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John Ford's The Searchers as an Allegory of the Philosophical Search



The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes. . . .

—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

. . . ain't got no eyes, can't enter the spirit land. He has to wander for ever between the winds. . . .

—John Wayne as Ethen Edwards in *The Searchers*

The landscapes that Wittgenstein is concerned to sketch in *Philosophical Investigations* are, I will say with irony, something like the landscapes of our interior world of mind. Without the irony, and so without the idea of an interior world, the metaphor refers to something like the associative patterns of our concepts, or, more accurately, the mechanisms and conditions by which we learn and use our concepts. We have a need for such sketches because we are often unaware of the patterns or, say, the landscape, of our own thoughts. We are especially unaware of the conflicts and inconsistencies that exist between our various thoughts. Insofar as we are unaware of the conflicts between our various thoughts, there are things about ourselves that we do not know. A consequence of such lack of self-knowledge is that we can do things in one moment, in light of one belief, that in another moment, in light of a very different belief, will appear to us quite awful or inconsistent with who we think we are. What we require is a kind of self-knowledge. What can help us to understand ourselves better, what can help us to gain this self-knowledge, will be something like philosophy. Doing philosophy can be like going on a journey.

Wittgenstein says of the philosophical sketches in *Philosophical Investigations* that the sketches “were made in the course of . . . long and involved journeyings.”¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, which I am taking to be a representative, even paradigmatic, philosophical text, can be described as a text that tells the story of the landscapes seen during “long

and involved journeyings.” I will argue that John Ford’s *The Searchers* can be seen as telling basically the same story, of a landscape and how to pass through it, and that this story is the story of philosophy, broadly speaking. I will further argue that the goal of both stories is to move from a greater amount of confusion, anxiety, and unhappiness to a lesser amount; to progress from self-deception, despair, and a kind of madness to something like a condition of mental health and a sense of knowing how to go on. The problem begins as an epistemological one, of a landscape that is unknown or insufficiently known, and of how one might come to know it, have the eyes, to see it. It ends with the ethical consequence of providing some information that may be helpful to oneself and to others about how to get through that landscape effectively. Wittgenstein says, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about.’” (§123). A philosophical solution shows me a way to go.

To start more directly with the film, the first shot of *The Searchers* is a tracking shot that starts in a darkness that is broken by the opening of a door. The door is opened by a woman, and the camera follows her shadow-outline in a movement from the darkened interior of a cabin through a doorway to the bright and vast landscape outside. The camera moves slowly forward to go through the doorway itself, still following the woman, to pick up in the distance the tiny figure of a man on horseback making his way through the huge landscape of Monument Valley (which is on the Arizona-Utah border, but, for purposes of the film, is Texas) toward the cabin from which we are watching him.

This opening is significant both cinematographically and philosophically. It is significant cinematographically as a framing device for the movie as a whole, and in its use of motion—a dynamic of space and time—on the screen that is peculiar to the medium of film. It is significant philosophically because of the philosophical issues it raises, issues that will be explored throughout the rest of the film, and which I will connect in this chapter with the work of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, and more remotely, with Socrates and Aristotle. I am following Stanley Cavell’s idea of reading movies as “spiritual parables.”² Cavell’s point seems to be to see in certain movies suggestions on how to distinguish the truly needful from the wrongly assumed to be necessary. In Wittgenstein’s terms, it is to determine “the fixed point of our real need” (§108).

The Searchers begins in darkness. Against Jean-Louis Comolli, who in his 1966 “Notes on the New Spectator,”³ disparages the darkness and the dreamlike character of cinema theaters and (especially) Hollywood movies, Ford seems to intentionally invoke exactly a dreamlike condition. The whole opening structure of the film, in darkness with a door opening onto a whole other world—a structure that will be mirrored at the end of the film—parallels and invokes the structure of dreams. The movie itself is

in many ways dreamlike and seems to demand interpretation that follows the logic of dreams—with its repetitions, compulsions, multiplications of a specific character, and its sublime horrors. Where Comolli sees the darkness and dreamlike character of movie theaters and Hollywood movies as escapist and antilife,⁴ Ford seems to invoke just those characteristics in order to clarify and expose certain aspects of life.

The opening movement from darkness to light, from inside to outside, is a kind of metaphysical inversion, representing a movement from the daylight world of clarity and consciousness into the darkened, murkier world of mythic dream-life. The issues that will be dealt with in *The Searchers* will be issues that are associated with dreams, primal issues of sexual desire, desire for power and control, fear, terror, and the need for revenge as a way to balance these various, often conflicting forces in us. Our reactions to these forces, like our reactions to the events of the movie, will also be conflicted.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes the problems he is addressing as having “the character of depth” (§111) and adds that they arise from “deep disquietudes.” He says that philosophical problems have the form, “I don’t know my way about” (§123), and he once wrote, “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into a primeval chaos and feel at home there.”⁵ Doing philosophy for Wittgenstein, is like a kind of sickness (§255, §593) and can look like a kind of madness.⁶ Wittgenstein himself often seems to be conflicted about the role and nature of philosophy in his insistence both on the need to put an end to philosophy and on the fact that what he is doing *is* philosophy and is needed. What in fact he is pointing to, however, is our own conflicts with philosophy. Philosophy begins for us with the desire to know and make sense of things, but can move quickly to an avoidance of knowledge, to an avoidance of understanding (Wittgenstein describes this phenomenon in terms of “an urge to misunderstand” [§109]) that takes the form for Wittgenstein of metaphysics, which, for Wittgenstein, is a sure sign of philosophy going wrong.

Nietzsche sees dreams as the origins of metaphysics, but his analysis is ultimately quite similar to Wittgenstein’s. Dreams provide the excuse, but the motivations to derive metaphysics from dreams are, says Nietzsche, “passion, error, and self-deception.”⁷ The problem is to undo the internal conflicts that we have by recognizing our self-deceptions, to see clearly “something that is in plain view.” One solution is to map out the landscapes in which we got lost in the first place. This, I propose, is the work that both Wittgenstein (as a representative philosopher) and Ford in *The Searchers* are doing.

The Searchers begins with movement, the movement of the camera, the movement of the woman, and the movement of the rider across the landscape. There are no words spoken throughout the opening sequence

of shots. All of the movements are human, and against the still background of the awe-inspiring landscape of Monument Valley. The immediacy of our engagement in the scene has to do with the medium of film, the motion that it can command. In a real sense we in the audience are engaged in this scene in ways that are similar to the ways that the woman is. We are similarly curious, edgy, and threatened in this immediacy. We are not threatened physically, but emotionally. Whether this man who appears to be moving toward us is coming with death or love in mind, we are committed by our presence in front of this drama to some emotional response, and we must prepare ourselves emotionally for how this situation will resolve itself. Given the genre, the sudden outburst of violence is as much to be expected as some touching reunion. We are not passively watching, but actively engaged in the situation, much in the way the woman herself is, with a kind of anxious anticipation we scrutinize the scene, the manner of the approaching rider, for clues about how to respond to this approach. By virtue of this motion across the screen the boundaries between film world and viewer world break down. Because of our own emotional commitments, we are in some real sense as much out on that porch as the woman is, and similarly anxious to learn what bodings this traveler across the land brings.

The fact that this movement is against the background of Monument Valley is surely significant. There is something decidedly uncanny about the place, especially in the panoramic vistas that Ford gets on film. These vistas effectively maximize the possibilities of film that Panofsky defines as “dynamization of space” and “spatialization of time.”⁸ The mesas and buttes of Monument Valley are both anachronistic and proleptic, speaking simultaneously of time past and of time to come, and hence, of the transformations that occur in space across time. In their simultaneous invocation of time as past and as future, they seem outside of time altogether, commenting on the nature of time *sub specie aeternitatas*. The monuments of Monument Valley are things out of the past, things that attest to an altogether different landscape that was there in the past. The surrounding red desert landscape attests to the future; the monuments are crumbling as we see them, each one surrounded by a ring of its own detritus. It will not be long, in geological time, before they will all be gone, leveled as just more pulverized dirt in a vast and flat landscape. These buttes and mesas invoke the central problem of our lives, the problem of how to occupy space in time—how to maximize the time that we have, what we must do to make the time of our lives worth living.

Ethan Edwards, the protagonist of *The Searchers*, is clearly identified with these monuments in the opening shot. He is first seen as a barely identifiable figure moving between the flat scrub-covered land and the towering monuments in the distance. The monuments of Monument

Valley are things out of the past. He is similarly atavistic. Ethan speaks in phrases that invoke his atavistic, almost atemporal condition—he denies being Methuselah, suggesting by that denial that he might be mistaken for Methuselah; his habitual refrain is “That’ll be the day,” a phrase which suggests that that said day will never come. He compares his own relentless search to “the turnin’ of the earth” which suggests time taken on a fairly broad scale. Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, is a figure caught in time, between an old order and a new order, and it will be this conflict between the old and the new order that will contribute to the tragedy of Ethan’s life. This is a great theme of Ford’s work, the figure that is caught between the old and the new order of the world, and one that will be readdressed even more darkly, and again with John Wayne as the protagonist, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. As a figure in this nexus of time, and of course we are all such figures, it will be something out of the past that will haunt Ethan to distraction and will determine his future. What haunts Ethan, I will argue, is not just his love for Martha and the violence that was done to her by the renegade Comanches, but it is also the violence of the world, that the world is a violent place, and that we are too passionate and violent in it, that distresses Ethan. The world is as indifferent to this human violence as those monolithic monuments. It is to this condition, to stand outside the human and be indifferent to it, that Ethan himself, uselessly, aspires. This is an aspiration because his actual condition is one of longing and vulnerability with respect to some very specific people, most notably Martha, the woman in the opening scene and his brother’s wife. The primary conflict in him that the movie explores is his despair and helplessness with respect to this violence in the world, and his own need and desire to participate in it.

The role the monuments of Monument Valley play in *The Searchers* may most usefully be described as diachronic, metonymically standing for the changes that occur across time, the changes that, in fact, constitute time. It will be the changes that occur in Ethan across time that the movie will track. The changes in Ethan that the film will record will also involve a kind of breaking down. Ethan’s ferocious isolation and independence will crumble a bit in favor of something like, but will not exactly be, assimilation. He will still stand alone at the end of the movie, but some of his independence as well as some of his antagonism toward the world will have been surrendered, and surrendered voluntarily, in favor of a quieter and longer-lasting good—the good of the community. His future and the future of those like him are prefigured in Ethan’s capitulation, like an allegory of a Nietzschean genealogy. The strength of the strong becomes a weakness and is no longer sustainable. Only through a certain kind of capitulation, only through a reliance on community, can we survive in so hostile a world.

This ethical move, within the context of the movie, to affirm some community association over absolute and solitary individualism is made, ironically, by means of a revolt against the movie's own genre (which itself signals the philosophical). *The Searchers* is commonly regarded as a 'revisionist' western.⁹ To say that it is "revisionist" is to say that the film reflects a reevaluation of, or a reflection on, the old version, the old vision of western life. From this reexamination, this reflection, we get a new vision, a new version of how, in this case, the West was. Clearly this new version is as fictional as the old version—it is just a film after all, a story; but also, presumably, the term *revisionist* suggests some kind of progress, some kind of direction, so that the new vision is not just a different vision but somehow a more accurate, truer vision of how the West was.

The old vision of the West was a vision of the world divided into good and bad men. The good men were either all good, or else so basically good that any shortcomings could be attributed to some pressing and obvious constraint. What makes *The Searchers* revisionist is that its protagonist, I will say its hero, is, at best, a morally ambiguous character. He is hyperaggressive, violent, criminal, angry, insensitive, and a blatant racist. For all that, however, there is something attractive about him and we certainly identify with him. We identify with him from the beginning, in part, because we do not know those things about him yet; we identify with him in part because all we do see of him at the beginning is that he is (mostly) warmly received by his brother's family; and we identify with him in part because the character of Ethan is played by John Wayne. We are able to sustain our identification with him because of his obvious strength, which circumstances clearly require, and because the bad things in his character seem to be in response to even more horrifying contexts. But he is a hard man with a hard heart, and he does not seem to be motivated, at least throughout most of the film, by any code of kindness or goodness. He is not like Roy Rogers or the Lone Ranger; he is not even like Shane. This is a different story from those and it is a story that seems to have progressed beyond those, in terms of its complexity, and because of its complexity, in terms of its verisimilitude. Certainly the hardness of the old West must have produced more hardhearted angry men like Ethan than golden-hearted masked men. To be revisionist involves a reexamination of an old picture, an old myth, and then a re-creation of it into a new form that is, in some sense yet to be determined, truer.

This process of revision itself parallels the philosophical process. Philosophy begins with a revision, call it reflection. To begin to do philosophy is to begin to see things in a new way, to begin to reflect. To begin to reflect is to begin to see what is ordinary as something extraordinary, and to move from that sense of wonder at the presence of the extraordinary to

giving some kind of account of it. It is from this process that philosophy gets associated with depth. The philosophical move from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and then the further move to give some kind of (ordinary) account of the extraordinary, is a move to get to the bottom of a thing, to move from its appearances to what it truly is. The philosophical discovery, perhaps the philosophical supposition, is that there is more going on than there appears.

I see the story that John Ford tells in *The Searchers* as an allegory for the story I am telling here about philosophy. I want to argue that not only is *The Searchers* structurally and allegorically like a text of philosophy, but that it is structurally and allegorically like the very best philosophical texts. Structurally, *The Searchers* is complex. It is and is not about what it appears to be about. It appears to be a story about revenge, and it is and is not about revenge in just about the same proportion that *Hamlet* is and is not about revenge. It is a story, I am saying, that has depth.

What is deep in *The Searchers* is not just what it has to say about the human condition, but also the way in which the movie is structurally composed to elicit a very specific kind of understanding from us, an understanding that is nothing if not philosophical. The plot of *The Searchers* is actually quite difficult to recount with any detailed accuracy because much is suggested and little is confirmed. There is a suggestion that Ethan is, or was, in love with his brother's wife; that he is a deserter, has stolen money, was, himself, perhaps, married to or loved an Indian woman; is, perhaps, tied by some blood-tie to his fellow searcher, the young Marty (a possibility Ethan repeatedly denies).¹⁰ The very broadest outlines of the story are not much clearer. It is not entirely clear what Ethan and Marty are searching for—whether it is Debbie, Ethan's youngest niece, or Scar, the Comanche chief who abducted her. And if it is primarily Debbie they are looking for, it is not clear what they propose to do with her. It is suggested at one point that Ethan proposes to kill her to keep her from becoming (or being) a Comanche's wife, in which case Marty proposes to keep him from doing that. The result of these uncertainties is that we, as viewers, become hypersensitive to signs, to indications that might fill in the mysteries presented by this story. We are compelled to be on the lookout for subtle forms of additional information. We are forced to accompany the searchers *as* searchers. We are compelled to become philosophers.

Part of this philosophical work will be to recognize and acknowledge some of the odd and dreamlike associations in the movie. The movie is constructed in haunting parallels that conform to a kind of dream logic, and many commentators have interpreted the events of the film along such lines. Ethan's enemy, the renegade Comanche chief, Scar, seems to be Ethan's own symbolic wounded savage other; Marty and Debbie versions of his good and more innocent self; old Mose, his tipped into genuine, but

gentle, madness self. The romance between Marty and Laurie seems to be a symbolic playing out of the possible histories (good and bad, possible and actual) of the romance between Ethan and Martha (who will become his brother's wife). Scar will steal and kill the settler's cattle, Ethan will kill the Indians' cattle (buffalo). Scar will kill Ethan's brother and have sex with his brother's wife, Martha (an enactment, apparently, of Ethan's own secret desires), Ethan will steal and try to kill Scar's wife (Debbie), soldiers will kill Marty's Indian (accidental) wife, Look. The relations are too complex, and too complexly rendered, to yield any simple account. They seem to demand a more interpretive response from the viewer in order for the viewer to even begin to make sense of all that goes on in the movie. This defiance of easy assimilation, this insistence on interpretation, has the character of the outrageous that Cavell attributes to philosophy, in general,¹¹ and signals the promise of something more than mere entertainment from the movie.

One can say almost axiomatically of the character of Ethan that he lives in the presence of absence, hence his need for the eponymous search. What is absent, however, is considerably more difficult to specify. Minimally, one might say that what is absent for Ethan is satisfaction. Whether he wants to kill Debbie or save her, whether he needs most to find her or to find Scar or to find both, at the very least we can say that he is not happy the way he is, and that he is determined to find some kind of satisfaction that is currently lost to him, but which he clearly believes he can at least minimally achieve. The way the ethical is related to the epistemological here is that Ethan does not know what he does not know, and this blindness leads him to want to do what, when he has more insight, he will not want to do, what he will recognize as wrong. To say it most simply, he thinks he knows what he is doing but he does not, and he sees that by the end of the movie.

This is progress, epistemological as well as ethical. What was absent for Ethan is ultimately a kind of knowledge. Just what kind of knowledge was absent, and what it might look like to acquire some of this knowledge is the point that the movie has to make. The failure of Ethan's life, the tragic flaw that makes him such a sad, solitary hero in the movie, is this lack of knowledge.¹² The great irony of the movie *The Searchers* is that the great searcher, Ethan, the man who says, "I'll find 'em, as sure as the turnin' of the earth," is really a flawed searcher, a sometimes poor reader of signs. It is his failure to recognize the original Indian trick to lure the men away from the farmhouses, and then the peculiar trail left by the led-away cows (a peculiarity noticed by the neophyte Marty), that leads to the horrible disaster of his slaughtered family and abducted niece. The search itself takes him five years, and it is not even Ethan who ultimately finds Scar, but crazy old Mose.

The irony of his failure as a searcher is compounded by the fact that in many ways he is a very good searcher. He is better at reading signs, at assessing situations, and generally knows more about what is going on in every situation that occurs than any other character in the movie. We are constantly surprised by how much Ethan knows, by how little seems to escape his notice. Most surprising of all is how much he knows about Indians, the Other for whom he proclaims his greatest hatred and contempt. He knows not just about their intimate customs, such as how they marry, but also speaks their languages, even that of the most hated of all Indians, the Comanche. What he misses, however, end up being the most important things. Perhaps the ultimate irony of his failure as a searcher is his failure to identify the true object of his search. Ethan does not really know what he is looking for. We know this because what he finds in the end has nothing to do with the thing he was searching for all of those years, and yet it is the only thing that can really put some kind of end to his searching.

All of this suggests some ambivalence, some conflict in the character of Ethan. The fact that Ethan is at odds with himself correlates with the very first image of the film, the contrast between inside and outside.¹³ The opening sequence, again, begins in darkness, a darkness that we will discover is inside, and moves to the bright, vast, open space of sky and land of Monument Valley that is outside. The association of Ethan not only with the monuments but also with outside in general is further emphasized by the shots of Ethan inside the cabin. Inside the cabin it is cramped, the ceiling is too low, the space too confined for the presence of Ethan along with the rest of the family in the little living room. The camera angle is from below shoulder height, which emphasizes the closeness of ceiling and walls of the room. There is an inescapable feeling that Ethan does not belong in there, that he literally does not fit in there. What we desire for him, and for ourselves, is that he should return to the outside, that he should go out once again among the buttes, the wide-open spaces, and that we should be able to accompany him there to see what adventures he will encounter. Knowing the logic of westerns, we expect something like that, indeed, we will it. The only question is, what will it take to get him back out there now that he has apparently returned to what there is of his family, of his home. Well, we will see soon enough what will get him back outside, back to the outdoors.

We want him out of the cabin, we will it, and what it will take to get him out will be the destruction of his family and this home—which suggests that we willed that, too. The subtlety with which Ford sets up the complexities of the opening sequence of *The Searchers*, it seems to me, rivals the subtlety and the complexities of a Socratic dialogue. Ford compels us to respond in a specific way, just as Socrates compels his

interlocutors to a specific response, by means of an appeal to our own considered and unconsidered commitments. Ford asks us, in the language of film, “Do you want Ethan to leave?” just as Socrates asks Euthyphro, “Is it pious because the gods love it or do the gods love it because it is pious?” They ask in order to show us what our own beliefs and desires commit us to. In addition, Ford compels us to identify with Ethan—not just with his sense of loss, but also with his overwhelming sense of guilt, which will compound his horror of the events that occur and fuel his maniacal determination for vengeance. Just as we, in willing Ethan out of the confines of that house, will the destruction of his family, so does Ethan, in his obvious desire for Martha, (his erotic desire for Martha), subconsciously will to do exactly the things that Scar in fact does do, i.e., destroy Ethan’s brother and his brother’s children so that he can have Martha, sexually, for himself.¹⁴ He does not really want his brother and his brother’s children killed, Martha raped and murdered; and yet, the lineaments of his secret desires are no doubt present. And so must ours be; our wanting Ethan’s escape from the confines of that house, from family and community, to some wide-open adventure, make what happens to Ethan’s family the lineaments of our desires as well. It is because of this that the scene in which the family is becoming aware of the approaching Comanches, which culminates in Lucy’s scream, is so terrifyingly horrible. There is no explicit violence shown, and yet we supply all the violence that the scene could hold, and our complicity in the impending violence, along with our ready, if not eager, reconstruction of it, is the source of the extreme horror that the scene evokes.

When there is a decision to be made about whether to side with the resigned wisdom of Mrs. Jorgensen, who asks Ethan to spare the boys and not seek vengeance, or to side with the vengeful fury of Ethan, we do not hesitate, or if we do, we do not for long. Ethan’s emotions at this point are our emotions: guilt, resentment, the desire for revenge. The fact that Ethan will, throughout the course of the movie, repeatedly take these emotions more seriously and base his actions on them more completely than we feel comfortable with will in a sense be the lesson that the movie has to teach us—how to find the place where we will feel comfortable with our own commitments, where we will be at peace with ourselves. The themes of guilt, resentment, and revenge fall clearly within the demesne of Nietzsche, and it is to him that I would now like to turn.

The origins of guilt, resentment, and revenge are quite complicated in the genealogy offered by Nietzsche, but in one relatively clear and brief passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche ties their origin to suffering:

For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent

who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of suffering to win relief, *anesthesia*—the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actual physiological cause of resentment, vengefulness, and the like: a desire to *deaden pain by means of affects*.¹⁵

For Nietzsche, resentment and vengefulness are a response to pain. The most resentful and the most vengeful are those who have experienced the most pain.

By a Nietzschean analysis, Ethan's real motivation is less viciousness than sensitivity. His resentment, hence his vengefulness, is an attempt at a kind of anesthesia because he is too sensitive. He cannot, like most of the settlers, finally accept and accommodate this violence, this loss, this cruelty in the world. In his pain, he finds one to call guilty, namely Scar, his own secret Other, and sets out to exact revenge on him. Ethan stands outside of society, in part, because he will not be placated, and to be placated, to be accepting, is precisely what society demands of us.

Nietzsche speaks explicitly to this inside-outside dichotomy: "One lives in a community, one enjoys the advantages of a communality. . . , one dwells protected, cared for, in peace and trustfulness, without fear of certain injuries and hostile acts to which the man outside, the 'man without peace,' is exposed. . . since one has bound and pledged oneself to the community precisely with a view to hostile acts."¹⁶ This description of community is considerably more idyllic than that found in *The Searchers*, but the basic dichotomy remains. Ethan is "the man without peace." He cannot live within society because he cannot accept the diminishment of self that that would require, he will not be placated, and so he cannot live among those who will be. But he cannot exist completely outside society either in the very Aristotelian sense that he is a human being. Human beings naturally have a need for human contact and society. We need communal associations for some basic level of satisfaction, hence Ethan's original return to his brother's homestead. Ethan's guilt derives from his attempt to return to society, to join his brother and his brother's family as a kind of capitulation to his own need for community, without the recognition or the acknowledgment of the responsibilities the satisfaction of that need will require. He attempts to return to society with his whole independent and violent self intact, and violence immediately follows upon his arrival. The violence is certainly associated with his arrival, even if only as an expression of his own unconscious desires. Nietzsche's analysis of guilt is that it is tied to the mnemonics of the punishment that a society will inflict on

those who do violence to it. One way or another there was going to be some violence that came along with Ethan, and, in some sense, he must have known it.

The tension between being a member of society or standing outside of society; of being true to oneself or being true to one's community; between solitude, alienation, and restlessness or conformity and the repression of one's desires and hostilities is a tension that characterizes not only Ethan, but also Nietzsche's conception of the philosopher. It is a tension, clearly, that we must all negotiate, but it is the special job of the philosopher to delineate the landscape of this territory.

For Nietzsche, as well as for Wittgenstein, the philosopher is one who necessarily stands outside of society, but he or she does so for the sake of society.¹⁷ The philosopher must stand outside of society in order to understand the forces that impinge upon us as members of a society, of a community. From inside we do not see; we conform and abide. It is only by going outside that one gets a perspective on what those forces are that demand conformity and abiding. By exempting oneself from those forces in order to examine them, one also exempts oneself from all the advantages of society, of being a member of a community. Philosophy is done for the sake of the community because without someone observing and tracking the unseen forces operating in a society, the society is blind. Without philosophy society moves forward through new situations, new crises, new economic as well as new ethical conditions without any sense of where it is going. The philosopher martyrs his or her communal self upon the altar of the community. The philosopher looks at the unlookable, sees the unseeable, and suffers a terrible suffering in isolation for what he or she has seen in order, in some sense, to spare the community those sights, but also to offer alternative visions to help guide the community.

In many ways, Ethan parallels this Nietzschean (and Wittgensteinian) vision of the philosopher. He repeatedly, within the context of the movie, sees unbearable sights, and protects others from seeing them. His life as a whole is a kind of martyrdom to the full expression of the feeling of outrage toward the violence that is endemic in the lives of all of those members of the community of settlers in the movie. Early in the movie Aaron tells Ethan of all those who have given up. The movie itself is the story of the price those who have chosen to stay must pay to stay—the price not just of sons and families, but also of passive acceptance of violence and repression of their own impulse to respond to violence with violence. Ethan's martyrdom serves to spare the remaining settlers having to give active vent to their outrage, and the resolution of his outrage will offer a kind of paradigm for constructive healing that can serve as an example to the community as a whole. The remaining settlers enact a quieter martyr-

dom for the sake of those who will come after them, as Mrs. Jorgensen describes in her "Texacans" speech. Those, in turn, enacted a martyrdom for our sakes, we who are here now.

Ethan in a very Nietzschean mode, is a kind of warrior/philosopher spirit. He is the outsider who confronts the even further outsider who is, ultimately, a kind of projection of our own worst self—the guilty Other on to whom we press our own worst outrages. What Ethan (hence we) will have to recognize is that this guilty Other is just like himself (ourselves), is a version of himself. This is the knowledge that he has gone in search of, but it is not knowledge that he particularly wants to own. It is a painful knowledge, and I take it that it is, in part, Ethan's ambivalence about its acquisition that extends his search over such a long period of time. It is knowledge that will muddy the pure, clarified world of vengeance with complexity. This knowledge will have to be forced upon Ethan, he must be compelled to confront it—as will we. This knowledge is really an acknowledgment. It is an acknowledgment of something that has always been right there before us, "in plain view." It is something of which we must be reminded.

The method by which Ford enacts this function of reminding, of compelling this acknowledgment, both within the context of the movie (with respect to Ethan) and outside the movie (with respect to us), one could equally well describe as Wittgensteinian or Nietzschean or Socratic. What is compelling about it ultimately comes from something that is already in us. Ford engages it by making an appeal to those parts of us that he sees but we do not. What Ford sees in us that we do not see is our temptation to over-simplify, our fantasies of pure good and evil, our willingness to identify with the strong over the weak in order to deny our own weakness. He sees those things as well as other parts of us that are in conflict with those, for example, our sense of justice, our sense of honesty, our sympathy for the disenfranchised, our awareness of complex motivations, of other points of view, of our own need to be understood in all of our own contrariness. Ford simultaneously appeals to both sides of these conflicting dispositional attitudes of, say, oversimplifying versus acknowledging complexity, at various moments within the film. These appeals work to prick us like the sting of conscience.

I have already discussed one such situation; our conflicting desires with respect to Ethan upon his return to his brother Aaron's homestead. We desire for Ethan to leave, to continue in the heroic loner mode and not to capitulate to the demands of family, routine farm life, and community. We are immediately confronted, however, with the price of our wishing—the destruction of Ethan's family, the homestead, and all that Ethan returned for—and so we are forced to confront our real complicity and the cost behind what we wish for. Our response is horror, but just as

Ethan does, we pass on the blame. We are not yet ethically educated enough to acknowledge our own complicity, and so we identify even more with Ethan in the hopes of having our own guilt expiated through his search for expiation through vengeance.

This pattern is repeated throughout *The Searchers*. The pattern is that of our being led to identify with Ethan, or another character, then our being confronted with what that identification really entails, what it really commits us to. That is the landscape in which we often lose our way. The predominant theme that this pattern draws attention to in *The Searchers* is the theme of racism. These moments are often fairly subtle. When Charlie McCorry comes courting Laurie he seems so inept at this that we feel a certain compassion and sympathy for him, or at least pity. When he laughs out loud and says, "So he married a squaw! Ha ha ha!" there is some recoil from our growing sympathy for him. We withdraw at this surprisingly racist attitude (which actually seems to be shared by all present except Mrs. Jorgenson), especially as a claim is simultaneously being made on our sympathy and understanding by Look, the "squaw" to whom Charlie is referring.

The scenes with Look appeal to similarly conflicting dispositions in us. We are tempted to be and are amused by Marty's inadvertent marriage to Look, but we are then confronted with the gross mistreatment of Look by both Marty and Ethan. Look is presented as entirely innocent in all of the transactions and as acting in good faith. There is something that is at once amusing and shocking in Marty's kicking her out of bed when she has lain down next him in wifely dutifulness. In case any have missed the poignancy here, perhaps by reading Ford's response into Ethan's response, in the very next scene we find Look inexplicably slaughtered by cavalrymen along with a group of other Indians, mostly women and children. Ford's point about the pervasiveness and the perversity of violence, especially against innocents, cannot be denied.

There is the sting of Laurie's racism when she tells Marty, after her own wedding to Charlie McCorry has been disrupted and Marty is again determined to leave her in pursuit of Debbie, that Martha, Debbie's mother, would have wanted her dead rather than married to an Indian (a remark rendered additionally incoherent by Laurie's own desire to marry Marty, who is part Cherokee). It is a startling insight that we suddenly get into Laurie's character and quite unwelcome. The scene is complicated because we like and identify with Laurie, especially with her frustration with Marty, and would feel sympathetic to nearly any subterfuge she might try to employ to get him to stay, but when the virulence of her racism is suddenly revealed (that Debbie is better dead than with an Indian), it is shocking.

The most striking scene of all of Ford's stinging our conscience occurs between the two situations described earlier. In spite of setbacks, our affection, trust, and identification with Ethan grows throughout the movie until a scene in which his absolute Otherness to us is most forcibly pressed upon us, and our own confusion is echoed by Marty. The scene takes place as part of the story within a story that is retold in Marty's letter to Laurie. After an apparently peaceful trading encounter with some Indians, and Ethan's indulging and amused response to Look, there occurs a scene that, as Marty says, "I ain't got straight yet." There is no getting it straight. Ethan and Marty come upon a herd of buffalo. Our sympathy and identification with Ethan are at their highest. The search seems to have been more clearly focused on Scar and less on killing Debbie, and Ethan has proven himself both knowledgeable and accepting of Indians.

He seems now more than ever before sympathetically heroic—more skilled, knowledgeable, and in control than anyone else in the film. It is at just this point that Ethan seems to go completely crazy, randomly shooting as many buffalo as he possibly can, killing them, as he says, for the sole purpose of depriving any Indians from ever getting them, so that they might starve instead. It is an extremely disturbing scene, and the point is to shock us into acknowledging our own complicity with what we really know to be a madman's vicious quest for vengeance. Our response is, "Don't do that! Don't kill the innocent buffalo!" but of course, that is just what he, and we along with him, have been symbolically doing all along, attempting to make life impossible for, i.e., to kill, the Indians. A reassessment is suddenly called for. After that scene we are much more careful about Ethan, as, indeed, we ought to be. Our care will continue right up to the end of the movie and the ultimate confrontation between Ethan and Debbie. In that confrontation we cannot be sure what Ethan will do. We know what we want him to do, what he needs to do, what he ought to do; but he's crazy with hate for Indians, and he could do anything. It is for this reason that the relief is so palpable when he reaches down and lifts Debbie up into his arms and says, "Let's go home, Debbie."

In *The Searchers*, Ford is confronting us with our own conflicting impulses, especially our impulses toward identifying others as Others, white characters as good versus Indian characters as evil (i.e., with our own racist tendencies). He does this in the very Socratic manner of tempting us to commit ourselves to one position, and then subtly exposing us to the fact that our original simple commitment conflicts in very complex ways with other commitments that we have, e.g., commitments against racism, against dehumanizing others, against random acts of violence, against revenge.

I have suggested that there is something in Ethan which resists finding Scar, that some part of Ethan does not want to confront what Scar means to him—which would account for why the search takes so long (five years) and for why in the end it is not Ethan but Mose who actually finds Scar. When Ethan finally confronts Scar they are presented as standing close and face-to-face; their words even seem to mirror each other's. It is a scene that is as close to a physical enactment of Aristotle's description of two friends perceiving each other, and hence seeing in the other a part of themselves to which they would otherwise be blind, seeing their own reflection in the other, as I can imagine.¹⁸ The irony, however, is that these two people are bitter enemies, which makes the scene a kind of Fordian extension of Aristotle. Where Aristotle describes how we can be made aware of our own goodness as it is reflected in our friend, Ford shows how we might be led to see our own evil through a confrontation with our enemy. The two move into Scar's teepee, his home, and Scar tells a tale of the murder of his family and of the need for vengeance that is virtually identical to Ethan's own story.

It is then that Scar says that for this he has taken many scalps. He has one of his wives (it turns out to be Debbie herself) show them the war lance with five scalps on it. Later, when Marty suspects that Ethan plans to kill Debbie rather than save her and expresses his concern, Ethan tells him that one of the scalps on Scar's war lance was Marty's mother's. Ethan's intent seems to be to incite in Marty the same hatred and desire for vengeance that he feels. It is a puzzling scene—how could Ethan possibly have recognized Marty's mother's scalp—that connects with another puzzling scene earlier in the movie. Very early in the movie Ethan denies that there is any special connection between himself and Marty. "I just found you is all." Here, however, he is able to recognize Marty's mother from a few strands of hair, which suggests a pretty intimate knowledge of her. There is a scene between these two scenes, when Ethan and Marty have been stymied in their search and have returned to the Jorgensons' ranch. Ethan and Marty are getting ready for bed in the bunkroom. They start to argue about whether Marty will continue searching with Ethan or stay behind at the Jorgenson's ranch and take care of what are now Ethan's cattle. Marty insists on continuing with the search and Ethan says, "Marty, there is something I have to tell you. . . ." Marty angrily interrupts him saying he knows what Ethan is going to say, but it is pretty clear that Marty does not know what Ethan was going to say, and neither do we. We never do learn what Ethan was going to say. Clearly it was something to make Marty more willing to stay behind at the ranch. It seems possible that it had something to do with Marty's mother, perhaps even something to do with Ethan and Marty's mother. What it was, though, the movie never says and we will never know.

To return to the scenes that follow the encounter with Scar, there are two scenes involving the mouth of a cave that seems inescapably symbolic. The cave symbolizes, as a womb metaphor, a kind of death/rebirth for Ethan, a return to a more innocent condition after the confrontation with, and then being routed by, Scar and his braves. It also becomes the scene of Ethan's attempt to make a home and a family of his own,¹⁹ a home that is spacious and natural compared to the confined home of his brother, and a family out of the adoption of the part-Indian Marty as his own son, which serves as an acknowledgment not only of Marty as someone valuable to him, but also of his own Indian-like nature. This may be a moment of an even deeper acknowledgment of Marty but again we will never know because Marty will refuse this overture of family by Ethan. It is appropriate that he does so because, although wounded and apparently softened (with respect to Marty) after his confrontation with Scar, Ethan still refuses to acknowledge Debbie as a legitimate relative, as his, which signifies his continuing self-deception and need for revenge. In the end it is Marty and not Ethan who kills Scar. If this were a movie about vengeance then that would be a terrible failure. The fact that Marty kills Scar for relatively good reasons, i.e., in self-defense while rescuing Debbie, saves Ethan from his own worst side, and so allows for Ethan's redemption through an act of mercy and love. Ethan then completes his own savage tragedy by scalping the dead Scar. In this, the final acknowledgment of his own similarity to Scar, this expression of his own raw savagery, he is set free to finally embrace Debbie rather than kill her.²⁰

In *The Searchers*, Ethan and Marty traverse a vast and complicated landscape. What prompts them to this traverse, this search, may be a kind of sickness, a kind of madness, but it is an important kind of sickness. How important depends on how far we are willing to go to understand it. Ethan's restlessness and roaming can be read as an analogue for the disquiet that we all feel from time to time about the uncertainty and potential for violence that is in the world, that is in us. The sickness is not the disquiet, but our attempt to ignore it or avoid it by means of a displacement that is really a self-deception. This is what Wittgenstein refers to as the sickness or the madness of philosophy (in the bad sense). The remedy, the way toward a kind of health, the way home, is by coming to know the landscape of the world, to know what to expect from the world, and, more importantly, from ourselves. The problem of coming to know ourselves, our own landscape, is a philosophical problem. We may help ourselves resolve this problem by paying attention to the way, in a movie, that a man learns it his duty to deliver a girl back to her community.

What is it, finally, that makes it possible for Ethan to embrace Debbie rather than try to kill her? It is my contention that the search for her took so long in part because he did not really want to find her. He did not want

to find her because he did not know what to do if he did. He was always of two minds, driven by love as much as by hatred, although he himself seemed to be unaware of this conflict. He was himself lost, lost to himself, and so kept losing the trail of Debbie. It is a characteristic of being lost that one does not know how to get home. What got him lost in the first place was an unwillingness to acknowledge certain things about himself, certain feelings he felt, certain commitments he had, certain choices he had made and the consequences of those choices. This refusal of acknowledgment meant that he carried within him a storm of violent conflicts, conflicting emotions, conflicting commitments, conflicting desires. His refusal to acknowledge these conflicts meant that he had no control over them. That is why the violence so inevitably followed in his wake. The specific details of his life that haunt him, that he refuses to acknowledge, are only vaguely suggested in the movie. Perhaps he was once confronted with the choice between a family life (with Martha) and a life of violence (in war) and chose violence. Perhaps he was once actually married to a woman who was part Indian and saw her slaughtered by other Indians. Perhaps Marty is his abandoned son, given up when he gave up on the world of love altogether.

The details, in the end, are not that important. Ethan was a troubled man whose troubles presented him with the necessity of a search. He became a searcher, and followed the search to the bitter end, to the place where his hate had been leading him all along, to the scalping of Scar, the hated Other that was the dark mirror of his own self. Perhaps to his surprise, and certainly to our relief, he finds something other than utter darkness on the other side of this event. He finds in himself a new concern, or perhaps the acknowledgment of an old commitment, and he picks up Debbie and says, "Let's go home, Debbie."

The movie ends with an immensely poignant shot, looking, as in the beginning, from within a dark house (though not the same house), out across the distant dusty landscape at Ethan, once again alone, walking off in that distant direction. There is no question of his becoming one with the community—he won't—but there is also no question that he is not the same man as the one who rode into the dusty farmstead in the opening scene of the movie. He knows he has some genuine commitments to certain people, and he knows, if he ever has to go there, where home is.²¹