

## Moral Vision in Jim Thompson's *The Getaway*

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It has been claimed by one commentator that "there is no moral center" in Jim Thompson's crime fiction, and that "concepts of right and wrong are not applicable; platitudes about crime not paying are meaningless."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, for another critic, Thompson's work reveals "the absence of any moral center at all . . . whatever order obtains at the end of one of his stories is a writer's order, not a moralist's."<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to understand how this view of Jim Thompson could have taken root—Thompson the hard-boiled cynic, obsessed, Poe-like, with the literary possibilities of negation, psychic disintegration, and self-destruction. The most celebrated and most "noir" of the novels, like *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) and *Pop. 1280* (1964), do seem to argue strongly for the nihilistic vision, each tracing the careers of psychopathic killers, from one brutal and cunningly executed murder to another, through a chaotic modern landscape from which the conventional moral signposts seem to have been removed. There is certainly a good deal of existentialist despair in Thompson, in the way in which so many of his protagonists, like Roy Dillon in *The Grifters* (1963), come face to face with "Desolation. Eternal, infinite. Like Dostoyevski's conception of eternity, a fly circling about a privy."<sup>3</sup> But this is not the complete story. It is the purpose of this essay to attempt to redress the balance somewhat, to present a case for Jim Thompson as a writer also concerned with the need to preserve a moral sense in the modern American society he describes. My principal text for discussion will be *The Getaway* (1959), Thompson's Bonnie-and-Clyde type story of a husband-and-wife duo who pull off a "routine" small-town bank heist that goes disastrously wrong.

If there is no discernible "moral center" in Thompson's fictional world—in the way that it exists in the crime fiction of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler, for example—it is because Thompson was unable to locate one in the real American world around him. Thompson's biographer, Michael McCauley, maintains that Thompson's own experience caused him to identify with "the victims of the system . . . those who lost their hope, their pride, even their identity. Thompson meditated on the big lie of capitalism as manifested in its most deadly form—the split souls of psychotic, doomed pursuers of the

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Pemberton, "Jim Thompson," in *Critical Survey of Mystery and Detective Fiction*, ed. F.N. Magill (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1988) 1591.

<sup>2</sup> Peter S. Prescott, "The Cirrhosis of the Soul," *Newsweek* 17 Nov. 1986: 90.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Thompson, *The Grifters* (London: Corgi Books, 1991) 165. In the United States, all Thompson's novels have been made available by Vintage Books or The Mysterious Press (New York).

American Dream. Soon rich and poor, appearance and reality, right and wrong, good and evil seemed to Thompson not so much polar opposites as a matter of power and perspective, on both a societal and a personal scale.<sup>4</sup> Several of Thompson's major protagonists share this vision of a morally bankrupt society. Sheriff Lou Ford, in *The Killer Inside Me*, calls it "a peculiar civilization. The police are playing crooks in it, and the crooks are doing police duty. The politicians are preachers, and the preachers are politicians. The tax collectors collect for themselves. The Bad People want us to have more dough, and the Good People are fighting to keep it from us."<sup>5</sup> In Ford's view, this "screwed up, bitched up" American world is beyond salvation because "no one, almost no one, sees anything wrong with it."

Most of Thompson's first-person protagonists exist in the moral no-man's-land of society rather than on the moral high ground formerly occupied by basically good men like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who "upheld distinct values, usually those which challenged the surrounding corruption," as Julian Hurstfield has put it.<sup>6</sup> Thompson's fiction has no room for private eyes or police detectives who step in to unravel mysteries and restore moral order; the world he depicts is too far gone, too morally decayed, to be restored by the principled individual. In the typical Thompson scenario, the vacuum left where the "moral center" used to be is now filled by the twisted intelligence of the psychotic killer or the cold-blooded amorality of the professional gunman. The traditional moral certitudes—integrity, altruism, a sense of right and justice—have not disappeared altogether from Thompson's world, but they are everywhere in retreat. Occasionally he will introduce a minor character who attempts to live by these old-fashioned standards—usually unsuccessfully.

In *The Getaway*, Thompson does this through the veterinarian, Harold Clinton, who represents a straightforward moral decency which is easily overwhelmed by the sadistic violence and "animal cunning" of Rudy Torrento, Doc McCoy's paranoid accomplice who comes to Clinton for treatment after being shot by Doc. Having saved the hoodlum's life, Clinton is terrorized by Rudy into giving up his practice, his car, and eventually his wife (who puts up no struggle at all). "All his life he had given up," Thompson comments, "He didn't know why it was like that; why a man who wanted nothing but to live honestly and industriously and usefully—who, briefly, asked only the privileges of giving and helping—had had to compromise and surrender at every turn."<sup>7</sup> The veterinarian finally takes his own life after being forced to share a motel bed with

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<sup>4</sup> Michael J. McCauley, *Jim Thompson: Sleep With The Devil* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1991) 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 118.

<sup>6</sup> Julian G. Hurstfield, "Mean Streets, Mystery Plays: The New Pathology of Recent American Crime Fiction," in *The New American Writing*, ed. G. Clarke (London: Vision Press, 1990) 173.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Thompson, *The Getaway* (London: Corgi Books, 1989) 113–14. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be given parenthetically in the text.

his wife and Torrento and to witness their lovemaking. "In his inherent delicacy and decency," says Thompson, "he could not admit that there was anything to object to. He heard them that night—and subsequent nights of their leisurely journey westward. But he kept his back turned and his eyes closed, feeling no shame or anger but only an increasing sickness of soul" (139). In the world Thompson presents, Harold Clinton's kind of well-meaning decency seems doomed to destruction by the forces of moral corruption.

In such a fast-moving and suspense-driven narrative, it is easy to overlook the fact that *The Getaway* is one of Thompson's bloodiest and most corpse-strewn novels; it contains no fewer than thirteen deaths (not to mention numerous pistol-whippings and other assorted beatings) which are either directly or indirectly the work of Carter "Doc" McCoy and his wife, Carol. Their coolness and bravado aside, there is no mistaking Thompson's distaste for the unhesitating viciousness that they display throughout the novel when eliminating often completely innocent human obstacles from their path. Take, for example, Doc's shooting of the traveling salesman whose murder is made "necessary" because the pair need his car in order to continue their flight after the robbery. Having beaten the salesman unconscious, "Doc dragged the man down the ditch to the culvert and placed the gun muzzle inside his mouth. He triggered the gun twice. He shoved it back into his belt, began squeezing the now faceless body into the culvert" (136). Or take the clinical efficiency with which Doc breaks the neck of the thief who has stolen the satchel containing the quarter-million dollar proceeds of the robbery. Seated next to the thief on the train, Doc "whipped the gun barrel upward. It smashed against the point of the thief's chin. His eyes glazed, and his body went into a sacklike sag. Methodically, Doc locked an arm around his head, braced the other across his back and jerked. It was over in a split second. If a man can die instantly, the thief did" (122-23). In their matter-of-fact murderousness, Doc and Carol belong to the same stable as many of Elmore Leonard's more recent trigger-happy punks and bloodthirsty hitmen.

Jim Thompson is very far from being a bleeding-heart sentimentalist, but with nearly all of his killer protagonists, he is at pains to track their extreme antisocial behavior back to some formative (or, usually, deformative) childhood experience, or, at least, to suggest the possible causal relations between their criminal activity and their social and cultural backgrounds. For Thompson, strictly speaking, no murder can take place without motivation, and no murder is inexplicable; in one way or another, centrally or marginally, society itself can usually be implicated. In this connection, one thinks again of *The Killer Inside Me* and Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford, a serial-murderer narrator whose psychosis is accounted for in part by the fact that as a child he was seduced into a sadistic sexual relationship by the family housekeeper. There is nothing so emphatically clear in *The Getaway*, but Thompson is still careful to set out the circumstances which have led Doc and Carol to take up their life of crime.

In Doc's case, these conditioning factors appear to have been partly hereditary and partly social. The son of a corrupt and therefore widely popular small-town Southern sheriff ("the grossest incompetent and the most costly ornament in the county's body politic"), Doc grew up with "an unshakable belief in his own merit; a conviction that he not only would be but should be liked wherever he went" (31). In New York, after graduating from school, Doc found it difficult to hold jobs not because of the Depression but because his popularity with other employees and supervisors made him "a disrupting influence." Thompson emphasizes the point that the precocious Doc already had the qualities to make an excellent "upper-echelon executive," but an inflexible corporate mentality discouraged any ambitions he may have had in that direction because "he qualified neither in years nor experience for anything but the lowliest jobs" (51). Doc's early "straight" career, therefore, has been the familiar story of Horatio Alger-like potential snubbed by an unsympathetic and myopic establishment.

Like a more famous frustrated idealist, James Gatz (alias Jay Gatsby), Doc found an easier and quicker way to satisfy his ambitions. Beginning with a scam to help a legitimate businessman associate collect on some burglary insurance, Doc soon graduated through gambling-joint holdups to "the truly big operations" which netted him over half a million dollars by the age of twenty-five (when he began an eight-year prison sentence). Thompson does not excuse Doc's criminality, but he provides him with a history that makes perfectly plausible his steady drift from establishment morality to the predatory world of organized crime, which is more than ready to reward Doc's initiative and intelligence. If Doc does learn to value any moral code, Thompson notes ironically, it is the elder McCoy's belief that "a man's best friend is himself, that a non-friend was anyone who ceased to be useful, and that it was more or less a moral obligation to cash in any persons in this category, whenever it could be done safely and with no chance of a kick-back" (52).

We have in Doc, then, a character who, for all his affability and apparently good-natured charm, still lives off society rather than in it. Opportunistic, exploitative, and individualistic, Doc has an overriding instinct for personal survival; sociable but ruthlessly antisocial, Doc recognizes no obligation to any interests outside his own. In the strictest sense of the term, Doc represents an unfettered amorality, which nevertheless has its own kind of freewheeling glamor—certainly for Carol, for this is what first attracts her to him. Something of the complexity and hesitancy of Thompson's moral perspective comes through in the way in which Carol views her life of crime as obviously preferable to the deadening monotony of her former life as a small-town librarian. "Back in the beginning," Thompson writes, "she had had some conscience-impelled notion of reforming Doc. But she could not think of that now without a downward quirk of her small mouth, a wince born more of bewilderment than embarrassment at the preposterousness of her one-time viewpoint. Reform? Change? Why, and to what? The terms were meaningless. Doc had opened a door for her, and she had

entered into, adopted and been adopted by, a new world . . . Doc's amoral outlook had become hers" (24–25). The undesirable and "dishwater-dull" librarian "had become more like Doc than Doc himself. More engagingly persuasive when she chose to be. Harder when hardness seemed necessary." Carol's "ordinary" and respectable small-town upbringing has harbored as much psychopathic potential as we find in the professional criminal she marries. Thompson is careful here to make Carol a reflection of, and an extension of, her husband.

What often gives Thompson's criminal characters a curiously poignant quality is their vague yearning for an alternative but unobtainable way of life which is more genuine and more fulfilling than the one they lead. Roy Dillon, the con-man protagonist of *The Grifters*, experiences a profound sense of desolation, and longs for a wholesome and honest love relationship with Carol Roberg, his young Jewish nurse. Sheriff Nick Corey, the psychotic narrator of *Pop. 1280*, clings to a vision of idyllic satisfaction in his passion for his mistress, Amy. For Doc McCoy, this yearning for a simpler satisfaction takes the form of a "normal" happily married life with Carol. As he gazes out of the train window at the beauty of the southern Californian coastline, Doc admires "this area of orange and avocado groves, of rolling black-green hills, of tile-roofed houses . . . stretching endlessly along the endless expanse of curving, white-sand beach. He had thought about retiring here some day. . . . He could see himself and Carol on the patio of one of those incredibly gay houses. Barbecuing a steak perhaps, or sipping tall drinks while they stared out to sea. There would be a cool breeze blowing in, temperately cool and smelling of salt" (152). The fact that Doc's "preposterous" out-of-reach vision depends for its full meaning on his wife, Carol, leads me to consider the nature of their relationship and to approach a more specific definition of the moral sensibility that informs much of Thompson's fiction.

On one level, *The Getaway* is a love story; more precisely, it is a story about a struggle by a husband and wife to preserve their marriage from themselves. Doc McCoy and his wife enjoy that very rare thing in Thompson's fiction—a loving marriage. Time and again, Thompson emphasizes this fact. At one point, during their escape toward Mexico, Doc and Carol quarrel and in their anger consider the possibility of splitting up; but Doc "did not want to be separated from her. Even if it had been practical, he would not have wanted it. And despite anything she said or did, he knew that she felt the same way. They were still in love—as much as they had ever been. Strangely, nothing had changed that" (150). At times, the closeness of their relationship seems to have all the obsessive intensity of the classic romantic love identification with the beloved—each is able to anticipate the thoughts and reactions of the other; they were "one with each other," says Thompson, "each an extension of the other" (68). The purpose of the bank robbery had been the very romantic one of guaranteeing a future together. But the security of their relationship is undermined by a nagging mistrust from

the moment Doc is presented with the possibility that Carol, in her eagerness to ensure that Doc be pardoned, may have slept with the chairman of the parole board, the lawyer Beynon. His suspicions are never proven (indeed, Doc does not want to have them proven) and Carol denies Beynon's insinuations, but Doc must take up what Thompson calls his "cross of doubt" (81), and their relationship is placed on a changed and more tenuous footing. Significantly, Carol's fidelity had been "the one thing he had trusted and believed in" (79), but "as a criminal, he had learned to link infidelity with treachery. It revealed either a dangerous flaw in character, or an equally dangerous shift in loyalties. In any case, the woman was a bad risk in a game where no risk could be tolerated" (84).

In Doc's mind, the practical demands of self-preservation begin to undercut the certainty of his love for Carol. Likewise, aware that her husband may be harboring suspicions, Carol's view of Doc is altered; she experiences a confused anger against him, but is unable to locate its cause. She cannot explain "why she had viewed him and almost everything he had done with distrust and distaste practically from the moment of their post-robbery meeting. It wasn't so much what he'd done, she supposed, as what he had not. Not so much what he was, as what he was not. And in her mind she wailed bridelike for what she had lost—or thought she had; for something that had never existed outside of her mind" (123-24). Eventually, Carol comes near to identifying her new sense of estrangement from Doc. The real trouble, she says, has nothing to do with the difficulties of their escape; "we kind of are strangers," she says. "we aren't the same people we were four years ago" (133).

Thompson objectifies the couple's growing sense of alienation in some powerful scenes where Doc and Carol have to resort to unusual hiding places to escape the law. The first of these is a pair of underwater caves—each "a dimly-lit, well-ventilated coffin"—in which Doc and Carol are entombed alive for forty-eight hours, lying side by side but separated by several feet of rock. Tony Hilfer has pointed to the apparent allegorical implications of the situation—the two "are in the same predicament but isolated from each other, an exact structural analogue to a relationship between two committed egoists."<sup>8</sup> During the agony of this disorienting experience, Carol confronts her own self and recognizes the impossibility of explaining the complexity and the ambiguity of her feelings toward Doc—her loss of faith in him, and yet her unbreakable dependency: "Carol wondered why she feared Doc as she did—how she could fear him and be unable to trust him. And yet love him as she could never love another. Even now, despite her fear and distrust, she would have given anything to have him with her" (175). Their next hideout is on a farm, under a hollowed-out and suffocatingly hot pile of manure (Doc himself is amused by the symbolism of the situation) where the pair have to sit naked for three days. Here, at least, they are physically together. But, as if to emphasize the "distancing" that has taken place,

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Hilfer, *The Crime Novel: The Deviant Genre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 138.

Carol's attempt at lovemaking is frustrated when "a soggy mass struck her on the forehead, slid down across her face. She sat back abruptly, scrubbing and brushing at herself" (187). As Robert Polito has noted, the allegorical implication of these two scenes seems to be that, on a metaphorical level, the getaway represents something like a "three-stage descent into hell."<sup>9</sup>

Because Thompson is unable to restore any kind of moral order in the "real" world of the novel, he resorts in the final chapter to an elaborate allegory which allows him at least to draw some moralistic conclusions about Doc and Carol and the logical outcome of their career in crime. This closing section takes place in an outlaw town in the Mexican interior—a refuge for fugitive criminals from north of the border. As Thompson describes this enigmatic mountain locale, "the tiny area where El Rey is uncrowned king appears on no maps and, for very practical reasons, it has no official existence. This has led to the rumor that the place actually does not exist, that it is only an illusory haven conjured up into the minds of the wicked. And since no one with a good reputation for truth and veracity has ever returned from it. . . . But it is there, all right" (202). Although "an excellent place in many ways" (it has a healthy climate and "the largest per capita police force in the world"), El Rey's kingdom is no bank-robber's heaven. "The fine swimming pools of the various villas are rarely used," writes Thompson, "the horses in the public stables grow fat for want of exercise, and the boats stand rotting in their docks. No one fishes, no one hunts, no one plays golf, tennis, or darts . . . there is almost no social life" (207). Polito has likened it to "a Swiftian paradise of eternal blankness."<sup>10</sup>

El Rey's expatriate guests are constantly complaining. Because they "have just so much money and can get no more," their main source of anxiety is how to prevent their ill-gotten wealth from being eaten away, particularly through the unusual deposit terms laid down by El Rey's bank. As far as protecting their loot is concerned, the residents find themselves the helpless victims of a catch-22 situation; they are not compelled to deposit their money in the bank, but there is no real alternative because "the resort management, specifically the police, will assume no responsibility if it is stolen—as it is very likely to be. There is good reason to believe that the police themselves do the stealing from nondepositors" (205). The bank itself charges interest *on* deposits, at a percentage rate in inverse ratio to the balance, six per cent on one hundred thousand dollars and "reaching a murderous twenty-five per cent on amounts of fifty thousand and under." But it is impossible to maintain the one hundred thousand dollar figure by economizing because "when one's monthly withdrawals fall under an arbitrary total—the approximate amount which it should cost him to live at the prevailing first-class scale—he becomes subject to certain 'inactive account' charges. And

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Polito, "Jim Thompson: Lost Writer," in *Fireworks: The Lost Writings of Jim Thompson*, ed. R. Polito and M.J. McCauley (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1989) 6.

<sup>10</sup> Polito 7.

these, added to his withdrawals, invariably equal that total" (204). One of the small ironies, then, of Doc and Carol's situation, is that having robbed one bank in order to secure their freedom, they now find themselves stripped of that freedom by another.

Thompson makes it clear that in the figure of El Rey (who, presumably, is intended as the Devil himself), Doc and Carol only get the master they deserve. El Rey and his subjects "delight in irony, in symbolism; in constantly holding up a mirror to you so that you must see yourself as you are, and as they see you" (213). Part of the ironic function of El Rey's code of values is that it presents a magnified reflection of the ruthless amorality pursued by the McCoys in their former lives, so that distinctions between fair and unfair, right and wrong, simply do not apply. El Rey "tosses your words back at you, answers questions with questions, retorts with biting and ironic parables. Tell him that such and such a thing is bad, and suggest a goodly substitute, and he will quote you the ancient proverb about the king with two sons named Either and Neither. 'An inquiry was made as to their character, señor. Were they good or bad boys, or which was the good and which the bad? And the king's reply?' 'Either is neither and Neither is either' (205). "They call him the devil," Thompson says of El Rey, "and accuse him of thinking he is God. And El Rey will nod to either charge. 'But is there a difference, señor? Where the difference between punishment and reward when one gets only what he asks for?" (206). As Hilfer has noted. "Doc and Carol didn't need to go through their ordeal to find El Rey's kingdom because they had it within them all along. For that matter, why cross the Rio Grande?"<sup>11</sup>

The lurking mistrust and mutual suspicion that had become the undercurrent to the McCoys' marriage relationship is brought to the forefront by their egotistical urge for self-preservation. The catalyst, again, is money. With a joint account that is steadily being whittled away, "the outcome depends on which of the two is the shrewder, the more cold-blooded or requires the least sleep" (206). Soon, the loving pair find themselves locked in a cat-and-mouse struggle for survival, with each eventually approaching Dr. Max Vonderscheid to ask him to recommend surgery which will lead to the "accidental" death of the other. In a flash of final recognition, Doc acknowledges the inevitability of their predicament when he admits to himself that "they knew each other too well. They lived by taking what they wanted. By getting rid of anyone who got in their way or ceased to be useful to them. It was a fixed pattern with them; it *was* them. And in the event of a show down, they would show no more mercy toward each other than they had toward so many others" (216). Thompson concludes his narrative on a characteristically ambiguous and ironic note. With each now aware of the other's plans for murder, the two express their love for one another and drink a toast to their "successful getaway." Thompson makes it

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<sup>11</sup> Hilfer 141.

seem that their mutual declarations of undying devotion may well be genuine, but they still appear virtually meaningless in the face of the primal urge to survive. It is enough for the narrative to be left "open"; the only possible conclusion would have to show one of them dying at the hands of the other.

Reassuring moral closures were not in Jim Thompson's line, and *The Getaway* does not provide one. But, although there may be no tidy and reassuring "moral center," there is nevertheless an obvious concern with morality as well as a good deal of moralizing. Some of the more obvious moral pointers are contained in the surface story of the McCoy's; their individualism, materialism, and egotism are not finally rewarded. They may not be caught and punished, but their crime pays only with diminishing returns. Their bank robbers' paradise turns out to be a hell of anxiety and insecurity. All this is surely anything but nihilistic. Other moral indicators are more subtle—their total knowledge of each other's soul that reveals only the meanest of instincts, and their mutual devotion that coexists with deadly hostility. This is the area, it seems to me, where Thompson is usually at his most acute and most disturbing—as the portrayer of the destructive energies located deep in the human personality and as the observer of moral confusion. If, as one critic has recently argued, the newest generation of crime writers has become heir to the morbid side of Romanticism "in which evil was at least the equal of good,"<sup>12</sup> then Jim Thompson must stand as an important forerunner.

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<sup>12</sup> Hurstfield 178.