence’; nor even the fact that the first is directed to a very humble Kurd with glaucoma, and the second refers to his curator friend in Mosul, but the fact that the first is preceded by the following paragraph:

The man in khaki shook his head, staring down at the laceless, crusted shoes caked thick with debris of the pain of living. The stuff of the cosmos, he softly reflected: matter; yet somehow finally spirit. Spirit and the shoes were to him but aspects of a stuff more fundamental, a stuff that was primal and totally other. (ibidem, p.4)

The second comes after the following paragraph: “The man in khaki fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chick-pea nestled in a corner of the Arab’s mouth; yet his eyes were distant. ‘Home’, he repeated. The word had the sound of an ending.” (TE, p.7) The relation among ‘love’, ‘choice’, ‘freedom’, and ‘evil’ is what will be important to the shift in the narrative

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<sup>132</sup> From now on to be referred to as TE.

from ‘the problem of evil’ to ‘the question of faith’. In addition to the last passage, when “the man in khaki” heads to his last visit of the ruins, the wooden plank that bridged a muddy stream “creaks” under his weight. Finally, there is a description of a sunset as the coming into darkness, and the “icy conviction that [the priest] soon would face an ancient enemy.” (TE, p.8) What it all entails, apparently contrary to the question of good versus evil, of spirit versus matter, is much more an issue of faith rather than evil. It may sound strange to say this in face of the present materiality of the narrative of the novel. However, what is normally forgotten, but is materially present in the narrative, is that this text *belongs* to the Jesuit ideology. During the encounter with the Kurd, when the priest takes out his wallet to pay for his tea, he finds a plastic calendar card with the following inscription on the back: “what we give to the poor is what we take with us when we die.” (TE, p.4-5)

In order to approach the Jesuit ideology, I selected a criticism made by Reverend James Wood in his dictionary, but which I think will be relevant for the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971):

Jesuitism, popularly regarded as an attempt to achieve holy ends by unholy means, but really and radically the apotheosis of falsehood and unreality to the dethronement of faith in the true, the genuine and the real, a deliberate shutting of the eyes to the truth, a belief in a lie in the name of God, a belief in symbols and formulas as in themselves sacred, salutary, and divine, fiction superseding fact, and fancy faith in God or the divine reality of things, the embodiment of the genius of cant persuading itself to believe that that which is not is, while atheism, on the other hand, tries to persuade itself to believe that that which is is not. (WOOD, 2004, p.919)

In this passage, what becomes relevant for the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is the part which says: “to achieve holy ends by unholy means”. This is actually the narrative strategy used by Blatty to make a theological question: how can evil be understood as good? How can one understand evil if one takes God as omnipotent and good? This is basically the question which permeates the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971).

Despite Wood's very 'emblematic' description, The Society of Jesus (SJ), or simply Jesuits, is a religious order founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola in the Sixteenth Century. Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits form an interesting and controversial part of the history of Christianity. What Teilhard de Chardin represents for the character of Merrin in *The Exorcist* (1971), Ignatius Loyola may represent for the character of Karras. According to Pollen (1912), Loyola began his self-reformation "prepossessed with the idea of the imitation of Christ." He is also known for his *Spiritual Exercises* (1522-1524), a set of meditations, prayers and mental exercises destined for inward reformation, something he sought both for individuals and for the whole institution of Catholicism of his days. With these two basic ideas, Karras embodies the symbolic images of 'self-sacrifice' and 'seclusion'. I am not claiming that Loyola inspired Blatty to build the character of Karras, but these characteristics are decisive for the configuration of Karras as a model for *fallibility*, as a kind of 'mélange' between Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" and "the Knight of Infinite Resignation". In a certain way, in very broad and general terms, what I am attempting to demonstrate here is that categories like 'horror' and 'theodicy' are more alien to what the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) entails than concepts like 'fallibility' and 'angst'. Thus, The Society of Jesus and Ignatius Loyola are more representative of Blatty's novel than the traditional associations it has with Gnosticism. There is no doubt that this shift is the result of its cinematic adaptation. However, this perspective is not to be translated into the binary opposition between novel = right vs. movie = wrong, novel = good vs. movie = bad, novel = altruistic vs. movie = mercenary. Later on I will return to the two crucial moments that will be considered symptomatic and which mark a broad cleft between the novel and the movie.

For the moment, this interpretation will follow the plot of the narrative in order to make explicit the existentialist motifs spread throughout the text. Between the prologue and the epilogue, the body of the novel is divided into four parts. The first one is called "The

Beginning”. This first part, in its turn, is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is clearly divided into seven ‘scenes’, or rather, organized around seven different steps in the narration. This first chapter introduces the characters of Chris MacNeil, a famous Hollywood actress who is in Georgetown D.C. in order to complete the final shots of her last movie; Regan MacNeil, her daughter, a teenager without any apparent problem; Willie and Karl, two elderly foreign servants; Burke Dennings, the foul-mouthed British director; and a priest, up to then unnamed. The ‘scene’ covers an apparently ‘common’ morning, ironically April 1<sup>st</sup>, and one day on the film set. However, what this chapter presents is the odd happenings that take place that morning, which consist of strange noises heard by Chris MacNeil. She first assumes they are produced by her daughter, but noticing she is still sleeping she concludes it must be rats. The opening sentence is decisive for the rest of the story: “Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on blind men’s eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed.” (TE, p.11) What it entails for the reader is a sort of warning: expect from this narrative not the ‘natural’, but the ‘unnatural’, or rather, ‘supernatural’.

In any case, this first section also has other relevant aspects for the rest of the narrative. One of them is the blurring of the division line between ‘reality’ and ‘imagination’, ‘dream’ and ‘awareness’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘unconsciousness’. The strange sounds and the fact that Regan’s room is very cold despite the radiator is associated by Chris to “tricks” of the mind. Indirectly, it also suggests a parallel question which will follow the whole story: is ‘reason’ itself not a ‘trick’? In this situation, Chris reflects: “A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating pipes or plumbing?” (TE, p.13) Later on she adds: “[...] and perhaps her mind, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rattlings.” (Ibid) Besides, Chris remembers her strange experience of apparently “seeing” a man levitating in Bhutan while meditating. From this moment on, there are two different ways of reading the story: on the one hand, one which assumes unquestioningly that the girl is really possessed,

consequently generating a feeling of indignation and discomfort in relation to the characters who cannot 'see the obvious'; on the other hand, the narrative is assumed in suspense in relation to the conclusion for possession as the most correct diagnosis of what is happening to Regan, thus keeping unclear the line which divides mental illness from spiritual possession. Even though Blatty made the effort to bring as much verisimilitude to the narrative, the narrative seems much more inclined to the second line of reading mentioned above. Clearly, the purpose of the narrative is not so much in convincing the reader that what is happening to Regan is actually possession; on the contrary, the strategy seems much more in favor of a reading which maintains this separation between mental illness and possession unclear.

Another important detail from this beginning is Chris's dream, which is determinant for the setting of mood in the direction of an existentialist perspective. In it she dreams about death. This passage is described as follows: "death as if death were still never yet heard of while something was ringing, she, gasping, dissolving, slipping off into void" (TE, p.15). What is remarkable is that before she 'really' wakes up, the *facticity* of the phone ringing is mingled with her dream state, obviously reinforcing the ineffable 'border' between 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness'. The narrator concludes this scene this way: "A dream? More like thought in the half life of waking. That terrible clarity. Gleam of the skull. Non-being. Irreversible." (Ibid) Thus, the narrative does not aim at blurring the line only between mental illness and possession, but also between consciousness and unconsciousness, dreaming and the state of being awake, between 'reason' and 'belief'. Much more than dividing them, the narrative is led in the direction of confusing them.

In one of the 'scenes' of the story, when Chris goes down to the kitchen, she finds a flower on the table, an action which is often made by Regan. Despite the obvious characterization of Regan as a very kind and lovely child, this 'scene' triggers in Chris's mind a memory that she almost named her "Goneril". Even though this may sound funny, the

implications it has in the story are much different from that. It explicitly relates to the latter happenings which will ‘dissolve’ Regan’s personality. Another important detail that escapes most commentaries on this character is that these names, Regan and Goneril, come from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*<sup>133</sup>. The former, a traditional Irish name, which may mean “the King’s child”, as well as “impulsive, furious”<sup>134</sup>, is the second daughter of King Lear, who, along with Goneril, the first daughter, become the ones who proclaim their love for their father only for the inheritance of his kingdom, in opposition to Cordelia, the youngest, who is disinherited. This image of ‘apparently good’ from the outside may plausibly be interpreted as the deceiving aspect of ‘evil’ hiding behind appearances. Moreover, this may also denote that ‘evil’, coming from the family, from the ‘inside’, from what is ‘closest’, refers back to what has already been mentioned, that evil is more ‘internal’ and ‘nearer’ than ‘outside’, in opposition to the Gnostic perspective of an opposing and exterior/independent ‘thing’. More important than assuming an externality and materiality of ‘evil’, what this image entails for the narrative is the fact that ‘evil’ can spring from what was apparently taken as ‘good’, ‘innocent’, or deprived of ‘evil’. What it engenders is actually the idea that ‘evil’ is as omnipresent as ‘goodness’, or rather, that both cannot be found in pure and separate states, but that they are closer to each other exactly because they are complementary and reciprocal.

However, there is still a much different perspective to be taken from this part. *The Exorcist* (1971), seen as a whole, along with all of Blatty’s texts, may, in a certain way, be analogically read as a *fictional imaginative variation* of the dialectics involved in the concept of “narrative identity” proposed by Ricoeur (1994). In this sense, character, which, according to Ricoeur, is normally associated with that which ‘lingers’ in us, or ‘remains’, is not so much what composes our identity, but that which ‘changes’, which ‘contradicts’ it. Identity, thus, is much more like a drama than an essence. Regan is not the only one who has her personality

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<sup>133</sup> All of Blatty’s texts are filled with references to Shakespeare. Besides, he has a title dedicated exclusively to Shakespeare: *I Billy Shakespeare* (1965).

<sup>134</sup> The Internet Surname Database; Baby Names of Ireland.

‘split’, but all the other characters as well. Chris is an actress who wishes to be a director but is prevented because this *possibility* conflicts with her *responsibility* as a mother. Karras is a priest who is lost somewhere between ‘reason’ and ‘faith’. Merrin is a kind of amalgamation of both. Sharon, the secretary, may be perfectly represented as a person who has many religions and essentially none. All of them are actually ‘prototypes’, ‘stereotypes’, in the general acceptance of these words, of the contemporary constituency of identities as ‘fragmentary’, ‘contradictory’, that is, a ‘drama’. Therefore, the actual battle may be allegorically a clash of forces which ends up being more ‘internal’, more ‘introspective’. In this sense, it is quite significant when Ricoeur says that “I read my character and designate it only through allusion, in the feeling of otherness that makes me different from all others.” (FM, p.61) More than a split between the self and a totally different other, what the narrative and its characters actually develop is not the fracture between them, but the one within the own self. Whence comes ‘evil’ will always be a mystery; what matters in the narrative is precisely the fact that ‘evil’ passes inevitably through us.

The second ‘scene’ of this first chapter is a very brief passage about Chris’s return home that day. The images of “about to return” and “hierophany”, analogically taken from Mircea Eliade (ROSS, 2003), in the sense of their Greek origin as a junction of the terms “ἱερός” (meaning “sacred” or “holy”<sup>135</sup>) and “φάινειν” (meaning “to reveal” or “to bring to light”) (WORDREFERENCE), coalesce and replicate the function of “the wind” in the Prologue of *The Exorcist* (1971). Thus, the world becomes, in these images produced by the narrative, a world ‘full’ of revelations of the sacred, as diaphanous as those of evil. There is a relevant comment made by Blatty, again in his letter to Jaffe, where he says that “the Red Sea’s parting and the raising of Lazarus are not valuable entries to religious belief. The trick to faith lies not in magic but in the *will of the individual*.” (BLATTY, 1974, p.9) In opposition

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<sup>135</sup> WordReference. Available at [www.wordreference.com](http://www.wordreference.com)



to the Gnostic perspective in which 'evil' would be something exterior, material and consequently out of our control, what Blatty's narrative provides is precisely the contrary; what it entails is actually our responsibility in face of our freedom to choose, and that even by choosing something good we may achieve evil ends, but more emphatically the fact that we may accomplish something good by doing something evil. This reflection is important because what seems to be at issue in the narrative is not so much Regan's possession but Karras's suicide in the end of the story. In this sense, 'evil', besides being out of our conscious control, is precisely constituted by our freedom to choose.

However, before hurrying to the end of the story, there is still the whole course of the narrative. Following its plot, there is a 'scene' in this first chapter which takes place at the kitchen of Chris's temporary house. The first and most immediate aspect to be highlighted is the sequence of odd happenings that occur in the story. First, Regan's dress disappears mysteriously. Secondly, Regan starts having frequent failures in her favorite subject, Math. Thus, because readers at the outset are put in a position of expectation, everything which initially looks 'normal', 'natural' or 'plainly explainable' ends up being constructed as unexplainable. The astonishing fact is that there is nothing 'strange' in these events, except that, from the start, the reader is set to expect the opposite. This is the most obvious of all the strategies in the narrative, referring back once again to the idea of the 'blurring line' between 'appearance' and 'reality'. However, what is most significant, theologically speaking, is Chris's remark about Sharon's involvement with meditation: "You really think that kind of stuff is going to do you any good?" (TE, p.29). Strikingly, this means exactly and explicitly what commentators like Szumskyj (2008) and Joshi (2001), regardless of their favorable and unfavorable reaction to it, respectively, have already noticed, that is, that for Blatty the only true religion is Catholicism. On the other hand, if we are to understand the text as autonomous from its 'author', as proposed by Ricoeur (1976), there seems to be no problem in assuming

that what this passage alludes to is not exclusivity to Catholicism, but exclusion of religiosity, or religiousness – in antagonism with religion, which would denote one specific dogma. In any case, this is exactly what will later contribute to Karras's hypothesis of "self-suggestive possession" for Regan's case. Once more, what the novel builds up is actually an environment of doubt for the protagonist as well as for the reader. In this line of thought, what the narrative keeps building is not confirmation of possession, but its contestation. This is an interesting paradox applied by the narrator: by planting reason it plants doubt. The reversal in order, positing faith on the side of 'certainty' and reason on the side of 'doubt' is actually the strategy proposed from the outset and which is to be the guiding thread throughout the story, that is, that faith and reason are much more correlated and paradoxical than independent and antagonistic. One last observation about this part of the novel is that when Chris goes to Regan's room to look for the missing dress, the girl mentions the noises to her mother, who says they are only "squirrels". What is not clear here is whether Chris had heard the noises by this time or not.

The next 'scene' is a brief narrative of Regan and Chris's dinner out. The only relevant note to be made about it is the passage where the mother observes her daughter's physical aspect. "The child was slender as a fleeting hope." (TE, p.30) It seems evident that an extreme appetite in face of a slender appearance may probably mean some kind of dysfunction in the girl's organism, which would be just another piece of 'evidence' to build up the almost undeniable diagnosis of 'mental illness' that will torment Karras later in the story. However, what is not observed by any interpretation of the novel, and which is possible to recognize through the lenses of Kierkegaard and Ricoeur, is the depiction of the girl as a "fleeting hope". Because this novel is mainly concerned with the development of the character of Father Karras, this passage is actually what reinforces once more the idea of the function of 'possession' in the narrative. It alludes to what Kierkegaard refers to as the

“sickness unto death”, that is, not being able to die, making death, in this sense, a last hope for faith. (SUD, p.151). It is interesting to notice that Kierkegaard also makes hope and madness analogous, when he reflects about the story of Abraham<sup>136</sup>. (FT, p.31) Therefore, in the novel, what brings Karras and Chris closer to faith is precisely death and despair. Regan is the “fleeting hope” that Karras will need to ‘recover’ his faith.

Thus, the rest of the first chapter is developed in the sense of providing the ‘symptoms’ which will complicate Karras’s final ‘diagnosis’. However, I still want to present an interpretation of a few more details. First, on the very same day, Chris is reading the script of the film she was invited to direct. It is a film with three different segments, each assigned to a different director. The ‘existentialist’ detail is that her segment is titled “Hope”<sup>137</sup>. (TE, p.33) It is interesting that Chris is asked to *direct* exactly that which she most lacks; in this story, it is not so much the believer who takes the unbeliever to faith, but precisely the opposite. It is Chris who will, in a way, lead Karras to recognize that the only sign from God which he can expect is exactly his own *will to believe*.

The second detail that still calls my attention is a visit that Dennings makes to Chris that very night. First, he is coming from a meeting with priests where he was obliged to drink only tea. This is a kind of everlasting mark which seems impossible to remove from anything written by Blatty. Any further inspection will prove *The Exorcist* (1971) to be full of these ‘wry’ situations, showing that Blatty never completely forgets he is a comedy writer. However, what is important in this ‘scene’ is actually Chris’s impulse to talk about “death”. If we take Kierkegaard’s arguments, the subject may be interpreted as what the Danish philosopher opposes to “the sickness unto death”. According to Kierkegaard, there is a difference between these two elements. For him, “death is not sickness unto death”, not even “earthly and temporal suffering: want, sickness, wretchedness, affliction, adversities,

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<sup>136</sup> In his book, Kierkegaard starts his reflection from the story of Abraham, who takes his son to mount Moriah to sacrifice him, after God’s request.

<sup>137</sup> The other two are “Faith” and “Charity”.

torments, mental suffering, sorrow, grief.” (SUD, p.145) Kierkegaard posits death as a “last hope”, therefore, not making it the “last thing”, which, in a Christian perspective, would be “despair”. What he calls “the sickness unto death” is equated to what he develops in a complex play of inverted logics and designates by “despair”. According to him,

When death is the great danger, one hopes for life. But when one becomes acquainted with an even more dreadful danger, one hopes for death. So when the danger is so great that death has become one’s hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die. (SUD, p.151)

This is actually a prolegomena to what the protagonist of the story, Father Karras, will undergo. Dennings suggests that Chris look for priests for comfort, and that is exactly what she does later, though comfort is not what she finds. Paradoxically, it is Regan herself, that is, the character who encompasses the ‘absurd’, that *resolves* Karras’s “sickness unto death”, in the sense of relieving him of despair by actually leading him into despair. This topic will be brought into discussion again when the character of Karras finally assumes its marginal/central position in the narrative.

The final ‘scene’ of this initial chapter, Chris’s day off with Regan and their sightseeing, is only a confirmation of the theme of death as a ‘central’ concern for this part of the story. There, Regan inquires her mother about death. If we pay attention to what could be called a the ‘conversational organization’ of this subject, it is possible to observe that first Chris talks about death to herself in an earlier chapter, then she talks about it to someone else (Burke Dennings), so that finally there is a full circle when someone else (Regan) talks to her about it. Existentially speaking, death is not a subject that ‘springs’ from us or ‘comes’ to us. It is, in fact, what constitutes us, for, anthropologically speaking, death is what makes us human (MORIN, 1988). Then, Chris asks Regan who is talking to her about religion; Regan confesses it is Sharon. Interestingly, what the narrative seems to be indicating is that the ‘possession’ manifested in Regan is a kind of self-suggestive state. This first part closes with a ‘scene’ on the following morning when Chris is woken up by Regan getting into her bed,

saying that her own bed was “shaking”. Again, what the reader truly has up to here is a mere comment made by a girl. What I intentionally did not mention was that the previous day was Regan’s birthday, and by the end of this part, we are informed that her father did not call her. Though Chris tries to call him in Europe, she is informed that he is incommunicable because he is on a yacht. What the narrative explicitly explores is not precisely confirmation of the possession hypothesis, but the reinforcement of the possibility of mental illness. However, this is only the first chapter of the novel.

Chapter Two marks a sort of ‘formal’ presentation of the character of Father Damien Karras. He has been mentioned at the beginning of last part as the priest who laughs at Dennings’s obscenities. However, this is the segment in which he deserves a name and a history. First, the symbolic aspect of this “scene” is where it starts: at the subway. It is interesting to quote the whole initial paragraph:

He stood at the edge of the lonely subway platform, listening for the rumble of a train that would still the ache that was always with him. Like his pulse. Heard only in silence. He shifted his bag to the other hand and stared down the tunnel. Points of light. They stretched into dark like guides to hopelessness. (TE, pp.50)

“Edge” and “platform” are words that evoke Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* (1980), in which he uses the image of a man standing at the edge of a cliff with a feeling of dizziness as he reflects upon “freedom”. This “ache that was always with him” can be associated to “anxiety/dread/angst/anguish”, which is the central concept developed by Kierkegaard and characterized by him as “unfocused fear” (ibid). “Silence”, “light” and “hopelessness”, in its turn, bring to the forefront *The Book of Job*<sup>138</sup> and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1954). Before providing a little more reference to the Danish philosopher, it is important to refer to the way Karras is initially characterized: he is confronted with a drunk beggar, which is something almost unbearable to him, since “he could not bear to search for

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<sup>138</sup> Job is generally understood as the figure who represents the unjustifiable sufferer.

Christ again in stench and hollow eyes.” (TE, p.51) This is a parallel situation to what happened to Merrin, or rather, “the man in khaki” from the prologue. This description of Karras constitutes him as already fallen from the start: his smile after listening to Denning’s obscenities might be just another symptom of his situation as a sinner. However, now sin can be understood as it is proposed by Kierkegaard, that is, “despair is sin”. (SUD, p.208) For the latter, sin means “potentiated weakness”, “defiance”, which entails a “potentiation of despair”. (Ibid) It is remarkable how well Karras fits Kierkegaard’s reflections about sin when the latter says that sin is “before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself” (SUD, p.212). Thus, it seems much in consonance with Kierkegaard’s observation that “despair does not come from without but from within” (SUD, p.230). From this point on, Karras starts his journey towards his despair over sin, which is a different degree from the initial equation of sin equals despair. According to the Danish philosopher,

Sin itself is the struggle of despair; but then when strength is exhausted there must needs be a new potentiation, a new demonical introversion, and this is despair over one’s sin. This is a step in advance, an ascent in the demonical, but of course it means sinking deeper in sin... Nevertheless despair over sin is conscious of its own emptiness. (SUD, p.241)

Therefore, Karras represents not only characteristic human fallibility, but also the awareness of the self over this self, not only as a possibility of evil but already evil, of being in despair about his own despair.

This section is also marked by Karras’s encounter with his mother, a key figure not only in *The Exorcist* (1971) but also in Blatty’s entire bibliography. While heading to his mother’s apartment to visit her, the poverty of the place reminds him that this had always been the condition for him and for his mother. It comes to his mind that he was not exactly looking for “love” in God, but actually escaping from his burden, from responsibility. In a sort of self-confession, Karras starts admitting to himself that it was not vocation which led

him to become a priest, but fear. In the narrative it is described as follows: “[...] seeds of vocation. From these he had fled into love. Now the love had grown cold. In the night, he heard it whistling through the chambers of his heart like a lost, crying wind.” (TE, p.53) That is why he “opened the door as a tender wound”, because he knew he felt “guilty” (TE, p.52). In a *kierkegaardian* sense, his angst increased in parallel with his consciousness. All this once again leads us back to the problem of theodicy, or to Job’s situation, that of the unjustified sufferer. In a Kantian sense, Ricoeur observes that “evil is a ‘nothing of privation’ that implies real opposition, actual repugnance” (FM, p.142). Thus, the category of the “unjustified sufferer” is not merely a condition, but is a “feeling” as well. In this respect, Karras’s guilt is not only his situation, but his condition, if we take into consideration Ricoeur’s observation that “feeling is conflict and reveals man as primordial conflict. It shows that mediation or limitation is only intentional, aimed at in a thing or a task, and that for himself man suffers disunion.” (FM, p.141)

In this sense, it is not by chance that, in the next “scene”, Karras is shown requesting not only a transference to be closer to his mother, but also a release from his duty. According to Karras himself, this is caused by his situation of doubt. The “Job theme” is made explicit by the following passage:

More rooted in logic was the silence of God. In the world there was evil. And much of the evil resulted from doubt; from an honest confusion among men of good will. Would a reasonable God refuse to end it? Never reveal Himself? Not speak? (TE, p.54)

It is relevant that God’s silence to this request is placed in parallel to the decision of the head of the Maryland province to be silent about Karras’s former request. Because this is only the ‘opening’ for Karras in the story, what will actually be narrated throughout the rest of the story is not so much the ‘absurd’ itself, but the situation and the relation of those around it. Therefore, from now on, the guiding thread of this existential perspective is Ricoeur’s

observation that “man is no less destined to unlimited rationality, to totality, and beatitude than he is limited to a perspective, consigned to death, and riveted to desire.” (FM, p.6)

Chapter Three is a return to the situation of Chris and Regan. It opens with Chris looking for a doctor for her daughter. She calls Doctor Marc because he is the only one she trusts. With this detail, Chris is characterized as a skeptic not only towards religion, but even in relation to science. One thing that is made clear is that for Chris all odd behavior presented by Regan is associated to a psychical reason. While talking about the psychical problems, the doctor makes a relevant remark about the “readiness of the general public to recognize psychosomatic illness, while failing to recognize the reverse: that illness of the body was often the cause of seeming illness of the mind.” (TE, p.59) This remark apparently leads to interpreting the narrative as misled by an erroneous idea of split between mind and body, when what it engenders is exactly the opposite. It is not only the mingling of body and mind, consciousness and unconsciousness, freedom and infinitude, to a point of indetermination, but also the same precariousness between matter and soul. The rest of this chapter deals with the medical investigation of what is happening to Regan. Since Marc cannot help Chris personally, he suggests a neurologist, Samuel Klein, who will initially diagnose Regan with “hyperkinetic behavior disorder” and prescribes her “Ritalin”. According to Laufer et al (1957, p.463), hyperkinetic impulse disorder, also known as hyperkinetic conduct disorder or hyperkinetic behavior syndrome, is a very frequent disorder in children and “is characterized by hyperactivity; short attention span and poor powers of concentration; irritability; impulsiveness; variability; and poor school work.” As doctor Klein explains to Chris, Ritalin, a stimulant drug, is prescribed because Regan is undergoing a state of “depression”. He also refers to the obscenities spoken by Regan. Doctor Klein finishes with a relevant remark: “the best explanation is always the simplest one.” (TE, p.63) He says this because Chris is still very inclined to take Regan to a psychiatrist. Up to this point, possession is merely translated



as psychic disorder. It is important to comment on the importance of Oesterreich's work for Blatty's 'symptomatology' about possession. It is in fact also one of the books consulted by Karras while he is studying Regan's case.

The next 'scene' in the narrative is related to Chris and Regan's return home. The daughter asks her mother about what the doctor had said, but Chris merely says that she is suffering from nerves. Later, while talking to Sharon, Chris asks: "how do I answer without telling what I think is a great big lie?" (TE, p.64) Apparently or not, what this discussion about sincerity and veracity entails is not so much related to the "clinical" aspects, but a parallel about another "great big lie", that is, whether possession exists or not. Sharon enigmatically answers to Chris: "give her multiple choice." (Ibid) What is not explicitly tied to this discussion, but which could work as a hypothesis for interpretation, is that diagnosis, as well as symptoms, explanations, lies, and facts are nothing but a game, a play, in which we run from the great big truth, in other words, that there are no facts, only interpretations<sup>139</sup>. In this sense, it is remarkable to relate this reflection to Ricoeur's observation about the paradox of our dissimulating-dissimulated condition when he says that "the human condition is naturally dissimulating in regard to its proper significance." (FM, p.15) Thus, it could be inferred from this that we lie not because we know the truth; on the contrary, it is because we actually do not know the truth that we make up symptoms and diagnosis and options.

The last 'scene' in this third chapter concentrates on the preparations for the party to take place at Chris's home. The first thing that the narrative brings up is the 'failure' of Ritalin in Regan's treatment. This is also complemented by the odd smell of something "burnt" felt by the girl. There is a constant building towards the 'schizophrenia' hypothesis. It is relevant to notice that Chris lies to Regan that she also "smells" something. Another important detail is Chris's meeting with her accountant. This is the moment in which the

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<sup>139</sup> This is explicitly a reference to Nietzsche. This is also the epigraph for this dissertation.

narrative posits Chris's three major concerns: Regan's condition, the prospect of directing, and, the last and "most important" (TE, p.65), her financial situation. One can clearly see the relation between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' at work in the narrative, and plausibly an allusion of the negative weight given to the latter. This is also the moment in which the invitees to the party are mentioned. There is an emphasis given to Mary Jo Perrin and Ellen Cleary – the former, a seeress, the latter, a secretary who worked in Moscow. The other guests mentioned are a senator and his wife, Dennings and a young director, an astronaut, two Jesuits and two neighbors. One should notice the 'epistemological' arrangement of the invitees according the categories of 'aesthetics', 'scientific', 'religious', 'communal', and 'politics'. The 'unusual' concentration of so many 'different' and 'antagonistic' perspectives may reinforce the hypothesis that what the narrative entails is not so much a 'clash', in the sense of opposition, but a confrontation, bringing closer not only what is *similar*, but what is *different*. In relation to the psychic situation, and the general fragmentary constitution of all 'identities' in the narrative, it is possible to suggest that the distance is not so much among 'selves', but within the 'Self'. In this sense, Chris lies to her daughter not because she wants to deceive the little girl, but because she is in conflict with herself. The diversity of perspectives engendered by this multiplicity of 'truths' merely represents the fragmentary and *fallible* aspect that even secularism and skepticism entail.

However, the tone of 'premonition' is brought to the forefront once again. The chapter ends like a 'promise' when it says that "there was a strangeness in the house. Like settling stillness. Weighted dust." (TE, p.68) If we take the Gnostic turn, this is nothing more than the 'materiality' of evil that has still not been perceived. However, if we take the 'rhetoric' turn, what we have is only a textual device to create 'suspense', not in the sense of *wondering* about what probably is coming, but in the sense of *being anxious* about something to come. What the text unstoppably builds up is much more a desire for the 'probable'.

Nevertheless, considering the existentialist perspective, this ‘latent disaster’ may entail much more the ‘blindness’ which leads man into ‘despair’. ‘Unconsciousness of evil’ may also refer to humanity’s lack of awareness of its despairing and sinful situation, its anthropological foundation, that is, its fallibility. The pronoun ‘it’ applied here refers to the *strangeness* of the self while being aware of ‘itself’, which does not escape the issue of ‘gender’; but only aims at the paradoxical situation of the ‘disclosure’ of a self in the relation of the self. This does not imply a disclosure of a third self in the relation of the “I” self to the “me” self, but in what is proposed by Kierkegaard: escaping the negative unity of a third term, this self as relation is not a relation of a part to a relation, but, according to the Danish philosopher, “a relation that relates itself to its own self”. (SUD, p.146) Thus, “man” is not “the” relation, but a relation that relates itself to its own self. What it engenders is that the human self, being “a relation which relates itself to its own self, and in relating itself to its own self relates itself to another” (Ibid), is always constituted by an ‘Other’. ‘Mind’, ‘identity’, ‘spirit’, and ‘soul’ will always be in a situation of ‘despair’ exactly because they are constituted by a relation, that is, a *split* from the start. Thus, the “silence” described in the narrative is actually the ‘announcement’ of despair, that is, despair already manifested. Hence, despair becomes, in Kierkegaard’s reflection, a “disrelationship”. Therefore, “consciousness” is only “a qualitative difference of despair”. (SUD, p.162) If we follow the Gnostic line of thought, then this ‘otherness’ becomes ‘evil substantiated’. However, taking the existentialist hypothesis, this ‘otherness’ is nothing else than the very constituency of the ‘self’, that is, nothing ‘external’, but actually very ‘inner’.

Chapter Four is the ‘closure’ of this first part of the novel. Ironically, it is the end of the beginning. It is focused mainly on two decisive ‘scenes’ in the narrative: Regan’s urination in front of the party guests and her “paranormal” behavior. The first thing to notice is the ‘suggestive’ order of entrance of the invitees. It begins with the ‘mysticism’ of Mary Jo

Perrin and ends with the ‘religiousness’ of the priests. This section could itself provide material for a whole dissertation. That is why I will try to be as brief as possible about it. One of its symbolic aspects is what Chris overhears from Mary Jo and Wagner’s conversation – the latter a Jesuit priest. They are talking about a priest who was also a “medium”. Besides the witty and ironical ‘intellectual’ dispute between the priest and the seeress, a fact that adds a little ‘pinch’ of comedy to the narrative<sup>140</sup>, there is a sentence uttered by the Jesuit which becomes very ‘central’ to the story. This refers to Wagner’s answer to Chris when she asks him about a “levitation” which she might probably have witnessed in Bhutan. He says: “who knows what gravity is. Or matter, when it comes to that.” (TE, p.71) After this little suggestive bit of information, any characterization of the novel as ‘silly Gnosticism’ is not only inadequate but actually totally erroneous. What the narrative slightly seems to suggest is not so much the ‘materiality’ of evil, but actually the anthropological and existential human condition of being hopelessly in ‘doubt’, that is, in a ‘disrelation’, to apply a *kierkegaardian* term, or rather, that evil is much more a situation, a condition, than ‘matter’. As Ricoeur observes, “evil is not exactly *outside*, in an alien and seductive body, but *inside*, in a discordance of the self with the self.” (SE, p.341) In addition, during this conversation, Chris inquires about the church she had seen the other day while coming back home. This is also the moment when Chris and her invitees start talking about Black Mass. It is intriguing that a character as skeptical as Chris ends up becoming interested in the subject while someone as ‘tendentious’ to such subjects as Mary Jo ends up disgusted and serious about it. It is at this point that I suggest a shift in interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) that may completely change the following pages of the novel. Is it possible to inquire if not only Regan, but also her mother might have started to display ‘psychic dysfunctions’ due to the latter’s present situation, i.e. being under ‘stress’? If Regan’s behavioral disorder can be applied to her

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<sup>140</sup> Unfortunately, I have skipped many of these ‘pinches’ of comedy along the narrative in order to follow the ‘existentialist’ line of interpretation. However, it would be an interesting re-reading of *The Exorcist* (1971) under the guidance of comedy.

psychic condition and emotional situation, could it be possible to include her mother under the same diagnosis, something which, in its turn, would configure 'genuine' possession, later alleged as actually being a case of 'mass hysteria'? The purpose of these two questions is more to raise a problem than to solve it. There is no reason to decide the matter right now. What is relevant is that Joseph Dyer is introduced in the story at this point and that, at this point, he is merely the priest who knows about Black Mass.

It is also during this conversation that the name of Damien Karras is introduced. It is Chris who brings him into the subject by asking Wagner about the "sort-of-dark" priest she saw the other day. This is the moment in which it is revealed that his mother has died. What grieves the situation is that Wagner mentions she was found only days later, exactly because of the noise of the radio (which Karras had fixed during his visit to his mother). At this point we have three characters in an extremely stressful situation, probably suffering from 'genuine' cases of depression, and very prone to 'hallucinations'. Is it possible to sustain this interpretation throughout the rest of the story? That is a question that is never asked in interpretations of the novel. In fact, all of them start from the presumption that the 'possession' must be taken for granted, which is not the case. If we follow my proposal of what the text is 'really' suggesting to us, that is, the indeterminacy of the situation, then it is still possible to refute the interpretation of 'possession'. I bring this into discussion not because it is supposed to be a central question to the narrative. On the contrary, it is exactly because the narrative seems less concerned about the 'genuineness' of the possession than it is about the existential situation of all these characters that they 'apparently' remain 'normal', 'conscious', inside the sphere of 'reason'.

Chris's next intromission occurs in the conversation between Father Dyer and the astronaut. It is remarkable that Dyer is inquiring the astronaut about what "space" is, something which the latter cannot answer. A question seems to 'gravitate' around this scene:

how can we know that evil spirits do not exist if we are not sure about what matter is, especially if 'existence' is still a very obscure and fleeting concept? Instead of suggesting Blatty's interpretation that evil spirits do 'exist', an existential reading of this passage may infer that what is at issue at this point, and actually something which seems recurrent in the text, is the issue of doubt, the problem of faith, that is, Job's parable.

The party is disturbed by one of Denning's fits of fury. This actually serves as a break for Chris to go to the basement and check on how Regan is. She is found playing with the Ouija Board, which has been mentioned before on page 40. Chris's quick glance has reminded her of her own attempts to "expos[e] clues to her subconscious". (TE, p.40) This second time, she sees it as mere "diversion" for her *depressed* daughter. Chris decides to introduce Regan to the guests. Considering that the girl has already been undergoing a psychic disorder which is characterized by "social reclusion", what kind of effect would a house full of people who were, in the girl's problematic perspective, 'stealing' the attention of her mother from her have on a girl like Regan? However, what the narrative gives us as information is that "Regan was strangely well behaved, except for a moment with Mrs. Perrin when she would not speak nor accept her hand." (TE, p.77) Perhaps Regan was envious of Robert, Mrs. Perrin's son who accompanied her to the party; perhaps the medicine she was taking could not solve the negative results of her psychologically deteriorated environment. Once again, to decide for 'genuine possession' is a hasty step, admissible only for the distracted reader. After introducing her daughter, Chris takes her to bed. Once more my imagination flows: could Regan have felt reprimanded by this action? Could it have triggered what later would be seen as 'supernatural'? It is interesting that Chris apologizes to her guests by saying that Regan is "sick". (ibid) Digressing a bit, is it not remarkable that 'temporary insanity' is something easily admitted in the judicial realm? It may be argued that this possibility of interpretation may not be supported since it is remarked by the narrator that

Mrs. Perrin stared at Regan with an “anxiety unexplained”. (ibid) Perhaps what she felt was much more the ‘gravity’ of Regan’s condition than actually something ‘metaphysical’; or perhaps she was someone already prone to this kind of explanation. It may also be argued that Regan did not even meet Robert. However, if we remember, Mrs. Perrin already knew Chris way before the party; so Regan might know him without introduction.

Despite all possible divagations, the narration still works on the hypothesis of possession through short passages that make symbolic connections, and which work not because they defy or negate the ‘mental illness’ hypothesis, but exactly because they do not provide as much information as the clinical ones. One of these passages is when Chris takes Regan to bed during the party and *feels* a cold wind, despite the heating working properly. The immediate connection to be made is that Pazuzu is the mythological figure associated to “wind”. Another parallel line of thought is that “evil” manifests itself sometimes in very subtle ways. However, as I proposed earlier in this dissertation, this is a perspective which leads the narrative to a Gnostic view of the world. But, if we take a line of thought that comes from, as I have proposed, references in existentialism, then evil stops being a Gnostic pole and can be taken as an anthropological constituency. As I said before, the narrative keeps everything ‘inside’ the scope of what is ‘normal’, ‘natural’, which is clearly the building up of tension, exactly because in literature we are never expecting what is ‘obvious’, ‘regular’, ‘common’. After leaving her daughter in her bedroom, Chris comes down to the living room where Dyer is playing the piano. However, instead of asking for a song, she asks him about Black Mass. The narrative also shows Mrs. Perrin, the seeress, as “thoughtful”, “edgy”, and “disturbed”. (TE, p.80) Dyer, in his turn, ends up mentioning Karras’s name as the expert on the subject. As it is known through the story, Karras is actually a psychiatrist, not a demonologist. In any case, everyone is shown as disinterested and disgusted by the subject, except Chris. For a very skeptic character who may be a ‘stereotype’ of atheism, the situation

adds a touch of strangeness to accepted social categories. In this sense, it could be possible, at least until this moment, to suppose that Chris is 'sick' as well, and that Regan is not the only one undergoing a *nervous breakdown*. It is exactly because there is so much of the 'psychological thriller' permeated throughout *The Exorcist* (1971), along with a strong theological bias, that the category of 'horror' literature becomes quite strange. Perhaps "psychological horror" would better apply to the case. However, what I am claiming here is not so much that *The Exorcist* (1971) is not 'horror', but that the idea of 'existentialism' is a perspective which can more positively 'read' Blatty's novel both out of the shadows of its cinematic adaptation and out of the closure that the label 'horror' has imposed on this book. The story is not so greatly centered in possession, but, as was well observed by its own author, and a decisive part in the story, it centers on the reactions of those in a situation which explores what is most existentialist in them, that is, anxiety, frustration, limitation, despair, loneliness, hopelessness, doubt, confusion, and finally the absurd, which Camus exemplarily used as a major theme for his stories. However, Camus is still much more related to a sort of existentialism developed by Sartre. This means that he approached similar themes, but not through a similar perspective, since the sort of existentialism proposed by Sartre is quite different from the one proposed by Gabriel Marcel and Paul Ricoeur.

In any case, it is during Chris's intromission in the musical moment of the party, by introducing an unfavorable subject, that the story presents another disturbance. This is the part in which Regan shows up in the middle of the living-room urinating "gushingly" and saying to the astronaut: "you are going to die up there". (TE, p.83) It is relevant at this point to make some remarks about the definition of 'paranormal'. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), it designates happenings "beyond the range of normal experience or scientific explanation." I believe I do not need to digress or make any further reference to say that 'normalcy' is one of the leading categories being reviewed by



post-modern thought<sup>141</sup>. However, I would like to relate Chris's intrusions, along with the 'precarious' situation in which Regan is found, to the idea of "broken world", which is a recurrent theme in Gabriel Marcel's philosophy. According to Treanor (2009),

The characterization of the world as broken does not necessarily imply that there was a time when the world was intact. It would be more correct to emphasize that the world we live in is essentially broken, broken in essence, in addition to having been further fractured by events in history.

In this sense, the 'paranormal' is not so much that which is *outside* 'society' or 'reason', but actually that which constitutes it. Thus, characters like Chris, Karras and Regan show no impediment of being closely related to Marcel's concepts of "broken world" and "functional person". In the same way, the paranormal could be exactly that which is most human in us, that is, that which would break us free from mindless, repetitive and monotonous conditions imposed by a kind of determinism engendered by high-tech scientificism, economic powerfulness, and finally culminating in exacerbated nihilism. We see at this point that exactly when Chris starts losing her 'skepticism' or her 'reason', is the moment when she starts becoming more 'human'.

One remarkable aspect of this moment in the story, symbolically speaking, is Chris's concern in instructing Karl to "see the rug before the stain became indelible" (TE, p.83), after all guests left the party. Once again it is important to recur to Ricoeur's *Symbolism of Evil* and bring some interesting insights to the novel. First of all, the image that the sentence extracted from the novel engenders is the one of "defilement". For Ricoeur, this is the starting point in his speculative course along the symbolism that evil entails. He mentions a passage from Raffaele Pettazzoni's *La Confession des Péchés* which says that defilement is "an act that evolves an evil, an impurity, a fluid, a mysterious and harmful something that acts dynamically – that is to say, magically" (PETTAZZONI, 1929-1935 apud RICOEUR, 1969,

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<sup>141</sup> For further reading: Michel Foucault's *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 2003); Georges Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

p.25). For Ricoeur, this is “a moment of consciousness that we have left behind”, but which is also symbolically rich and not *completely* left behind. (SE, p.26) It still belongs to a stage in which evil and misfortune are not discernible yet (SE, p.27), and it is something which has an indissoluble complicity with sexuality (SE, p.28). Thus, this ‘quasi-materiality’ of defilement engenders a sense of “infectious contact” which, in its turn, constitutes a kind of “consciousness of impurity” (SE, p.30). This “primitive dread” is what connects defilement to “vengeance”, settling their “invincible bond” (Ibid). With the reciprocity within the circle of “retribution”, “vengeance”, and “suffering”, defilement works as a first step into the “disentanglement” between misfortune and fault in the direction of an “ethical vision of the world”. Thus, the “dread of the impure” is what “deploys its anxieties” (SE, p.32). Therefore, from the “two archaic traits of defilement” proposed as “a ‘something’ that infects” and “a dread that anticipates the unleashing of the avenging wrath of the interdiction” (SE, p.33), what results, according to Ricoeur, is the “half-light of quasi-physical infection that points toward a quasi-moral unworthiness”, making the Greek word καθαρός, which, in Ricoeur’s perspective, is “the word that dominates the whole vocabulary of defilement” (SE, p.37), that which “expresses the ambiguity of purity, which oscillates between the physical and the ethical” (Ibid). Therefore, defilement, being an “enduring symbol of evil fault” (SE, p.41), engenders the idea that the “dread of the impure is like fear, but already it faces a threat which, beyond the threat of suffering and death, aims at the diminution of existence, a loss of the personal core of one’s being” (Ibid). In this sense, “consciousness, crushed by the interdict and by fear of the interdict, opens itself to others and to itself; not only does it begin to communicate but it discovers the unlimited perspective of self-interrogation” – in this sense, according to Ricoeur, “suspicion is born” (Ibid). Thus, the character of Chris works like a counter-pole in relation to Karras, and both *posit* Regan as the ‘intermediary’ vector oscillating between ‘reason’ and ‘faith’, ‘skepticism’ and ‘belief’. It is because the narrative

of *The Exorcist* (1971) is so full of symbols involving the images of ‘infection’, and because it gravitates so closely to the realm of religious symbols that this parallel reflection along with Ricoeur makes Blatty’s text ‘substantial’. According to the former, “stain” is the first “schema” of evil (SE, p.46).

However, before leaving, Father Dyer, in his conversation with Chris about Regan, makes a comment on the mother’s certainty about the “hyperkinetic” explanation merely saying that “I’ve heard sleepwalking’s common at puberty, except that [...]” and completes by saying: “guess you’d better ask your doctor.” (TE, p.84) The last guest to leave is Mrs. Perrin. Chris asks her opinion about the Ouija Board and Mrs. Perrin tells her that despite the blurred line between the natural and the supernatural, there still remains a distinction between this relation and the “occult”. Mrs. Perrin also comments that “there are lunatic asylums all over the world filled with people who dabbled in the occult.” (TE, p.86) There is a passage from Blatty’s *William Peter Blatty: from novel to film* (1974) which makes reference to this subject:

Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit philosopher-paleontologist, once proposed that what we think of as matter and spirit are but differing aspects of something else, some third and fundamental reality in which matter and spirit commune. And indeed, the views of modern physicists on the ultimate nature of matter seemed to be leaning toward support of Chardin, seemed increasingly to be edging toward something like mysticism, a paradoxical consequence of the steadily deeper probings into the Chinese box of the atom. Consider the neutrino. It can speed through a planetary thickness in a twinkling, yet has no mass and no magnetic or electrical charge. Real, yet lacking fundamental properties of matter, the neutrino is a ghost. (p.13)

If we recall Kierkegaard, the “Self”, just like “matter”, “actually does not exist” (SUD, p.163). In the same sense, the Danish philosopher observes that “the fantastical is that which so carries a man out into the infinite that it merely carries him away from himself and therewith prevents him from returning to himself.” (SUD, p.164) In a *Kierkegaardian* sense, Chris is only shifting from the “despair of being conscious of being oneself” into “the despair

of not being oneself'. Chris is *losing substance, ground, all that matters*. Adorned with this vocabulary, *The Exorcist* (1971) can be seriously taken less as an invitation to the 'materiality of evil' and more like a story about the 'fragmentation of the self', of 'consciousness', of 'reason'.

Thus, after Mrs. Perrin tells Chris about a strange case that took place in Bavaria, which could clearly be related to a case of mass hysteria, the skeptical actress is framed in the following paragraph: "'Oh, boy!' breathed Chris as she thought of Captain Howdy. He had now assumed a menacing coloration. Mental illness. Was that it? Something. 'I *knew* I should take her to see a psychiatrist!'" (TE, p.87). Chris also thinks about taking the Ouija board away from Regan, but she is prevented by her memory of when Howard, Regan's father, tried to do the same with the girl's baby bottle. Therefore, she decides to wait and see. Since this interpretation is guided by a shift from the 'logic and materiality of evil' towards 'the absurd and inconsistency of reason', it cannot be difficult to infer from these passages that the interpretation of this narrative is a perpendicular way of saying that 'knowing' always comes *too late, or almost too late*. It is not difficult, either, to relate this to the notion of 'consciousness' as a delayed phenomenon<sup>142</sup>.

It is only on page 90 that 'strange' things start to happen. Chris is awoken in the middle of the night with Regan screaming. When she comes to her room, the narrative describes the situation in the following terms: "Regan lay taut on her back, face stained with tears and contorted with terror as she gripped at the sides of her narrow bed" (TE, p.90); which is complemented by the following: "the mattress of the bed was quivering violently back and forth." If we go back to the subject of paranormality, according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2009), the word means "not scientifically explainable". However, if we consider the prefix "para" in its Greek origin, with its meanings of "alongside, beyond,

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<sup>142</sup> This perspective is brought from António Damásio's *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.

altered, contrary" and "beside, near, from, against, contrary to", along with its cognate in Sanskrit meaning "beyond", and its Latin origin as "before, for, in favor of", together with its Hittite form meaning "on, forth" (HARPER, 2009), all we can say about paranormality is that it is a hybrid, ambiguous and diffuse term, which actually may lead us to infer that what we have is not a 'scientific' problem, but rather a 'linguistic' one<sup>143</sup>. What is developed in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is not so much the 'scientific proof' that 'spirituality' is acceptable, but actually something very different, that is, the existential condition of a subject limited by only one perspective – that of 'reason'. Thus, even if this initial part of the story is called "The Beginning" only because it is dedicated to the first manifestations of 'paranormal' activities, what this 'beginning' may also entail, in an existentialist perspective, is that 'reason', 'conscience', 'awareness', 'science', etc., are only a first moment, and that to limit ourselves to this scope is misleading. Thus, the act of translating the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) into *an invitation to mysticism* may also entail an apparently antagonistic perspective which would state: *doubt reason and certainty*. Moreover, if we consider the four chapters of this first part as a whole, we may notice that most of it is dedicated to the breakdown of Chris's 'skepticism', that is, the failure of 'reason'. What this means may be closely related to what Kierkegaard calls "scientific aloofness" in his preface to his *Sickness Unto Death* (SUD, p.142).

The second Part of *The Exorcist* (1971) is divided into six chapters. Before dealing with them, it is important to make some comments about its title and epigraph. This second part is called "The Edge". If "The Beginning" is interpreted as being concerned with the apparent 'evidence' of facts and their 'clear' explanation by scientific discourse, and if we take the existentialist perspective that skepticism is as 'illusory' as faith<sup>144</sup>, then, the "edge" which is about to come is not so much one that is 'clearly' distinguishable, but one that is

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<sup>143</sup> Any reference to Wittgenstein is not mere coincidence.

<sup>144</sup> According to Kierkegaard, they are two aspects of one thing, that is, "despair".

‘dizzy’, ‘diffuse’, ‘blurred’, and that the move from one ‘floor’ (from consciousness, to unconsciousness, from sanity to insanity, from reason to faith) to the other is not so much a ‘quantitative’ step as it is a ‘qualitative’ *leap*. I mention the word floor in reference to Ricoeur’s *Freedom and Nature: the voluntary and the involuntary* (1950) when he observes the misleading interpretation of psychology when placing the mind metaphorically as the building of a house, where the foundation would be the involuntary and the upper floor would constitute the voluntary. The word “leap” obviously comes from Kierkegaard. According to Ferreira (1999, p.207), “[the word ‘leap’] informs [Kierkegaard’s] various accounts of the peculiar character of transitions between radically different ways of life as well as his challenge to the philosophical and romantic accounts of such transitions that were influential in his day”. Moreover, the ‘edge’ of *The Exorcist* (1971) may not refer exactly to a line, a division, but rather a state, the situation of indecision, of indeterminacy, of doubt. In this sense, this ‘edge’ may be much more related to the ‘edge’ proposed by Kierkegaard in his *The concept of Anxiety* (1980), which actually refers to the dizziness resultant from the situation of standing too close to the border of a high cliff, and the paradoxical feeling of the fear of falling and at the same time of the desire for it. But this is only a preliminary reference before a more close reading of the chapters in this part.

There is still another important aspect to mention before going on with the narrative which has to do with the epigraph chosen for this second part of the novel. It is a passage by Aeschylus which says: “... in our sleep, pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God...” (TE, p.92) Aeschylus is known as the author of *Prometheus Bound*<sup>145</sup>. The amazing relevance of this information is due to the importance that this tragedy has in Ricoeur’s *Symbolism of Evil* (1960). As Ricoeur instructs us, this mythological figure is “rooted in

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<sup>145</sup> Even though the matter of authorship and the date of this document is still under dispute. For further reference, see Mark Griffith’s *Aeschylus Prometheus Bound* (1983).

cosmogonic myth” (SE, p.208). According to the French philosopher, the symbolism of evil moves from an initial theogony, which *starts* with the ancient Summery-Akkadian myths, specifically the Babylonian myth of Enuma Elish, and which is complemented by a cosmogony. In relation to its meaning, Ricoeur observes a “negative” “meaning of this possibility”, in the sense that “man is not the origin of evil”, which entails that “man finds evil and continues it” (SE, p.178). On the other hand, it also means that “evil is as old as the oldest of beings” (Ibid). In this sense, evil is “twice designated” by the idea that “chaos is anterior to order” and that chaos is overcome by struggle (SE, p.179). It is not difficult to link this perspective to the image of the demon Pazuzu, which is a symbolic figure in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971).

However, before hurrying too fast to Prometheus, it is still necessary to make a brief reference to what Ricoeur posits as the intermediary steps that lead from theogonic myths toward the quasi-anthropogonic myth promoted by Aeschylus’ tragic character. The first step is what Ricoeur calls “the figure of the King”. He starts with the New Year’s festival at Babylon as a representative moment of transition from cosmic drama to history, because in the figure of the king the drama of creation becomes “historical”. This figure “introduces a factor of unforeseeability into history” (SE, p.196) with the perspective that cosmogonic strife is not merely enacted, but that it *must be* re-enacted. With this ‘figure’ the king becomes at the same time “the responsible and the victim of any discord” (SE, p.195). This is what founds the King-Enemy relation which is responsible for what much later culminates in a myth which will definitely set evil as anthropogonic. However, in order to achieve the intermediary position of the tragic myth, it is still necessary the step taken by what Ricoeur calls “the recessive form of the drama of creation” (SE, p.198), which he relates to the transition effected within the encounter between the Hebrew world with the Hellenistic world in ancient Greece. This is the part of the development of the symbolism of evil in which “evil” starts to

be “demythologized”. With this, “final victory is no longer an already attained moment of the drama, but a moment waited for at ‘the end of time’” (SE, p.202), that is, it gives birth to an eschatological dimension of myth. Evil stops coinciding with the origin of cosmos; it becomes at the same time “scandalous” and “historical”. What it starts to engender is that, according to Ricoeur, “man himself become human, nothing but human, and human, purely human evil must find a new myth capable of taking over the wickedness of the Enemy and, even more than that of the Enemy, the wickedness of man in every man.” (SE, p.205)

Finally, the intermediary position of the myth of Prometheus is a kind of middle point between a cosmogonic and an anthropogonic view of evil. In this sense, according to Ricoeur, “Aeschylus makes him if not a man, at least the demigod who gives man his humanity.” (SE, p.209) In addition to this, he observes that it “represents an uncertain attempt to situate the origin of evil in a region of being intermediate between the divine and the human”, and that it is “perhaps an attempt to tie the antiquity of human evil, which is always already there, to those aspects of brute reality which testify of themselves to a resistance to order and beauty.” (SE, p.210) Is evil *already there* always waiting for man or is it man who finds evil by *digging it up*? Was Pazuzu responsible for seducing *the human* or was it *the human* who was responsible for allowing itself to be seduced? To conclude that God is punishing Regan and her mother for not being Catholic and Karras for forgetting to be one is one interpretation which too quickly condemns the text from the start. If our guiding thread, represented by Ricoeur’s concept of “autonomy of the text”, is a prosperous one, then our task is exactly to distrust this kind of *immediate impression* – if we really *believe* that it is possible to *exorcize* this text from the *spirit* that has been *haunting* it.

The first chapter of the second part of *The Exorcist* (1971) focuses on the character of Karras. It starts with the burial of his mother, follows with a later conversation between him and Dyer in his dormitory, a dream he has, a Mass he delivers, a visit by two priests (first



a young one then an elderly one) and ends up with his release from his duties as a priest but not as a lecturer on psychiatry. I will now only mention a few aspects which are in keeping with the guiding line of existentialism. Despite the immediate reference to the Biblical story of Job, the unjustified sufferer, provided by Karras's plea for a sign from God on pages 94 and 98, what this initial chapter engenders, in an existentialist perspective, may lead to many different directions, which could be represented by the words 'request', 'rage', 'guilt', 'deprivation' and which culminates in a word already present in the epigraph for this part, namely, 'pain' – more moral than physical. As Ricoeur well observes, "evil has its roots in the pain of being, in a tragedy that is the tragedy of being itself." (SE, p.327) This is also brought to an existentialist dimension if Karras is positioned in Kierkegaard's view of sin as "despairing over one's sin". (SUD, p.240) According to the Danish philosopher, this is a second detachment which does not relieve the burden, but rather deepens it. According to him, "despair over sin is an attempt to maintain oneself by sinking still deeper." (SUD, p.241) The significance of this section to the character of Karras is still more astonishing if we repeat a reference already made to Kierkegaard:

Sin itself is the struggle of despair; but then when strength is exhausted there must needs be a new potentiation, a new demonical introversion, and this is despair over one's sin. This is a step in advance, an ascent in the demonical, but of course it means sinking deeper in sin [...]. Nevertheless despair over sin is conscious of its own emptiness... (SUD, p.241)

Kierkegaard's following reflection on this relation between sin and forgiveness fits so admirably in the situation in which Karras is positioned by the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) that I take it to be one of the best representations of Karras in this moment of the story. What Kierkegaard says about a man in his guilty condition is that "his sorrow, his concern, his despair, is selfish [...] because it is self-love which would like to be proud of itself, like to be without sin – and consolation is what he is least in need of." (SUD, p.243) Therefore, Karras is a character who *embodies* pretty much the abstract reflections made by Kierkegaard

about sin. Karras represents, under this perspective, the *character* of sin, or rather, the constituency of the sinful character, the sinner, properly speaking. This merely reinforces the idea that considering *The Exorcist* (1971) a narrative about a girl or one about a priest makes a complete difference.

Another relevant aspect of this chapter is the fact that Karras is consulted by the elderly priest due to the case of desecration that had happened very recently. What is significant is the fact that the priest suspects it is another priest who is doing the desecrations because of the messages found, since they were written in a Latin that only priests could write. What is interesting is that a great number of interpretations of the novel *infer* that, despite all the absurdity, Regan is supposed to be responsible for the act. This is actually the line of investigation developed and at the same time unbearable for Kinderman. Once again, it is not so much the proof that evil spirits exist, but of human condition in face of the ‘absurd’, which permeates the narrative.

Because this interpretation has already started to extend itself more than it should, we will have to skip ahead more than we ought to, at the price of probably losing too much along the way. Much of the rest of this part focuses on the struggle that Chris and Karras make to understand what is happening with Regan. Thus, chapter Two has two important aspects to be mentioned. Its first half deals with the medical procedures used in order to treat Regan’s condition. The subject of the *indefinite line between sanity and insanity* is reinforced once more when Dr. Klein explains to Chris that “the difference between [Regan] and an epileptic is a matter of degree”. (TE, p.110) The other aspect is the book which Chris finds, and that, according to her secretary, was brought by Mrs. Perrin. The title of the book is *A Study of Devil Worship and Related Occult Phenomena*. The author is not mentioned. This book becomes significant to the story because it mysteriously disappears at the end of this chapter.

It reinforces the possibility that Regan may be undergoing a ‘self-suggestive’ case of possession.

The following chapter, a very short one, narrates the strangeness felt by doctors because they cannot find any indications in the EEG that Regan has any problem. It is noteworthy when the neurologist says to Dr. Klein: “There’s just nothing there, Sam. Nothing I can see.” (TE, p.120) What is once more brought into play in the narrative is the problematic dichotomy spirit-matter. The problem, then, could properly be shifted from *they cannot see what is wrong with Regan* to *they cannot match the hypothesis with the diagnosis*. With this, what the narrative starts to assume is not so much the negative criticism it received, that is, that *The Exorcist* (1971) is a novel focused on proving the existence of evil spirits. Even though the author’s belief in the spiritual world points towards that interpretation, what the narrative proposes to the reader up to this point is merely the insufficiency of science, of reason, of logic. Regan may be in a condition beyond ‘reason’ not because this *beyond* really exists, but exactly because this is a precarious and much confused limit.

Then, the doctors receive a call from Chris’s house asking Dr. Klein’s presence urgently. When they ‘face’ Regan’s condition, they mention as possible diagnosis “schizophrenia”, “neurasthenia”, “hysteria”, and “split-personality”. The narrative also describes Regan’s “abnormal” strength and behavior. All the doctors say is that it is a “strange case” (TE, p.129). They are reluctant to resort to psychiatry before “exhausting the somatic possibilities first” (TE, p.126). But the most important detail is their prescription to Chris of some tranquilizers. First of all, instead of wrongly interpreting all the diagnosis mentioned above as actual manifestations of evil spirits, what the narrative may be plausibly suggesting is the precariousness of scientific diagnosis in general – once again, not because science is

wrong, but because it fails, exactly because it is something human, that is, fallible.<sup>146</sup> Despite the fact that until the end it could be maintained that Regan was merely ‘mentally sick’, instead of assuming the possibility of ‘possession’, what this passage starts to build up for the rest of the narrative is the complementary relation between science and faith; and it is exactly because science is a matter of faith that it becomes truly human. Thus, faith and science become a matter of ‘knowing’, ‘recognizing’, ‘understanding’ what seems ‘absurd’, and sometimes, as in Regan’s case, of recurring to the ‘absurd’, to the ‘unbelievable’ in order to surpass our limitations, the precariousness of our ‘knowing’. Therefore, Regan does not represent the ‘veracity’ of possession by evil spirits as much as the limitations of ‘reason’. It is exactly because Regan’s “strange case” is not the major concern of the narrative, in the sense of deciding whether she is genuinely possessed or not, that we should forget this dichotomy and shift our attention to what it represents for Karras.

Another important moment in the novel, and which is normally forgotten by commentators, is that Chris refuses Dr. Klein’s suggestion to find a nurse to assist with the injections and all medical care that Regan’s case demands, so that she or her secretary could do it. Besides, all tests carried out by Dr. Klein are negative, making him reconsider the decision of taking Regan to a psychiatrist.

Still in chapter Three of this second part of the novel, there is the insertion of a complicating factor in the narrative: the death of Burke Dennings. What is complicated is that he dies in a very strange manner while left alone with Regan in the house – he is actually found dead outside the house, near Regan’s window. This marks the introduction of the detective story that the novel assumes from this moment on. After that, all the rest of the narrative will concentrate on the unbearable assumption that it was Regan (possessed or mentally ill) who killed Mr. Dennings. This also inserts Karl, the servant, as a probable

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<sup>146</sup> Schizophrenia itself is something still very controversial if we consider Boyle’s (2002) and Bentall’s (2004) refutation about the validity of schizophrenia as a valid diagnosis, as well as the Campaign for Abolition of the Schizophrenia Label led by a group of patients and mental health professionals from the UK.

suspect for the crime. Despite all the relevance that the ‘detective structure’ of this subplot has for the following narrative, what must be highlighted is the paragraph which describes Denning’s death, an indirect report from a “young director of the second unit”, the first person to inform Chris about what happened:

He’d been drunk. He had stumbled. He had fallen down the steep flight of steps beside the house, fallen far to the bottom, where a passing pedestrian on M Street watched as he tumbled into night without end. A broken neck. This bloody, crumpled scene, his last. (TE, p.134)

For a person in a precarious psychological situation like that of Chris, this shock could only lead to an aggravation of both hers and her daughter’s condition. Remarkably, this is also the same moment of the novel where Regan is described, according to what Chris ‘sees’, as coming down the stairs in the following manner: “gliding spider-like, rapidly, [...], her body arched backward in a bow with her head almost touching her feet, [...], her tongue flicking quickly in and out of her mouth while she hissed sibilantly like a serpent.” (TE, p.135) Even though it is impossible to argue that Chris was having a hallucination since Sharon also witnessed the same thing, it is still possible to infer from the narrative that ‘mental illness’ is still the assumed version of what is happening to Regan. Even more remarkable is the fact that, after witnessing this aberrant scene, Chris asks Sharon to call the doctor, and not a priest.

Chapter Four starts with a visit by a psychiatrist to Regan. What should be highlighted from this passage is that even the psychiatrist is not sure about his diagnosis, mentioning that it is only a “guess” (TE, p.147). However, instead of interpreting the rest of the novel as an advocacy at the same time of the belief in the mysticism of religion and the discredit of science, a little more attention could be given to the final passage of the first ‘scene’ of this chapter when Chris *avowals* her hopelessness, when she says to the psychiatrist that she has “lost hope”, that what she has is an “inside tragedy” (TE, p.148). She says this

right after the psychiatrist advises her to take Regan to a clinic to have “an intensive examination by a team of experts” (TE, p.147). Once more, it becomes quite explicit that the focus of the narrative is not so much on the veracity of possession but exactly on the hopeless condition of human hope.

The next ‘scene’ of this same chapter is the encounter between Chris and detective Kinderman. This part of the story is mainly concerned with the latter’s suspicion about Karl’s involvement in the death of Burke Dennings. However, from an existentialist perspective, what is relevant is Kinderman’s comment about the apparent meaninglessness of the world, where one does not *need* a motive anymore to commit crimes. His remarks about the issue are worth quoting. First, he says that “a motive is only an encumbrance; in fact, a deterrent” (TE, p.150). Right after that, he says that “the world - the *entire world* – is having a massive nervous breakdown.” (TE, p.151) Once more, theodicy is brought to the forefront: what is the purpose of evil? Is there a *meaning* for evil? Can it become *meaningful*? Can it *make sense*? Or is it exactly the main aspect of the character of evil to be *meaningless*? It is due to the close relation between ‘meaning’ and ‘existence’ that the *leap* from theodicy into existentialism becomes attainable. Kinderman functions, in the narrative, like a conscience that *struggles* with the small fragments of ‘logic’ in order to *better swallow* the absurd. As Kristeva reminds us, “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.” (1982, p.2) Thus, explaining the unexplainable is not a matter of ‘finding’ the truth, but rather of ‘bearing’ the meaningless. Kinderman also makes some remarks about the dangerousness of “winds”, explicitly a symbol for evil in the narrative, and reflects on the eschatological aspect of myths by saying that “a myth, to speak plainly, to me is like a menu in a fancy French restaurant: glamorous, complicated camouflage for a fact you wouldn’t otherwise swallow, like maybe lima beans.” (TE, p.156) Reason, in this sense, is like spice, that is, camouflage for the abjection of the raw. Right after, in the following ‘scene’,

Kinderman is shown comparing scrapes from Regan's bird to other scrapes (up to now not mentioned from where) while watching her window from the outside, *wondering if he might* have seen something moving inside the room. Because she is supposed to be very sick, it would be contradictory if she were wandering through the room.

The next 'scene' in the narrative is dedicated exclusively to Kinderman's investigation. The scene which describes him examining "fragments of baffling data" (TE, p.161) in a room with little light in order to "help him narrow the focus of concentration" (Ibid) only corroborate the existentialist hypothesis. Another important passage is a fragment from the pathologist who examined Dennings's body. For the pathologist, even though it was "unlikely" that a fall might have caused all the bruises found on the body, it was still a *possibility*. However, they could only be made by a very powerful person, something a child or an elderly person could not. Thus, the character of Kinderman is present in the narrative merely to work as a *complement*, a *reinforcement* of what Chris and Karras already mean, that is, the existential situation of those in face of the meaningless, the absurd, the unexplainable. The matter is not so much whether Regan is possessed or not, but how those around her deal with this absurd hypothesis. It is not by chance that Kinderman recites Lewis Carroll to *clear his mind* so that he could *reason properly*. Kinderman also starts to suspect that Karras may be involved in the cases of desecrations found in the church, and that this may be related to Dennings's death and consequently to devil worship.

The next chapter is then focused on the encounter between Kinderman and Karras. The first thing to notice is that Karras is wearing a t-shirt with the inscription "philosophers". Another interesting detail is the fact that Kinderman changes his way of addressing Karras from "doctor" to "father" – a sign of the indeterminacy of Karras's identity. They also talk about the desecrations and about Satanism. The t-shirt, Karras explains, is from a baseball team while he was teaching at Woodstock Seminary in Maryland. It is significant to mention

that the other team wore a “theologians” t-shirt, and that the latter won the game. Beyond the obvious interpretation that faith is placed ‘above’ reason, it must be mentioned that Karras was part of the losing team. However, to interpret that faith ‘beats’ reason does not entail that the former is ‘superior’. It may also mean that reason can be ‘beaten’. Moreover, both ‘reason’ and ‘faith’ may engender the idea that they are merely ‘players’ in a game called ‘existence’. In this game, reason and faith beat each other endlessly, without a final winner. Besides, even though Karras could play on both teams, what is important to notice is that he would be *misplaced* in either one. However, the most important passage of this section is the fact that, for Karras, Satanism is actually “mental illness”. In his opinion, “this century hasn’t got the lock on insanity.” (TE, p.179) What Karras and Kinderman are discussing is actually the reliability of ‘confessions’ in cases where people alleged they were werewolves. At this point, Karras makes the following observation:

But one thing that sometimes we tend to forget is that people psychotic enough to confess to such things might conceivably be psychotic enough to have done them. For example, the myths about werewolves. So, fine, they’re ridiculous: No one can turn himself into a wolf. But what if a man were so disturbed that he not only thought that he was a werewolf, but also acted like one?” (TE, p.179)

What this part suggests for the following of the narrative is not a confirmation that Regan is ‘really’ possessed, but rather that she might have come to a degree of psychosis in which she, as well as those around her, have started to believe she was possessed. Thus, what seems at stake once more in the narrative is not the veracity of things, but rather the issue of ‘belief’. Thus, the meeting between Karras and Kinderman is actually the encounter between two lonely *crusaders* in search of ‘meaning’. In this sense, the matter is not so much the *facticity* of possession than the *fragility* of belief. As Ricoeur peculiarly observes, “when we try to understand others and ourselves we implicitly resort to this genesis of affective meaning: for it is not another or ourselves that we understand, but the content of belief.” (FM,



p.125) Therefore, Karras and Kinderman do not believe in what is believable, but in what is presumed. Their belief is ‘weak’ not because possession is the ultimate truth, but actually because, as Ricoeur observes, “nothing is more fragile, nothing is easier to wound than an existence that is at the mercy of belief.” (Ibid) In this sense, Karras and Kinderman are *fallible* not because they do not believe. On the contrary, what makes them *weak* is their belief. The more they know, the more they despair. Recurring to Kierkegaard once more, one might say that “however far a thought may be pursued, the whole action is within a hypothesis.” (SUD, p.203) For Karras and Kinderman, “to believe is to be.” (SUD, p.224)

The last chapter of this second Part is dedicated to the return of Chris to the narrative. Regan is back from hospital where doctors were unable to help her. All they could tell Chris was that: “*We’ll just have to keep trying and hope for a change.*” (TE, p.190) Moreover, the doctors start to suggest exorcism as a ‘last measure’, but they do so for scientific reasons. According to them, exorcism is:

*[an] stylized ritual now out of date in which rabbis and priests tried to drive out the spirit. It is only the Catholics who haven’t discarded it yet, but they keep it pretty much in the closet as sort of an embarrassment, I think. But to someone who thinks that he’s really possessed, I would say that the ritual’s rather impressive. It used to work, in fact, although not for the reason they thought, of course; it was purely the force of suggestion. The victim’s belief in possession helped cause it, or at least the appearance of the syndrome, and in just the same way his belief in the power of the exorcism can make it disappear.* (TE, p.192)

The possibility of exorcism is brought up not because it is the correct one, but rather because there is nothing ‘reasonable’ left out; or rather, because all that ‘reason’ could think of was actually the unthinkable. The irony in this passage is that it is precisely reason and logic which reinforce the hypothesis of exorcism as a prescription. It is because possession is diagnosed as ‘auto-suggestive’, and because of the failure of any other known medical procedure, that exorcism is suggested. This represents the return of the image of demon Pazuzu, the idea of using evil against evil. It represents the resurgence of theodicy, since it

justifies the unjustifiable. However, the fact is that Regan is still seen by the other characters in the narrative as ‘mentally ill’. In this chapter Chris also finds the missing book about possession lent by Mrs. Perrin. This may indicate a kind of ‘scientific possibility’ for possession since Chris reads about the perspective of authors like Carl Jung, William James and Traugott Oesterreich on the possibility of possession. In this chapter Karl’s situation is complicated since he is a possible suspect for the *hypothesis* of murder. What is important to notice is the possibility still open between accident and murder.

Despite all this, the chapter culminates in what is traditionally known as the hallmark of *The Exorcist* (1973) – the scene where Regan’s head turns 360°. It starts with Chris being informed by Willie that the book was found under Regan’s pillow. It is at this moment that they hear noises and Karl and Regan’s altered voice start to scream at each other. When Chris approaches the room she is no longer sure who is speaking with that voice. When she enters, she finds Karl unconscious on the floor and Regan masturbating violently with a crucifix. As described by the narrative, “the threatening bellow, the words, came from *Regan*.” (TE, p.214) Chris runs toward her daughter who clutches her mother’s hair and presses her head against the bleeding vagina. With a blow at the chest, Chris is sent across the room and crashes with stunning force. According to the narrative,

Chris crumpled to the floor in a daze of horror, in a swirling of images, sounds in the room, as her vision spun madly, blurring, unfocused, her ears ringing loud with chaotic distortions as she tried to raise herself, was too weak, faltered, then looked toward the still-blurred bed, toward Regan with her back to her... (TE, p.216)

Right after, the narrative is completed by the following description:

The words were cut off as Chris started crawling painfully toward the bed with her face smeared with blood, with her eyes still unfocused, limbs aching, past Karl. Then she cringed, shrinking back in incredulous terror as she *thought*<sup>147</sup> she saw *hazily*, in a *swimming fog*, her daughter’s head turning slowly around... (Ibid)

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<sup>147</sup> Italics mine.

The unreliability of the veracity of the 360° head turn is undeniable from the perspective of a character with such a distorted view in a strongly stressful condition such as this. Chris *thought* she had seen, just like the case of levitation in Bhutan. What matters for the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is not so much the scientific impossibility of a person turning her head 360°. What is at stake in this passage is the condition in which Chris finds herself and which will be decisive for her in order to resort to a priest. Therefore, she looks for Karras not because she believes in exorcism; she did not lose hope with despair – actually she found hope in it. This passage receives a completely different interpretation if understood under Kierkegaard’s comment that “the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd.” (FT, p.48) The absurd, for him, is “not identical with the impossible, the unexpected, the unforeseen.” (FT, p.57) Thus, the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) properly follows Kierkegaard’s axiom that “faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off” (FT, p.64), turning it into a “tremendous paradox” (Ibid). Amazingly, the narrative will culminate in this same schema when Karras finds himself in a parallel situation to that of Chris. It is interesting to notice that he will also be alone in face of the absurd, and it will be only then that faith will be *understood*.

In order to reinforce my arguments, a very simple question must be made at this point: is *The Exorcist* (1971) a text concerned with a genuine case of possession? Is it a text which *champions* the ‘veracity’ of possession? Or is it a text concerned actually with the situation of those characters facing the absurd? This issue is crucial for the interpretation of the novel. It does not only shift the perspective on the narrative; it inverts it.

The Beginning – The Edge – The Abyss: what does this sequence in the parts of the novel suggest? It may be that this *movement* is not so much that of evil, but rather that of faith. It may plausibly be inferred that ‘reason’ is merely the beginning of despair, faith, and

toward the self, in a *kierkegaardian* sense. However, it is still evil because it is related to our freedom to choose, if we still adopt the concept of anxiety/dread/angst proposed by Kierkegaard. Thus, the abyss to be faced by Karras is the abyss of the freedom to choose. Anxiety is the *pharmakon* that Karras will find at the end of the narrative. That is the difference between Karras and Chris: the latter runs toward the cliff and jumps - or she is pushed - while Karras totters at the edge, just long enough to *feel* the dizziness of freedom.

The three epigraphs which open this third Part of the narrative are intriguing. The first is from John 6:30-31. This is part of the *Gospel According to John* which is known as “Jesus is the Bread of Life” (DOYLE, 2008) and which is referred by Roman Catholic theology as “transubstantiation”, that is, “the conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the Body and Blood of Christ, only the accidents (i.e. the appearances of the bread and wine) remaining.” (CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 1997) The second epigraph is an excerpt from Newsweek about a brigade commander who ran a contest for killings. The third epigraph goes back to John 6, but now verse 36-37 – an explicit allusion to the relation between ‘seeing’ and ‘believing’, once more reinforcing the emphasis on the matter of faith. This is the point of the narrative where Karras and Chris meet. It is also where Karras faces ‘the devil’. The caution from now on is not to be led by the deceiving association between reason and doubt as well as between faith and certainty. Karras’s mistake is that he is looking for *substance* in *accidents*, in the Aristotelian sense of these words. Thus, the abyss may be interpreted, in an existentialist perspective, not as the huge gap which separates faith from non-faith, being from non-being, but rather the one which separates faith from faith, despair from despair, which actually turns the abyss into a bridge. Hence, Karras and Chris are not going to *leap* from ‘reason’ to ‘faith’. In the apologetic perspective of *The Exorcist* (1971) there is no “transubstantiation” from ‘evil’ to ‘goodness’, from ‘reason’ to ‘faith’; what there is, is exclusively the drama of faith. Taken from a *kierkegaardian* scope,

wisdom means foolishness, and hope becomes madness. (FT, p.31) Faith is not the *otherness* of reason, or of doubt; it does not have an otherness exactly because it is a paradox. In this sense, Karras cannot *see* God both because he believes and because he does not believe. If what he perceives is only ‘accidents’, then he is unable to *see* the substance. However, if he believes that what he sees are only ‘accidents’, then he can *perceive* that *seeing is not seeing*, and that *not seeing is seeing*. The narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) takes a totally different shift if interpreted under the shadows of Kierkegaard’s reflection when the latter says that there is a “profound contradiction in the demonical”, when he says that in it “dwells infinitely more good in a demoniac than in a trivial person.” (FT, p.106)

Thus, the third part of the narrative is divided into two chapters. The first chapter consists of six ‘scenes’. The first of them is the encounter between Karras and Chris. What one must notice is the moment when Chris asks Karras how a psychiatrist becomes a priest, to which he answers that it was “the other way around” (TE, p.222). Another remarkable detail is the way Karras analyses Chris: “There were people, Karras knew, who approached salvation as if it were an unreliable bridge overhanging an abyss.” (TE, p.223) What Karras did not know was that he himself would later come exactly to this conclusion. Moreover, both ‘reason’ and ‘faith’ are to become unreliable bridges for him. Even more remarkable is not the fact that Karras advises Chris to look for medical help, but the way he decides to *check* Regan: “‘It’s alright,’ Karras whispered as he patted her shoulder. He wanted only to calm her; to humor; stem hysteria. [...] It was she who needed psychiatric help.” (TE, p.226)

The next ‘scene’ of this chapter is concerned with the encounter between Karras and the possessed Regan. The latter shows one of the traditional symptoms used as criteria for distinguishing genuine possession: knowledge of things that the possessed person could not know. In Regan’s case, she repeats the sentence that Karras heard from the bum in the subway; she also has very specific geography and history knowledge. However, what is

important, from an existentialist perspective, is Karras's comment to Chris when she asks him if he believes that Regan is possessed. Karras says:

Look, whether it's a demon or a mental disorder, I'll do everything I possibly can to help. But I've got to have the truth. It's important for Regan. At the moment, I'm groping in a state of ignorance, which is nothing supernatural for me or abnormal, it's just my usual condition. (TE, p.237)

First of all, it is important to pay attention to the word "grope". It is the same word used in the prologue of the narrative to describe "matter" as "Lucifer upward-groping back to his God." (TE, p.4) It is Karras who is in a 'state of ignorance'. It is Karras who is about to suffer the drama of the protagonist. The narrative is clearly concerned with the drama of faith, not with the materiality of evil.

The next 'scene' is Karras and Chris's discussion about the relation between possession and mental illness. Karras makes hypothetical diagnosis that Regan may be undergoing a "compulsive behavior produced by guilt, perhaps, put together with split personality." (TE, p.238) However, it is interesting to see his comment that "the best explanation for any phenomenon is always the simplest one available that accommodates all the facts." (TE, p.239) This state of apparently not being in despair is actually one of the modalities proposed by Kierkegaard as one of the ways of being in despair (SUD, p.155). For the Danish philosopher, it is only a matter of not being aware. Therefore, the drama of *The Exorcist* (1971) is precisely Karras's awakening to his despairing condition. Finally, what really matters in this 'scene' is Karras's comment to Chris that "sooner or later, [he is] going to have to tell one of [his] superiors what [he is] up to." (TE, p.243) Karras is, therefore, deceiving himself by the idea that he is trying to convince others, and not himself. Perhaps, at this point, the image of the 'monster' and the label of 'horror' are already lost somewhere in the filmic reel.

The next ‘scene’ shows Karras in his room doing research about possession. The bibliography is suggestive: Oesterreich’s *Possession*; Huxley’s *The Devils of Loudun*; Vandendriessche’s *Parapraxis in the Haizman Case of Freud*; McCasland’s *Demon Possession and Exorcism in Early Christianity in the Light of Modern Views of Mental Illness*; Freud’s *A Neurosis of Demonic Possession in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* and Reider’s *The Demonology of Modern Psychiatry*. The first, originally published as *Die Bessessenheit* (1921) and later published in English as *Possession: demonical and other among primitive races, in antiquity, the middle ages, and modern times* (1966), is actually the source used by Blatty to depict some symptoms shown by Regan. *The Devils of Loudun* is a non-fictional account of a supposed case of demonic possession that took place in 17<sup>th</sup> century Loudun (France). Vandendriessche’s essay is a review on Freud’s study of Haizmann as one of the first documented cases of schizophrenia. MacCasland’s text is a study that tries to make a parallel between the way of attitudes of today and those of Biblical times. The fifth title, by Freud, is the classic essay by the famous psychiatrist in which he psychologically interprets the “devil”. The last one, an essay by Norman Reider, is an attempt to explain why the beliefs in ancient superstitions still exist. However, the interesting slight detail is that only after these readings does Karras turn to *The Roman Ritual*. Once more the already mentioned move from ‘reason’ as an ‘*arche*’ toward ‘faith’ as a ‘*telos*’ is repeated.

The next ‘scene’ shows Karras continuing his research and his scientific hypothesis on the symptomatic evidence shown by Regan, all the time presenting him as uncertain both toward his ‘reason’ and his ‘faith’. He always comes to the conclusion that the symptoms presented by Regan show that she is not genuinely possessed. However, he is still in doubt about his ‘certainties’. He is also shown as insecure while saying a lonely Mass. He reconsiders exorcism as a possible cure, but for scientific reasons. He then decides to use tap

water as if it were Holy water, an aspect which brings back the issue of transubstantiation mentioned above.

The second chapter of the third part shows Karras still convinced that Regan is presenting some sort of mysterious disorder. The interesting detail is that one of the reasons for this conclusion is supported by the hypothesis of ‘telepathy’ in one of the manifestations observed by Karras, something that astonishes Chris. In other words, Karras is prone to believe in telepathy and telekinesis, but he does not believe in possession. Another important aspect is his conviction that he needs to convince his superiors that Regan needs exorcism, but not because he thinks she is possessed. He is also worried about *lying* to the Bishop about what is happening to Regan. However, all the facts necessary to receive the authorization for an exorcism are already available to him; the only other thing he needs is his own opinion that all the symptoms can be identified as possession. Thus, the main issue of the narrative is not the veracity of evil possession but the existential aspect of belief. In this sense, Karras always finds a ‘reasonable’ explanation for all the mysterious things he is observing. For him, there was no “paranormal performance, only the limitless abilities of the mind.” (TE, p.310) Nevertheless, according to the narrative, “Karras felt an instant dismay as his certainty crumbled, felt tantalized and frustrated by the nagging doubt now planted in his brain” (TE, p.301), as if he were not already in doubt. His condition, according to the narrative, is described in these words: “despairing, he stepped out of darkness into darkness.” (TE, p.305)

After this, Karras becomes very tired and goes to his dormitory to rest. He is woken up by a telephone call from Sharon asking for his visit to the house. There, he sees inscriptions of “help me” appear on the girl’s body, which Sharon recognizes as Regan’s handwriting.

Right after this episode, Karras is shown in front of the Bishop asking permission to seek an exorcism. The most important detail for the entire third Part of the novel is the answer



that Karras gives the Bishop when the latter asks him if he is convinced that the case is genuine. Karras answers:

“I’ve made a prudent judgment that it meets the conditions set forth in the *Ritual*”, answered Karras evasively. He still did not dare to believe. Not his mind but his heart had tugged him to this moment; pity and the hope for a cure through suggestion. (TE, p.313)

This passage does not only show that the main matter of the narrative is not whether Regan is possessed or not, it also confirms the hypothesis that *The Exorcist* (1971), differently from the movie version *The Exorcist* (1973), is a narrative dedicated to a priest who faces a dramatic existential condition instead of one concerned with the veracity of possession. What it also entails is not, as Blatty mentioned, “the problem of evil”, but the *drama of faith*. Therefore, up to this point in the text, Chris, Karras and Kinderman are shown as much more central characters than Regan. It is even more remarkable to observe the following comment about Karras when the Bishop asks him if he is willing to perform the exorcism: “He felt a moment of elation; saw the door swinging open to fields, to escape from the crushing weight of caring and that meeting each twilight with the ghost of his faith.” (Ibid) This passage clearly shows the existentialist tone of its discourse and Karras as its protagonist – aspects which reinforce even more the differences between ‘the meaning of the film’ and ‘the meaning of the novel’.

Finally, we come to the fourth and last Part of the narrative, which has as its title the following passage from *Psalms*: “And let my cry come unto thee...”. This Psalm, according to the *New American Standard Bible* (1995), is normally associated as “a prayer of an afflicted man for mercy on himself and on Zion”, or rather “a prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord.” Matthew Henry’s *Concise Commentary on the Bible* (1706) states that this Psalm corroborates the perspective of evil as something more inner than external, for “when we consider our own vileness, our darkness and deadness,

and the manifold defects in our prayers, we have cause to fear that they will not be received in heaven.” Seen from this point of view, evil is not what possesses Regan; ‘evil’ is precisely Karras’s freedom to choose. Thus, what the narrative entails is not so much the immediate Gnostic impression that the novel received (that evil is something material and totally external), but more precisely what can be identified in parallel with Ricoeur’s reflection on the concept of “fallibility”, when the latter takes it to be “the constitutional weakness that makes evil possible” (FM, p.xliii). As Ricoeur observes, “[this concept] approaches a threshold of intelligibility wherein it is understandable that evil could ‘come into the world’ through man.” (Ibid) Thus, Ricoeur’s conclusion about the concept of fallibility becomes fundamental to accomplish this existentialist shift in the interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971). According to Ricoeur,

Fragility is not merely the “locus”, the point of insertion of evil, nor even the “origin”..., it is the “capacity” for evil. To say that man is fallible is to say that the limitation peculiar to a being who does not coincide with himself is the primordial weakness from which evil arises. (FM, p.146)

Therefore, it seems quite clear at this point that the prayer oriented by Psalm 102 is not dedicated to Regan, but rather to Karras. He is the one who is ‘sick’. But what kind of sickness does he suffer from? Kierkegaard’s diagnosis fits perfectly: it is “the sickness unto death”. For the Danish philosopher, “Christianity has discovered an evil which man as such does not know of; this misery is the sickness unto death.” (SUD, p.145) Karras is precisely the fictional character who admirably fits Kierkegaard’s description of a man in his struggle for faith, that is, of despair, when the latter says:

Picture a man who with all the shuddering revolt of a terrified imagination has represented to himself some horror as a thing absolutely not to be endured. Now it befalls him, precisely this horror befalls him. Humanly speaking his destruction is the most certain of all things – and the despair in his soul fights desperately to get to leave to despair, to get, if you will, repose for despair, so that he would curse nothing and nobody more fiercely than him who attempted to prevent him from despairing... (SUD, p.171)

The epigraph for this part of the narrative also deserves some comments. The epigraph is a verse from the *First Epistle of John*, which says: “he who abides in love, abides in God, and God in him...” This is a part of the New Testament which is normally associated with heresies, mainly those concerning heterodox beliefs that perhaps Christ did not come into flesh. Matthew Henry’s comment about this passage is helpful for the interpretation of this epigraph in the narrative. The latter says that “we must distinguish between the fear of God and being afraid of him”. (1995) This reflection is in parallel with what Kierkegaard says about what this kind of ‘love’ is. For the Danish philosopher, “he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; he who loves God believingly reflects upon god.” (FT, p.47) Karras, from the fourth part of the narrative on, starts to take the position which Kierkegaard calls “the Knight of Faith”. For the latter, this is the category where the individual places complete faith in himself and in God. This is actually the way pursued by Karras. However, Karras still has to struggle with his condition as “the Knight of Infinite Resignation”, which Kierkegaard regards as still lacking the faith in the absurd. Ricoeur may reinforce this perspective when he says that “sin only acquires spiritual meaning when suffering becomes absurd and scandalous” (SE, p.32). Thus, Regan’s condition is not yet able to make Karras reach the level of “the Knight of Faith” exactly because what he still has in front of him is only the absurd, but not yet the scandalous.

However, to lead the interpretation of the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) toward this direction, some more comments on a selection of passages from this chapter are still necessary. This last part is actually composed of only one chapter. It is precisely the part in which Father Merrin joins Karras to perform the exorcism. Regan is in a state of coma, from where Karras is afraid she might not return. He is exhausted. Back at his dormitory, he is awoken up by the phone from which he receives the news of Merrin’s arrival. The following passage is very important. While talking to Chris about how long the exorcism will take,

Karras reflects to himself: “he knew that an exorcism often took weeks, even months; knew that frequently it failed altogether. He expected the latter; expected that the burden, barring cure through suggestion would fall once again, and at the last, upon him.” (TE, p.324) Instead of hope, what he experiences is a feeling of being somehow “unworthy, incompetent, rejected” (TE, p.325). Another remarkable passage is the part of Merrin’s book which Karras reads:

[...] We mourn the blossoms of May because they are to wither; but we know that May is one day to have its revenge upon November, by the revolution of that solemn circle which never stops – which teaches in our height of hope, ever to be sober, and in our depth of desolation, never to despair. (TE, pp.326)

This can be described as the moment in which Karras starts to become aware of his despair, thus heading towards his understanding what faith means to him. What Karras is about to recognize is his self not as identity, in the sense of “sameness” proposed by Ricoeur, but as “disrelationship” proposed by Kierkegaard.

Another interesting point is that both Karras and Chris are reluctant to start with the exorcism right away, unlike Merrin. During the ritual, Karras is shown to be insecure. Karras sees the bed levitate, which makes him think to himself “it’s there! There it is! Right in front of me! There!” (TE, p.342). However, it is not yet faith; he sinks back into doubt. As the narrative describes,

Karras watched her intently as his shock and excitement began to fade, as his mind began feverishly to thresh, to poke its fingers, unbidden, compulsively, deep into corners of logical doubt: poltergeist; psychokinetic action; adolescent tensions and mind-directed force. (TE, p.344)

While Merrin ignores everything strange that happens in order to proceed with the ritual, Karras is constantly disturbed and distracted by these same things. In addition, he keeps checking Regan’s pulse as in hope that she would become better. This relevant aspect can be

understood in parallel with what Kierkegaard says of Abraham's story about going on with the sacrifice of his son. For the Danish philosopher, "the story of Abraham contains therefore a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the individual he became higher than the universal. This is the paradox which does not permit of meditation." (FT, p.77) Kierkegaard also makes a split between "the tragic hero" and "the knight of faith". According to him, the difference is that "the tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal" while "the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to become the individual." (FT, p.86) Moreover, while the tragic hero "gives up wish in order to accomplish his duty", for the knight of faith wish is duty (FT, p.88). Thus, "the hero does the deed and finds repose in the universal, [while] the knight of faith is left all to himself." (FT, p.89) In this sense, reflects the Danish philosopher, "aesthetics can well understand that I sacrifice myself, but not that I sacrifice another for my own sake." (FT, p.122) Karras is still bound to the category of the tragic hero; that is why he cannot understand Merrin's conviction, exactly because he cannot understand faith. However, Karras has already discovered that seeing is not enough for believing. He cannot comprehend because "comprehension is conterminous with man's relation to the human, but faith is man's relation to the divine." (SUD, p.226) What Karras does not understand, in a *kierkegaardian* perspective, is that "sin is ignorance", that is, "ignorance of what sin is." (SUD, p.227) According to the Danish philosopher, "sin does not consist in the fact that man has not understood what is right, but in the fact that he will not understand it, and in the fact that he will not do it." (SUD, p.226) Therefore, the sinner of the story is not Regan; she is not being punished because she is not Catholic. It is Karras's conflict with his own faith, with himself, that is the actual plot of the story.

Because an exorcism may require that the ritual be performed many times, and because Regan has not been exorcized yet, Merrin and Karras have an interval before they proceed. It is during this break that Karras and Merrin have a discussion about possession

which can be considered the most important part of the whole narrative. By questioning the multiple personalities that Regan presented during the exorcism, Karras makes the following argumentation: “we say the demon [...] cannot touch the victim’s will”, to which Merrin answers that this is so because “there is no sin” (TE, p.351), excluding any moral interpretation that Regan was possessed because her parents were divorced, or because they were not Catholic, or even because she was dealing with pagan things like the Ouija Board. Merrin acknowledges with much greater ease his ignorance about the purpose of possession. However, he reflects that the “devil’s target” may not be the possessed, but “the observers” (Ibid). Thus, Merrin complements:

“I think the demons target is to make us despair, to reject our own humanity, Damien; to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly, unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. For I think belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it finally is a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love us.” (TE, pp.351-2)

Right after this, he makes another important observation:

“There it lies, I think, Damien... possession; not in wars, as some tend to believe; not so much; and very seldom in extraordinary interventions such as here... this girl... this poor child. No, I see it most often in the little things, Damien: in the senseless, petty spites; the misunderstandings; the cruel and cutting word that leaps unbidden to the tongue between friends. Between lovers. Enough of these,” Merrin whispered, “and we have no need of Satan to manage our wars; these we manage for ourselves... for ourselves...” (TE, p.352-3)

Therefore, this passage makes it clear that this is not a narrative guided by Gnosticism. It precisely shows the contrary, that is, that evil is not something exterior, but rather, as Ricoeur observes, “the very worldliness of the world” (CI, p.273). As he reflects, “evil does not exist in itself”; “evil comes *from us*”; “evil is not *being* but *doing*” (Ibid). In a while, Merrin goes down the corridor to the bathroom as Karras goes back to Regan’s room to check her pulse. The devil then tempts him by mimicking his mother’s pleading. Merrin

returns to the room and asks Karras why he is worried and what can be done in relation to her physical condition. Karras answers: “nothing” (TE, p.257), but leaves the room and calls his friend, a doctor, asking for help. The astonishing moment is that, after examining Regan, the very doctor advises Karras to “pray” (TE, p.359). Merrin resumes the ritual, being followed by Karras, in whose heart there was still a “desperate torment” (Ibid).

After long hours, Karras leaves the room because Kinderman has come to talk to him. The interesting detail in this passage is that Kinderman, in one of his digressions, mentions an anecdote about his aunt – whenever she was angry with her husband, she would go to the closet and *damned* him with all her strength. What Kinderman wants is that Karras provide him with information about the case. However, more than information, this part is actually an allusion to confession as a means of relief. Thus, Kinderman starts to tell a ‘hypothetical’ case, which is exactly Regan’s. During his story, Kinderman says: “the girl is not responsible, Father. She is demented.” (TE, p.366) What Kinderman is asking Karras is exactly whether he should proceed with the investigation, something that would inevitably make Regan guilty for the murder of Dennings, or forget the matter and “hope” that she get better. Astonishingly, Karras answers Kinderman’s question with the following sentence: “I would put it in the hands of a higher authority.” (Ibid) Karras, at this point, represents the existential disproportion and gap that a self represents to its own self. In other words, if this distance is already huge among different persons, it is even greater between the self to itself. According to Kierkegaard, “to strive against the whole world is a comfort, to strive with oneself is dreadful.” (FT, p.123) Moreover, according to Kierkegaard, by “delving deep into oneself one would first of all discover the disposition to evil.” (FT, p.110) What the character of Karras entails, in an existentialist perspective, is that “to exist as the individual is the most terrible thing of all.” (FT, p.85) Karras, until almost the end of the novel, is still a prisoner of “self-love”, which, according to Kierkegaard, only expects the possible, in opposition to “the

love for others”, which is “expecting the eternal”, and completely opposed to “love for God”, which is exactly “expecting the impossible” (FT, p.31). After Kinderman leaves, Karras is described as “surprised at the heart’s labyrinthine turnings” (TE, p.367). Back inside the house, instead of returning to Regan’s room, Karras still looks for Karl to give him a message sent by Kinderman and waits for coffee, which is about to be ready. He is still too close to what is earthly to be able to reach what he is so madly striving for, that is, faith. He has not yet made the “movement of resignation”, which, according to Kierkegaard,

is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who had not made this movement has not faith; for only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity, and only then there can be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith. (FT, p.57)

Karras is unable to refrain his rage, his indignation, his dread, his angst, his anxiety, his fear, and falls into resignation. According to the narrative,

[...] he listened to the thump of the percolating coffee, his hands began to tremble and compassion swelled suddenly and blindly into rage at disease and at pain, at the suffering of children and the frailty of the body, at the monstrous and outrageous corruption of death. (TE, p.369)

However, he was not aware yet of his sickness. He was still concerned about death. As has already been pointed out, in an existentialist perspective, death is not the sickness unto death. Karras is not in despair to save Regan; he is desperately looking for the end of his guilt. He does not understand that his struggle is not against sickness, death and corruption. What he is about to realize is that faith is all about “the teleological suspension of the ethical” (FT, p.64), that is, if the suspension of the ethical can still be considered “good”.

Finally, Karras goes back to Regan’s room, without having a coffee (an indication that he is privileging duty over individuality for the first time in the narrative). When he first arrives there, it takes him a while to notice Merrin’s absence. He must stumble on him before he realizes that Merrin is dead. His immediate reaction is to diagnose the causes of his death:



“heart failure”, “coronary artery” (TE, p.370). He is described in the narrative as follows: “he shut his eyes and shook his head in disbelief, in despair, and then, abruptly, with a surge of grief, he dug his thumb with savage force into Merrin’s pale wrist as if to squeeze from its sinews the lost beat of life.” (Ibid) Consumed by “hatred and rage” (TE, p.371), and inflamed by the insults propelled by the possessed girl, Karras desperately defies the ‘devil’ and says: “Come on, loser! Try *me*! Leave the girl and take *me*. Come into...” (Ibid). The narrative then shifts immediately to the study where Chris and Sharon wait. The sounds that they hear are: “stumblings. Sharp bumps against furniture. The voice of... the demon? The demon. Obscenities. But another voice. Alternating. Karras? Yes, Karras. Yet stronger. Deeper.” (TE, p.372) And then, Karras says: “No! I won’t let you hurt them! *You’re not going to hurt them!* You’re coming with...” (Ibid). immediately after, there is the sound of a broken window. Chris and Sharon run to Regan’s bedroom and find Karras lying dead outside the house on the same steps where Burke Dennings died. Chris then hears Regan’s voice calling her. The most important detail is that the narrative does not follow Chris reencountering her ‘original’ daughter healed and safe. The narrative follows Sharon going after Father Dyer, who comes to see what has happened. When he arrives near the multitude of bystanders, his first impression is to “hear the murmurs of the litany of indifference.” (TE, p.373) Karras was still alive and Dyer receives his confession before he finally dies. The ambulance arrives and the intern tells Dyer that “there is nothing [he] can do for him” (TE, p.375). This final chapter closes with the following paragraph: “The wail of the ambulance siren lifted shrill into night above the river until the driver remembered that time no longer mattered. He cut it off. The river followed quiet again, reaching toward a gentle shore.” (Ibid)

Was the girl really possessed? Did Karras finally exorcise her by taking the devil into himself? These questions may seem quite secondary if compared to the following: did Karras

get his faith back? The narrative itself provides the answer in the “Epilogue” when it is mentioned that:

It was now six weeks since the deaths of the priests. Since the shock. And still there were no answers. Only haunting speculation and frequent awakenings from sleep into tears. The death of Merrin had been caused by coronary artery disease. But as for Karras... (TE, p.379-80)

The final reflection is left for Kinderman. In his perspective,

Obviously, Karras had ripped away the shutters, leaping through the window to deliberate death. But why? Fear? An attempt to escape something horrible? No. Kinderman had quickly ruled it out. Had he wished to escape, he could have gone out the door. Nor was Karras in any case a man who would run. But why the fatal leap? (TE, p.380)

For Kinderman, Karras’s death was caused by the latter’s “emotional conflicts”, which were composed of “his guilt about his mother”, “her death”, “his problem of faith”, increased by his “continuous lack of sleep for several days”, “the concern and the guilt over Regan’s imminent death”, “the demonic attacks in the form of his mother; until finally, his “mind had snapped”, “shattered by the burden of guilts he could no longer endure” (Ibid). Kinderman’s final conclusion is that Karras’s suicide was due to “strong feelings of guilt and the need to be punished, added to the power of autosuggestion.” (Ibid) This is a conclusion that Dyer refuses to accept, however. It is explicitly expressed in the narrative that the main concern is not possession, or even ‘evil’, but rather ‘faith’. It could be easily suggested that everything ‘supernatural’ that took place in the story actually happened to characters who were immensely prone to believe in the unbelievable. It could be easily questioned whether Karras was not being deceived by himself. Even so, the narrative culminates in Karras’s jump out of the window. Did he jump deliberately in order to end with the possession? Or was it the devil which finally got the real person whom it wanted to destroy, thus achieving its final objective? This is what is left open in the story. I ask these questions not in order to impel the

reader to take the Gnostic side and finally conclude that Regan was really possessed, or to take the ‘skeptic’ turn and take Karras as a suicide who misunderstood ‘salvation’ with ‘desperation’. I ask the questions above in order to show that it is still left open for the reader to choose, and that all the ‘evidence’ which ‘corroborates’ the hypothesis for ‘possession’ are only sufficient according to the characters in the story. In this sense, it can be stated that this existentialist interpretation ‘decided’ to take the ‘skeptic’ turn in order to make ‘evil’ a matter of ‘freedom’, not to make man ‘guilty’, but ‘responsible’. ‘Evil’, in this sense, still remains ‘material’ if we interpret it as Karras’s ‘depression’.

Another interesting part of the “Epilogue” is the conversation between Dyer and Chris, when the former asks if she, as a “nonbeliever”, believes that Regan was really possessed. Because of all she went through, it would be difficult to hear her says that she did not. But her answer is that “she could buy that” (TE, p.382). She does not say that she believes in possession; she merely says that she does not discard the possibility, because of all she has experienced. Finally, it is Chris who reflects that God “never talks”, and that it is the devil which “keeps advertising”. (TE, p.382) After that, Dyer posits the following question to her: “but if all of the evil in the world makes you think that there might be a devil, then how do you account for all the *good* in the world?” (Ibid). It becomes explicit at this point that the great mystery, for the narrative, is not so much ‘evil’, but rather ‘goodness’. Besides, it is a narrative which shows it is more concerned with the existentialist struggle of faith than with the materiality of evil.

Was Regan’s ‘possession’ a trial or a temptation? Karras depicts with much evidence the character of “dread”, in a *kierkegaardian* perspective. As Walter Lowrie comments in one of the footnotes to his translation of *Fear and Trembling*, dread “denotes the presentment of evil but doesn’t sufficiently emphasize the anguish of the existence.” (FT, p.264) In a sense, Karras entails one of the main characteristics of Kierkegaard’s “Knight of Faith”, that is, his

ability to fall. This correlation is reinforced when Kierkegaard comments that “the only thing that can save the knight of faith is the absurd.” (FT, p.57) For the latter, recognizing the impossibility means believing in the absurd. One could easily insert the following reflection made by Kierkegaard in a comment about one of the characters in *The Exorcist* (1971):

I can stand everything – even though that horrible demon, more dreadful than death, the king of terrors, even though madness were to hold up before my eyes the motley of the fool, and I understood that by its look that it was I who must put it on, I am still able to save my soul; if only it is more to me than my earthly happiness that my love to God should triumph in me. (FT, p.60)

I am not proposing that Kierkegaard is the only possibility to read *The Exorcist* (1971) ‘adequately’. What I am suggesting with this relation is the admirable resemblance that they offer each other. Karras is not only a character in literature who depicts in a very emblematic way what the Danish philosopher speculates about Christianity, as the latter offers an insightful way to read Blatty’s text. My surprise is that this comparison has never been made.

Karras is described as *possibly* having thrown himself out of the window deliberately. If this possibility is accepted, which would refute the idea of the devil being responsible for his death, then the whole narrative becomes concerned not so much with the veracity of possession as in the protagonist’s choice of *killing himself* in order to save the girl (possession or auto-suggestion, both would be solved by the absurd option for suicide). Thus, Karras entails a kind of heroism that is precisely in accordance with what Kierkegaard describes as “Christian heroism”, that is, “to venture wholly to be oneself, as an individual man, this definite individual man, alone before the face of God, alone in this tremendous exertion and this tremendous responsibility.” (SUD, p.142) Karras is in conflict with himself, and what the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) tells is the story of a man, a specific individual man, who is left all by himself with the responsibility of being, with the burden of existing

with his disproportion, of being “a synthesis of the infinite and finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity [...] a relation between two factors” (SUD, p.146). Karras’s despair is not about saving Regan or not, or even about believing in the devil or not, but actually of struggling to be oneself. This is even more remarkable because this struggle to be oneself is precisely the theme that dominates all of Blatty’s texts. It is always a matter of being lost ‘in-between’ *being*. Kierkegaard comments that “the problem is not becoming Cesar, but the fact that one cannot get rid of not being Cesar.” (SUD, p.152) Thus, Karras’s problem, as well as that of all of Blatty’s protagonists, is not so much of being what they are, but rather not being able to not be that. In fact, all the characters in Blatty’s fiction show a sort of ‘self-inconsistency’, of ‘displacement’, of ‘disproportion’. Thus, the “life after death” so peculiar in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) works as a kind of existential vector, much corroborated by Kierkegaard’s reflection that

Every human existence which supposedly has become or merely wills to become infinite is despair. For the self is a synthesis in which the finite is the limiting factor, and the infinite is the expanding factor. Infinitude’s despair is therefore the fantastical, the limitless. (SUD, p.163)

Therefore, in an existentialist perspective, Karras was not struggling with the devil; he was struggling with himself. In this sense, ‘evil’ is actually a ‘goodness’. As Kierkegaard observes, “a demon knows how to torture powers out of even the weakest person, and in his way he may have the best intentions toward a human being.” (FT, p.107) The alacrity of ‘evil’, all the noise that Regan’s possession provokes, actually masquerades the real concern of the narrative, that is, the struggle of an individual in his solitary path toward faith. Thus, it is remarkable, for an existentialist reading of *The Exorcist* (1971), when Kierkegaard comments that “the greatest danger, that of losing one’s own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc, is sure to be noticed.” (SUD, p.165) Moreover, in order to escape both ‘determinism’, where everything

has become *necessary*, and ‘philistinism’, where everything has become *trivial*, Karras fights madly for ‘possibility’ – which is actually the meaning of faith for Kierkegaard (SUD, p.173). In *The Exorcist* (1971), faith is not an easy task. As the Danish philosopher observes, “one supposes that it might be such an easy matter to acquire faith and wisdom which come with the years as a matter of course, like teeth and beard.” (SUD, p.192) Therefore, what the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) narrates, what it says, what it *means*, is not so much the materiality of evil, the veracity of possession, the catechism of theology, the madness of theodicy, as it narrates the existential struggle of faith. It is the story of a “travel through the despair of the self to faith.” (SUD, p.199) Karras “represent[s] this agonizing self-contradiction in a demonic man.” (SUD, p.200) What this character entails is that “by the aid of the eternal the self has courage to lose itself in order to gain itself.” (SUD, p.201) What Karras lacks is the “hope in the possibility of help”, that is, “the absurd”. (SUD, p.204). Therefore, “instead of seeking help”, “he prefers to be himself” (SUD, p.205). In the end, “he rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him.” (SUD, p.206) What I mean with this *collage*, as if Kierkegaard were commenting on *The Exorcist* (1971), is to show the extreme relevance of reading the latter in the light of the former. The existentialist perspective does not merely open a new positive perspective on *The Exorcist* (1971); it also shows how relevant it is to read the novel under this existentialist perspective. That is why I make the claim that *besides* horror, and *beyond* theodicy, *The Exorcist* (1971) is an existentialist narrative.

Paradoxically, Karras’s greatest evil is actually his greatest gift: the freedom to choose. However, his awareness of this freedom is what actually makes him *dizzy* (in allusion to Kierkegaard). The kind of evil that the narrative engenders is not so much an overpowering entity which subsumes mankind; on the contrary, it is precisely human freedom to choose in its individuality – something which is at stake with Karras’s alleged suicide leap.

Paradoxically, Karras, by committing the greatest evil of killing himself, ends up achieving a mysterious goodness. Regan finally gets better, and it does not matter if this occurred by the powers of *suggestion* or any other means. The narrative is not concerned with that; it is Karras choice of *tasting the fruit of knowledge* that characterizes the novel. The character of Karras is undeniably permeated by the Adamic myth. As Ricoeur interprets it:

[The Adamic myth] reveals this mysterious aspect of evil, namely, that if any of us initiates evil, inaugurates it, [...] each of us also *discovers evil*, finds it already there, in himself, outside himself, and before himself. For every consciousness which awakens when responsibility is taken, evil is *already there*. In tracing back the origin of evil to a distant ancestor, the myth discovers the situation of every man: evil has already taken place. I do not begin evil; I continue it. I am implicated in evil. Evil has a past; it is its past; it is its own tradition. (CI, p.284)

Karras discovers evil not only outside himself, but precisely inside of him. The exteriority of evil works for him like a way towards introspection. The evil that he irremediably perceives all around is actually his incapacity of seeing his own responsibility in all of it. Thus, Karras's realization of evil starts as an exteriority to finally culminate precisely as something very inner. As Merrin comments to Karras, the target is not the possessed but those around him. Evil is not 'released' by Merrin when he unburies the statue of Pazuzu. It is not 'committed', either, when Karras *deviates* from his faith. Therefore, what Karras finds out from his dread, from his dizziness, from his despair, from his sin, is his implication in sin. As Ricoeur observes, "we *inaugurate* evil. It is through us that evil comes into the world. But we inaugurate evil only on the basis of an evil already there, of which our birth is the impenetrable symbol." (CI, p.286). Ricoeur comments that Augustine's attempt to rationalize "original sin" into a concept was actually an attempt to combat Gnosticism, something which would bring him to a "quasi-Gnosticism". I mention this because the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is exempt from the accusations of being Gnostic at the expense of being extremely attached to the 'quasi-Gnostic' concept of "Original Sin" proposed by Augustine. In this

sense, what happens to Regan may be better classified as ‘misfortune’, in opposition to what happens to Karras, which would be better described as ‘evil’. Karras does not commit ‘evil’; he characterizes it, he depicts it. His ‘fall’ is parallel to the Adamic Fall. In consequence, what the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) entails by telling the story of Karras’s fall is a kind of *adventure into being*; though the symbolism of his character reveals something very different.

As Ricoeur remarks,

The symbolism of evil is never purely and simply the symbolism of objectivity, of the separated human subject, of interiorized self-awareness, of man severed from being, but symbol of the union of man with being. One must, then, come to the point where one sees evil as the adventure of being, as part of the history of being. (CI, p.309)

The evil that defies Karras is, therefore, more a ‘necessity’ than a ‘contingency’. ‘Evil’ is not so much what obstructs him from ‘seeing’ God and understanding faith. It is finally what allows him to do so. It is out of evil that he realizes what goodness is. Karras, in a sense, entails Ricoeur’s proposition that “evil is not the first thing that we understand but the last.” (CI, p.347) For the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971), evil is actually “the crucial experience of the sacred” (SE, p.6). What Karras ‘depicts’ is actually the existential category of ‘sin’, that is, “the experience of being oneself but alienated from oneself” (SE, p.8). As Ricoeur also observes, “Sin makes me incomprehensible to myself: God is hidden; the course of things no longer has meaning.” (Ibid) Karras is always able to *explain* what is happening to Regan, but he is barely able to *understand* it, exactly because all he can ‘see’ is *her* condition, though he fails precisely to see his own. The girl is found by him in a condition which goes beyond the reach of science - doctors cannot help her any longer. If there is any ‘help’ for her, it is only in ‘faith. That is what he fails to see. Karras is so alienated from himself that he cannot distinguish the doctor from the priest anymore. He is so lost in himself that he becomes neither of them. He is even more lost than Regan, who can be regarded as someone in a sort of schizophrenic state, because, at least, her condition can be simply *neurological*.



His, in its turn, is a matter of choice. Regan does not even have the right to choose. This is Karras's drama: to be himself. What the character of Karras may represent, in an existentialist perspective, is that "evil manifests itself in man's humanity." (FM, p.xlvi) Appropriating Ricoeur's words, what the characters of Regan and Karras may entail is that they are:

Not the root origin of evil [...] but merely the description of the place where evil appears and from where it can be seen. Indeed, it is quite possible that man is not the radical source of evil, that he is not the absolute evil-doer. But even if evil were coeval with the root origin of things, it would still be true that it is manifest only in the way it affects human existence. (Ibid)

In the narrative of Karras's struggle, what allows evil to be manifested is not an independent *evil entity will*; it is precisely his own fallibility, his own disproportion. It is in his character that the paradox of finitude is admirably enacted. It is Karras's finitude which is dramatized. But his "finitude becomes a problem only when the belief that something really appears is shaken by dispute or contradiction." (FM, p.19) However, this fallibility, this disproportion, is actually shown in a more positive perspective, that in which "man's disproportion is[/becomes] a power to fail" (FM, p.145). What the character of Karras entails, in this perspective, is that "fallibility is the condition of evil, although evil is the revealer of fallibility." (FM, p.144) Karras's fallibility means that "the capacity to fail consists in the fragility of the mediation that man effects in the objects, in his idea of humanity, and in his own heart." (FM, p.141) Karras fails not because of an exterior evil; he fails because of himself, his own self, his disproportion. But, more than that, Karras represents that "the most fundamental presupposition of every ethic is indeed that there is already a cleavage between the valid and the non-valid and that man is already capable of the dual." (FM, p.142) It is because the narrative is focused on his character that we can infer from it that "man can invent only human disorders and evils." (FM, p.143) What his character finally entails is the idea that "it is only through the currently evil condition of man's heart that one can detect a condition more primordial than any evil." (FM, p.144) Therefore, "to say that man is so evil

that we no longer know what his goodness would be is really to say nothing at all. However primordial badness may be, goodness is yet more primordial.” (FM, p.145)

“In forgetting, they were trying to remember.” (TE, p.385) This is the sentence that closes the entire narrative. Connected with the opening image of the blinding sun, this is a sentence that symbolically *opens* and *invites* us to thinking; it *gives rise to thought*. As Ricoeur observes, “forgetfulness is the counterpart of the great task of nourishing men.” (SE, p.349) What the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) engenders, in an existentialist perspective, therefore, is not the answer to what evil is, or means. Any speculation of the nature, origin and end of evil is, according to Ricoeur, a “prolegomena to faith” (SE, p.307). The exorcist of the title is an explicit indication that what the reader is about to experience is the drama of a man in his struggle within faith. What is actually being justified in the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) is precisely a defense of a primordial goodness in human beings, despite all evil committed by them. For the narrative, faith is a drama; sin, a possibility; goodness, a mystery; and evil, a reality. Karras entails fallibility; Chris, hope; Kinderman, heart; Regan, the absurd. Ricoeur’s observation that “evil becomes mediation of being” (SE, p.329) enlightens the interpretation on the novel, thus deepening the shallow perspective of Gnosticism and moving to an existentialist/philosophical point of view.

Therefore, instead of interpreting *The Exorcist* (1971) as a novel concerned with the problem of evil, we should read it as a narrative which tells the story of a character in his struggle with the absurd of the world, as well as with his own disproportion, in the search for understanding, meaning, and the consciousness of his own existential condition. What this narrative *wants to say*, what it *means*, is that the ‘real’ exorcism is not the one that we do to others. The final exorcism in the narrative is not the one performed by Karras on Regan. From beginning to end, not only Karras, but all the other characters are actually performing their own exorcisms, that is, their own struggle to be somebody, to fight against their own devils,

their own humanity. Chris entails the idea that ‘hope’ is not a matter of faith, but of despair; Kinderman, the idea that ‘reason’ is not a matter merely of logic, neither of faith, but actually a matter of ‘comfort’; Karras entails the idea that faith is not a matter of belief, of dogma, but simply the despair of the self in being aware of his own fallibility.

Finally, the best key to interpret *The Exorcist* (1971) is still the very one provided by the narrative itself. Despite all that the existentialist perspective can offer to its reading, and to its opening into new and invigorating possibilities, the text of the narrative is still the best key to interpret it. Therefore, any detour that we may take into parallelism with other texts is actually the necessary condition of distancing that we need in order to *understand* what is already there in the text. In the case of *The Exorcist* (1971), despite all that has already been said, namely, that it cannot be simply classified as horror, and that it is much beyond a theodicy, what this narrative tells is finally the story of the “human phenomenon”. The “groping” back towards God mentioned in the Prologue and later by Merrin is explicitly Teilhard de Chardin’s “Omega Point”. According to the latter, this is a kind of teleological pole toward which the universe evolves (DE CHARDIN, 1955). In his theory, *Homo Sapiens* marks a step into the increasing complexity within evolution while becoming conscious of itself. In Blatty’s narrative, this *still strange spiritual world* that surrounds people as ‘ghosts’ is actually the outcome of men’s own “augmented consciousness”, the unconscious, or rather, in *Jungian* terms, “the collective unconscious”, which, in De Chardin’s theory, composes what he calls “Noosphere”, a term first coined by Vladimir Vernadsky and developed by the French Jesuit, which means “the sphere of human thought”. In this sense, Karras’s struggle may entail that human kind, while still remaining hermetic and secluded, selfish and hopeless, is very prone to perish. The ‘spiritual’, for Blatty as for De Chardin, is actually part of the development of matter toward the “Omega Point”. The ‘devils’ that possess Regan are actually, in Blatty’s perspective, very human exactly because they are not ‘para-’ or ‘supra-’

human, in the sense of ‘external’ and ‘independent’ from it. On the contrary, the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’, for Blatty, are an extension of one and the same principle. Amazingly, Blatty’s text is much more prone to be labeled as ‘spiritualist’, in relation to the legacy of Alan Kardek, than in a strict Roman Catholic tradition<sup>148</sup>. It is remarkable to note that Teilhard de Chardin, who seems to serve not only as a model for one of the characters in *The Exorcist* (1971) but for the whole story, was a philosopher, a Jesuit priest and a paleontologist who was censured by the Church because of his controversial ideas about Christian dogmas. One of the topics of his theory of evolution is that the latter is becoming an increasingly optional process (Ibid). For De Chardin, evolution is an ascent toward consciousness and the strife towards consciousness. (Ibidem, p.166) Despite all of Blatty’s effort to bring *verisimilitude* to the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971), the text actually turns towards a clear ideological allegory of De Chardin’s theory. Thus, the story ends up becoming an existentialist struggle to find not a justification of God in face of all the evil in the world, but a purpose for man in an *apparently* meaningless existence. Instead of interpreting Karras as the inevitable choice between the mutually excluding ‘faith’ and ‘reason’, ‘science’ and ‘religion’, what the narrative with all its references provides is the interdependence between these elements, exactly the one proposed by Teilhard de Chardin, and later developed by ‘transhumanism’. Therefore, instead of the argument that Blatty’s text would be a leap back into the Middle Ages, what the references of the text bring to it is quite the opposite.

Conclusively, what this dissertation has emphatically attempted to say is that the label ‘horror’ normally associated with *The Exorcist* is much more a product derived from its cinematic adaptation than due to its literary version. This entails not merely confusing one for the other, but actually accepting the inadequacy of the term for the latter. This does not mean that there are not some *elements* of horror in *The Exorcist* (1971), but that horror is the least

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<sup>148</sup> Blatty’s experience with *séances* and his speculations on the problems on concepts such as ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’ clearly indicate an approximation with the spiritualist doctrine developed by Kardek.

important aspect in the story. There is much more relevance in its association with the kind of existentialism related to Kierkegaard and Ricoeur than any interpretation of it as a kind of catechism, dogma or even theodicy. Finally, *The Exorcist* (1971) is not a story about a possessed girl who is exorcized by a priest who, at the end of the story, recovers his 'traditional' faith. What the novel actually tells in its narrative is the struggle of a man towards consciousness of his own humanity. Whatever interpretation, or rather, response it might provoke in a reader, I still believe that a text produces a *mode of being in the world* that is *already disclosed to me*, that is, inscribed in the text, not as an 'immanence', but as a 'proposal', which interpolates readers for a *narrative identity*.

## AFTERWORD

At the beginning of this dissertation I had mentioned the addition of the words “through hermeneutics” to its *provisory* title “Literary Exorcism: Meaning *The Exorcist*” as a way to compensate the weight that this theoretical reflections took place in my research. Now it is time to give a little more attention to the term “provisory” highlighted above.

Particularly, I like short titles; I appreciate the power of condensation and the ‘gravity force’ that a very short piece of language can have. At this point of my research, I am still confused if what was provisory should not become permanent. I am still very satisfied with the effect that the title “Literary Exorcism: Meaning *The Exorcist*” has on me. However, I also feel very much in debt to two words that form the root of the two main chapters in this study, namely, hermeneutics and existentialism. Therefore, the challenge, after finishing the main body of this dissertation, was to *reconfigure* the title that started it all into one that could still preserve the positive impression that the former had on me, and which, at the same time, could allow the reader to be better informed about what this dissertation was all about. Thinking in other words, the new title also needed ‘credentials’. Moreover, I was in pursuit of a title that could also help the reader make a ‘better’ and ‘safer’ *leap* from one side to the other of the two sides of this study, since one of the most difficult things that I faced in the writing of this text was not exactly the composition of each part but the *bridge* between them. The initial proposition, or rather, the problem that started this research was my amazement that after so much ado caused by the cinematic interpretation of Blatty’s novel, the latter had not yet received the proper focus that it deserved. In other words, much more has been said about the movie in relation to the novel and, to make things worse, most of what has been said about the latter is still greatly ‘possessed’ by the former. Szumskyj was an important

contribution to this dissertation because of all the time saved with the collection of essays he organized and which I initially intended would be a part of the objective of this dissertation. His book coincided with my acceptance at the UFRGS Graduate Program in Literature, which allowed me to go on a little further and deeper into the theoretical aspects of 'literary interpretation' and the question of 'meaning'. However, this *pharmakon* had its 'venous' effect; I almost ended up slipping out of my main concern, that is, providing a new interpretation of Blatty's novel in order to widen the gap that separates the literary text from its cinematic adaptation. Ricoeur came into my hands as an attempt to deal with the problem of evil. Amazingly, his hermeneutical phenomenology proved to be a precious reference for the question that I was positing to my *point of scrutiny*.

'What does it mean?' was not only the starting 'naïve' question to lead the rest of the whole dissertation; it almost became the center of the whole dissertation. I realized, with the aid of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, that this was not only a 'hermeneutical' question; it was an 'ontological' issue – to be more precise, it was quite existentialist. From my formation in Languages I was already quite aware that *the author was already dead*. However, for me it still sounded too *monadic*, for a lack of a better word to describe my impressions. In my *naïve* perspective, the only exit from the congeniality of the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey was the hermetic and solitary recess of the affirmation that *the meaning of a text is what it means to a reader*. This was a position that dissatisfied me as much as the congeniality of the author. I still believed *blindly* that there should be something in between. Thus, it was in Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* that my concerns started to find a way. I did not want to disavow all the contributions that the last century had made towards the importance of the reader in the *construction* of meaning; however, I also did not want to discard the category of the 'author' as something irrelevant. But, above all, I did not want to make the categories of 'author' and 'reader' 'central' to the question.

In this sense, *The Politics of Interpretation* was an excellent start to show that the issue of meaning is far from being solved and, more than that, is still meritorious of attention. Mitchell's collection of essays, more than being exemplary of the validity of researching subjects regarding categories such as 'interpretation' and 'meaning', also provides worthy arguments on the validity of referring to 'intentionality' in written texts. It is no longer a matter of coming to terms with what the *author had in mind*, nor is it even about, in a perspective like that of Schleiermacher, *knowing the text more than its author*. This is the importance of Hirsch's book for this dissertation. He is not in pursuit of reestablishing romantic hermeneutics. The kind of hermeneutics that he seeks is actually much more in favor of the ones proposed by Gadamer and Ricoeur. Despite all their differences, what is important in all of them is the reevaluation of the category of 'intentionality'. It is because all of them believe that communication is possible, despite all its contingencies, that they make the issue of meaning a precious one. For them, interpretation is the question *par excellence*. Thus, the goal of the first chapter of this dissertation was to try to demonstrate that we should be a little more aware about the inconsistency of the category of the reader. In other words, if the category of the author is not a trustful one anymore, then why should the category of the reader be so? Between the finitude of the author and the infinitude of the reader, there is the *possibility* of the text. This is the argument for the first part: the text maintains an 'intentionality' which is no longer associated to the closeness of the author or to the openness of the reader, but to the possibility of communication of the text. This is not a matter of epistemological impossibility, but of ethical responsibility. This is why Ricoeur became a referential figure not only for the question of 'evil', but also for the problem of 'interpretation'.

Therefore, it is possible to shorten the entire first section in the following reflection made by Ricoeur:



To understand is to follow the dynamic of the work, its movement from what it says to that about which it speaks. Beyond my situation as reader, beyond the situation of the author, I offer myself to the possible mode of being-in-the-world which the text opens up and discloses to me. (HHS, p.177)

The possible mode of being-in-the-world opened and disclosed by the text is not something unique which could be grasped by one single mind or text, which would belong exclusively to one reader. However, it is also not the infinitude of ‘any’ reading of ‘any’ reader. Thus, the conflict of interpretations will remain in the realm of the disputes for the validity of what a text *possibly wants to say*. As Ricoeur reflects, “the text is not without reference; the task of reading, *qua* interpretation, will be precisely to fulfill the reference.” (HHS, p.148) The author, in this sense, is nothing more than just another reader in the pursuit of this fulfillment; albeit a very precious one, I would say. Struggling for meaning is not a move made only by the reader or by the author, it is also a movement of the text toward existence. In this sense, Ricoeur reminds us very well that “*understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being*.” (HHS, p.44)

Thus, the *meaning* of the text becomes its *identity*, not in the sense of *sameness*, of duplication, of character, but precisely in the sense proposed by Ricoeur (1994) as “narrative identity”. As he proposes,

Narrative identity oscillates between two limits: a lower limit, where permanence in time expresses the confusion of *idem* and *ipse*; and an upper limit, where the *ipse* poses the question of its identity without the aid and support of the *idem*. (OA, p.124)

Moreover, there is the ethical implication of this category. In this sense, Ricoeur says that “by narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself coauthor as to its meaning.” (OA, p.162) When I set myself as *responsible* for the ‘meaning’ of a text, for *interpreting* what it *wants to say*, I cannot forget that there are different modes of being

involved in this relation. Therefore, as a reader, I close the ethical circle between the other two components of this sphere, namely, the author and the text.

However, as I said in the beginning of the first chapter, this part of the dissertation is less a conclusion than it is the raising of a problem. What has been exposed above was only the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics, more specifically the one proposed by Ricoeur, and the one which I am very much prone to.

Back to the final purpose of this dissertation, what finally can be said about *The Exorcist* (1971) is that it is a novel full of symbolic language. Therefore, as Ricoeur observes, “the symbol gives rise to thought.”<sup>149</sup> First of all, I hope that my initial hypothesis has been confirmed at the end of this dissertation: the one which says that *The Exorcist* (1971) lacks a better definition of genre than that of ‘horror’. It must be emphasized that it does not entail the idea that it is not horror at all. What this argumentation attempts to champion is the perspective that ‘horror’ is what *The Exorcist* (1971) least is. In fact, this labeling is much more due to the impact of its cinematic interpretation than a close reading of the text of the novel and its many textual references. Therefore, what I am proposing is that *The Exorcist* (1971) deserves, lacks, and invites other interpretations.

In this sense, I could also take the blame for *defending* the novel. But this accusation also needs further explanation. First of all, it is not a matter of the book being better or superior to the film; it is mainly a matter of being quite different. There are two important ‘scenes’ that are decisive in splitting the two works. The first one is the removal of the scene in the movie where Father Merrin tells Karras his perspective on the purpose of possession. Evidently, this was equivalent to removing the main argument of an essay. Secondly, in the movie the scene where Karras supposedly leaps through the window, which is only overheard by Chris and Sharon at the kitchen, is visually interpreted by showing Karras’s eyes turning

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<sup>149</sup> Op. Cit.

green and his face contorting, explicitly arguing for the cause of genuine possession. I understand that Friedkin, the director, did this because he wanted his movie to be as close as possible to what Blatty wanted in his text. The fact is that the text is not closed at all in favor of this interpretation. The text allows the possibility of still interpreting Karras's leap as an escaping device for the burden of his guilt. In a *kierkegaardian* perspective, Karras never lost his faith, because to be in doubt is only one of the degrees of being in despair; and as Kierkegaard observes, "faith is despair"<sup>150</sup>.

Another interpretation that is given to *The Exorcist* (1971) is that it is a novel with a strong ideology bias towards Catholicism. Despite Blatty's still debatable religious orientation, which could be easily shifted from devout Catholicism to a more 'relaxed' Spiritualism, in a *kardecist* perspective, the reading of the novel as a kind of theodicy is still as insufficient as the one for 'horror'. Blatty once affirmed in an interview that *The Exorcist* (1971) was part of a trilogy, and that this novel was specifically dedicated to the problem of evil. Most probably this is what may have made the novel into a *Job's complaint*. However, as Blatty himself observed, not only about *Twinkle, Twinkle, "Killer" Kane*, or *Ninth Configuration*, but also for *The Exorcist* (1971) itself, these were narratives about the "mystery of goodness", of illogically sacrificing oneself for the benefit of the other. Despite its immediate relevance to what is apparent in the narrative, what I have attempted to show was actually the great potential that the text provides if it is read in an existentialist perspective. I have already mentioned, too, that existentialism is a concept with many facets. But, by seeking a philosophical point of view on 'evil', I ended up discovering that what Ricoeur and Kierkegaard had to say on their own subject matched surprisingly the arguments engendered by the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971). All of them are substantive testimonies of faith. 'Evil', in this comparative reading between *The Exorcist* (1971) and Ricoeur's and

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<sup>150</sup> Op. Cit.

Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections about the subject, is only the detour necessary to understand what is human in humanity, and to experience faith in a deeper sense. By dealing with unjustified suffering and sacrifice, what seems to be the argument pursued by Blatty's novel is actually a reflection on the existential struggle of faith.

I am also aware that at a certain point my dissertation may have taken the aspects of a theological argumentation. I do not deny this. But this was achieved after Ricoeur's axiom about interpretation which says that to interpret a text is to allow oneself to what a text opens up and discloses, not as something hidden or veiled by the narrative, but rather as something, in a very broad sense, *already there*. This does not mean that the meaning of a text is already present in the text, like an immanence. Under this perspective, I could not deny the immense importance that Teilhard de Chardin has not only religiously for Blatty, but also philosophically for *The Exorcist* (1971). However, I still found it necessary to enact a long detour through Ricoeur and Kierkegaard in order to achieve the humanist and existentialist perspective provided by the French paleontologist/Jesuit. I wanted to show that Blatty's novel is not a narrative about the 'materiality' of 'evil', but rather about the very humanity of faith, and the importance given to fallibility as its major aspect. What all of them are actually arguing for is precisely that faith is made of fault, that goodness is also made of evil, and that all of them will ever remain a mystery precisely due to their *pharmakon* aspect of being a poison and a cure.

I also wanted to show, finally, that *The Exorcist* (1971) is a work that still deserves more attention than it has received up to now. Szumskyj's book was an important step in this direction, and I hope that this dissertation serve as another opening door for increasing the positive reception of the novel for the academic public. Therefore, what Blatty and I have to say about *The Exorcist* (1971) is as important as what the text itself opens up and discloses. Once and for all, it must be understood that *The Exorcist* (1971) is not a novel about a

possessed girl who is saved through exorcism, neither the story about a priest who recovered his faith. In a very opposite sense, this is a story about a priest in his existential struggle to cope with his humanity, his own fallibility. By striving to understand how God could allow 'evil', being so omnipotent and good, Karras was actually masquerading his own fallibility - avoiding his own responsibility. Karras is left alone and in despair because, *existentially* speaking, we are all alone, despairingly left to ourselves, and meaningless; we only achieve significance, value and direction precisely when we become "social", when we become aware of this immaterial relation net that unites us, like the "noosphere" proposed by de Chardin. This is why the novel does not end with Karras suicide; this is why it ends with the beginning of a new friendship, between the reason and logic of Kinderman and the faith and devotion of Father Dyer. Ideologically, it champions the same idea defended by the French paleontologist/Jesuit, that in diversity we find unity, that evolution is complexification towards self-conscience, that despite all our disproportion we can coincide. Whatever the criticism this idea may engender, positive and negative, I believe that if there is anything that the narrative of *The Exorcist* (1971) wants to say, despite the author's and readers' implications in it, is precisely that. Even though Hirsch is right to say that interpretation is always a guess, I still agree with him that some guesses may be more plausible and valid than others. I hope to have provided an interpretation of *The Exorcist* (1971) that not only opens it to new perspectives, but also justifies it.

In the final analysis,  
for the believer there are no questions,  
and for the non-believer there are no answers.

Hafetz Hayyim

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