

TILlich AND THE WILD THINGS: EVIL AND TRANSFORMATIVE SOTERIOLOGY

Matthew Aaron Tennant, University of Oxford

“The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind, and another; his mother called him ‘WILD THING!’ and Max said ‘I’LL EAT YOU UP!’ so he was sent to bed without eating anything.”¹ These are the opening words from Maurice Sendak’s 1963 children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are*,² and Sendak’s story can, quite conveniently, be read closely alongside Paul Tillich’s explication of “Existential Self-Destruction and the Doctrine of Evil,” found in his *Systematic Theology*, volume two.³ This comparison is made using Tillich’s own correlation, bringing an artifact of human culture into theological discourse. However, it is only a comparison, and not an exact parallel. Where they diverge, it is not necessary to shoehorn Sendak into Tillich’s theology. It is possible to examine the nature of estrangement in Sendak’s story and apply Tillich’s theological answer to the estrangement found there.

Tillich defines evil as “the consequence of the structure of estrangement,”⁴ and he suggests a soteriology that is a transformative means by which humankind does not remain in existential estrangement. Tillich explores “The meaning of Salvation” in the final section of the same volume of his *Systematic Theology*, arguing that salvation, as healing “means reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, [and] man and himself.”⁵ Salvation as “reuniting” the estranged-self with God transforms the self of existential estrangement into the New

¹ Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

² The book won the prestigious Caldecott Award in 1964 and according to the Jewish Museum (New York), the book is one of the most popular children’s books of all time (Cf. Amazon.com, where it is #183 in book sales, which would seem to be pretty high for a children’s book published in 1963).

³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 59-78.

⁴ Tillich, *ST/2*, 60.

⁵ Tillich, *ST/2*, 166.

Being.⁶ In estrangement, there is a sense of *not yet*, and Tillich describes estrangement as if humankind is unresolved while still estranged.

I place Tillich next to Sendak to explore Tillich's "ultimate concern"⁷ in a microcosm. This simplification can be illustrative of Tillich's transformative soteriology. In Sendak's story, the protagonist Max symbolizes anyone living into the existential "structure of estrangement."⁸ I treat Max's mother as symbolic, in a limited sense, of God, instead of as a temporal enforcer of rules or pietism. The Wild Things present an interesting hermeneutical dilemma.⁹ I consider them as estranged beings along with Max, but one could argue that they fulfill a different role in this juxtaposition. The entire comparison is susceptible to oversimplification, but if we let it, Sendak's story might help us see Tillich's response to evil through transformative soteriology.

1. Max misbehaved.

Max, our prototypical person, dons his wolf suit and lives into his finite freedom and "makes mischief,"¹⁰ which Tillich argues is implicit in human existence.¹¹ He writes, "Not permitting sin would mean not permitting freedom; this would deny the very nature of man, his finite freedom."¹² In other words, God permits sin by permitting the world to exist.¹³ Max misbehaves because he *can* misbehave. Tillich suggests that evil is "man's existential predicament in all its characteristics,"¹⁴ but at this point, he uses *evil* and *sin* almost interchangeably, citing the classical explanation, "God punishes sin by throwing the sinner

⁶ Tillich, *ST/2*, 166.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 10.

⁸ Tillich, *ST/2*, 60.

⁹ According to the Jewish Museum (New York), the Wild Things are based on Sendak's Eastern European Jewish relatives, whom he remembers from childhood.

¹⁰ Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

¹¹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 61.

¹² Tillich, *ST/2*, 61.

¹³ Cf. Especially strong in Tillich, *ST/2*, 44.

¹⁴ Tillich, *ST/2*, 60.

into more sin...[as if] sin is both the cause of evil and the evil itself.”¹⁵ However, he only equates *sin* and *evil* because “sin is evil because of its self-destructive consequences.”¹⁶

Humankind’s existential estrangement is outside the potency for goodness, which Tillich understands is part of humankind’s essential being. His positive ontological perspective is consistent with the universal state of existential estrangement. Tillich emphasizes “self-loss as the first and basic mark of evil,”¹⁷ which is similar to the classical theological language of throwing the sinner into more sin. As a person, like Max, falls further into existential estrangement, the person is more susceptible to the constraints of estrangement.

Tillich writes about the “structure of destruction” because destruction cannot exist on its own, and understanding the “structure of destruction” is the first step to understanding evil.¹⁸ However, in his definition of estrangement earlier in the same volume, he describes it as a universal condition. He writes, “The state of existence is the state of estrangement.”¹⁹ Therefore, even though there is a universal “potency for goodness,”²⁰ human existence means estrangement. It is only possible to transcend estrangement through transformative soteriology (e.g. reuniting the estranged-self and God).

2. Max is sent to his room.

Max’s mother sends him to his room without any supper. The state of estrangement leads to ontological conflicts. Max did not want to be sent to his room, because if he did, he would not have to be *sent* there; he simply would have gone to his room. Given the opportunity to act in finite freedom, Max put on a costume and misbehaved. A line could be drawn from his action to Tillich’s assertion that “Man has used his freedom to waste his

¹⁵ Tillich, *ST/2*, 61.

¹⁶ Tillich, *ST/2*, 61.

¹⁷ Tillich, *ST/2*, 61.

¹⁸ Tillich, *ST/2*, 60.

¹⁹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 44.

²⁰ Tillich, *ST/2*, 60.

freedom; and it is his destiny to lose his destiny.”²¹ This bleak suggestion bears itself out in Sendak’s story. Max’s mother, analogous to God, can no longer allow Max’s misbehavior. Whereas God does not send us to our collective eschatological rooms, we are estranged from God through our use of freedom.

The use of the plural pronoun “we” is relevant here because Tillich does not want to create existential individualization. He is not arguing for individuals seeking salvation. He writes, “Theology must join existentialism in showing the universally human character of loneliness in interdependence with submergence in the collective.”²² The nature of estrangement is that it impacts all of humankind. He also argues against the idea of self-salvation because he understands it as a soteriological distortion,²³ and in a later section of the same work, he writes about a Messianic transformation of existence.²⁴ Transformative soteriology is an existential response to evil and, for Tillich, transformative soteriology has universal implications.

3. Max sailed off.

“That very night in Max’s room a forest grew, and grew...” and Max sailed off. In a condition of estrangement, Max is “determined by his finitude,”²⁵ but his finitude does not determine his actions. He can only go into that which he can create. He is both limited by his finitude and simultaneously bound to live into his finitude, which includes estrangement from his mother. It is worth noting that his mother is neither present in his transforming bedroom nor in the land where the wild things are. Because of the way he treats the wild things, it is possible she might be represented or reflected in them, but she is not there. In

²¹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 63.

²² Tillich, *ST/2*, 65.

²³ Tillich, *ST/2*, 80-86.

²⁴ Tillich, *ST/2*, 88.

²⁵ Tillich, *ST/2*, 66.

human estrangement, there is a condition of separation from God. The condition is existential, not absolute, or as Tillich writes of humankind:

He is given over to his natural fate. He came from nothing, and he returns to nothing. He is under the domination of death and is driven by the anxiety of having to die. This, in fact, is the first answer to the question about the relation of sin and death."²⁶

Just as Sendak illustrates fear in Max's face (raised eyebrows and corners of the mouth turned downward), humankind is not content in estrangement. The existential limitations of estrangement make it an inhospitable condition. Tillich writes, "The transformation of essential finitude into existential evil is a general characteristic of the state of estrangement."²⁷ In this sense, to leave, as Max does, is to live into existential estrangement, and, just as the story does not end with Max in the land of the wild things, humankind does not find resolution in estrangement.

4. Max arrives

When Max arrives "where the wild things are," his confidence returns, illustrating Tillich's definition of concupiscence. The look of fear on Max's face is replaced with a scowl, and though the wild things do their best to frighten him, he has found compatriots in estrangement, only he is *wilder* (more estranged) than they are and he is emboldened by them. The variety of wild things provides a visualization of different forms of estrangement (e.g. some have tails, some have scales, horns, etc.). Tillich writes, "No description of the structures of evil can be exhaustive."²⁸ No matter how many lists of *kinds of evil* or *perpetrators of evil* there are, the lists will always be incomplete. Human creativity allows the possibility of innumerable variations of estrangement. He cites Heraclitus and the relationship between divine-demonic powers, yet Tillich points to the human desire to find a

²⁶ Tillich, *ST/2*, 66.

²⁷ Tillich, *ST/2*, 68.

²⁸ Tillich, *ST/2*, 68.

home, essentially in estrangement. Human desire and longing is oriented toward drawing the world into oneself; our longing makes us more estranged. Tillich argues elsewhere that estrangement includes a misunderstanding of truth, and it reflects a misplaced ultimate concern. For example, in *Dynamics of Faith*, he writes, “The criterion of the truth of a symbol of faith is that it expresses the ultimate which is really ultimate.”²⁹ However, in *Systematic Theology*, he argues that humankind remains a “pilgrim on earth,”³⁰ similar to John Yoder’s idea of Christians as “resident aliens.”³¹ Despite the inexhaustible structures of evil and human unbelief, hubris, and concupiscence, humankind remains a “pilgrim” at least in this life, seeking through salvation (or reuniting) the “ultimate that is really ultimate.”³²

5. Max tames the wild things.

“Max said, ‘BE STILL!’ and tamed [the Wild Things] with the magic trick...and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all.”³³ As he lives more fully into existential estrangement, Max confuses being a pilgrim with finding the “ultimate that is really ultimate.”³⁴ He confuses where he is with where he longs to be. Tillich writes, “If the distinction between essential solitude and existential loneliness is not maintained, ultimate unity is possible only by the annihilation of the lonely individual and through his disappearance in an undifferentiated substance.”³⁵ Max departed from the solitude of his room, and he found in the wild things fellow pilgrims in his existential estrangement. However, he and the wild things are both in existential loneliness. The solitude of Max’s room was not essential solitude. It was existential loneliness, imposed by an “ultimate that is really ultimate,” because in this story, Max’s ultimate concern is to maintain fellowship with

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 111.

³⁰ Tillich, *ST/2*, 69.

³¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 192.

³² Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 111.

³³ Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

³⁴ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 111.

³⁵ Tillich, *ST/2*, 72.

his mother, even though he does not realize it yet. Fellowship is necessary because “ultimate unity is possible only by the annihilation of the lonely individual.” Max had the right idea in going to where the wild things are: he sought fellowship with other estranged individuals, but the estranged individuals were fellow pilgrims, not leading him toward ultimate unity or salvation. Instead, they “called him the most wild thing of all.” Tillich identifies “aloneness” as the main cause of “meaningless suffering” or evil.³⁶ Transformative soteriology can allow the alleviation of meaningless suffering, but not yet. Max is not yet ready to enjoy the “ultimate unity” that is available to him.

6. Max initiates and stops a wild rumpus.

“‘And now,’ cried Max, ‘let the wild rumpus start!’”³⁷ For Tillich, “finitude includes doubt.”³⁸ The wild rumpus is like the human life. It is finite. Max sits on a makeshift throne, really just a small mound, and basks in the adoration of the wild things. During the “rumpus,” they howl at the moon, swing from trees, and parade around. While it may be a somewhat harmless rumpus and a boring state of estrangement, Max remains separated from his mother. There is no reunion or “ultimate unity.” Like Max, humankind finds it easy to be deceived by the bowing wild things and to miss, as Tillich argues, humankind exists in estrangement. During the rumpus, Max looks content, or even happy. Tillich connects estrangement with a continuing sense of the ultimate. He writes, “If in the state of estrangement the dimension of the ultimate is shut off, the situation changes.”³⁹ Instead of seeking an “ultimate that is really ultimate,” an individual who does not have any sense of the ultimate finds “insecurity becomes absolute” and being becomes despair. Tillich writes, “The destructive character of existential insecurity and doubt is manifest in the way man tries to

³⁶ Tillich, *ST/2*, 71.

³⁷ Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

³⁸ Tillich, *ST/2*, 72.

³⁹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 73.

escape despair.”⁴⁰ He is arguing that the loss of a sense of the ultimate is the true manifestation of evil in the world and can take the most destructive forms, “some of which are brutal, some fanatical, some dishonest, and all insufficient and destructive.”⁴¹ The loss of a sense of the ultimate is what leads to existential destruction.

7. Max looks sad.

“‘Now stop!’ Max said and sent the wild things off to bed.”⁴² The state of estrangement lost its luster for Max. In true storybook fashion, he recognizes that he needs to change his behavior. That is, “he gave up being king of where the wild things are,”⁴³ and for our purposes, he sought “ultimate unity” and salvation. For Tillich:

The term “salvation” has as many connotations as there are negativities from which salvation is needed. . . Ultimate negativity is called condemnation or eternal death, the loss of the inner *telos* of one’s being, the exclusion from the universal unity of the Kingdom of God, and the exclusion of eternal life.⁴⁴

Instead of remaining in estrangement and moving toward “ultimate negativity,” salvation provides an alternative that point toward an “ultimate that is really ultimate.” In this sense, humankind experiences salvation as reunification, not “the loss of the inner *telos* of one’s being.” For Tillich, salvation is reunion with the “ultimate concern,” and it is transformative because the reunion between the estranged-self and God requires the one being reunited to change. At this point, Tillich does not clearly explicate his transformative soteriology, but he pushes the issue further in other works, such as *The New Being*.⁴⁵ In the section of his *Systematic Theology* we have been exploring, he examines the other side of salvation; condemnation. Referencing Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death*, he suggests that “‘death’ means beyond possible healing.”⁴⁶ For Tillich, condemnation is despair and “despair

⁴⁰ Tillich, *ST/2*, 73.

⁴¹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 73.

⁴² Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

⁴³ Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

⁴⁴ Tillich, *ST/2*, 165.

⁴⁵ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

⁴⁶ Tillich, *ST/2*, 75.

is the state of inescapable conflict,⁴⁷ which is found by remaining in the state of estrangement.

8. Max sails back home.

Max decides he wants to be “where someone loved him best of all,” so he decides to go home.⁴⁸ The ontological result of the dichotomy between existential estrangement and “ultimate unity” is based in transformative soteriology. Max returns of his own will, but Tillich does not allow for humankind to save itself. For Tillich, God is present in existential estrangement. He writes, “The risk of faith is existential; it concerns the totality of our being, while the risk of historical judgments is theoretical and open to permanent scientific correction.”⁴⁹ Even though the state of estrangement is the cause of evil and destruction, he does not want to concede that estrangement is *the* existential reality. He writes, “[Evil and destruction] are counterbalanced by structures of healing and reunion of the estranged.”⁵⁰ The way he views “condemnation” in relation to estrangement sheds light on his understanding of soteriology. For Tillich, “Man is never cut off from the ground of being, not even in the state of condemnation.”⁵¹ And in Max’s experience, even though he entered the land of estrangement “where the wild things are,” Tillich would respond that Max is not completely cut off from his ground of being. The existential reality is transformative, not transactional, salvation because Max returns home in “in that very night,” where he finds his supper waiting for him “and it was still warm.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Tillich, *ST/2*, 75.

⁴⁸ Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

⁴⁹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 117.

⁵⁰ Tillich, *ST/2*, 75.

⁵¹ Tillich, *ST/2*, 78.

⁵² Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

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