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ON DANGEROUS GROUND (RKO, 1951) 82 min.

Director: Nicholas Ray. Screenplay: A. I. Bezzerides; based on the novel Mad with Much Heart, by Gerald Butler; adaptation by A. I. Bezzerides and Nicholas Ray. Cinematography: George E. Diskant. Cast: Ida Lupino, Robert Ryan, Ward Bond, Ed Begley, Charles Kemper, Anthony Ross, Ian Wolfe, Sumner Williams, Gus Schilling, Frank Ferguson, Cleo Moore, Richard Irving.

Finished in early 1950 but not released for almost two years, Nicholas Ray's On Dangerous Ground explores the world of the film noir cop with a number of new variations. The Robert Ryan character was patterned after a Boston policeman with whom Ray had gone out on assignments. He had interested him in the idea of a man whose job it is to prevent violence and yet possessed those same violent tendencies himself. Blessed with one of Bernard Herrmann's finest scores, the film for most of its length "functions effectively on three different levels: as an exciting genre thriller, as a 'heightened' but basically serious study of the police, and as an intense symbolic drama of the conflict between love and violence."³²⁰

Jim Wilson (Ryan), a cop, is a loner with a violent and misanthropic disposition. In the first part of the film we see him make his rounds with his partners, as they venture among the neon-lit, rain-slicked shabby streets of a big city, "catching in sleaziness

and violence some sense of the rancor of the cop...."³²¹ After Ryan has viciously beaten a suspect his superior, to calm the situation, sends him out to a snowbound rural area to help apprehend the murderer of a young girl. Here Ryan confronts the mirror image of his own violence, when he witnesses the behavior of the murdered girl's father (Bond), whom he goes with to track down the killer. In the process he meets Mary Walden (Lupino), a lonely blind woman who lives in a remote part of the community and whose half-witted brother, Danny (Williams), is the murderer. Both Lupino and Ryan have some tentative encounters that display their need for one another; at the same time this is happening Ryan and Bond pursue Williams in a series of chases. This culminates with the young boy falling from a cliff to his death. "Ray wanted to end the film on the ambivalent image of Jim Wilson returning to the bleak city, but as the film now stands, he goes back once more to Mary Walden."³²²

On Dangerous Ground almost succeeds by virtue of the gritty environment of the first part of the film, and the kinetic energy of the chase scenes through the snow. Its main handicap is the transition of Ryan's character. As he moves from the metaphorical darkness of the city to the white landscape of the country, with all its redemptive qualities, his behavior goes through too much of a change in too short a time to be totally believable.