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## The Political Imagination of Cormac McCarthy

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# THE POLITICAL IMAGINATION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by

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## **Acknowledgements**

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examples for me. But seeing them as parents, I am continually awed and humbled by the people they have become.

I could not have achieved this milestone (or any other, for that matter) without the love and support of my parents, Tony and Krista Thompson. The completion of this degree is a testament to that love, for it was only by their steadfast commitment to honoring a promise made long ago that I could ever have made it. True to their word, they saw me through to the end. Though I can never repay them, I hope that in some small way this document may serve as a small testament to the gratitude I feel to them.

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when I thought I was lost. On long evening walks we have hashed out every argument in this dissertation. Together. She has been instrumental in the writing of every page, and I could never have found a better collaborator for this project. But it was not because of Dana's considerable intellectual abilities that I was finally able to *see* this project for what it was and complete it. As we fell in love, I came to understand that, however many triumphs or imperfections might be found in the pages of this dissertation, it was the life that we were creating *beyond* them that would stand as the proudest achievement of my life thus far.

And so, this chapter of my life comes to a close. This dissertation is now complete. Whatever its flaws, I must take sole responsibility. Whatever its merits, I owe them to those mentioned above. And I dedicate it to Dana, with love and gratitude, forever.

Drew Kennedy Thompson  
Murray, Kentucky  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is a study in literature and politics and proceeds by tracing out the major political themes of McCarthy's body of fiction and analyzing them toward their logical conclusions. The critical approach in this narrative-based anthropology looks at man first in profound isolation and then progresses through his novels in sequence, in an increasingly social context. McCarthy's later fiction displays an increasingly affirmative view of the sacredness of human life and of the basic impulse toward community in even the most unreflective of characters; an essential characteristic of humans.

To call any of McCarthy's works a "political novel" would be absurd. Apocalyptic fiction has rarely, if ever, been overtly or consistently political in terms of its subject matter or intended audience. Rather, I find in McCarthy's novels an artistic or poetic utterance that speaks to discomfiting realities of experience while simultaneously sublimating the particularities of experience, however immediate, into a mythic plane. In this textual world, with its apocalyptic backdrop and mythical sublime, I construct an analytical framework for exploring the political ideas that appear and reappear throughout all of McCarthy's work. Though interrelated, narrative, nature, history, witnessing, agency, and order are broad conceptual categories within which I discuss essential political questions.

McCarthy's political vision demonstrates the general failure of politics to do what politics is supposed to do. The political or sovereign power in McCarthy's world may be said to attempt to provide for an ordered environment for human existence, even with nominal liberty. But it fails in any meaningful way to protect men from each other and from themselves or to advance any notion of the good life. Indeed, his reader is frequently left to ponder exactly what might even be said to constitute the good life in McCarthy's fiction. Is this failure of the political the

result of some deficiency in our laws or political institutions? No. The failure results from our gross misunderstanding of our place in the order of the world. It results from our inability to accept our fundamental loneliness in the world.

## Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is not commonly regarded as a political writer. His works express a strong preference for rural or frontier settings, a world beyond the city gates and the effective reach of positive law. They display a general ambivalence regarding the political as commonly depicted. Even in domestic scenes the familiar sense of stability and security accompanying a settled or civilized way of life is never a given. By omitting familiar power structures and symbolic representations of the state, he calls into question the bases of common philosophical assumptions regarding man's fundamental nature. His frequent presentation of the natural human condition as one of hostility and violence challenges traditional approaches to moral or ethical life. This would explain, at least in part, why the political dimensions of McCarthy's vision remain an impoverished topic of scholarly inquiry by political theorists. This oversight is unfortunate for both the fields of political theory and literary criticism, as McCarthy's fiction is deeply resonant with established themes in both literatures. Indeed, many of his signature tropes connect with a long tradition in American intellectual life wherein novelists have taken up the role of political philosophers, using their fiction as a means of examining the fundamental assumptions of liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup>

McCarthy's fourteen novels, plays, short stories, and screenplays comprising his body of fiction range in terms of character, setting, and narrative style, but are thematically linked by a set of three persistent concerns: freedom, violence, and the relation of the self to the other. McCarthy's fiction is typified by his ongoing and developing interest in the place and power of

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul A. Cantor, "Literature and Politics: Understanding the Regime," PS: *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 1995), 192-195; Zuckert, Catherine "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Aug., 1981), 683-706.

myth in the realm of human affairs. Over the course his lengthy career, McCarthy's fiction presents an ongoing interrogation into the mythic convergence of the particular and the universal. Broadly considered, each of his works reveals some partial aspect of this mythic project in which the story of one man, bound by particularities of place and time, sublimates into an ongoing story that is common to all men in all places and at all times. The imagery McCarthy employs as a means to suggest this mythic or narrative substance to reality is that of a man on a journey. This story, as one of his oracular characters expresses it, is *the* story: "Ultimately every man's path is every other's. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell."<sup>2</sup> My political interpretation of McCarthy's fiction begins with the central idea of story in McCarthy's corpus, using it as a way to frame the later chapters. The notion of a literary project dedicated to the articulation of *the one tale that is the tale of all*, something that is true for all men at all places and at all times, would align McCarthy's fiction with the most basic aims of philosophy. Basic questions of ontology and epistemology—whether one defines philosophy broadly as a systematic description of reality or of experience—are at the heart of this enterprise. To wit: what it is to be, to know, and to act, in a world that provides few answers to life's most difficult questions. McCarthy's fiction abounds with formulations (and re-formulations) of these questions, though rarely positing any definitive conclusions.

The existing scholarly research on McCarthy tends to coalesce around three overarching themes that dominate McCarthy's entire body of work. Literary theorists have productively engaged McCarthy's preoccupations with violence, freedom, and identity with an array of compelling interpretive frameworks. And yet, insofar as these major themes in McCarthy's work have captured the attention of theorists, the insights available to date have offered little to

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<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 156-7.

foster a robust discussion of McCarthy's literary vision explicitly from the standpoint of the political. This lack of attention is not altogether surprising, as McCarthy's representations of the city and its established institutions of governance are more often provided in the negative, that is, by their absence. McCarthy's vision is rugged and primitive, favoring the upheavals of movement and change to the settled and static scene. Any notions of the good life, to say nothing of right order, can only be approached from a position of threat and of fear in McCarthy's fictional worlds.

The extraordinarily violent character of his novels reveals a device McCarthy employs as a means of expressing certain uncomfortable truths about man's fundamental condition in the world and his endless journey in search of some absent or unknown good. Considered broadly, this general view of man and human nature raises political questions concerning action and identity, and questions the possibility of agency, of the ways in which the constant human will to impose a rational order upon the world confronts a mysterious and resistant natural realm actively opposing this effort. This frequently antagonistic view of nature is central to McCarthy's vision; a mysterious terrain of timeless forms and forces acting with a sentience and lethal beauty all their own. Human activity within such a world is constrained not only by the forbidding landscape, but also by a natural ordering that, if not hostile, is at least indifferent to human affairs. Violence is also a prominent component of McCarthy's vision of history. An accomplished regionalist, his novels are highly historical in setting, but in this mode he employs a sleight of misdirection. By engaging the reader's assumptions about the veracity of local, regional, and even national history, McCarthy subtly calls into question the very concept of history itself, as the substructure of individual and collective human identity. The very act of historicizing—the telling of a story as a representation of truth endowed with meaning—

resonates with the symbolic representation of violence in McCarthy's vision. A theorist in his own right, McCarthy displays a nuanced understanding of narrative. Storytelling, as a creative and destructive force in the world, is a major preoccupation for McCarthy and operates in his fiction as the fundamental human enterprise. The interplay of narration and description, storytelling and witnessing, establishes a philosophic textual and intertextual matrix of intersecting lives and stories binding the worlds of his fiction, the characters of his stories, and the artist to his audience. In my reading, this preoccupation with narrative reveals a deep concern for questions regarding human freedom and the origins and reach of law, the ways in which human agency is enabled or constrained by real or perceived forces of power. Many of these forces are illusory, some outright illusions, but in their mysterious universality they bind McCarthy's imagined worlds, creating perpetual sources of dramatic tension.

Further, the epidemic violence of McCarthy's novels is seldom if ever the result of familiar rational motives like theft, retribution, intimidation, or impassioned jealousy. For McCarthy's characters, violence is not the means to an end but rather the end in itself. This approach is liable to catch uninitiated readers off guard (as it has many scholars of his fiction), being ill prepared by a framework of experience or philosophic tradition to accept a world in which violence is not aberrant, but ordinary.

### **The search for McCarthy's political vision to date**

McCarthy's fiction is unified by his attempt to explore the problem of human freedom in the absence of the coercive power of the state or of civil society and the rule of law. Freedom in McCarthy's vision is compatible with license—the way humans are seen to act in the absence of any recognized or sovereign authority invested with sufficient power to restrain them. For

McCarthy, the question of man in his natural state is always a primary concern, whether this condition is one of profound isolation or a web of social and political relationships. McCarthy's vision abounds with provocative insights into the nature and purpose of civilization, the legitimate basis of sovereign power, the true origins of law, and the real possibilities for order and meaning in the world. To date, this effort constitutes a new and needed political interpretation of McCarthy's literary vision across disciplines. Although a fairly broad cross-section of critical literary studies of McCarthy's work engage canonical works of philosophy, and even a few political theorists, to explore questions of ontology, human nature, and the individual will, none has sufficiently clarified these insights and their implications from the standpoint of the political. Previous scholarship on McCarthy abounds with points of comparison to Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power, as well as the writings of Schopenhauer, Schelling, Wittgenstein, Hegel, and even Marx. A number of these have explored the idea of history as mythopoeic representation of truth and the narrative basis of identity as the impetus for political action in McCarthy's fictional universe.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, McCarthy's concern for man's natural, which is to say, pre-political origins, has drawn critics toward the literature of social contract theorists, particularly Hobbes's famous formulations on man in the state of nature.<sup>4</sup>

While this general trend of McCarthy scholarship has been to place the tone or tenor of McCarthy's work into conversation with Western (and, to a lesser extent, Eastern) philosophy, both ancient and modern, none has yet attempted a unified accounting of his fiction in terms of

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<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin Mangrum, "Democracy, Justice, and Tragedy in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," *Religion and Literature*, 43.3 (Autumn 2011); Dwight Eddins, "'Everything a Hunter and Everything Hunted': Schopenhauer and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45, no. 1: 25-33; Chris Dacus, "The West as Symbol of the Eschaton in Cormac McCarthy," *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 2009; for a partial but indicative survey of these studies.

<sup>4</sup> See political philosopher John Gray's piece "A Time When Violence is Normal," published by BBC News Magazine online, 16 July 2012. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18829385>



its political vision. At least two fairly obvious explanations can account for this. The first is an epistemological concern. Critical theory should avoid imposing ideologies on authors. Though a scholar may choose to adopt a theoretical “lens” for interpretation, he must always be careful about making absolute conclusions about what the author himself is saying to the reader or risk betraying a narrow and insular prejudice on the part of the critic. The second difficulty is related and is a direct result of McCarthy’s lack of public comments about his work as well as his apparent ambivalence toward contemporary issues or even of direct portrayals of the state.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his career, McCarthy has remained famously private, consistently refusing to grant interviews or to comment on his work. Though one commentator has inferred a deeply, even “*radically* conservative” outlook implied by McCarthy’s sympathy for the Southern Gothic tradition, these are neither McCarthy’s words, nor should they be taken to indicate his inclinations in contemporary politics.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a basic premise structuring my study of McCarthy’s political imagination is to limit the field of inquiry to the philosophic vision revealed in the substance of his texts. However appropriate, this remains a difficult endeavor nonetheless because McCarthy’s artistic and aesthetic approach resists concrete interpretation.

The “perverse and tantalizing density” of all McCarthy’s novels is noted by the earliest book-length critical publication on McCarthy’s fiction, Vereen M. Bell’s *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*.<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to his book Bell is quick to note the frustrating opacity of McCarthy’s prose. “The pressure of meaning in them is strong, but they belligerently resist

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<sup>5</sup> A few critics have read in McCarthy’s novels allegorical depictions of contemporary issues. Kenneth Lincoln, to give one example, finds in *Blood Meridian* a take on Vietnam. Lincoln, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). Others have used McCarthy’s preference for highly specific historical/geographical setting to explore possibilities of commentary or parody beneath the text. While compelling, I do not find these sufficiently convincing in an effort to pursue McCarthy’s use of political and philosophical concepts.

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 April 1992 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 2.

abstraction and classification.”<sup>8</sup> The reader is typically left in a state of bafflement at their conclusion, as though something intense and emotionally significant passed fleetingly overhead, and then disappeared. Regarding McCarthy’s use of characters, Bell aptly notes their almost total lack of interiority, their “tantalizingly obscure motivations” challenging familiar assumptions about empathy. “All of the characters threaten to become almost eerily unselfconscious. This is a poignant and haunting effect in itself, calling forth an impoverishment in them far deeper than their simple lack of material means,” Bell concludes.<sup>9</sup>

While McCarthy is frequently celebrated for the *tooth-and-claw* realism of his writing, his fictional reality remains mysterious and ephemeral, somehow simultaneously beautiful and lethal. Yet perhaps the most enduring legacy of Bell’s critical enterprise remains his assertion of an “ambiguous nihilism” at the heart of McCarthy’s fiction. This interpretive position remains a touchstone for the majority of McCarthy scholarship, framing the terms of ongoing conversations and galvanizing scholars in either agreement or rejection of Bell’s premise.<sup>10</sup> Most compellingly, Bell’s ascription of an aesthetics of violence in McCarthy’s fiction, typified as existential nihilism, continually invokes other prominent leitmotifs of landscape, history, and storytelling. Taken together, these conceptual themes dominate the field in a broad survey of the existing scholarly literature. Later critical reactions can generally be divided into either of what one might call the *McCarthy-as-nihilist*, or the *McCarthy-as-moralist* camps, respectively.

One critical voice sharing an affinity for Bell’s nihilistic thesis belongs to the eminent Harold Bloom. Celebrating McCarthy’s fifth novel, *Blood Meridian*, as an unsurpassed achievement in twentieth-century American fiction, Bloom asserts: “When novels become this

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Vereen M. Bell, “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy,” *Southern Literary Journal* 15.2 (Spring 1983), 31-41.

difficult, and this negative in their visions, do they still persuade us that there is a substance in us that prevails? . . . Negativity cleanses, though at the high price of nihilism.”<sup>11</sup> Similar to the work of Bell and Bloom, Steven Shaviro’s essay on *Blood Meridian* also embraces this dark vision reading of McCarthy. In the character of the novel’s antagonist, the Mephistopheles-like Judge Holden, the novel’s immortal villain, Shaviro finds a bleak affirmation of unremitting warfare between all men, in all ages. War in McCarthy’s vision, Shaviro argues, “is finally our inmost, most secret and most horrific desire.”<sup>12</sup> But Shaviro does not sufficiently parse McCarthy’s thought on this point, failing to stand the vision of man on its feet, one might say. Also similar to Bell, Steven Frye observes how McCarthy’s western novels “display an overt concern with the material pattern of violence in the physical world.”<sup>13</sup> Yet Frye militates against Bell’s extreme stance on McCarthy’s “ambiguous nihilism,” a compelling distinction. He suggests that while *Blood Meridian* (typically regarded as McCarthy’s most violent and, thus, nihilistic novel) seems like an extended nightmare in human language,” it is not the programmatic expression of nihilism that to some it appears to be.<sup>14</sup> Frye cautions McCarthy’s readers: “Though it is inappropriate to conflate McCarthy with one of his characters, it seems reasonable to assume that, for all his fatalism, the author by no means accepts the bloodshed he often portrays.”<sup>15</sup> Frye stands in a middle position between the two camps.

At the opposite end of the moral/ethical spectrum from Bell, and what we may call the “Nihilist camp” in McCarthy criticism, are scholars who find in McCarthy’s vision a carefully integrated moral vision. This reading finds in McCarthy’s fiction an affirmation of ordered

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 273.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Shaviro, “The Very Life of the Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*,” Arnold and Luce (eds.) *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993; revised edition, 1999), 157.

<sup>13</sup> Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

existence and the human need for redemption, of which violence is but the vehicle of expression. Thus, contra Bell and his allies stands the “Moralist camp” in McCarthy scholarship, of which Edwin T. Arnold is the indisputable banner carrier. Arnold presents the bold thesis that McCarthy is a deep and profoundly moral thinker, finding clear evidence in McCarthy’s work of “a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious.”<sup>16</sup> Similar to Arnold’s position, Matthew Potts’ recently published dissertation in the field of religious studies finds strong affinities between McCarthy and sacramental theology.<sup>17</sup> Potts argues, “If McCarthy does in fact offer some moral system through his fiction, a sophisticated understanding of sacraments might inform how we understand McCarthy.”<sup>18</sup> The moralist camp can be said to rally around a basic position best articulated by Arnold: “There is, in addition always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales, although that redemption may require more of his characters than they are ultimately willing to give.”<sup>19</sup> Most of McCarthy’s critics tend to fall somewhere in between these two positions with regard to the presence or absence of God in McCarthy’s fiction, and nowhere is this better glimpsed than in the diversity of conclusions regarding McCarthy’s use of landscape as an interrogation of nature.

McCarthy’s novels are stylistically linked through a pervasive use of passages presenting natural imagery, a profound appreciation for landscape. The significance of this stylistic trope transcends a mere preference for detailing scenery. Indeed, in this dissertation I argue that in many instances McCarthy’s use of landscape is allegorical, externalizing some point of psychological characterization or moral ambiguity in a way that his presentation of human

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<sup>16</sup> Edwin T. Arnold, “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” in Arnold and Luce (eds.) *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993; rev. ed. 1999), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew L. Potts, “Frail Agony of Grace: Story, Act, and Sacrament in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy,” Harvard University, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold, “Naming,” 46.

characters avoids. So crucial, in fact, is McCarthy's depiction of the natural landscape, it arguably comes to serve as a foil to the protagonist (or antagonist) in the plots of all his works, if not acting as a character itself. The *country* often appears endowed with a certain will and agency all of its own, acting as a causal force in how men act at certain times and in certain places. Commenting on *Blood Meridian*, Dianne Luce affirms, "McCarthy's landscape is his real protagonist, looming over the kid's story like some perverse deity or idiot narrator."<sup>20</sup> Once again, the eloquent analysis of Vereen Bell clarifies the depth and complexity of this dense symbol within McCarthy's vision.

The thought that is difficult to hold in focus is that nature...is both a void and an emanation. In either role it is not analogous to the categories of thought. . . . The human beings constitute one protagonist and the natural world another. Narrative and description collaborate with each other in conventional ways, but what is ultimately important is that, even ontologically, they compete.<sup>21</sup>

Bell's statement here presents a compelling gloss on many of the interrelated political and philosophical concerns congregating around the conceptual theme of nature and its intimate relationship to narrative throughout all of McCarthy's novels. Beginning from similar premises, Dana Phillips advances the argument:

This competition has been decided in favor of description and the natural world even before *Blood Meridian* begins. For McCarthy, description and the natural world as categories contain both narrative and human beings. Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists—*Blood Meridian* does not have that kind of dramatic structure. They are instead parts of the same continuum and are consistently described by McCarthy as such.<sup>22</sup>

An inescapable problem with attempting to account for the purely eco- or bio-centric elements of McCarthy's vision, then, is that the horizon of the human sphere is never fully

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<sup>20</sup> Dianne C. Luce, "Cormac McCarthy." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Novelists Since World War II*. Third Series. Ed. James R. Giles and Wanda H. Giles. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994. 143: 118-136. [Revised and expanded version of Cox (1980), *q.v.*]

<sup>21</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*, in Lilley, ed. *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 32.

eclipsed. Indeed, if anything, McCarthy's use of landscape serves only to throw attention back on the words and deeds of men. However intimate this relationship between the human and the nonhuman may ever prove to be, any attempts to derive coherence or meaning from events in the natural world are typically thwarted for McCarthy's characters. Extending a related line of thought regarding *Blood Meridian*, Phillips notes that "in the raw orchestration of the book's events, the world of nature and the world of men are parts of the same world, and both are equally violent and indifferent to the other."<sup>23</sup> Consider a brief passage from one of the novels' imagist scenes of narrative description:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in *the optical democracy of such landscapes* all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.<sup>24</sup>

The phrase "optical democracy" used to describe the landscape in an important scene would seem to imply more than simple notions of equality but rather a sense of mutual agency of all things in that world, "as if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience."<sup>25</sup> The immediacy that such style achieves for the eye on the page stands in powerful and often paradoxical relation to the panoramic focal distance of the narrative voice. The reader sees all, except for the inner world mediated through the eyes and mind of McCarthy's "eerily unselfconscious" characters.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the motivations for McCarthy's characters' actions,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>24</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 258-9 (Emphasis is mine.)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>26</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 4. While this assertion of Bell's is generally borne out through McCarthy's earlier fiction, I should note here that his more recent novels, beginning with *The Border Trilogy*, depart from this somewhat. In *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, for instance, the reader is given a good deal access to the interior thoughts of characters. I draw on this in the discussion of these works in my chapter on order.

whether horrific or humane, remain mostly obscure for the reader. On this point, McCarthy scholar Robert Jarrett offers the following observation:

While McCarthy's landscapes often do supply a symbolist commentary on his characters or their drama, those landscapes fulfill another function—that of rehistoricizing an old myth of American national self-consciousness. In this myth the “American” contradictorily defined as “natural man” yet receives identity in the consciousness of his or her exile from nature.<sup>27</sup>

Jarrett's observation on this point is instructive for my analysis as it invokes the mythic nature of national identity. While my primary interest in McCarthy's political vision is directed toward its philosophical interrogation of man as man, I find it difficult to ignore the particularly American implications it brings to bear. This development becomes particularly compelling in the context of McCarthy's later novels (*Blood Meridian*, the Border Trilogy, and *No Country for Old Men*), as they all incorporate elements of the Western genre, a provocative and distinctly American form of political fiction.

The American frontier setting of McCarthy's later novels foregrounds the question of human freedom in the absence of law or civil society, perennial themes within political philosophy. In such a setting: expansive, uncivilized, and limitless in potential for the growth or decline of human sociality, the deep and often troubling paradoxes of philosophy and human existence can be explored, though often without resolution. Indeed, such a setting “magnifies and clarifies what is at issue” in these stories.<sup>28</sup> American novelists, particularly those concerned with depicting life on the wild frontier, frequently invoke important considerations on nature, human nature, and society. Discussing the political significance of the Western as a specific and important genre of American literature and a highly philosophical mode of storytelling, political

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 135. This correspondence to the role of fate in Greek tragedy, as well as the idea of the rehistoricization of the American mythology are worth noting and will be treated again at length elsewhere in my essay.

<sup>28</sup> Earnest Yanarella, “Introduction,” to Yanarella and Sigelman, eds., *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 10.

theorist John Moeller argues that the American Western genre is a bountiful field for political research as it “reveals about human nature, the innate human condition, and the society in which humans reside.”<sup>29</sup> In his study of this deeply political form of American literature, Moeller identifies sharp points of contact with established and ongoing conversations in political theory.

Because the natural environment remains relatively untainted and human civilization is either absent or still nascent, the early Western frontier invites comparison with the state of nature posited by social-contract theorists. Of course, each of the protagonists has tasted civilization, so that none is wholly natural. When they appear in the novels, however, they have left the civilized world behind...and thus offer a glimpse of what a natural person might look like and how that person might act.<sup>30</sup>

Free from the constraints of conventional or legal society, the Western hero, like a number of McCarthy’s protagonists seeks a new way to shed the accumulated detritus of tradition-bound institutions and social relationships, and to live unfettered by the mores or expectations that typically govern the lives of most ordinary men.

The archetypal western hero, the ruggedly individualistic frontiersman of many famous American novels, is a favorite trope of McCarthy’s for presentation and parody. This character type stands at the center of an important type of political theory conducted through storytelling. Political scholar Catherine Zuckert develops this paradigm at length in her thematic study of American literature, *Natural Right and the American Literary Imagination*. Zuckert concludes that by setting their narratives on the real and metaphorical frontier of civilization canonical American novels pose enduring questions about the modern democratic regime. She writes:

These novels encouraged their readers to ask not only what was natural, but also whether nature provided an adequate foundation for human community or freedom . . . To inquire into the relation between nature and convention is to ask whether there is a standard of

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<sup>29</sup> John Moeller, “Nature, Human Nature, and Society in the American Western,” in Yanarella and Sigelman, eds., *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Moeller, 20. Moeller notes three “perspectives” on nature frequently recurring in the form of the Western novel: 1) that “human nature includes a primal, nonrational essence...” 2) questions of man’s innate goodness or evil; which is very closely related to 3) related to man’s telos. For Moeller, human interaction with the natural environment is a key theme for the form: “Specifically, the arid and spacious environment is overwhelming, so that one can be at peace with that environment only by nurturing one’s nonrational characteristics” (21).



right or good inherent in human life by which all the different laws and customs that the various peoples have established for themselves by agreement (convention) can be judged good or bad—just or unjust. The issue of nature and convention is thus the question of political philosophy as such, but different philosophers have raised that question in different ways.<sup>31</sup>

Though remarkably similar to this tradition, the political thrust of McCarthy's Western fiction diverges somewhat from the Zuckert typology, attempting no such act of refoundation, and pointing instead to rather opposite political conclusions. McCarthy never systematically engages the philosophic basis of American political institutions beyond illustrating the inherent violence attending their implementation throughout history. McCarthy scholar Steven Shaviro argues:

*Blood Meridian* performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. Or better, it traumatically re-enacts this ritual, for foundations are never set in place once and for all. More blood is always needed to seal and renew the pact.<sup>32</sup>

My own interpretation of violence is heavily informed by the text of *Blood Meridian*, analyzing its portrayal as a powerful leitmotif illustrating deeper truths related to his view of human nature, the problematic representation of truth in history and, ultimately, the way in which he considers the artistic project in general to be an inherently violent enterprise. Other critical interpretations have illuminated provocative and diverse elements of McCarthy's literary and philosophical project. The full depth and breadth of this discourse would be impractical (if not impossible) to exhaust in this survey, even in a gloss. I have distilled the most compelling of the ongoing debates around the signature hallmarks of McCarthy's style: the extraordinarily violent character of his subject matter, the preoccupation with landscape as a device for demonstrating human isolation, and the antinomian frontier setting he favors for staging human action.

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Literary Imagination* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Shaviro, "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," in *Perspectives* Arnold and Luce, eds., 157.

A final major theme found throughout McCarthy's fiction remains to be discussed. Scholars of McCarthy's fiction have begun to pay increasing attention to the idea of narrative itself in McCarthy's overall project. Indeed, no other conceptual theme (even among the most prominent ones I have just presented) comes as close to capturing a unifying thread running the entirety of McCarthy's corpus. Vereen Bell, interpreting McCarthy's third published novel, *Child of God*, finds in it "a novel that is partly *about* stories and storytelling."<sup>33</sup> Bell observes how "McCarthy is acutely conscious at each new turn of phrase or shift in idiom of how language intensifies and heightens, defines and sharpens, or spreads out and projects our reality through layers of time."<sup>34</sup> Beginning around the time of McCarthy's major shift to a new locale and subject matter, his novels display an increasing fixation with the idea of narrative and the manner in which it structures the basis of human reality, in both form and substance. In the novels of this later period, storytelling comes to dominate McCarthy's humane vision. James D. Lilley observes:

The central question of McCarthy's fiction has always centered on the possibility of agency—"whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay"—and in McCarthy's world this possibility is actualized only through a further perpetuation of the dance, a witnessing and retelling of the story, a reweaving of the world.<sup>35</sup>

Lilley briefly traces the progression of this idea from McCarthy's earliest work. McCarthy's fictional representations of historic and familiar places and times are not simply static or pre-ordained, fractured "sketches and bones" of a distant and fading past. "Rather, they are a work in progress, a living and fluid dialogue, that exists only at those storied moments of intersection

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<sup>33</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 55 (Emphasis is original.)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> James D. Lilley, Introduction, in Lilley, ed., *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 2.

between speaker and witness, traveler and desert absolute.”<sup>36</sup> This connection between agency and the interaction of narrative between storyteller and witness is a dominant and dynamic theme in all of McCarthy’s work. Dianne C. Luce tackles this same theme in an essay on the Border Trilogy, part of McCarthy’s later period. In her interpretation, the ideas of narrative and witnessing emerge in the context of road narratives, a prominent motif in many of McCarthy’s novels.

Like *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *Blood Meridian* (1985), and *Outer Dark* (1968), *The Crossing* [the second part of the trilogy] is a road narrative, but more than in the earlier novels, *The Crossing* employs the road as metaphor for the life journey or the narrative of a life. . . . And McCarthy is concerned with the role or function of story in human experience of life, not only our own stories, our autobiographies, but our biographies of others, our witnessing.<sup>37</sup>

The relationship between the self and the other, a social and moral vision found throughout McCarthy’s work, is charged with compelling ideas for the study of politics and literature. As I will show in this dissertation, the idea of narrative unlocks and provides lines of connection amid a constellation of political ideas within and between his texts. Indeed, engaging McCarthy’s theory of narrative, such as it is, offers the best possible framework for a systematic political critique of McCarthy’s overall project. Developing this concept and using it as a contextual reference point, I address McCarthy’s treatment of ideas related to essential questions of moral obligation and ethics, the questions of nature, human nature, and man’s questionable sovereignty in the world, the critique of our traditional pathways of knowing through which McCarthy engages questions of ontology, and, finally, the notion of individual agency amid a universe circumscribed by potent forces of fate and chance. It is, then, appropriate that I turn now to offer some statement on the methodology I employ in this dissertation.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2-3. Lilley is quoting here from *Whales and Men*, a screenplay written by McCarthy.

<sup>37</sup> Dianne C. Luce, “The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*,” in Arnold and Luce, eds., *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. Copyright: *The Southern Quarterly*, 1999), 195.

## **Statement on methodology**

I intend this dissertation as a study in literature and politics. I proceed analytically, tracing out the major political themes of McCarthy's body of fiction and analyzing them toward their logical conclusions; such as may be found. Central to my interpretive and analytical strategy is a commitment to approaching the political ideas found in any work of fiction as they appear, rather than as asserting a specific message, teaching, or agenda on behalf of their author. My interest in these texts concerns their possible contribution to an understanding of the human, and a vision of man in the world. To accommodate this, I have adopted a longitudinal method of approaching the broad political themes appearing in McCarthy's novels as a way of both reading and also in structuring a coherent argument. To this end, I approach the idea of a narrative as a guiding leitmotif, but in a dualistic way: employing a similar distinction between narrating the autobiography of the self in isolation and the witnessing of others' stories as they intersect. My critical approach in this narrative-based anthropology looks at man first in profound isolation (not difficult to do in McCarthy's work), and then, progressing through his novels in sequence, in an increasingly social context. McCarthy's later fiction displays an increasingly affirmative view of the sacredness of human life and of the basic impulse toward community in even the most unreflective of characters; an essential characteristic of the human.

Conceiving this study over a prolonged period of reading and research, I feel it bears mention that had I anticipated finding programmatic, definitive, and conclusive answers to the political questions raised by McCarthy's fiction, I would have passed on the study or abandoned it early on out of disinterest. Indeed, to call any of McCarthy's works a "political novel" would be absurd. Apocalyptic fiction has rarely, if ever, been overtly or consistently political in terms of its subject matter or intended audience. Rather, I find in McCarthy's novels an artistic or

poetic utterance that speaks to discomfiting realities of experience while simultaneously sublimating the particularities of experience, however immediate, into a mythic plane. In this textual world, with its apocalyptic backdrop and mythical sublime, I construct an analytical framework for exploring the political ideas that appear and reappear throughout all of McCarthy's work. Though interrelated, narrative, nature, history, witnessing, agency, and order are broad conceptual categories within which I discuss essential political questions arising from the texts.

### **Organization of chapters**

Using the pervasive themes of narrative, nature, history, witnessing, agency, and order, I hope to demonstrate the manner in which his apparent ambivalence toward the political serves to conceal a more robust philosophical inquiry into human nature and, correspondingly, the way in which McCarthy raises problems of integrating the individual into the inhumane landscapes of the natural world. Assuming that a political audience may be unfamiliar with McCarthy's fiction, I have structured the dissertation in such a way as to provide my reader with a general context for McCarthy's works by moving through them in the chronology of their publication. This strategy is partially out of necessity due to the diversity of the material covered; a particular challenge for studies in literature and politics. I should also mention that this dissertation is not intended as a comprehensive or exhaustive study of all of McCarthy's fiction (published or unpublished, novels, plays, and screenplays). Indeed, I omit all of McCarthy's early works (prior to the publication of *The Orchard Keeper* in 1965, McCarthy had published two short stories—"A Wake for Susan" (1959) and "A Drowning Incident" (1960) in the *Phoenix*, a literary magazine at the University of Tennessee), and, most glaringly, I have opted not to treat

McCarthy's other Masterpiece, *Suttree* (1968) in my longitudinal analysis of his catalog. This difficult editorial decision was made after it became apparent that, while a very impressive piece of literary artistry (made the more so due its being his first started, but fourth published novel) and while offering some resonance with established themes I trace out in other works, I find *Suttree* to be largely out of dialogue with McCarthy's other works, particularly with regard to political themes. These considerations addressed I now set forward a basic organizational overview of the dissertation and its chapters.

In my first chapter, titled "Narrative," I begin by sketching McCarthy's use of narrative in his earliest three published novels. Although *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God* are three very distinct works of fiction, they are unified by a sense of setting and an approach to narrative. These are McCarthy's "Southern" or "Appalachian" novels, all set in the mountains of East Tennessee. They are further unified by certain stylistic devices McCarthy uses in his early fiction before moving on to the later stylistic hallmarks of his Southwestern fiction. Thus, my first chapter sets forward the framework for the theory of narrative that grounds many of McCarthy's most compelling political insights. Though many of the more provocative aspects of this theory appear in McCarthy's later works, his first three novels are helpful to illustrate some of the signature aspects of McCarthy's style. Storytelling, for McCarthy as well as for several of his characters, is a world-making enterprise. And yet, the reader may wonder, what is this world? I argue that McCarthy's storytelling project creates an atmosphere of disequilibrium by challenging his reader's assumptions about time, space, and empathy. As my analysis of his first novel *The Orchard Keeper* illustrates, McCarthy uses the text as well as the plot of the novel to create a space for the exchange between the author, the text, and the reader. Structurally, *The Orchard Keeper* creates a rupture in time through which

the story enters and, by the novel's conclusion, exits. Seen in this way, McCarthy's theory of narrative displays a particular understanding of time.

A related convention is visible in *Outer Dark*, McCarthy's second novel and the first of his road narratives. Here the idea of wandering builds upon the idea of time as seen in the parallel wanderings of the siblings Culla and Rinthy Holme. Whereas *The Orchard Keeper* demonstrates the manner in which McCarthy uses narrative to disrupt chronological sequence, *Outer Dark* uses the imagery of the journey to demonstrate a similar effect in both time and space. Finally, this chapter's exploration of McCarthy's storytelling techniques considers the idea of meta-narratives in his third novel, *Child of God*. Here, McCarthy's theory of storytelling engages assumptions regarding identity through the use of disembodied community voices, creating a moral conversation around one of the most unsympathetic protagonists in all of American literature. The key interpretive detail here is the manner in which the community creates the role of pariah that Lester Ballard comes to occupy simultaneously with his horrific deeds. *Child of God* advances McCarthy's basic theory of storytelling by establishing the narrative component of empathy, in which the reader's discomfiting experience mimics that of the community in the novel. In sum, the discussion in chapter one establishes the importance of stories and of storytelling to McCarthy's political imagination. While the narrative components of time, place, and identity are presented across three very distinct novels, the political questions of freedom and agency will be readily apparent in this discussion of the first chapter.

McCarthy's view of nature, presented in chapter two is intimately connected to the concepts of history, presented subsequently in chapter three. The correspondence and tension between these two concepts serves to dramatize the mystery of existence, revealing a kind of

spiritual blindness at the heart of human existence.<sup>38</sup> The text of *Blood Meridian*, widely regarded as McCarthy's masterpiece, will serve as the focal point for this area of analysis. The novel's central theme actively engages one of the ultimate questions of political philosophy: whether the political regime, and its laws, has its origins in nature or in convention. As a nameless "kid," the novel's putative human protagonist, crosses into the unsettled frontier of country of Texas in the year 1849, the voice of the impersonal narrator states that "not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation can be shaped to man's will, or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay."<sup>39</sup> In this formulation I find one aspect of McCarthy's political vision most clearly expressed. For McCarthy, the question of human nature and sociality can only be addressed in the open and boundless expanse of the frontier—wherein the extent of man's beastliness or godliness can become fully visible. Only here can the deep and often troubling paradoxes of philosophy and human existence be explored, though potentially without resolution. The political implication at issue is whether any society, however rightly ordered or justly governed it aspires to be, can fully protect human being from the feral rapacity within the self, or within others.

In chapter three I argue that McCarthy posits history as an analog to this problem regarding the substance and of men's hearts, and how to know them. Scholar Tim Parrish also notes this paradoxical tendency. Regarding the paradoxes of history that contribute to many of the deepest philosophical questions permeating *Blood Meridian* (and no less relevant to McCarthy's corpus in its entirety), he notes: "One cannot say precisely whether the novel is about the true nineteenth-century historical events it describes or about the nature of history

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<sup>38</sup> Luce, *DLB*, 143, 123.

<sup>39</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 5.



itself.”<sup>40</sup> Parrish’s interpretation reveals a philosophical paradox at the heart of McCarthy’s fiction, questioning the capacity of language to adequately represent the truth and, further, whether the possibility of arriving at purely objective truths is entirely available to humans at all.

The nature and history chapters focus primarily on *Blood Meridian*. Distinct though related, nature and history invoke discussions of McCarthy’s metaphysics, questions of ontology, of epistemology, of the possibility and meaning of action, of the idea of truth and the resultant questions complicating traditional assumptions about the order of the world. Out of these ideas flows Lilley’s central question: the possibility of agency which, as the quotation cited above illustrates, is deeply connected to the ideas of narrative and witnessing as a world-creating force in McCarthy’s vision.

Chapter four, titled “Witnessing,” presents the other half of McCarthy’s narrative theory. The idea of witnessing comes to the fore in McCarthy’s fifth novel, *Blood Meridian*, reappearing with renewed vitality in *The Crossing*, the second novel of the Border Trilogy. In this early period, McCarthy’s concern with story and with storytelling is a primary means of expressing the function of story in the individual or subjective experience in human life. In this way, the concept of witnessing is other-directed. Witnessing corresponds to the essential human encounter with the other in McCarthy’s fiction, ultimately demonstrating the manner in which the multiplicity of particular stories—corresponding to the multiplicity of particular or individual people—converges to become the one tale told for all time by the one man, who is all men. McCarthy’s theory of witnessing represents the social aspect of his vision (contra the charge of a solipsistic nihilism ascribed by his harsher critics). It is through witnessing, ultimately, that McCarthy’s great challenges to knowing, and pathways to the truth become most apparent.

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<sup>40</sup> Timothy Parrish, “Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*: The First and Last Book of America.” *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 80.

My fifth chapter, titled “Agency,” begins with a return to the idea of existential heroes in McCarthy’s work. Here, I begin discussions of will, action, agency, and making promises that will direct the argument throughout the second half of the dissertation. A classic expression of this theme in McCarthy’s writing and thought is seen in scenes of dialog between the young existential cowboy prodigy, John Grady Cole, and his interlocutor, the dueña Alphonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*. As a mouthpiece for existential determinism, and endowed with a certain total knowledge of the world expressed as total authority for action, Alphonsa represents a new take on the established model of McCarthy’s favored antagonist. Yet she is unique in her accessibility for a McCarthy “villain.” Accordingly, she serves as a useful point of departure for continuing my ongoing analysis of McCarthy’s predatory characters found throughout his corpus. In this chapter I proceed from an introduction and synopsis of The Border Trilogy to scenes of dialog between John Grady and Alphonsa found in its first volume, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). Next, I turn to address the ongoing thematic analysis of naming responsibility in McCarthy’s work, expressed here through the idea of making and keeping promises in the context of the trilogy and later works. As ever, the issue of freedom looms and yet retains its characteristic nebulousness. McCarthy never engages the idea directly in any text, at least in any definitive way. The image of the road or path, invoking the established concepts of narrative and witnessing remains vibrant, now seen in complicating paradoxes of causality, of the interplay of chance, choice, and fate in the realm of human action.

I address the concept of order in my sixth chapter. Here, the relationship between immanent and transcendent horizons are central. The tragic dimensions of McCarthy’s thought are also visible here. To get at this I turn to McCarthy’s most recently published novels, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006). In this work McCarthy deals with the

question of the order of reality in a post-apocalyptic setting to frame the essential humane questions confronting a dying man's final mission: to get his young son to safety. Here McCarthy reengages familiar imagery: the last man on earth, walking down a road with a boy. The existential questions confronting the duo are obvious, as are the moral ones: What are the choices a father must make to protect his son in such a world? What are the lessons he can impart in good conscience? In this novel the act of naming responsibility is a *fait accompli*, but what are the consequences? What are the promises that can be made and, perhaps more importantly, kept? In the horrifying moral terrain such a landscape, the making and keeping of promises comes to define both the man and the boy. McCarthy now questions directly the uncertain substantiality of human value of man, and his position in the matrix of the world.

The discussion of order is the final substantive chapter. In my conclusion, I reframe points of analysis reached in previous chapters, attempting to draw together the various thematic strands of analysis in an attempt to offer some final thoughts regarding the breadth, depth, and impact of McCarthy's literary project in terms of political theory.

As illustrated, the literature of McCarthy scholarship initiates a number of analytical discussions regarding themes of political and philosophical relevance. However, what it does not currently provide is an analytical framework illuminating McCarthy's vision from the perspective of political theory. The questions of violence point out McCarthy's concern for the question of human nature and its moral core, and are glimpsed through his frequent painting of the natural world as a mysterious realm of beauty and danger points toward a deep duplicity inherent in human self-understanding. His foray into a kind of parodic historical revisionism underscores the dramatic or story-telling nature of all human activity. While literary scholars have glimpsed this, they do not sufficiently consider its implicit political significance. My

dissertation seeks to correct this. In this work, McCarthy's implications are treated more emphatically. Where his formulations bear upon politics, these connections will be made more explicit and traced to their theoretical conclusion and logical extensions. McCarthy's vision, with its deep concern for questions of nature, human nature, and society deserves a political accounting. From it, political theory may gain access to a unique and insightful perspective on human interaction and the nature of the American soul. The themes of narrative, nature, history, and witnessing history manifest continually in the secondary literature as conceptual hallmarks of McCarthy's fiction. Discreet categories of this kind are always risky when treating works as deeply nuanced as McCarthy's. And the need for caution is particularly high in this case, as the themes are neither succinct nor conclusive. The moral and ethical implications that flow from the theme of metaphysical violence, for instance, are often most visible in McCarthy's depictions of the non-human world, but no less are they a major component of his understanding of narrative. Likewise, the centrality of agency within McCarthy's vision is difficult to address without considering the intertextual matrix of thought, word, and action, typical of McCarthy's presentation of narrative. However distinctly any of these conceptual motifs may appear within or between McCarthy's works, the critic is hard-pressed to discuss without recourse to their convergence. The most sensible way forward, then, seems to start with the rudiments of his vision as they first appear. In my first chapter, Narrative, I use McCarthy's novels *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God* to present the hallmarks of McCarthy's narrative strategy. Here I establish the ground rules for reading and interpreting McCarthy's fiction in terms of political philosophy.

## 1. Narrative

In a rare interview published in *The New York Times Magazine* edition of April 1992, McCarthy reflects briefly on his artistic philosophy, his influences, and the general tenor of his fiction. Woodward, his interviewer, offers the reader this brief summation of McCarthy's expansive and hopeful vision for his medium: "He still believes that the novel can, in his words, 'encapsulate all the various disciplines and interests of humanity.'"<sup>1</sup> McCarthy openly acknowledges his influences: "The ugly fact is books are made out of books," he says. "The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written." McCarthy notes his regard for only a short list of "'good writers'—Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner—[and] precludes anyone who doesn't *'deal with issues of life and death.'*"<sup>2</sup> In the same interview McCarthy further states: "There is no such thing as life without bloodshed. . . . I think the notion that the species can be improved some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea."<sup>3</sup>

In almost all of McCarthy's fiction the astonishing bleakness of the natural world combines with the overwhelming violence of the human sphere and suggests violence as the enduring common denominator of reality. McCarthy plays with the aesthetics and thematic tropes of genre but is very seldom identified as an author of *horror* fiction; the philosophical implications of his writing are horrific nevertheless. McCarthy places his reader in a position of encountering the realities of life from a position of maximum insecurity but his motive is more instructive than cautionary. The terrifying and destabilizing effect of his bloody pasquinades creates a tensional field in which the reader must ponder the place and the role of the human

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<sup>1</sup> Richard C. Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times Magazine*, 19 April, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis is mine).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

amid an omnipresent atmosphere of “ambiguous nihilism.”<sup>4</sup> The importance of McCarthy’s “metaphysics of violence” notwithstanding, the interview quoted above presents another deep insight into McCarthy’s overall project that is of more immediate concern for this study: the idea of focusing, if not reducing, the plurality of individual stories or narratives into ultimate questions coalescing into a single theme or story; the *one true story*.<sup>5</sup>

All of McCarthy’s novels dwell upon the ultimate human question of life and death in one way or another. However, many of the “various disciplines and interests of humanity” he may take on in a particular work, his commitment to his craft requires that he return, inevitably, to the central question of human existence—what it is to live, and to die, in a mysterious and hostile world that threatens to devour us at every turn. For McCarthy, this story is *the story*, standing as the unique testimony of each man and of all men. “Rightly heard all tales are one” is the great lesson of experience for one of McCarthy’s young protagonists.<sup>6</sup> In the same novel, another character makes a similar pronouncement: “There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell.”<sup>7</sup>

In both interview and artistic enterprise, McCarthy subtly hints at a worldview in which both the idea and practice of storytelling come to represent something fundamental to humanity. The idea of the one man and the one tale common to all permeates McCarthy’s vision with increasing frequency and nuance as his career has progressed, though the ideas are no less visible in his earliest work. From *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), to the present, McCarthy’s fictional works are largely meditations on the idea of narrative. McCarthy writes stories in which the act

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<sup>4</sup> Vereen M. Bell, “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy.” *Southern Literary Journal* 15 (Spring 1983): 31-41.

<sup>5</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1998)

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*. (New York: Random House: *Vintage International*, 1995), 156-7.

of storytelling itself is a central feature. In McCarthy's vision, this very activity is in many ways its own life and death struggle.

McCarthy's concept of narrative is not a singular or static idea, but rather a multifaceted and dynamic interplay of symbols, emphasizing different ideas at different times in his fiction. His prose engenders a sense of sublimation—of men, roads, journeys, and tales, representing the penultimate expression of a theory of narrative in McCarthy's fiction. Within McCarthy's fiction the paradigmatic isolation of an individual man on a journey begins to converge with the journey itself. This journey becomes the story of a life. Consider the following pronouncement McCarthy places in the mouth of one of his oracular characters:

The events of the waking world...are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. Each man is the bard of his own existence.<sup>8</sup>

Theorized in this way, narrative is created when certain events in time are rendered coherent by their ultimate outcome, implying the sense of an ending and, as will be shown, the presence of some storyteller or witness. Thus, the activity of storytelling comes to constitute meaning in common life. The freedom to construct meaning is central to McCarthy's artistic and philosophical enterprise. And yet, for all his preoccupation with this idea, McCarthy never offers concrete answers to the questions he raises. Rather, he increasingly points away from the *storyteller* and toward the story's *hearer*; in the language of McCarthy's prose, this is *the witness*. The reception of the story, the translation of its meaning, and its retelling by this same agent, a witnessing *other*, substantiates an essential ethics embedded throughout the majority of McCarthy's fiction. And this relationship between the self and the other is the primary ground of moral inquiry to begin a political analysis of McCarthy's fiction. But, one might ask, what is the

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<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 283.

substance of this story? Further, what are the limits to this purported freedom of telling, understanding, and retelling? Through narrative, I contend, McCarthy begins to insert the various elements of his political vision. Through this medium of narrative McCarthy is able to render political questions that form the interpretive framework of this dissertation: the question of moral obligation and ethics, the question of the individual's will against the undeniable possibilities of fate and chance, the question of man's sovereignty in the world, and the ultimate problems of knowing and being.

The narrative strategies employed in *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God* shape and give context to a discussion of McCarthy's later work. Mythos is best understood in this context as a set of stories embodying the values that define its characters as well as the world of the reader. In this manner, the characters McCarthy creates stand less as complex individuals with compelling histories of their own, and rather as interlocutors inhabiting a mythic space in which some truth is interrogated. Remembering that "all tales are one"—at least on some level in McCarthy's oeuvre—the witness, perhaps standing in as a proxy for the reader him or herself, becomes the torchbearer of whatever truth may be disclosed in this exchange. This notion would necessarily include the implicit freedom to define this truth however the hearer may be able. Using the narrative techniques of rupture, dislocation, and discomfort, McCarthy is able to explore "the authority of competing narratives and the complex relationship of experience, witness, and tale."<sup>9</sup> The ancient political and philosophical notion of mythopoesis is integrally important to all of McCarthy's fiction. Later works in his corpus more focused on the aesthetics of the frontier show this most clearly. Still, even in his earliest published works, McCarthy

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<sup>9</sup> Dianne C. Luce, "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, 199.



clears his path of preconceptions, creating a mythic setting to time and space in which the ultimate questions stand forward most clearly.

My interpretation finds in McCarthy a philosophical vision through which he establishes “the role of fiction in our lives and the validity of our lives as fictions.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, McCarthy has something to teach his reader, both about him or herself, as well as something about the act of reading. At issue here is the question of freedom: the freedom or agency to create or narrate the “story” of one’s life. Vereen Bell comments that “McCarthy is an expert at manipulating the conventions of reading, setting us up frequently so as to require us to consider some of the main differences between books and the world.”<sup>11</sup> This opposition between books and the world opens a door into the tradition of using fiction as a medium for political inquiry. Using the poetic imagination as a basis for philosophy and, by extension, the substance of poetic texts as a basis for political theorizing engages the political imagination, questioning the ground or substance of reality as well as how that reality can be known. Martha Nussbaum’s formulation is instructive on this point.

Novels...present persistent forms of human need and desire realized in specific social situations. These situations frequently, indeed usually, differ a good deal from the reader’s own. Novels, recognizing this, in general construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters. In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires—and also, in fact, on their very structure.<sup>12</sup>

Such an epistemology forces the theorist into a different mode of observation and analysis than that typically used in describing political phenomena. The world as lived often differs markedly

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>11</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 7.

from the world as observed by the objective and detached social scientist. This is a world mediated by human consciousness and it exists as a matrix of intersecting personal and communal narratives.

Importantly, this is the ground upon which individual actors and political communities construct a sense of identity and purpose. Here, I draw on the work of Stephen Crites.

Stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling-places. People live in them. Yet even though they are not directly told, even though a culture seems rather to be the telling than the teller of these stories, their form seems to be narrative. They are moving forms, at once musical and narrative, which inform people's sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience.<sup>13</sup>

Engaging this world of stories as a field for inquiry, the political theorist must deal with premises that may not be explicit. Often the operative concepts are only exposed through the subtlest arrangement of metaphors. Taking an author's narrative voice at his or her word—and always weighing whether or not that word is completely trustworthy—the philosophically minded reader can begin to sketch theories about the world contained in a text. To understand the political in such a fictional world is to have some idea of its limits, as well as the possibilities it offers for human interaction, social engagement, establishing order, and the building of institutions. To know this world, the theorist must observe or infer its laws whether natural or conventional. One must examine questions regarding individual and collective will versus a cosmos of competing wills, and never excluding the possibilities of chance and fate. Political theorist Catherine Zuckert writes:

Novels...present a very special or peculiar kind of political thought. Theorists abstract by generalizing, while novelists abstract by selecting certain elements to represent the whole. Where the abstraction is, or ought to be, explicit in a theory, in a novel it is veiled by the specificity of description for the sake of engaging and involving the reader in the characters' experiences. Such an involvement is necessary for the reader to understand

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) pages 291-311 (Here citing 295.)

the novelist's vision, but it is not sufficient. In order to comprehend the vision of the author of the novel completely, the reader must also be able to make the significance of the setting and structure, the implicit interpretation of the personal experience, explicit.<sup>14</sup>

McCarthy begins and ends his work as a novelist with an emphasis on the human being as storyteller. And, as all beings are to some extent storytellers, all fiction is to some extent a commentary on the political milieu from which it emerges. Having established the basic premises upon which political theory may engage the world of fiction as a source of political thinking, it remains to explore the manner in which such a philosophical view of narrative informs McCarthy's artistic vision in his own work.

### **Atmospheres of disequilibrium**

McCarthy is a story-telling artist. He is also, to a great extent, a theorist of storytelling itself. His fiction directly engages the role of storytelling in the world of human existence. This is also a theoretical enterprise through which he challenges commonplace cultural assumptions regarding the idea and purpose of the novel as a form of political thinking. These conceptual hallmarks and their political impact are visible even in his earliest published novels. In broad terms, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), and *Child of God* (1973) are unified by particularities of their specific regional setting: early to mid-twentieth-century East Tennessee (The Appalachian Mountains). Each incorporates nuances of topography, demographics, folklore, and regional speech patterns specific to that region. In all three novels, the reader almost immediately becomes aware of a pervasive atmosphere of the grotesque, of a disequilibrium between the human and non-human elements; a world in which both character and reader can never feel quite comfortable or at home. This world stands forward—vividly real,

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Zuckert, "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (August, 1981), 688.

and yet so strange as to create some doubt as to which planet is being referenced. The following passage from *The Orchard Keeper* illustrates this point.

In the relative cool of the timber stands, possum grape and muscadine flourish with a cynical fecundity, and the floor of the forest—littered with old mossbacked logs, peopled with toadstools strange and solemn among the ferns and creepers and leaning to how their delicate livercolored gills—has about it a primordial quality, some steamy carboniferous swamp where ancient saurian lurk in feigned sleep.<sup>15</sup>

Consonant with the overwhelming and mysterious strangeness of the world McCarthy portrays, his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, introduces powerful metaphors of rupture and distortion in the imagery of its opening passage, a prologue. In this, I find a major interpretive insight into the political vision of McCarthy's fiction. The rupture of chronology, an "ironic chiasmus," as Jay Ellis terms it, of the inherent ordering of events in time as being endowed with coherence or even meaning is at issue and faces a serious challenge.<sup>16</sup> In this vein, a closing scene in the novel offers the suggestive phrase "hallucinated recollections," to describe this phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Programmatically, the governing motifs of rupture and distortion of chronological time establishes narrative as a potent creative and destructive force. I deal first with rupture in this section because it is how the novel opens, and because it provides such a fitting and emphatic statement of one cornerstone of McCarthy's vision.

Having established the power of narrative as a creative and destructive force in the world of the novel, as well as in the world in which novels interact with their readers, McCarthy begins his career-long exploration of the manner in which the human perception of time is bound up in the substance of memory, which is itself a narrative. Distortion is a direct result of this rupture in the temporal dimension of conscious perception. Although treated indirectly in this early novel

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<sup>15</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*. (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Ellis, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 42.

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 245.

from his oeuvre, the question of history and its ability to convey meaning is a major theme of McCarthy's later work.

A similar development is discernible in *Outer Dark*. My interpretation of this work is directed toward the philosophical impact of McCarthy's use of dislocation. Here, instead of the distortion of time, through ruptures in individual and communal memories, McCarthy does much the same thing to the idea of space. Space, in *Outer Dark*, as well as in other works throughout McCarthy's corpus, functions metaphorically, even unto the point of allegory. The wandering of the novel's protagonists through a landscape that is (and yet, most definitely, is *not*) the Appalachian South comes to stand as something emblematic of all men at all times; a narrative space of responsibility and judgment that cannot be escaped. This idea of the road narrative or, more properly, the central image of the man on the road—imagery of movement and the sense of a journey—serves as a major conceptual theme in much of McCarthy's fiction and is the interpretive key to his artistic enterprise. Important here is the allegorical use of space through dislocation, a technique that raises questions of moral and ethical relationships, all of which McCarthy expresses through narrative.

*Child of God*, McCarthy's third published novel, extends this tripartite discussion of themes, incorporating the idea of discomfort to the discussion. The novel extends this same moral reasoning inaugurated in *Outer Dark* in some particular and noteworthy ways, as they more directly invoke the reader and open up important considerations regarding empathy and membership. While McCarthy is fairly famous for his preference for the seamier side of the tracks, peopling his imagined communities with an array of outcasts, misfits, ne'er-do-wells, "anomic types," and, in several cases, outright criminals, his protagonist Lester Ballard, is, without doubt, his boldest foray into the recesses of human depravity embodied in an individual.

In casting a murderous necrophiliac as the titular “child of god, much like yourself perhaps,” McCarthy overtly challenges the outer limits of his reader’s empathy.<sup>18</sup> Ballard has almost no redeeming quality whatsoever and yet the conditions of his ostracism are not entirely his own.

In Part One of the novel, the main narrative voice (or direct narrator) is fragmented by italicized first person asides offering commentary on the character of Ballard and, obliquely, the action of the plot. This technique of back story conveyed in fragmentary first person accounts, identified as anonymous voices of the community, offers insight into the novel’s moral universe. It suggests that the stories we tell, even in recounting our memories, is in a very real and powerful sense a way of recreating our world, so as to absolve ourselves of uncomfortable truths in our own history. Such realizations are liable to be disquieting, particularly in a novel that raises the stakes so high as to suggest joint or communal complicity for crimes of rape, murder, and the mistreatment of the dead.

In the three sections that are to follow, I interpret and analyze McCarthy’s first three novels in an effort to establish the centrality of narrative to his political vision as it bears out in *Blood Meridian*. Broadly, the effects of distortion, dislocation, and discomfort establish the idea of narrative as a creative and destructive force at the core of human reality. The one tale—the tale of each and of all—is a story of human consciousness and its isolation in the world. This will be the central topic of interpretation in my chapter on witnessing. Yet here also McCarthy establishes the essential human impulse toward community. Within each section, I identify a relevant major theme within that novel that illustrates some prominent component of McCarthy’s overall style and its effect on the political concepts that form the organizational framework of this dissertation.

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<sup>18</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*. (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 4.

In the section that follows, “*Rupture and distortion in stories and storytelling in The Orchard Keeper*,” I analyze McCarthy’s first published novel as a form of political storytelling. His narrative technique poses a challenge to the reader’s preconceptions regarding the way in which the interplay of time and memory conveys meaning. Said in another way (and perhaps more accurately), the interplay of distortions in time and memory may be said to thwart traditional conceptions of meaning. This tactic exposes direct challenges to the reader’s most basic assumptions about time and memory projecting perceptual distortion through anthropomorphic bias in the perception of reality. The conceptual dichotomy of appearance and reality becomes a major theme in McCarthy’s later work, especially *Blood Meridian*. Examining its early and less mature appearance here will facilitate the later discussion and its conceptual vocabulary. *The Orchard Keeper* foregrounds the idea of storytelling as way of presenting a narrative version of reality that, chronologically, makes no sense. Yet it is, ultimately, a closer approximation of reality than a strictly linear presentation. Here, McCarthy indicates his earliest assumptions about the way in which both act on reality as well as establishing its basis in the sphere of human consciousness through memory.

### **Rupture and distortion in stories and storytelling in *The Orchard Keeper***

Rupture and fragmentation are the dominant images of McCarthy’s first published novel. *The Orchard Keeper* provides a convenient context to talk about McCarthy’s use of time, a “broken world of divisions and borders where fragmentation overwhelms holistic perception.”<sup>19</sup> McCarthy’s treatment of time in *The Orchard Keeper* anticipates his later treatment of history in

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew R. Horton, “Hallucinated Recollections: Narrative as Spatialized Perception of History in *The Orchard Keeper*,” in Lilley, ed. *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 286.

*Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy. The work is structurally complex: a multi-layered story constructed in narrative fragments centered around one young boy's coming of age in the isolated mountain region of east Tennessee. The reader has a difficult time identifying a main character or even a linear plot, so I opt to discuss it in terms of theme.

Like many of McCarthy's works, *The Orchard Keeper* is built around the structure of a modern bildungsroman—a boy with no father struggles to come to some sense of being in the world. The story of a boy's moral development and, importantly, in the absence of his father, progressively emerges as a dominant theme in many of McCarthy's works, notably in *Blood Meridian*.<sup>20</sup> In this first novel, McCarthy's narrative construction of selfhood depends foundationally on the idea of discontinuity, rupture, and distortion. Its narrative is disjunctive, frequently switching between an omniscient and impersonal third person, to the viewpoints of various characters, including a mountain lion, without any warning to the reader or regard for linear temporal sequence. Speaking toward this theme of ruptures in time and their distorting effects on perception, Vereen Bell observes the following:

This odd and thought-provoking contrivance enables McCarthy to emphasize the disconnection of these people's lives, by showing from an aerial perspective connections that they at their level cannot possibly see. Again the experience of reading is manipulated, forced into play. We become ironic metaphysicians making order out of random data, though that order is as meaningless, finally, as the incoherence it supersedes: what ought to be or might have been is never a serious issue in this novel.<sup>21</sup>

McCarthy's rhetorical strategy presents his reader with a world in which the reader's assumptions about time, space, and even empathy, are thrown off balance, calling into question their most basic premises. Descriptive passages often skip over large and indeterminate temporal

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<sup>20</sup>Major themes and plotlines in the novels of his "Tennessee period" anticipate more fully wrought and philosophically incisive presentations later on. Cooper observes: "Arthur Ownby's and John Wesley's struggles in *The Orchard Keeper* are consistent with struggles of characters searching for a moral code in a chaotic, codeless world in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) and *The Crossing* (1994)" (Cooper, *Heroes*, 28). Likewise, John Wesley Rattner can be viewed as an antecedent of the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

<sup>21</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 25.



expanses, arriving at some disjunctive next scene that, in terms of linear progression of plot, often seem wildly eccentric. Yet despite these temporal disruptions, the sequences never wander so far as to deplete the impact of the whole.

McCarthy melds a principle of his artistic or philosophic stance on narrative into the very form of the novel itself in *The Orchard Keeper*. This is that the nature of story is more process than artifact, an activity transcending the life of the character, the experience of the reader, and even the craft of the author. Referring back to his statements in the Woodward interview, I postulate that since there is only one story, one tale to tell, which is the man on a perpetual journey, the narrative cannot be said to have a beginning or end. Through its coming into being, McCarthy's first published novel literally *opens with an opening*. Even before plot or characters are introduced, *The Orchard Keeper* begins with a rupture: a tree cut down and the crew cutting it into lengths. The novel's prologue is quoted here in full:

*The tree was down and cut to lengths, the sections spread and jumbled over the grass. There was a stocky man with three fingers bound up in a dirty bandage with a splint. With him were a Negro and a young man, the three of them gathered about the butt of the tree. The stocky man laid aside the saw and he and the Negro took hold of the piece of fence and strained and grunted until they got the log turned over. The man got to one knee and peered into the cut. We best come in this way, he said. The Negro picked up the crosscut and he and the man began sawing again. They sawed for a time and then the man said, Hold it. Goddamn, that's it again. They stopped and lifted the blade from the cut and peered down into the tree. Uh-huh, said the Negro. It sho is now, ain't it?*

*The young man came over to see. Here, said the man, look sideways here. See? He looked. All the way up here? he said? Yep, the man said. He took hold of the twisted wrought-iron, the mangled fragment of the fence, and shook it. It didn't shake. It's growed all through the tree, the man said. We cain't cut no more on it. Damned old elum's bad enough on a saw.*

*The Negro was nodding his head. Yassa, he said. It most sholy has. Growed all up in that tree.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 3.

In the trunk of this “*elum*” tree the men find a “mangled fragment” of wrought iron fence, twisted and awry. The fence, observes one of the men, is “*grewed all through the tree*,” and conspires to thwart the bite of their saw.<sup>23</sup> The tree is a living thing while the fence is inanimate and so, in actuality, their observation reverses the obvious story of what has happened: a fence was built and, at some later point, a tree has grown up and enveloped it. While the error is obvious to any reader familiar with the nature of plants and inanimate objects, the narrative voice offers nothing to correct it.

The dialogue between the three unnamed characters here reveals the novel’s dominant themes: a spurious relationship between the workings of nature and the realm of human activity; a perception of time that is distorted or out of joint. Bell states: “We are being reminded, in relation to the novel’s principal agenda, of the place of our identity in the impersonal scheme of things.”<sup>24</sup> McCarthy scholar Matthew Horton contends that this “condensed image of perceived history, giving shape to the passage of time” illustrates the manner in which “human hindsight objectifies the passage of time.”<sup>25</sup> The pronouncement of the three mysterious characters is left to stand, while the tree that has grown into a fence, as well as the integrity of the fence itself, is not. The novel’s italicized prolegomenon (quoted above) is one of many such interstitial or parenthetical passages scattered throughout the rest of the novel. Through a variety of voices and viewpoints, it serves as an aside to the main narrative strand, disrupting the temporal sequence of the events to create new openings into the world of the novel. Horton explains:

If this initial metaphor for storytelling generates tension between coherence and disorder, it does so in part by bridging the apparent perceptual gap separating time and space. McCarthy projects a temporal concept (history) through a spatial lens (tree fragments) and so *foregrounds distortion as an integral part of conveying historical perception*. The fallen and fragmented tree represents the mind of man struggling to recollect and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Horton, “Hallucinated Recollections,” 285.

reassemble the past. Just as the scattered segments indicate that the tree has been fractured, so must the events and sensations of a story told about the past be extracts from the temporal order of sequential history. But McCarthy's style of storytelling, his narrative technique, goes beyond the idea of distortion as a consequence of limited memory. He deliberately warps conventional appearance, reveals multiple dimensions of perception, and jumbles the sequence of his narrative to simulate how man reconceives the past within memory. Thus, the aesthetic engine of storytelling gives birth to and is sustained by distortion, the predominant means by which McCarthy undermines the boundary between time and space and uncovers the structures that exist hidden within chronology.<sup>26</sup>

McCarthy presents the idea of narrative as a creative and destructive force. He begins and ends his first novel with the image of an opening wrenched out of a matrix, composed of things human and things nonhuman, and creating a gap in space and in time.<sup>27</sup> Bell adds the following:

The characters [in the prologue] and the location are not identified. For the time being the episode remains unassimilated. We can then only assume that some arcane metaphor is at hand and later on attempt to construe it. The fence that is supposed to have grown up into the tree, we assume in retrospect, has reference to the theme of man and nature interfused. In fact, the image is interesting in those terms because the fence that the baffled observers think has somehow grown into the tree—an odd instance of human vanity as well as ignorance—has of course been grown around by the tree, absorbed into it.<sup>28</sup>

Though McCarthy typically offers no direct insight into the interior consciousness of his characters, his presentation of the young protagonist, John Wesley, offers a few more narrative details than those found in later incarnations of the character type. For one, the course of the boy's childhood is described in terms of its history, a rupture in time between *what was* and *what*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>27</sup> Horton's observation on this feature is worth quoting at length: "If this initial metaphor for storytelling generates tension between coherence and disorder, it does so in part by bridging the apparent perceptual gap separating time and space. McCarthy projects a temporal concept (history) through a spatial lens (tree fragments) and so foregrounds distortion as an integral part of conveying historical perception. The fallen and fragmented tree represents the mind of man struggling to recollect and reassemble the past. Just as the scattered segments indicate that the tree has been fractured, so must the events and sensations of a story told about the past be extracts from temporal order of sequential history. But McCarthy's style of storytelling, his narrative technique, goes beyond the idea of distortion as a consequence of limited memory. He deliberately warps conventional appearance, reveals multiple dimensions of perception, and jumbles the sequence of his narrative to simulate how man reconceives the past within memory. Thus, the aesthetic engine of storytelling gives birth to and is sustained by distortion, the predominant means by which McCarthy undermines the boundary between time and space and uncovers the structures that exist hidden within chronology. (Ibid., 286)

<sup>28</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 22.

is. The narrative moves in and out of past and present tense, creating a sense of disjuncture through “illusions of proximity.”<sup>29</sup> This is significant because, like the rest of the novel, the disjuncture of time and memory is an essential motif through which things happening in the present clash against things long passed. The story told, so the novel closes:

They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust.<sup>30</sup>

As I have discussed in this section thus far, *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy’s first published novel, presents some important and enduring themes germane to the political vision found throughout his body of fiction. McCarthy’s concern for the opposition of the natural order and its radical separateness from the history of men foregrounds the non-human element and in doing so opens a large space for the exploration of man as man. His commitment to a certain depiction of reality—a world in which beauty and horror are somehow unified, and in which man is not altogether welcome overwhelms his characters, along with his reader, page after page. And yet however vividly the non-human world stands forth in McCarthy’s prose, he presents the position of the human in such a way that the substance of that reality is constantly called into question. The interpretive key for this stylistic hallmark turns on the centrality of narrative in McCarthy’s vision. Horton presents the following:

Storytelling in *The Orchard Keeper* similarly infuses time frames from the past into the present. As stylized performances of intact memories, storytellers and their stories in the text come closest to embodying how perceiving history and composing narratives interact; moreover, performances, unlike flashbacks, require an audience to hear them, adding another layer to the idea of perception.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 74. Full quote: “Lighting glared in threatful illusions of proximity and quick shapes appeared in the road, leapt from ditch or tree in configurations antic and bizarre.” (*TOK*, 74).

<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 246.

<sup>31</sup> Horton, “Hallucinated,” 301.

Another way of understanding the pervasive concept of rupture in the novel is the word *deracination*, as evidenced in the image of the stump in the bookended opening and closing scenes. Indeed, one gets the sense that the author may have built up the novel conceptually from a playful take on the word ‘deracination’ itself which, means stump. Ergo, the entire arc of John Wesley’s character is one of a rootless existence: truncated and unregenerative. And yet his homelessness ultimately proves to be his salvation, carrying him away from the decay of the homeplace and the petrification of the cemetery, out and away out onto the road.

The imagery of the prologue, the tree in the fence in the cemetery, provides a perfect backdrop. “John Wesley Rattner is in flight from the enclosing spaces of his home and even the largest town nearby—the sizeable Knoxville, Tennessee. He is also a character in flight from the entrapment of epilogue. Above all, he is in flight from the graves of his ancestors.”<sup>32</sup> A space has been opened where before there had been a continuum: the falling tree has carried with it the ingrown fence, wrenching open a gap. Horton adds the following:

[John Wesley’s] attempt to reorder his fragmented past, to tell a story that revitalizes the initial harmony of the whole of what has occurred, is met with the intrinsic barriers of history to human perception. Moreover, as he considers where he stands in a changing world, the impenetrable composite of the old and new orders resists his inquiry. The tree grows around the fence, and the fence infiltrates the tree. That section of history is removed, in a sense, by the telling of it, and John Wesley finds a gap through which he can walk away.<sup>33</sup>

In this space, after a profound moment of self-realization (or actualization), John Wesley Rattner chooses to go out, to move or emigrate out of the confinement of his previous life, his history, and heads off down the western road. Here I detect a theme in McCarthy’s fiction that will serve as a central feature for the analysis of his fiction. More than any other single image or motif found throughout his corpus, the road—or more properly, the image of the man on the road—

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<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *No Place for Home*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Horton, 308.

most fully expresses the concept of human nature found in McCarthy's fiction. Roads, and journeys on roads, are themselves phenomena through which consciousness must mediate the constructs of *time* and *space*. Certainly in challenging these assumptions in this particular way McCarthy is not arguing that they do not exist. Rather, he is interested in contrasting them as constructs against the void that, for McCarthy, is the world itself.

The image of the road provides a nice segue into the discussion of the individual's condition of displacement in McCarthy's fiction. *Outer Dark*, McCarthy's second published novel is his first example of a road narrative. His dislocated and dispossessed protagonists, the siblings Culla and Rinthy Holme, spend the majority of the novel in separate journeys in search of an abandoned child. Of interest to my dissertation here is McCarthy's presentation of dislocation: protagonists wandering through allegorical space stands as a metaphoric exploration of the position of man in the world. The lack of direction, of getting anywhere on the road, is the operative metaphor and demonstrates a further manner in which McCarthy challenges his reader's assumptions about things familiar in the world in order to explore underlying truths of existence—that we actually know very little about the world in which we find ourselves. The dominant motif of allegorical space in *Outer Dark*, when combined with its analog of time in *The Orchard Keeper*, intensifies the role of narrative as a force of creation and sovereignty in McCarthy's fiction.

### **Dislocation and allegorical space in *Outer Dark***

*Outer Dark* bears some structural similarity to *The Orchard Keeper* but is formally simpler. The novel's main characters, Culla Holme and his sister Rinthy, live in the mountains of an unspecified, but implicitly Southern locale. Here they abide in a region remote enough,

especially considering its time period, to exist beyond the reach of civil law. The siblings' home is some four miles from the nearest store and outside of any appreciable sense of human community. As such, they are thus beyond the reach of any custom, common law, or moral law regulating the relations of human beings, and no one has disturbed this seclusion for "some three months."<sup>34</sup> This is a common and important trope appearing frequently in McCarthy's fiction and bears considerable weight for the political implications of his vision. As Jay Ellis notes, the sense of dislocation and disconnection of characters is circumscribed by the spatial domains of the natural and the conventional. "McCarthy's characters often seem at odds with the facts of nature as much as culture. As antinomians, they exist in such stark opposition to the normative constraints of the dominant culture that they seem all the more at home in the wilderness than in civilization."<sup>35</sup> This insight offers an important early glimpse into an important political consideration made throughout McCarthy's corpus as a whole: the narrative presentation of sympathetic characters in direct violation of the most universal of moral taboos. The siblings have committed incest and conceived a child.

As I have discussed in the previous section, McCarthy uses fissures or disruptions in chronology to create an opening for story in *The Orchard Keeper*, reflexively calling attention to the reader's subjective notion of time itself. In *Outer Dark*, McCarthy adapts this technique somewhat, preferring instead to focus on what I term *dislocation* and allegorical space.

Allegorical space functions much in the same way as metaphorical time. By reducing either or both to the quality or character of experience, McCarthy engages a level of myth in his novels, opening the door to phenomenological or existentialist philosophy. Just as time through memory becomes discontinuous, space through dislocation becomes allegorical, in which

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<sup>34</sup> McCarthy, *Outer Dark*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis, *No Place for Home*, 54.

wandering comes to represent the fundamental human condition. The world of *Outer Dark* has no map, no direct correspondence to the real world. Its geography is self-contained and this bears a strong connection to McCarthy's use of narrative as a world-creating enterprise.

McCarthy's tactic in establishing these allegories is to give familiar names to towns, counties, and rivers, and even relative distances between them, but corresponding to no known map.<sup>36</sup> In this way, *Outer Dark* stands as another reworking of one of McCarthy's favorite forms: that of the road novel.

In many respects, it presents a kind of prototype for later novels. My discussions of *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy in later chapters reveal these to be later manifestations of the same basic philosophical question. In the context of *Outer Dark*, spatial imagery returns to the man on a journey motif within McCarthy's canon. The image of the isolated wanderer figures significantly into McCarthy's political imagination, a foundational component of his ethical or moral philosophy. Blair presents a typology:

Cormac McCarthy's novels have always centered around the figure of the isolato—the man alone in a naturalistically indifferent and shockingly violent world, trying to keep flesh and soul together in the face of existential doubt and terrible tribulation and suffering. That world in which McCarthy sets his lonely characters is thoroughly postlapsarian and thoroughly undifferentiated; the same unpleasantness is everywhere, and whether in Kentucky or New Mexico is largely a matter of detail.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> McCarthy's critics and commentators typically group this among his "Appalachian" or "Tennessee" novels, citing the similar use of regional diction or idiom familiar to *The Orchard Keeper*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree* (1979), all of which are early works and all of which are set in East Tennessee. *Outer Dark* differs from these, however, and this is a point too often overlooked in the interpretive and critical secondary literature. Whereas the other works from this period are highly specific, using exact correspondence to actual places, *Outer Dark* employs some significant ambiguities in its setting, informing its overall philosophic statement. In short, the novel is set in East Tennessee, and it is not. The reader is given no clear sense of the date—unusual for a McCarthy novel. Further, the places named in the story *could* be real places, as they bear resemblance to place names found in Tennessee (county names: Johnson, Cheatham, and Clayton; town names: Cheatham, Wells Station, Preston Flats, Morgan, Harmsworth, Charlestown). But these places are only analogous to real places in their allegorical similarity. With their familiar names, towns in the novel sound like real places, but they are made up. Furthermore, the narrator mentions a character hearing "the dull lowing of an alligator somewhere on the river" (38) Wild alligators do not live in Tennessee.

<sup>37</sup> John Blair "Mexico and the Borderlands in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42, no. 3: 301; 2001. *Sociological Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 18, 2013).



While this motif is developed more thoroughly in *Blood Meridian* and later works, the basic ideas are present in McCarthy's presentation of Culla Holme in *Outer Dark*. And the motif is an important political component of McCarthy's overall narrative project. Its appearance in this early work demonstrates the centrality of freedom within the context of a journey narrative to McCarthy's mode of storytelling. Why is this important? A partial answer is that the imagery establishes something elemental about McCarthy's portrayal of human nature—man as homeless, isolated, and spiritually blind.

The dislocated wandering of the siblings Culla and Rinthy Holme typifies this idea of the destination-less journey in McCarthy's fiction. The object of the quest for Rinthy is her unnamed child, for Culla, it is his sister. The child is the object of Rinthy's desire, and yet she has no idea where to go, what to say to any would be helpers, any description of the tinker she believes is holding her child, any sense of distance or geographic relationships. She cannot tell anyone where she is going, of where her home is located, the name of the child (or of the tinker). She knows only a few things: that she has a child in the world, that her brother is the father of the child, that the tinker most likely has the child and, that she wants him back. When asked where her she lives she cannot answer: "I don't live nowhere no more, she said. I never did much. I just go around huntin my chap. That's about all I do any more."<sup>38</sup>

The tension between Culla and Rinthy in the allegorical space they inhabit is one of being bound to each other, and yet driven apart. The travelling, the movement, the not admitting to needing anything like help or empathy or sympathy, the point of it all, is that the narrator presents them recessively and the reader's perception or judgment of them becomes a difficult matter of choice. So few clues are available, and so few opportunities for redemption, reconciliation or conclusion remain, save for the "frail agony of grace" that Rinthy inhabits, or

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<sup>38</sup> McCarthy, *Outer Dark*, 156.

Culla's "terror of the open land."<sup>39</sup> While their respective journeys have a purpose, they are undertaken with little knowledge or forethought; hence, the wandering. The two spend the majority of their time in the narrative simply on a road to somewhere although they don't where they are going or how to get there. The reader gets no sense of how long the journey takes or where it leads. They have no sense of a destination or any real sense of themselves as they correspond to their journey. They move about in no apparent direction and this recursiveness of movement heightens the significance on their encounters with other characters. In opposition to Rinthy and Culla, these characters are defined by their staying put, rather than their moving on. In this sense, the encounters themselves serve as the only waymarkers of their journeys. Noting this, Giles observes something significant about the characters' general situation. "Until Culla's ill-fated journey to town to find help for Rinthy, one wonders whether they have ever known anything like an established human society."<sup>40</sup>

Throughout their episodic wanderings, the two encounter a myriad of eccentric characters, provincials and grotesques, who offer either assistance or scorn, and with little apparent motive. These "others" encountered by Culla and Rinthy occupy an altogether different type of space. Typically, they do not live closely with anyone else, and any sense of community among them is conspicuously absent. Townspeople readily become mobs in this narrative and are generally suspicious of each other and particularly of newcomers, at least in the case of Culla. The talkative ones—typically serving as interlocutors with the protagonists in dialogic scenes—live more simplistic, isolated lives. They seem less suspicious than townspeople, less judgmental. They appear to regard wandering vagabonds very much in stride, rather than

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 237, 89.

<sup>40</sup> James R. Giles, "Teaching the Contemporary Naturalism of Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*" *American Literary Naturalism Newsletter* 1.1 (2006), 4.

something strange; all of these exchanges, however, are not so benign. Here, McCarthy introduces Culla to the novel's villains:

*When he entered the glade he could see men seated about the fire and he hobbled on, one hand raised, into the firelight. When he saw what figures warmed there he was already among them and it was too late. There were three of them and there was a child squatting in the dust beyond them the tinker's car with the hung pans catching the light like the baleful eyes of some outsized and mute and mindless jury assembled there hurriedly against his coming.*<sup>41</sup>

Three murderous outlaws, archetypal emissaries of darkness, "foot soldiers of the apocalypse," flirt about the periphery of *Outer Dark*.<sup>42</sup> They drift in and out of the primary narrative strands, encountering Culla in his own aimless wandering, and eventually reencountering him in the novel's concluding scenes. They dispense death and violence everywhere they go and exact on Culla a repulsive and malignant version of authority and judgment over life and death. In terms of political themes, it is important to note that in their metaphoric role, the trio represents a version of absolute freedom and sovereignty of action in McCarthy's political world. Though in later works the character type will take on even greater significance in its role as foil to a protagonist seeking to avoid judgment, even in this debut, the predatory nature of authority figures helps to add focus to McCarthy's philosophic program. "What is at stake in the cryptic exchanges between Culla and these smugly grotesque outlaws is the simple, premetaphysical use of human identity."<sup>43</sup> Somehow Culla manages to survive these encounters, but his ultimate fate is to be lifelong wandering, blind and destitute, within a spiritual wasteland. Human society seems neither prepared to accept him nor able to kill him, but only to sit in silent judgment of his unspeakable guilt. Toward this hostility, he seems unable or unwilling to offer much resistance. Bell comments on this lack of agency: "Culla appears to

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<sup>41</sup> McCarthy, *Outer Dark*, 231.

<sup>42</sup> William J. Schafer, "Cormac McCarthy: The Hard Wages of Original Sin," *Appalachian Journal*, 4 (Winter 1977): 105-119.

<sup>43</sup> Vereen Bell, *Achievement*, 41.

have punished himself by giving up, and everyone else's guilt has become his own. He has managed to have himself cast out from a tiny place that ruled absolutely into a world in which he is absolutely ruled."<sup>44</sup>

Judgment and guilt are dominant themes in many of McCarthy's novels. Interestingly, they are commonly connected to tensions between fathers and sons. In *The Orchard Keeper*, John Wesley Rattner combats the stern visage of his erstwhile father in the portrait on the mantle. In *Outer Dark* the paternal tensions are inverted, but the element of guilt is intensified by both the landscape, and by the necessity of naming one's sin. This is the definitive image of Culla: face clutched between his hands in sheer horror, hounded, fugitive, wanting to hide and terrified of being found. Culla's guilt over his commission of incest animates his own dislocation and journey on the road. His pointless search for his sister is his way of keeping on the move, of avoiding the reckoning for what he has done, of naming responsibility. Thus, Culla's freedom is totally curtailed. He is in the opposite position to everyone else, he cannot judge, but only be judged.<sup>45</sup> His position in allegorical space is one of banishment—the exile of outer darkness. For Culla there can be no redemption, no healing, absolution, or reconciliation. Drawing on the biblical overtones of this theme of judgment and guilt in the novel, especially with reference to its title, Edwin Arnold finds a life-affirming moral center animating the moral and ethical questions presented in the novel. "In McCarthy's highly moralistic world," he writes, "sins must be named and owned before they can be forgiven."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this see Lydia R. Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 49. (Also, in this section Cooper gets into issues surrounding the empathetic connection of the characters to the reader (45-6). These connect to *Child of God*.)

<sup>46</sup> Edwin T. Arnold, "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables." *Southern Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1992): 31-50. Rpt. Arnold and Luce, *Perspectives*, 43-67; rev. ed. 45-69, 54.

Things that are named may be said to exist, and not so the other way around. Thus, things that exist must always have some witness to substantiate their reality. McCarthy's world, despite what critics contend, is not solipsistic. However tightly locked in upon itself, consciousness is an interactive phenomenon in McCarthy's world. A witness is needed, and this is Culla's greatest fear—that his name is known even though he tries to hide it. That his deeds or transgressions have a life on their own, even though he has tried to keep them hidden by refusing to name them.

In this way, Culla is metaphorically emblematic of all men as McCarthy views them. Man's only hope is to be witnessed by someone, as the conclusion of the Border Trilogy makes clear. Like Culla, most men do not listen or heed this. Men do not wish to have to answer for themselves, accepting the burden of responsibility that follows an act of naming. We do not want to acknowledge or need or neediness of others. Our greatest fear is that we will be discovered, and yet this remains our secret suspicion: that we have already been found out. We fear the ultimate judgment of God, but we encounter it only in the world. This is ultimately the strongest argument against the allegation of existential nihilism in McCarthy's artistic and philosophical project.

The true horror of McCarthy's vision is not that there is no God, but that there is, and that the world is in some way an expression of what God is really like. Somehow who and what we are and what we have done and whatever we may do, out of choice or necessity, is already known. That we cannot change this narrative is our plight as humans—that whatever we might come to think of as ourselves individually or the expression of some independent will is already written in some other book. Thus, like individuality—and its expression through will—the conclusion must be considered that freedom, too, is just an illusion. Even in the boundless

expanses of the world, with an infinite array of other possibilities, we are never truly free to create.

The ideal of the open land is both compelling and terrifying for McCarthy's characters. Yet this paradox would appear to lie at the heart of something deeply true in all of McCarthy's philosophic imagination. Of course, the open land symbolizes freedom. Yet while McCarthy's later fiction is deeply preoccupied with this question, it becomes increasingly complicated. The open land symbolizes freedom—human freedom. It does not inherently or essentially symbolize anything further in and of itself. The imagery sets up a confrontation between the human will and the impersonal ordering of the world. A further confrontation is seen here between the idea of the individual itself and a matrix of word and flesh independent of any individual actor.

Thus, space, narrative, and freedom connect with the ideas of naming and moral judgment by the novel's conclusion. This development turns the conversation toward the issue of sovereignty in McCarthy's fiction: *Who has the authority to pass judgment, and what makes this authority legitimate?* This feature serves as something of a paradox because the ultimate symbols of this kind of absolute authority are a trio of ghouls who transgress every basic taboo imaginable, and yet their power over the general direction of the plot is undeniable. These characters *must* be reckoned with, and they only obey rules that they impose upon themselves. It would seem that their authority is derived from some higher order than any social or political institution or entity. They recognize laws of a different kind and thus live either in an existential vacuum, or the opposite of one. Chaotic, wholly unaccountable, discriminately lethal—but the basis of this discernment is known only to them. They are wholly “free men.” And as free men, they may transgress when, where, and however they please.

All of the facts of our existence, signifiers of our identity, are already known. And thus, all of who we are and what we will do is already foreordained, judged, and the executioner of sentence is actively seeking us in the world. Characters like the grim triune here, and others that follow in later novels embody a duality and a certain charm, because they possess this ultimate knowledge and thus, we are attracted to them even as we are repulsed. In a gnostic formulation, their knowledge of the truth exposes a deeper division in the world between appearance and reality. And this is precisely what the average human lacks, and even seeks. This need is precisely what animates the journey of the man on the road. Thus, while the story is already written, perhaps McCarthy's moral teaching is that man must act as though this were not so. He must hope that, somehow, somewhere further on down the road lies some later man, some unforeseen witness, who will overtake the story and continue it.<sup>47</sup>

Having considered the stylistic effects of rupture and dislocation in McCarthy's theory of narrative, a final brief survey of McCarthy's third published novel remains to round out this conceptual triad. Heretofore, I have presented concepts in McCarthy's fiction that are mostly bound within or contained by the works themselves. However a large component of McCarthy's political vision is found in the interaction between the narrative voice and the reader. *Child of God*, McCarthy's third published novel offers the clearest expression of this idea.

### **Empathy and discomfort in *Child of God***

*Child of God* (1974) is based on historical subject matter: an actual murder case that took place in the Knoxville area. The newspaper accounts date to a time that McCarthy was living in Knoxville, and it is possible that he had knowledge of the case. The novel chronicles the process

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<sup>47</sup> Ellis, *No Place for Home*, 32.

of alienation, banishment, and final descent into total madness of its protagonist, Lester Ballard. In the novel's opening scene, Ballard is forcibly removed from the small farm he has inherited from his father. Ballard's deranged mental state of derangement is exacerbated by his father's death was a grisly suicide by hanging. Nobody seems to know why. Some indication is given that it was ostensibly either for nonpayment of taxes or because, as an unnamed character narrates: "The mother had run off, I don't know where to nor who with."<sup>48</sup> Ballard is stripped to the most meager trappings of humanity, which he combines with his vengeful wrath, and his ability to shoot a rifle with deadly accuracy. His life is thus constrained and marginalized, and his choices for belonging within human society become increasingly constricted by both circumstance as well as his own maladjustment. In what has been aptly described as "an inexorable progression of events that bear a horrifyingly logical relationship to one another," Ballard becomes a necrophiliac and then a serial killer. Pursued by authorities, he takes refuge in a cave in the mountains. Ballard is beyond the pale, challenging the most primitive taboos often thought to separate man from beast, and yet he remains a child of God, despite his essentially human perversions.

This novel finds McCarthy at his most grotesque and horrifying extremes, yet the novel is not devoid of moral judgment or even empathy. The central moral question of the novel turns on whether Ballard— "a child of God, much like yourself perhaps," has been born into his blighted fate, or whether he is the creation of a community that needs to create pariahs, and is thus, through its scapegoating, rendered accomplice in his crazed acts of depravity. The sense of discomfort conveyed by the narrative voice in *Child of God* points out that the reader (both as audience and as witness to Lester Ballard's acts) is not willing to acknowledge certain disturbing realities—"monstrosities of moral deviance"—about him or herself and, further, that the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 21.



evidence for this fact can be found in the reader's subjective inability or refusal to acknowledge Lester Ballard as one of "our own."<sup>49</sup> And yet, McCarthy asks, on what authority can we reject him? The sense of discomfort is located in the very possibility of such deviance within a community of "normal" people. We are discomforted because the familiar moral terrain has become confused. It is located in the reader's moral imagination and in the realization of the extent to which every one of us is partially complicit in such deviance in our midst. McCarthy plays on our fears that the greatest horrors imaginable in human behavior might, in fact, stem from a failure of compassion, and not reason.

As the reader watches Lester's descent into the monstrous and deadly moral terrain of his actions, he becomes increasingly aware of the community's complicity. McCarthy is never a moralist. Nevertheless, he offers a damning critique of the *nomos*—a critique that shakes the foundations of traditional assumptions about identity and history. His outcast and wandering characters are *dispossessed* as much (if not more) than they are dislocated or discontinuous with reality. Lester Ballard stands as a sort of apotheosis of this kind of moral reasoning found throughout McCarthy's corpus, but particularly during this period. His monstrosity is a difference of degree, not of kind.

To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps.<sup>50</sup>

His humanity is consistently affirmed in the text; as well as his love. Lydia Cooper states that "the narrative voice in *Child of God* seems intent on making the point that the reader ought to interpret Ballard as a sympathetic, or at least pathetic man—an interpretation that grows

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<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Lincoln, *American Canticles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 3.

<sup>50</sup> McCarthy, *Child of God*, 4.

increasingly absurd as Ballard's depravity sinks to new depths, literally and metaphorically."<sup>51</sup>

She continues:

In the dark worlds of McCarthy's corpus, human affinity is always endangered if not practically extinct, but it is also the source of human hope. The urge toward connectedness with others becomes absolutely primal in these novels. When a character's internal thoughts and motivations are revealed, such revelations almost always serve to emphasize that character's visceral need for others.<sup>52</sup>

For the reader, just the same as for the community depicted in the novel, the discomfiting aspect of Lester Ballard is the reader's sense of obligation toward him, or a sense of responsibility for what society has made him. This is partially achieved by the novel's narrative style. It is also achieved by the direct narrator's appeal to the reader's empathy. Consider the following passage (an aside):

He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him. You could say he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?<sup>53</sup>

The problem presented in *Child of God* is ultimately social in nature. But in its fullest expression, it is also a matter of political philosophy. "Reality itself can be rather dark, and perhaps McCarthy's complex, knotty ethical arguments demand attention precisely because they offer necessary insights into an increasingly complicated nonfiction world."<sup>54</sup> The discomfort, then, comes from the reader's suspicion that these "rather complicated ethics" of McCarthy's vision have bearing in the world outside his novels.<sup>55</sup> This is how McCarthy conducts his

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<sup>51</sup> Lydia R. Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 41.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> McCarthy, *Child of God*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, *Heroes*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

political philosophy in this early work—though he will continue this in later works in more expressive terms, as I discuss in later chapters of the dissertation. The invocation of the audience as witness here, though, is something not to be missed. Narrative disruption is a stylistic technique pointing to key insights for McCarthy’s political project.

The continuity of the narrative is interrupted seven times over the course of the novel. There are levels of storytelling: the first is the voice of the direct narrator—the omniscient, third person voice that serves as the primary vehicle for character and plot description in all of the works.<sup>5657</sup> The second level of storytelling is the one created by the tales of characters themselves in the novels. The man on a journey frequently encounters an array of prophets and oracles, often blind or prescient, offering reflection or wisdom that is typically of limited use.

McCarthy’s fiction relies heavily on the voice of the omniscient third person narrator. The function of this voice is to introduce the reader to the world of any particular novel. Yet this voice is frequently interrupted by other voices interwoven into the text that serve to recount events from differing perspectives based on characters’ viewpoints. *Child of God* is a particularly clear example of this. Through this stylistic device, McCarthy establishes a narrative technique of discomfort through the grotesque. The operative political considerations, I contend, are not bound up in whichever particular trope is in play, so much as what the effect achieves in

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<sup>56</sup> The position of omniscience is affirmed in Scott Williams’s thesis. He writes: “The [Direct Narrator] conveys a distant and omniscient point of view that John Lang describes as ‘detached, his [McCarthy’s] authorial stance frequently that of a journalist recording horrific events in the most objective fashion (104),” 5.

<sup>57</sup> Critics and commentators have remarked upon divergences within this voice. Cf. the work of Lydia Cooper for a particularly detailed analysis. NB: Narrator’s omniscience is challenged by Spurgeon, ed., Intro to *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 3: “...the objective, almost disinterested voice of the narrator in describing the [violent] action (McCarthy rarely provides glimpses of his characters’ internal monologues).” Cf. Ibid., 4: “His novels are laced with an intertextuality that references both the scene structure and visual quality of film (where, *generally lacking an omniscient narrator*, we must infer a character’s inner thoughts from his or her actions, as is the case in nearly all of McCarthy’s published work)...” (emphasis is mine).

terms of a political program directed toward the basic assumptions of human sociability and the nomos of the tribe.

In McCarthy the settlement is confronted, as is all else which threatens to striate space, through violence of the most extraordinary kind—violence as a sustained intensity rather than a simple reaction, a constant which smooths away all custom and law to facilitate unfettered movement.<sup>58</sup>

A final dimension, the tragic, is also worth mentioning here before moving on. A sense of tribalism pervades *Child of God*. And when we find it, the nomos of the tribe is definitely under attack in all of McCarthy's moral vision. But no less is logos. Both, I believe, inevitably must die in the descent into chaotic violence that typifies the middle works of McCarthy's oeuvre. Tribalism presents an outlook on the political world that casts all questions of sociability into the narrow dichotomy of "us" versus "them". Considering the moral context presented in *Child of God*, the question he poses may be phrased thus: can we bear it that one of our own is deviant? At what point does the particular case of Lester Ballard no longer make demands on our sympathy? At what point does he no longer have any sense of a claim to our empathy?

The narrative disruptions serve the following purpose: they show the disjunctive nature of nomos. In Euripidean fashion, they call out the basic suppositions about the nature of order into question. Empathy is essential to human attachment or affection, and this says something significant about human sociability. Can order be maintained impersonally? Can we extend membership to even the most loathsome examples of humanity? Can we deny such humanity simply due to acts of deviance and transgression? How does our human community process such evil in our midst? The historical record of history, as witness, attests something very different. Such moments of wondering are remarkable when placed into the thoughts of McCarthy's famously unreflective characters. These scenes stand as an expression of empathy,

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<sup>58</sup> Brian Evenson, "McCarthy's Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country." In Hall and Wallach, eds. *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 43.

particularly in *Child of God*. Lester thinks to himself in both: “Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls.”<sup>59</sup> “[Lester] watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself.”<sup>60</sup> The idea, of course, is to imply the reader’s moral complicity in the morass of moral chaos found in any (and every) McCarthy work. The “disorder in men’s souls” passage, quoted above, intensifies this feeling and is echoed by one of *Blood Meridian*’s most important and memorable passages. Before turning to that work, however, some conclusions need to be made in the present area of analysis.

## Conclusion

While McCarthy’s first three novels do not present the entirety of his political philosophy, or even his narrative vision, his Appalachian period does serve as a useful hors d’oeuvre (in the literal sense) because in it he presents some of the essential or signature elements of his style in less complicated forms. The applicability of distortion, dislocation, and discomfort as interpretive “hooks” to the first three novels does not do justice to the quality of the fiction, but they are sufficient to establish the basic terms of the discussion.

First, the opening of *The Orchard Keeper* provides a demonstration of the metaphoric and literal power of narrative. The existential void, a continuum encompassing “reality” itself, is ripped apart. The full potential of this narrative device is never considered by the protagonist, nor explained to the reader, but its metaphoric value is immense. The temporal fragmentation of plot conveys distortion between the immediacy of present experience and the largely conjectural backstory.

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<sup>59</sup> McCarthy, *Child of God*, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 141.

Second, *Outer Dark* intensifies and complicates elements visible in *The Orchard Keeper*.

Whereas assumptions about chronological linearity are challenged in the former work, a similar challenged is posed to spatiality in the latter. Horton adumbrates it thus:

McCarthy frustrates clarity of perception even as he establishes links or patterns of meaning. In fact, what he does allow his reader to see depends on the suspension of temporality he forces his reader to endure. The distortion of strict linear chronology into another shape continually reinforces the inherent tension between narrative space and time.<sup>61</sup>

The idea here is to see both the fragmentation motif, but also (and more importantly) to note the manner in which allegorical space sets up a narrative context in which to examine questions of moral accountability. My discussion of *Outer Dark* focuses on the conceptual themes of identity, naming responsibility, and judgment, all of which are tied to the pervasive theme of movement. While the idea of human freedom presented in *The Orchard Keeper* is one of an individual mostly constrained by external and historical forces, *Outer Dark* departs from this strategy. While the power of circumstance and the unforeseeable effects of coincidence constrain the realm of action, everything that happens in the narrative results from an action. Whereas Rinthy almost floats along her journey, Culla, by contrast, is pursued incessantly by superhuman agents of retribution who claim full authority and agency to exact their will. The baby serves largely as a MacGuffin device—a metaphorical entity whose pursuit animates the plot. The journey is the essential thing for McCarthy who asks: “what impels us?” The answer suggested by the conclusion of *Outer Dark* is that it is our desire not to take responsibility for our culpability, as well as our need for community. The dislocation of sovereign authority complicates the action in this novel. The place where things happen (and do not happen) is significant. Ellis offers the most profound explanation of pace and authority and relationships on this point. In formulating my own analysis, I have become particularly attached to the phrase

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<sup>61</sup> Horton, 289.

“terror of the open land.”<sup>62</sup> The visibility of the open country, or even of the open sky, seems to be what Culla fears most. The idea of having nowhere to run to, or nowhere to hide, invokes the themes of witnessing and the natural landscape, the respective subjects of the next two chapters.

Like *The Orchard Keeper*, the general mood conveyed in *Outer Dark* is one of profound isolation. There is no escaping the imperative to account to oneself to a higher authority. Questions of identity reappear: “Who am I?”, and, “What am I supposed to do?” In the context of *Outer Dark*, this question is encountered in the context of unspeakable guilt through moral transgression. Almost all of the moral or ethical questions opened in *Outer Dark* remain unresolved, but its conclusion offers something of a foothold. The theme of spiritual blindness is typical of McCarthy’s protagonists. So is the idea of wandering through a world created by allegorical space.

Space and open country are prominent motifs for McCarthy, and are intimately connected to his portrayal of human freedom. The allegorical depiction here heightens our awareness to the philosophical depth and complexity of ourselves as storytelling beings; moving, always moving, stumbling our way through a world that does not care that nobody wants us. And if the reader finds him or herself made uneasy by the lack of a locus of certainty in moral reasoning in these matters, this feeling is only intensified when one proceeds next to McCarthy’s third published novel, *Child of God*.

*Child of God* discomforts the reader first by breaking the fourth wall between the narrative voice and the audience. This is a tactic McCarthy’s reader will encounter again and again. But in Lester Ballard’s story, I find a rehearsal of established themes, with the added wrinkle of implying the reader’s complicity as a witness to the protagonist’s monstrous acts of moral transgression. Empathy is an interpretive problem in all of McCarthy’s fiction. Cooper

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<sup>62</sup> McCarthy, *Outer Dark*, 89-90.

presents this issue in the context of heroism, and her interpretation is compelling. Lester Ballard commits his horrifying acts out of a perverse form of love, or a need for the acceptance of some form of community. The larger society wants his “wrong blood” all the more for this very reason. Emblematically, they must ostracize and, eventually, kill him for his acts of transgression, but on what authority? The scapegoat must be killed because society cannot stomach the thought of accepting him. All that Ballard is and, ultimately, all that he will be is dissected for study in a medical school. Such monstrous evil in our midst cannot be accepted, so it must be explained. Somehow we must discover the hidden flaw in the weft of his being, the physiological seat of his deviance, the thing that makes him *other* than we. But ultimately, McCarthy suggests that Lester Ballard wants only the same thing that we all want: community. And in this context, I think he intends it as another word for love.<sup>63</sup>

McCarthy’s first three published novels offer insights helpful to understanding his larger body of work. First and foremost, they establish the place and power of narrative in shaping McCarthy’s overall philosophic and aesthetic outlook. McCarthy’s disorienting narrative techniques in his presentation of time in *The Orchard Keeper*, space in *Outer Dark*, and empathy in *Child of God* anticipate more mature and, important to this study, more political discussions of these themes in later works. In the next chapter I use the theme of nature to frame my discussion of *Blood Meridian*. Here, I use McCarthy’s distinctive treatment of the non-human world as a commentary on human nature and human art. The vocabulary I use shifts away from this chapter’s emphasis on space to the term “landscape,” which is more appropriate to that novel. The landscape of *Blood Meridian* functions largely as a character itself, and is the best point of entry to examine the novel’s political themes. Further on, time remains conceptually relevant,

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<sup>63</sup> Lester Ballard displays the political salience of the other, beckoning the community in a manner not unlike that described by Emanuel Levinas.



but reappears later in a discussion of history in chapter three. Empathy is reengaged in chapter four under the conceptual theme of witnessing. I turn now to introduce *Blood Meridian* and begin my discussion of nature in McCarthy's political imagination.

## 2. Nature

The next three chapters of this dissertation will focus on *Blood Meridian*. In the chronology of McCarthy's publishing, his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*, represents a tidal shift in the setting and tone of his literary output, as well as his biography. His previous four novels are set in the rural Appalachians and are colored by the topography and local idiom of that place, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding. The publication of this work marks a decisive turning point in terms of historical and geographical setting, imagery, and theme. McCarthy has become a Southwestern writer since his move to west Texas in the nineteen eighties. The novels of this second period in McCarthy's career are unified by a few key features: First, many of the works are inflected with prolonged un-translated dialogue in Spanish; second, many feature pervasive gothic imagery of post-colonial Catholicism; thirdly, the idea of the borderland, and of Mexico as the embodiment of the natural or untamed *other*, become part of a general trend in McCarthy's concern for landscape. Beginning with *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's fiction begins an increasingly direct exploration of *la frontera*, the border between the United States and Mexico—a source of both attraction and apprehension for many of McCarthy's characters. McCarthy uses the reality of this historical and geopolitical fact to weave a metaphoric liminal zone in which certain philosophic questions can best be explored.

First, it is worth noting that *Blood Meridian* represents the last work McCarthy published as “America's best unknown major writer.”<sup>1</sup> Published in 1985, the novel made few waves among reviewers and critics when it appeared. It is now, however, widely regarded by many as McCarthy's finest novel, and even thought to rank among the most important novels of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), xii.

twentieth century. Operatic in tone and epic in scope, it has been called “the authentic American apocalyptic,” and “the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed,” by eminent literary scholar and critic Harold Bloom.<sup>2</sup> The novel is artfully conceived and rendered as a pastiche or even parody of the nineteenth century stylistic tropes that constitute its subject matter—its form and style informing its plot and the underlying philosophical questions. Central to these, perhaps more so than in any other work of McCarthy’s is the relationship between the world as it is and the world created by language. Indeed, it is in *Blood Meridian* perhaps more than in any other work that McCarthy renders the mythopoeic language of time and space into the realm of the *actual*, or, one might say, of history. This chapter and the one that follows are designed to interrogate the two sides of this dichotomy.

All of McCarthy’s fiction is unified by an overwhelming sense of natural landscape—a world of power and mystery standing apart or in opposition to the human realm. For McCarthy, the natural landscape represents a foil to the being and doing of the human characters. This view of nature is an important component of McCarthy’s political vision. He constantly engages the question of what it is to be human in a world so categorically inhumane. In doing so he raises the classic question of the relationship of nature and convention, but his answer serves to cloud or complicate this question rather than to simplify or answer it. I build upon previous points of analysis as a means of presenting McCarthy’s naturalistic vision in its fullest expression.

Following the review of scholarly literature, arranged thematically under the heading “McCarthy’s Erotics of Landscape,” the major sections of this chapter: “Optical Democracy” and “McCarthy’s Moral Terrain,” treat *Blood Meridian*’s presentation of nature in terms familiar to political theory. The major political question to be addressed is the manner in which this optical democracy of the human and the nonhuman informs the faculties of seeing, being, and

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 254-255.

knowing in McCarthy's political vision. Over the course of this chapter I interrogate McCarthy's positioning of man in a nonhuman world and how this establishes a philosophical commentary on ontology and epistemology. These insights open up further questions of ethics and action in an existential vacuum. Questions about the place of the Divine loom, but never find concrete answers in *Blood Meridian*, or any of McCarthy's other works.

Throughout his corpus, McCarthy's view of nature is broadly conceived and subtly presented. Of primary importance is the profound sense of hostility between the human and the non-human that pervades many of these descriptions. If it can be said that McCarthy creates a world wherein humans and nature are locked in a mortal contest, then it may be said that, at least on the surface of things, that nature wins every time. Nature, for McCarthy, is a concept representing the unknowable, the irrational, and the anti-human—but this last one is not without some interesting problems stemming from value-laden assumptions inherited about nature for the particular (twentieth century) audience of this novel. To wit, it stems from the historical fact of the human conquest of nature as a consequence of Enlightenment rationalist philosophy.

In all his works McCarthy's narrator avoids sympathetic language to describe nature, eschewing Romantic notions in favor of modernist ones. This is paradoxical, as McCarthy is parodying the style of the modern romance (novel). Nature is quite often presented as ugly—at least in terms of the vernacular McCarthy parodies. Nature is never simply *pretty* in McCarthy's fiction. It is never homely. Indeed, in most of McCarthy's narratives, nature is presented rather as the opposite of home, challenging the common view of nature as an edenic paradise. This view is not nature's perspective at all, however much McCarthy's audience is hardwired to expect that it is, which is entirely the issue. Thus, McCarthy's brutal, "tooth and claw" realism, at least where confined to his narrative descriptions of landscape, functions as an instrument for

challenging both his characters' as well as his readers' assumptions about the world in which *we* live. I begin this chapter with a brief synopsis of the novel for readers who may not have the benefit of familiarity. Following this synopsis, I preface my own analysis with a brief review of pertinent critical scholarship on *Blood Meridian*.

### **Overview of *Blood Meridian*: plot, characters, and style**

*Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West* begins with three epigraphs. The first is from Paul Valéry:

Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you bear blood more and more. Blood and time.

The second epigraph is from Jacob Boehme:

It is not thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is not sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness.

The third and final epigraph comes from the *Yuma Daily Sun*, June 13, 1982:

Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier showed evidence of having been scalped.

The novel is divided into twenty-three chapters plus an epilogue. Mimicking the romance, a popular nineteenth century literary convention, each of the chapters begins with an overview of the major plot points of the chapter. Thus, the overview of *Blood Meridian*'s Chapter One appears as follows:

Childhood in Tennessee – Runs away – New Orleans – Fights – Is shot – To Galveston – Nacogdoches – The Reverend Green – Judge Holden – An affray – Toadvine – Burning of the hotel – Escape.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3.

The major events of each chapter are prefigured in these summaries. Their combined effect partially reveals McCarthy's interest in finding a means to express what Vereen Bell calls "the episodic nature of experience."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the episodes, though linked, reveal very little in the way of a typical linear plot progression. Presented as a historical romance *Blood Meridian* is a pastiche, mimicking the stylistic conventions of the novels of the time period it takes as its subject matter. McCarthy is ever playful in this regard, yet this textual (or even *meta*-textual) enterprise is essential to understanding McCarthy's philosophic project. He engages in an interplay of literary conventions: historical romance, bildungsroman, pastiche, and parody. To begin this synopsis, I must first introduce the novel's narrative voice. The direct narrator beckons the reader to moral accountability or witnessing and thus invokes the reader's direct responsibility in the moral landscape of the novel. It also serves as a means of introducing the novel's protagonist. Here I quote at length:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him.

Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The dipper stove.

The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again. He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man.<sup>5</sup>

Important to note here is the aforementioned narrative voice's invocation of the reader's complicity. The phrase, "See the child..." draws the reader into a sense of connection with the

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<sup>4</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3.

kid as an innocent.<sup>6</sup> McCarthy uses the voice of his direct narrator as a witness and his relationship to his reader through the medium of the text is a project in engaging empathy and then testing its limits.

Also important in the passage above is the emphasis on optics; the imperative to “See the child.” “Seeing” is a central feature in reading *Blood Meridian* and, indeed, in McCarthy’s entire body of fiction. The “optical democracy” of landscape in *Blood Meridian*, discussed in this chapter as a philosophical and political concept, is of primary importance to understanding one of the key elements of McCarthy’s overall philosophic agenda, what Vereen Bell (discussing another novel) describes as “the place of our identity in the impersonal scheme of things.”<sup>7</sup> Seeing and hearing are both crucial elements to the world of this novel, and both have to do with the idea of witnessing. Of further importance here is the use of real or actual historical detail: snow, wolves, the Leonid meteor shower of 1833; all are natural elements. But these elements have actual historical correspondences to that period in American history, and as such, begin an interesting interplay between the mythical or metaphorical on one hand, and the historical fact on the other. Noting this, McCarthy scholar John Emil Sepich writes: “In *Blood Meridian* are historically verifiable characters, places and events, though few of these correspondences are immediately apparent to the novel’s reader.”<sup>8</sup>

*Blood Meridian*’s reader is witness to the life and deeds of this unnamed kid, but the kid is not, in fact, a work of pure imagination but an analog to an actual historical figure: Col. Samuel E. Chamberlain (1829-1908). Sepich’s research into McCarthy’s source materials for

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<sup>6</sup> The reader may recall a similar line in the opening of an earlier novel: “A child of God much like yourself perhaps.”

<sup>7</sup> Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> John Emil Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, 2008), 1.

the novel discloses that one of the novel's major influences was Samuel Chamberlain's memoir, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*. Sepich writes:

Union Army general Samuel Chamberlain's handwritten personal narrative, *My Confession*, chronicling his adventures in the Southwest of the late 1840s, rediscovered by a private collector at a bookseller's in 1956, was probably written as much as a hundred years earlier (Chamberlain 2-3). It was serialized in *Life* in three abridged parts during the summer of 1956, with, as well, its "obvious mistakes and exaggerations . . . winnowed out" (July 23, 1956; 68).<sup>9</sup>

McCarthy's use of Chamberlain's memoir as the inspiration for *Blood Meridian* is significant to the novel's interpretation, as McCarthy creates in the latter a dialectic between verifiable historical dates, places, and names, and a fictional narrative. And into this this dialectic McCarthy extends his earlier forays into time and space into a new and previously untested dimension. McCarthy also uses Chamberlain's recollections to people his novel with other fictionalized accounts of real people; most notably, the scalphunter John Joel Glanton and his gang.

Though the novel is presented as a life of McCarthy's otherwise nameless "kid," historical accounts of the Glanton gang are the backbone of the book. Decorated Union Army general Samuel Chamberlain's narrative *My Confession* provides McCarthy with his core Glanton tales and the historical basis for his essential character, Judge Holden. It also supplies one analogue to the kid, since the youthful Chamberlain joins Glanton in midadventure, is occasionally sympathetic to the gang's Indian victims, is linked in an attraction-repulsion with Holden, and might have been a filibusterer.<sup>10</sup>

Like Melville's Ishmael, Chamberlain's "confession" invokes witnessing through the protagonist's need to tell his story, such as it is. In *Blood Meridian* no such direct testimony exists. The witness of the reader is not merely implied, but implored.

Divested of family and nearly all material possessions, this innocent abroad, a wastrel, leaves home and goes adrift into the wide world of early nineteenth century America. Here I return to the text of *Blood Meridian*:

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<sup>9</sup> Sepich, *Notes*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



He is taken on for New Orleans aboard a flatboat. Forty-two days on the river. . . He lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors. He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close. The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated.<sup>11</sup>

Of interest here is this early glimpse into the kid's "taste for mindless violence," being complicated by the narrator's description of his face: "oddly innocent behind the scars." With the kid, McCarthy raises the questionable reality of an innate moral sense. Somehow, this human—with no ingrained sense of good, bad, right or wrong, or anything resembling affection or social obligation—endures. As I will show later in this chapter, the moral of McCarthy's protagonists is essential to an understanding of his view of the responsibilities of personhood.

The kid is presented as a loose analog of a "natural man," understood in a sense akin to that of Rousseau. He lives wholly in the present moment and is not given to considerations of social status, or a concrete sense of place in the world; he is asocial. But here the comparison to Rousseau's natural man ends. The kid is naturally violent.

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart in not another kind of clay.<sup>12</sup>

The narrator invokes a challenge: that man's quest to *know* himself begins and ends in nature, formulated in the novel as pre-civilized, pre-political; perhaps even pre-social. Having no attachments or any visible indication of an independent will, the kid is a pawn of fate and historical circumstance. Endowed with an innate "taste for mindless violence," he is recruited by

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<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

into the doomed enterprises of a filibustering expedition led by a Captain White to retake the state of Sonora from the Mexican government following the end of the Mexican War.

The captain nodded. He folded his hands beneath his knees. What do you think of the treaty? He said.<sup>13</sup>

The treaty in question is the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the Mexican-American War.

The captain leaned forward. We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didn't give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government. A people so cowardly they've paid tribute a hundred years to tribes of naked savages. Given up their crops and livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned. While a heathen horde rides over the land looting and killing with impunity. Not a hand raised against them. Did you know that? They kill them with rocks. The captain shook his head. He seemed made sad by what he had to tell.<sup>14</sup>

Sepich offers the following instructive historical background on this plot point in the novel. He writes:

The existence of Captain White's filibustering expedition into Sonora in the spring of 1849 is not verifiable. A nonmilitary and presumably illegally constituted troop of freebooters that was attacked and virtually wiped out by the Indians in the desolate eastern Chihuahua country would leave few traces in the record. . . . It is possible that small-scale low-profile expeditions took place in the late 1840s. The time seems to have been ripe.<sup>15</sup>

In a famous battle sequence, the company is slaughtered at the hands of a band of mounted Comanches in a grisly scene aptly described as "death hilarious."<sup>16</sup>

During the time in which *Blood Meridian* is set the Comanches were following an established economic pattern of raids based in part on the productivity of the Mexicans, but also in part fueled by what Ralph A. Smith calls "a taste for European manufactures" ("Mexican" 103). The Indians at this time also found swelling numbers of westward-bound caravans of gold seekers: "As the Forty-niners swarmed across the vast vacancies

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<sup>13</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>15</sup> Sepich, *Notes*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 55.

of west Texas, there were hardly enough warriors to go around, but the Indians did the best they could” (Sonnichsen, *Pass* 130).

The lone survivor of the massacre, the kid is later saved from the hangman by joining the ranks of Captain John Joel Glanton, a real historical personage, who in 1849 was granted a contract for clearing the state of Chihuahua of Apaches by its governor, Angel Trias.

The decade of the forties saw the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, in its attempt to break the cycle of Indian incursions, hire Anglo aliens to kill the raiders. James (don Santiago) Kirker, in particular, brought hundreds of “proofs” of the deaths of the Indians and thousands of head of livestock to Chihuahua City during the first half of the decade. “Proofs”: that is, the scalps of Indians, or “receipts.”<sup>17</sup>

Much of the material presented in this section, “though ‘historical’ in its events and experiences, exists as a vehicle designed to introduce the world of the late 1840s and the Glanton gang.”<sup>18</sup>

Captain John Joel Glanton and his assembled gang are retained as scalphunters, state-sponsored genocidal mercenaries, when the kid joins their ranks.

The identity of these regions [between El Paso and Chihuahua City] with the names of certain stormy characters supports the law of the survival of the fittest. Among the hardiest of these persons were certain Apache chiefs and scalp hunters like Captain Santiago Kirker, Captain John Joel Glanton, Major Michael H. Chevallié, Major J. S. Gillet, Colonel Joaquín Terrazas, and Captain Juan de Mata Ortiz. (Smith, “Indians” 38)<sup>19</sup>

The novel’s second section spans the period of their contract in scalp-hunting and ends with their arrival at the ferry on the Yuma river. Their brutal career is assisted by the presence of a mysterious and malign polymath known as Judge Holden of Texas, who serves as an antagonistic foil and ersatz father figure to the kid. Holden is the greatest villain in all of McCarthy’s fiction and possibly even in all of American fiction. Joshua Masters’ introduction of Holden is fantastic. He writes:

At the center of...*Blood Meridian*, we find Judge Holden, a Mephistophelean figure who seduces a nomadic horde of scalp hunters into a “terrible covenant” (126), which

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<sup>17</sup> Sepich, *Notes*, 6 (Notes omitted.)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 5.

consigns both their spiritual and physical lives to the judge's jurisdiction. With his "disciples of a new faith" (130), the judge wanders the Mexican-American borderlands like an anti-Moses, a lawgiver who has made no covenant with a higher power, save, of course, war. Amidst the arbitrary violence and mindless wanderings of the Glanton Gang, we find only the judge's voice, for he provides the coherence, the order, the meaning that defines the scalp hunter's pilgrimage west. Certainly McCarthy's most articulate, cunning, and slippery character to date, the judge is a nightmarish embodiment of the myths of colonial expansion, myths that he extends, rewrites, and reconstructs to apocalyptic ends.<sup>20</sup>

The Glanton gang's arch of dramatic action occurs in their inevitable gory comeuppance at the hands of a band of even more vicious and vengeful Yuma Indians on the Colorado River, but this is not its conclusion. Having betrayed the company in the desert following the massacre at the ferry, Holden disappears. At the end of the novel he returns to find the kid, now a man, in a bar in Fort Griffin, Texas. In a final conversation, the Judge tells the kid his final outlook on the affairs of men. The subject of this monologue is war.

In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.<sup>21</sup>

In a scene best left to the novel, the judge kills the kid in an outhouse. Returning to the bar, wherein pandemonium has erupted after the killing of a dancing bear, the judge is next scene playing the fiddle and leading the dancing. In the description of the novel, his

feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Joshua J. Masters, "'Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World': Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.1 (Fall 1998), 25-37; 25.

<sup>21</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 249.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

*Blood Meridian*'s concluding images of the judge, as the immortal, shape-shifting dancer, the archetypal high-prophet of war and destruction, harkens back to allegations of McCarthy's "ambiguous nihilism." However, we also have the completed story of the kid—an innocent flung into the world and left to fend as he may by a mysterious, if not malevolent, will. The kid's death might be his undoing, but it is not his defeat. And yet, his is not the martyr's spiritual victory either. McCarthy would never offer such a trite moral for a novel's ending. Instead, he leaves the question entirely open through the creation of an abstract and loosely connected series of images.

As in several of McCarthy's novels, *Blood Meridian* closes with an italicized epilogue, one of McCarthy's many "moral parables."

*In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the holes and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.*<sup>23</sup>

The line of holes stretching across a darkened plain serves to move the story on, drawing our attentions and our hopes for meaning further on to other voices and different landscapes.

*Blood Meridian*'s conclusion leaves McCarthy's audience with a daunting political question: On what ground can the kid ultimately resist the judge if he is, fundamentally, a blank slate? I do not find it sufficient to walk away from this novel resigned to saying that a single act of compassion generates cosmic ripples, even in the face of the gristmill of time. *Blood*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 351.

*Meridian* is McCarthy's witnessing to basic questions of human identity and the ultimate question of the infinite, as the defining limits of human freedom and agency. This has philosophical bearing: knowing that McCarthy is pre-eminently concerned with the role of story and of storytelling in our lives, this tactic in *Blood Meridian* throws into question of whether a story is a thing "made" by human arts or whether stories might be said to exist independently of human convention. This stylistic device intensifies the effect of the philosophic enterprise of displacing characters within the setting of landscape.

All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear.<sup>24</sup>

At dusk they halted and built a fire and roasted the deer. The night was much enclosed about them and there were no stars. To the north they could see other fires that burned red and sullen along the invisible ridges. They ate and moved on, leaving the fire on the ground behind them, and as they rode up into the mountains this fire seemed to become altered of its location, now here, now there, drawing away, or shifting unaccountably along the flank of their movement. Like some ignis fatuus belated upon the road behind them which all could see and of which none spoke. For this will to deceive that is in things luminous may manifest itself likewise in retrospect and so by sleight of some fixed part of a journey already accomplished may also post men to fraudulent destinies.<sup>25</sup>

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belie their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.<sup>26</sup>

Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon the harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit

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<sup>24</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 258-259.

of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality.<sup>27</sup>

These passages serve as a fairly comprehensive sampling of McCarthy's presentation of landscape in *Blood Meridian*. Of note in the passages are the ideas of mystery's destiny, and the altogether unhomely nature of the world created in the novel. One can easily notice the cadence and vocabulary of the Bible in these; a sort of gnostic sense of separateness from the world imparted by the voice of the direct narrator.

Questions regarding human nature also abound in passages of this kind. At the core of these questions is the motif of *the substance of men's hearts* that runs throughout the novel.

Below is an example of this from the text of the novel.

Sproule was clawing at his neck and he was gibbering hysterically and when he saw the kid standing there looking down at him he held out to him his bloodied hands as if in accusation and then clapped them to his ears and cried out what it seemed he himself would not hear, a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world. But the kid only spat into the darkness of the space between them. I know your kind, he said. What's wrong with you is wrong all the way through you.<sup>28</sup>

Here the phrase "what is wrong with you is wrong all the way through you" is of interest. It invokes the dialectic of things natural vs. things manmade, as well as pointing toward the question of knowing in the novel.

The kid seems endowed with certain abilities that set him apart from the other characters in the novel, both the members of the company of filibusters as well as the Glanton gang. His knowledge of the false hearts of those around him is connected to both his innocence as well as his unique capabilities for violence. The kid has a unique ability of sight. He *sees* certain truths of men in manner not compatible with his peers. This theme is reinforced by two other traits

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 69.

associated with the kid: scenes in which the kid appears as a spectator to violence, and the substance of his dreams.

Regarding the first of these, I cite a passage that comes around the peak of the novel's dramatic action, found in chapter XV. Pursued by Mexican cavalry under Elias, the Glanton gang is on the run. They leave the kid behind to dispatch wounded men who otherwise await a fate worse than death at the hands of their pursuers. Hurrying to catch up with the gang, the kid gets lost in a blizzard. Wandering the snowy peaks of the high desert the kid, attempts to catch up.

He moved north all day and in the long light of the evening he saw from that high rimland the collision of armies remote and silent upon the plain below. The dark little horses circled and the landscape shifted in the paling light and the mountains beyond brooded in darkening silhouette. The distant horsemen rode and parried and a faint drift of smoke passed over them and they moved on up the deepening shade of the valley floor leaving behind them the shapes of moral men who had lost their lives in that place. He watched all this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horsemen were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert.<sup>29</sup>

This passage is indicative of a general trend in the novel particular to its characterization of the kid. While the kid is a member of a gang of paid mercenaries engaged in genocide, he is often notably absent from a number of scenes in which the most gruesome acts of violence are depicted. Further, in this passage—in which we see the beginning of the end of the Glanton gang's activity in the novel—the kid is apart from his comrades as a distant observer or spectator.

In the world of *Blood Meridian*, a world in which no thought or reflection precedes action, seeing stands opposed to doing. The kid is gifted with a form of sight related to intuition or spiritual insight. But he is also absent when the gang experiences the first strong taste of their

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 223.



eventual (and inevitable) comeuppance. This separateness will be the substance of the judge's ultimate critique of the kid toward the novel's conclusion when he accuses him.

You came forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged and you poisoned it in all its enterprise.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, the term witness, used in the quotation above, is seemingly compatible with that of spectator. The kid sits out of the action. He is absent from the scenes of the gang's greatest depravity. Often he is described as looking but avoids speech. What he knows, he knows, but for the reader this remains a mystery.

The kid's insight is further related to dreams. Dreams and dreaming figure prominently in *Blood Meridian* as in many of McCarthy's works. The discussion of dreams is more properly at home in my later chapter on Witnessing. For the present discussion, the idea of the substance of men's hearts being unknown is key here. The novel's stance on human nature would appear to be simply limitless violence. But this is not its final say.

Having introduced the novel's principal characters and sketched the major movements of its plot, such as they are, I turn now to consider the scholarly literature published on *Blood Meridian*. In the section to follow I discuss critical appraisals of McCarthy's treatment of nature and landscape pertinent to the political ideas presented in *Blood Meridian*.

### **Critical reception of *Blood Meridian*:**

Nature and the idea of landscape has always been a major focal point for critical scholarship on McCarthy. McCarthy's southwestern fiction is one of expansive geography. Whereas his earlier fiction is also concerned with problematics surrounding a "mapped" or

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 319.

legible world of actual towns and the literal charted topography of that region, his later, more mature work moves dramatically from the verticality of Appalachian hills and hollows into the horizontal axis that typifies his rendering of the expansive flatness of the desert plains of southwest Texas and northern Mexico. In this second period, McCarthy's interest shifts toward the killing fields of the Texas borderlands in the middle of the nineteenth century. The aesthetic details of McCarthy's prose style are central to this. McCarthy scholar Steven Shaviro comments on the transition between McCarthy's early and later periods and how they reach a crescendo in *Blood Meridian*.

*Blood Meridian* is a book...not of heights or depths, nor of origins or endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance. Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition. For there can be no alienation when there is no originary state for us to be alienated from.<sup>31</sup>

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, McCarthy likes to create atmospheres of disequilibrium and allegorical spaces in which to invoke the philosophical questions subtextually: not as mere scenery, but as a platform for engaging deeper matters. The reader is often challenged to know who is speaking and to whom, deflecting his attention from the substance of any speech. By withholding these important details McCarthy seemingly abandons his reader, like his characters, to become as lost and morally confused in the immensity of his frontier landscapes as he does his characters. Shaviro continues:

The prose enacts not a symbolization or a hermeneutics but *an erotics of landscape*, moving easily between degree zero of "desert absolute" (295) and the specific articulations of water, mud, sand, sky and mountains. It leaps from the concrete to the abstract and back again, often in the space of a single sentence. It observes a fractal symmetry of scale, describing without hierarchical distinction and with the same attentive complexity the most minute phenomena and the most cosmic. And its observations

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Shaviro, "A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," in Luce and Arnold, eds., *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*—Revised Edition, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, Copyright by *The Southern Quarterly*, 1999), 147.

cannot be attributed to any fixed center of enunciation, neither to an authorial presence nor to a narrating voice nor to the consciousness of the characters.<sup>32</sup>

This discussion of nature as a form of literary “erotics” is productive to an interpretation of the novel’s political themes. It is a well-documented interpretation in political studies of American literature. Catherine Zuckert develops the paradigm:

The withdrawal from civil society...is not merely a celebration of the freedom that human beings enjoy in the absence of conventional restraints. In fact, no canonical American author has presented life in the state of nature as completely satisfying or simply desirable. On the contrary, these authors have seen that with the veneer of civilization removed, the state of nature can represent a setting in which *certain truths* about human beings become evident—truths that readers of the books could use to order their own more civilized lives.<sup>33</sup>

But McCarthy’s frontier hero eschews Zuckert’s typology, or at least requires some reconciliation. These “certain truths” are very much of at the heart of McCarthy’s project in *Blood Meridian*, but are they instructive? Hobbes concluded that the state of nature is intolerable; McCarthy characterizes it as normal. John Gray elaborates:

*Blood Meridian* has been interpreted as presenting a Hobbesian view of human nature, but what it shows is something that Hobbes did not envision - violence as a way of life...

Where [Hobbes] went wrong was in thinking that violence can be tamed principally by the use of reason, an illusion of the European Enlightenment, of which Hobbes was one of the first great exponents.

We cannot escape the "war of all against all" by any kind of contract. Learnt slowly and painfully, the practices of civilized[sic] life are permanently fragile and precarious. Here the visionary novelist is more realistic than the rationalist philosopher.

Violence cannot be eradicated, because its ultimate source is in the warring impulses and fantasies of human beings.

This is the truth conveyed in McCarthy's great novel – civilization[sic] is natural for human beings, but so is barbarism.<sup>34</sup>

It is in this vein that McCarthy comes close to the philosophy of Hobbes and yet he does not totally reconcile the position. Hobbes believes that the will to contend that predicates the state of nature can be pacified, subdued, or constrained by the legitimate application of force. *Leviathan*

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<sup>32</sup> Shaviro, 154 (emphasis added.)

<sup>33</sup> Zuckert, *Imagination*, 1-2 (emphasis added, footnotes omitted).

<sup>34</sup> John Gray, “A Time When Violence is Normal” BBC Magazine, 16 July 2012.

can, for Hobbes, achieve mastery over those whose pride leads them to create a state of civil war within the body politic. McCarthy counters this position with Judge Holden who beckons the kid to give himself over to the ideology (or metaphysics) of total and perpetual war. In the world of *Blood Meridian*, the partisans of the Glanton gang do not wish to live in peace, but rather to test boundaries—to exhaust the possible as “agents of the actual.”<sup>35</sup> They eschew the life of the settlement. On the frontier setting of the Texas borderlands they are fully at liberty to explore whether in such a state man lives either as a beast or as a god.

The above discussion naturally points toward some tentative conclusions regarding McCarthy’s position on the law and what it represents. A natural law of McCarthy’s universe is that nothing stays put, and being a human among other humans is a challenge for most (if not all of his protagonists). It appears to be a natural law of McCarthy’s fictional universe that we cannot escape accounting for ourselves and that in this position we must attempt meaningful ethical action. Other forms of law in McCarthy’s world are purely conventional. Freedom exists but is circumscribed by the necessity of naming responsibility.

Life’s way in the world of these novels is dialectical, contingent, and transient. In the background of the novels there may be some yearning for ontological certainty—we suspect this from the recurrence of preachers and priests, however demented. But this nostalgia is subordinated forcefully to the opposing conviction, implied everywhere, that absolute certainty is always a form of unfreedom; that an administered world is, for the individual, a deprived one; that ideas and systems, the pursuit of essences and first principles, are as dangerous, and as reifying as imposed social orders. So the structures are emblematic as well as functional: it is in the pockets of experience, in the particular, that we in fact live.<sup>36</sup>

Bell’s insight here is instructive. He sees in McCarthy a persistent sense of searching for some signification that the world is not really as chaotic and mysterious as it appears to be; that its ultimate design is rational and that each individual has a place in it. This yearning is palpable in

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<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 179.

<sup>36</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 7-8.

so many of McCarthy's narratives, *Blood Meridian* not the least among them. Bell's comments above identify political questions relevant to the present study. In the Hobbesian-sounding formulation he uses above he identifies life's way as dialectical. Here I take Bell to mean that the "dialectic" of life's way stands opposed to an experience of life as prosaic or heroic. Purpose is constantly thwarted by happenstance, meaning coming only after the fact, if at all. Life's transience, as Bell puts it, is seen in the constant movement and travelling of his McCarthy's characters. They are not homely or domestic but rather the opposite. Unfettered as they are McCarthy's characters attain a level of freedom in their living in "the particular" of the moment. And yet, however particular, they are not endowed with any special recognition of their place in the ordering of reality. Thomas Pughe comments:

McCarthy writes as though he were depicting an apocalyptic pageant. The narrator's vision is superimposed on the scene, turning the individual experience of death into an anonymous process of dying. This strategy is adopted throughout the novel though the degree to which the stylistic traits of visionary writing may vary.<sup>37</sup>

The phrase "optical democracy," taken from the text of the novel, excites the political imagination, beginning with a basic philosophical position. Initiating a discussion of the political consequences of McCarthy's treatment of nature, the work of Vereen Bell is once again helpful, as it clarifies the depth and complexity of this dense symbol within McCarthy's vision.

The thought that is difficult to hold in focus is that nature in *Blood Meridian*, as in all of McCarthy's novels, is both a void and an emanation. In either role it is not analogous to the categories of thought. If we think of the whole of *Blood Meridian* as a parable, it is a perfect vehicle for representing the futility of the human will—because of, not despite, the hubris that the Indian-killers embody and the judge rationalizes. The human beings constitute one protagonist and the natural world another. Narrative and description collaborate with each other in conventional ways, but what is ultimately important is that, even ontologically, they compete.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Pughe, "Revision and Vision: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Revue française d'études américaines* in No. 62, LE RETOUR DE L'HISTOIRE: FICTIONS AMÉRICAINES DES ANNÉES 80 (novembre 1994), 374.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 133.

Bell's statement here is an apt summary of many of the interrelated political and philosophical concerns congregating around the conceptual theme of nature as it appears throughout all of McCarthy's novels. McCarthy scholar Dana Phillips begins from premises similar to those of Bell and then advances the argument in an important way:

This competition has been decided in favor of description and the natural world even before *Blood Meridian* begins. For McCarthy, description and the natural world as categories contain both narrative and human beings. Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists—*Blood Meridian* does not have that kind of dramatic structure. They are instead parts of the same continuum and are consistently described by McCarthy as such.<sup>39</sup>

Using the vocabulary of political theory, the best expression for uniting these themes is the interplay of *nomos* and *physis*. Calling this “the central issue of political philosophy,” Catherine Zuckert offers the following insight:

To inquire into the relation between nature and convention is to ask whether there is a standard of right or good inherent in human life by which all the different laws and customs that the various peoples have established for themselves by agreement (convention) can be judged good or bad—just or unjust. The issue of nature and convention is thus the question of political philosophy as such, but different philosophers have raised that question in different ways.<sup>40</sup>

This issue of judgment, as I shall show, is a central feature of McCarthy's philosophic project in *Blood Meridian*. It relates to another major theme found throughout McCarthy's fiction – the idea of “naming responsibility.” In this we find a certain moral law or moral principle that runs throughout all of McCarthy's work. In its fullest expression, this concept comes to be called witnessing—a subject of analysis in this dissertation. I believe the above quoted statement and the following statement come as close as any available to positioning McCarthy's reader into the heart of its most central philosophical issues. “The writing of *Blood Meridian* is a catastrophic

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<sup>39</sup> Dana Phillips, “History and the Ugly Facts in *Blood Meridian*,” in Lilley, *New Directions*, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Zuckert, *Imagination*, 2 (footnotes omitted).

act of witness, embracing the real by tracing it in gore.”<sup>41</sup> Witnessing in McCarthy’s fiction comes to denote the moral obligation entailed in the essential encounter of the self and the other. The unremitting horror of violence and depravity however is largely a personal story. A character study that makes frequent use of the negative space created by the opacity of characters in McCarthy’s fiction; voids, vacancies, the absence of a sense of conscience or consciousness. But in its amorality *Blood Meridian*—after reflection and lots of rereading—becomes a sort of morality tale unto itself.

Turning briefly to what I identify as the novel’s “ontological” or “epistemological” problem, or the problems of being and knowing in the novel, Bell indicates that, on the whole, McCarthy’s work generally concerns the nature of truth. Truth, he says, is not created out of a dialectic between the actual and mere representations of the actual, but rather, “Truth is the dialectic itself, an unending contest between the stubbornness of fact and the irrepressibility of desire.”<sup>42</sup> These dialectical approaches to the truth cast additional levels of discomfort into the mind of the reader. With so much in question, the very knowledge of who ‘we’ even are is no longer certain. McCarthy challenges our deepest assumption about who ‘we’ truly are. And of how much we are truly capable. And of how deeply we are each truly culpable. First we must reacquaint ourselves with the image of man in McCarthy’s maturing political vision. This issue of identity brings my interpretation once again to the issue of human nature.

McCarthy consistently raises the reader’s puzzlement as to what it is to be human in the world he creates. What it is to be human in a world that appears to have no concrete set of rules—or at least rules consonant with an ordered, peaceful, predictable, *safe*, world for human society. What would constitute a legitimate act of transgression in such a society, in such a

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Shavero, “A Reading of *Blood Meridian*,” in Luce and Arnold, eds., *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*—Revised Edition, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, Copyright by *The Southern Quarterly*, 1999), 155.

<sup>42</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 135.

world? A further complicating factor on this issue is a lack of clarity on whether we are talking about the world as a concept or the *particular* world of *Blood Meridian*'s setting? This duality is a general interpretive problem in all of McCarthy's fiction, but *Blood Meridian* in particular. In his immensely insightful *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Emil Sepich offers the following comment addressing this problem:

The initial critical confusion about the genre of *Blood Meridian* (its scenes were called, among other things, "wonders of the imagination") illustrates the uniqueness of McCarthy's artifice (Bell, *Achievement*, 124). It is as if McCarthy has taken Manzoni's critical challenge at face value and has made *Blood Meridian* so particular in its references that "people of that time" would have found the people and places so "probable" that "the novel [might have] been written for them" (Manzoni 125). Readers attempting to identify its genre confront the tension McCarthy creates between the eyewitness testimony ("bare historical facts") underpinning *Blood Meridian* and the dimension of historical romance that he adds to unify them.<sup>43</sup>

While McCarthy's fiction is quintessentially American in its form and in substance, the scope of his philosophical vision is expansive, addressing universal themes. In all its various inflections, within and between his works, McCarthy's narrative voice—arguably a character unto itself—raises problematic questions regarding the state of human nature itself in the almost limitless expanses of McCarthy's Southwestern landscape. In this context, he questions who *we* are, as well as those forces of order and disorder—for instance, law on the one hand, and fear on the other—that constrain our actions. McCarthy's fiction dramatizes these forces in order to question when they are effective, and when they are not. Literary scholar Steven Frye powerfully articulates this insight:

The governing motive of much of the author's work, especially *Blood Meridian*, is the question of meaning, purpose, and value in a universe that yields answers only in bright but fleeting glimpses. Can human beings speak of possibility, hope, even God with any validity or intellectual credibility? Can the assumptions of inherent meaning reflected in the dominant world religions be entertained with any honesty in the twentieth-century mind.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sepich, *Notes*, 2 (Footnotes omitted.)

<sup>44</sup> Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, University of South Carolina Press, 2009, 66-67.



As ever, the resulting effect of McCarthy's stylistic choices places the reader in a position at once removed from basic familiarity or empathy with the characters, while simultaneously calling his awareness to his own culpability for the atrocities being described. The effect of which, as one reviewer notes, "displaces our focus from the outer events to the primal archetypes that underlie them," continually shifting the reader "from the physical to the metaphysical, creating a recursiveness of action in which we suddenly catch the ozone whiff of human souls eking their way forward under an indifferent sky."<sup>45</sup> Phillips confirms this. "The book's odd power derives from its treating everything and everybody with absolute equanimity; its voice seems profoundly alien, but not alienated."<sup>46</sup> This sense of alienation is key and stands as the major philosophical problem the novel attempts to engage, if not unravel. Into this milieu the concept of will emerges, invoking the novel's ethical considerations. The specter of McCarthy's preference for extreme violence is related.

In *Blood Meridian* death does not individualize characters, as it does in the conventional Western, it makes them disappear into the landscape. The novel's innumerable scenes of barbarity, none of which seems distinguishable from the other with respect to its importance in the overall plot of the narrative, are metonyms of a general death of civilizations, metonyms, one could almost say, of the << terrain >>.<sup>47</sup>

The pared down syntax underlines the will to let the landscape << speak >>. Each aspect of nature...appears as a distinct event that seems not to conform to any human pattern.<sup>48</sup>

The landscape is thus of and for itself in *Blood Meridian*, a vast, often terrible and cruel alterity, unknowable to human beings and beyond their reckoning despite their attempts to defy or master it.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sven Birkerts, "The Lone Soul State," review of McCarthy's novel "The Crossing" in *The New Republic*, 11 July 1994, 38-41.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts," 37.

<sup>47</sup> Pughe, 376.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 381.

Addressing violence in McCarthy's work, Phillips adds the following. "In McCarthy's work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else."<sup>50</sup>

As stated above, in McCarthy's literary erotics of landscape the overwhelming *otherness* of the frontier region initiates the character's erotic pull toward "wild" and "undiscovered" country south of the border. This motif animates the early sections of *Blood Meridian* and intensifies in the Border Trilogy. And while this stylistic turn of McCarthy's certainly engages tropes of Western genre fiction, it cannot be limited to these. Like writers of the Western, McCarthy employs some of the standard characteristics of the Western, most notably the use of the West as "not merely a backdrop but in fact a 'generating force.'"<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the desert setting of *Blood Meridian* sets the stage for an exploration highly philosophic in nature—a quest to find out how the substance of reality relates to the agency of humans. Key to this enterprise is the novel's "optical democracy" of men and landscape placed in the foreground of the novel. I turn now to examine the political aspects of this feature in greater detail.

### **Optical democracy**

To interpret the political relevance of McCarthy's idea of nature some clarification of terminology is in order. The terms "nature" and "landscape" are related in McCarthy's vision, but it is important to note that they are not precisely synonymous. Both terms invoke the non-human world, and both are deceptively charged with an anthropocentric bias, the latter more obviously than the former. Obviously McCarthy's readers interested in political theory will question whether, and to what extent, nature as used here is a reflection on human nature. This is

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<sup>50</sup> Phillips, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Moeller, "Nature, Human Nature, and Society," 20; citing Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 300-301.

not so simple, particularly in the case of *Blood Meridian*. The reader has a constant vague suspicion that *Blood Meridian*'s narrative voice is *up to something*. I contend this is McCarthy's philosophical attempt to call his audience's basic assumptions into question. This confusion between nature, as the timeless and universal realm of inhuman forces, and landscape, as particular historical setting, is precisely the whole point.<sup>52</sup> McCarthy's reader is seized by the pervasive sense of impermanence, if not transience, of the human impact upon the world. Human art and production are always threatened by the clawing chaotic opposition presented by the material world in McCarthy's fiction, or, "the way in which nature corresponds to an imagined condition of being that the facts of life otherwise contradict."<sup>53</sup> But how is this political? McCarthy displays a strong affinity and for anti-social spaces. In these types of environments, human interaction, action has greater consequence, as there are no constraints on behavior but also less consequence as there are fewer (if any) witnesses present to observe and recollect the events. This is significant because the lack of a visible community present to judge the action (we might think of the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy) heaps greater responsibility upon the testimonies of the few witnesses present. Any perceived or implicit responsibility to get the story right, or accurate, providing testimony to the truth, typically falls upon the shoulders of other community members who are, obviously, weak vessels. Such characters necessarily have their own agendas or intentions. But they are somewhat unified terms of the conceptual role that they play in McCarthy's style. They alone are capable of facts to the reader—they are witnesses providing testimony. The reader, likewise, also becomes a witness in this exchange. These characters are alone and isolated by the fact that their testimonies are a lone or fugitive testimony to the acts witnessed.

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<sup>52</sup> NB: this phenomenon is mirrored by McCarthy's thematic presentation of history in his later fiction.

<sup>53</sup> Vereen Bell, *Achievement*, 128.

McCarthy's preference for the private over the public sphere, for isolated and even anti-social spaces, create an environment in which human action, which is to say *interaction*, has particular consequence. Only here do we find the fewest constraints on individual freedom and no public sphere for action, saving the omnipresent need for the substantiating testimony of some witness or third party. Once again, the absence of a visible standard of right, or even good, is withheld, denying the reader an immediate sense of empathy with the individual. Any formal or even tacit responsibility for the facts lies ultimately upon the voice of the narrator. And even this voice occasionally betrays a vague sense of an agenda.

The phrase "optical democracy," taken from *Blood Meridian* is the most appropriate expression available in McCarthy's work for describing the philosophic function of setting. A strange equality of human and non-human, replete with "unguessed kinships" abounds throughout McCarthy's corpus. Considered broadly, their combined effect necessitates a reconsideration of the question of freedom in a more expansive way, for now the concept must also incorporate the nature of man amid the flora, fauna, and geospatial terrain of the world McCarthy creates for humans to inhabit.

The very existence of an "optical democracy" of landscape is predicated or dependent upon the presence of an eye, a human eye, to perceive and judge the various components of the "landscape", which is, again, a human-dependent term. The narrative voice maintains a tremendous focal distance—panoramic, if not even greater, like from a satellite—from the action of the scenes. And yet it is also characterized by its voice. The narrator in *Blood Meridian* speaks with a powerful and compelling and, most importantly, *human* voice. Subtly, this voice invokes the domain of things particular to humanity. Moral considerations arise, even if only through the highly conspicuous absence of any moral or ethical language—especially when it is

describing deeply immoral human actions. Indeed, it is perhaps not going too far to say that “democracy” is not a value-neutral term, especially in the context of *Blood Meridian*’s narrator.

After such nightmarish dismemberment and evisceration and decay, what is precious to us may seem immeasurably more precious for being defiled; and yet it seems grotesquely negligible as well. This is a leveling effect as well as a horrifying one, a democratizing of species, *an enhancement of the being of the world and a relegation of the human*.<sup>54</sup>

This relegation of the human has the effect of calling into question the most basic of assumptions regarding the sanctity of human life, to say nothing of social and political institutions. And it is in such a de-humanized world that McCarthy begins to re-theorize the most basic assumptions about human sociability. Importantly, he accomplishes this task by remythologizing dominant narratives of American self-understanding.

The phrase “optical democracy” implies more than simple equality within the visual frame of a space or scene. If extrapolated somewhat, it also implies a certain mutual agency of everything in a scene. The human characters act, always unreflectively, but no less does the weather, the flora and fauna, the geological forces under the ground. Everything is equally capable of acting and does so constantly, a realm of sentient forces acting and reacting with everything else at any given time or scene in the novel. I contend that the democratic optics of McCarthy’s narratives function as a philosophic device for challenging the anthropocentric bias of the reader’s assumptions in an effort to examine the very basis of knowing. This will require some further explaining.

*Blood Meridian*’s direct narrative voice switches in and out of modes. In the abundant similes used by the voice of the direct narrator the reader encounters a mode of description of the Glanton gang in which the particulars of time and place, setting and character, are sublimated to the level of myth. Here is an example:

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<sup>54</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 133; emphasis added.

Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. . . . Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all.<sup>55</sup>

The characters in the novel begin to stand forward like symbols for something more elemental, primal, and closer to the natural essence of the world. In this manner they come to stand as avatars for the reenactment of ancient myths. Phillips describes this phenomenon:

It is *Blood Meridian*'s adherence in its descriptions of events to the protocols and paradigms of natural history that gives it epic resonance. The present world as McCarthy describes it is an ancient world not of myth but of rock and stone and those life forms that can endure the daily cataclysms of heat and cold and hunger, that can weather the everyday round of random, chaotic violence.<sup>56</sup>

Consider the following quotation:

Rather than representing a specific place at a specific time the desert becomes the central metaphor of *Blood Meridian*, a metaphor for transgression, for that which cannot be contained or controlled, and for that which is not human.<sup>57</sup>

Before the idea of transgression can come to the fore, however, some indication of knowing must be accounted for.

The idea of optical democracy throws open the question of whether there are gods of any kind in McCarthy's fictional worlds. Perhaps it is ultimately less important to posit some provisional answer to the yes/no question of the gods in McCarthy's fiction than it is, simply, to note with emphasis the fact that the issue seems so uncertain. On this issue McCarthy's fiction taps into a deeper, that is to say, 'un-ideological' truth about human existence. For even if God or some panoply of lesser deities *does* exist in this world, His hand is conspicuously absent from the deeds of men; particularly (if not ironically) those deeds done in His name. The questionable

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<sup>55</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 179-180.

<sup>56</sup> Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts," 38.

<sup>57</sup> Søfting, "Desert Pandemonium," 25.

existence of a higher power is never resolved, indeed, the author's silence on this question becomes more maddeningly opaque at every turn. Why is this? Because in McCarthy's world, the very idea of civilization itself is just as questionable as the existence of The Divine, or some other transcendent power.

McCarthy is similar to Nietzsche on this point, insofar as he is serious about giving voice to the boundless empty space at the heart of human existence. Like Nietzsche, McCarthy is a poet of the abyss. So the question of freedom, how men behave in the absence of any conventional forms of constraint: would range from the city and its laws, down to the levels of society or culture—some sense of the public sphere. Reinforcing this trend in his work is the omnipresent concern with witnessing. Action, classically understood, is possible only within the city, that is, within the public sphere. McCarthy's fiction eschews this tradition of political thinking.

### **McCarthy's pursuit of man's natural state**

"In *Blood Meridian* there is no masquerade; almost everyone in McCarthy's wilderness is fundamentally bestial, barely recognizable as human."<sup>58</sup>

Becoming bestial is indeed the fate of McCarthy's characters who cross the fragile boundary separating the civilized from the uncivilized, from the settled East into the unsettled West. . . . Violence lies at the heart of humankind; it always has, it always will. Because of McCarthy's focus on the elemental nature of humanity, characters who roam about in his West often are described as creatures from primitive, if not prehistoric, times; they are manifestations of our forebears, humanity in its original state.<sup>59</sup>

What is elemental about the way men act in their natural state? The state of nature as envisioned in *Blood Meridian* perfectly captures the idea of maximum insecurity typified by the

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<sup>58</sup> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, "Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West," in *Bleeding Westward* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2007), 39.

<sup>59</sup> Brinkmeyer, "Remapping," 39.

formulations of Hobbes. While the actions of the Glanton gang are motivated by certain necessities of commerce one cannot conclude that their ability to engage in unbridled savagery simply due to psychopathology. This can be said of all in the gang except Judge Holden—who is not simply crazy but who acts in the service of higher obligations.

Still, man in his natural state is a killer in the world of *Blood Meridian*, that much cannot be denied. And while each member of the gang is “discrete unto himself,” the narrator says, “conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save the conjectural winds.”<sup>60</sup> Further, each member of the Glanton gang appears to have some sense of what awaits him in the event that their marauding ceases and they are made to account for their actions. They exist in a state of borrowed time. Bell adds that the gang “live *only* from one day to the next, in a perpetual, moving present...coercing themselves back to their primal state.”<sup>61</sup>

Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. . . . Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all.<sup>62</sup>

To understand the novel McCarthy’s reader must treat these characters symbolically for they represent all men at all times. As forces, rather than forms, they show as manifestations of the primeval interplay of the elements. They stand as elemental forces at work in a symbolic landscape.

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<sup>60</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 158.

<sup>61</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 118. (Emphasis is original).

<sup>62</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 179-180.



The foregoing has established that McCarthy starts doing political theory from an “all things being equal” position, and has established that the forms—particulars of character, setting, and context are intended as symbolic representations of larger, timeless forces set in motion by an unseen and possibly malevolent prime mover. It remains now to explore the case of the novel’s protagonist. One must consider the kid as a vision of “natural man.” Who is he and what must he do?

The kid has had some taste of civilization. So while he may not be a “wholly natural” man he is, nevertheless, presented in that imagery.<sup>63</sup> McCarthy presents his teenage protagonist in the mold of the “western hero.” He is as close to a natural man as can be conceived. True, there are even more natural men depicted in the novel, but the reader is given little information about them. The kid, then, stands for McCarthy’s audience as the emblematic natural man—he is the dependent variable in an experiment that inquires into the nature of the human soul:

Only now is the child divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.<sup>64</sup>

Jarrett offers the following comment on this passage:

Apparently, the narrative will inquire first into the relation between nature and man—specifically the extent of man’s autonomy and authority over nature—and then into man’s ethos to judge whether the “heart” signifies a moral principle inherent in the self...or whether it denotes merely a biological function.<sup>65</sup>

How to interpret this? The complex relationship between *nomos* and *physis* displayed throughout McCarthy’s fiction invites reflection upon the bases of our institutions and our reliance upon them. It inquires into the manner in which man orders his existence in a world that often presents only chaos. If it can be said that the ultimate function of political organization is

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<sup>63</sup> Moeller, 20.

<sup>64</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 66.

to provide for an ordered environment in which man is protected from himself and from others, then McCarthy's fiction offers a powerful mirror for self-appraisal. He questions how much faith *ought* we have in the established order. He challenges both the rational and, importantly, the pre-rational bases of our assumptions.

Thus, a primary question governing all of McCarthy's work concerns whether man can truly see or know himself. How can man possibly change the essential nature of his being, and, assuming that he could, *should* he? Conversely, if man cannot change, is it then better to perpetuate an order based on false assumptions about the nature of man and society through participation, or at the very least, complicity in it?

McCarthy's portrayal of the kid in *Blood Meridian* offers insight into three important features of McCarthy's overall theory of nature. First, the kid falls into the established mode of the western hero as natural man due to his departure from civil society presumably out of a sense of dissatisfaction with it, glimpsed in the novel's opening passage in which his childhood in a home with an absent mother and a dysfunctional father is depicted in very negative terms. This period is ended by the start of the novel's third paragraph: "At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark. The firewood, the washpots."<sup>66</sup> His dissatisfaction propels him out into the world, but it appears to be his experiences in New Orleans where he "walks in the streets and hears tongues he has not heard before."<sup>67</sup> Here is the second feature, intimately tied to the first: The kid's very identity is connected to his status as a natural man and his "taste for mindless violence." The kid begins to learn lessons about life that will contribute to cleanse him of his past and set the vague course of his future: "He lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to

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<sup>66</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

fight with the sailors. He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close. The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent."<sup>68</sup> In this fighting with strange men from all over the world, "standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, his taste for mindless violence sets him on this path. The third insight concerns the kid's relationship with Judge Holden and concerns agency. Will the kid join in the life of total warfare as instructed by the man who claims to have "loved him like a son"?<sup>70</sup> This final insight invokes important political questions of freedom and agency.

As stated, the kid represents the dependent variable in the equation that forms the novel's central point of philosophic questioning: whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. Phrased politically, the substance of this question is whether human will exists as something apart or distinct from nature, or whether this idea itself is not simply an illusion—whether the mind itself is not simply "a fact among others." This latter position is articulated by Judge Holden in one of his memorable orations, the gist of which is found in this line: "For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others."<sup>71</sup>

The judge stands symbolically in the novel as one potential answer to the central question of human will. His philosophy of the will, scattered throughout the novel's scenes, is articulate, even eloquent. Interestingly these passages tend to come out when the judge is commenting on his "hobby;" that he is a naturalist. He carries a sketchbook and makes notes and drawings of flora and fauna and interesting historical objects that he encounters along their travels. His

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 256.

notebooks are the subject of much speculation among the other members of the gang and even suspicion for some, particularly Toadvine. In a memorable scene between the judge and his suspicious interlocutor, the following important details emerge:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.

He looked about the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.<sup>72</sup>

Here, in the judge's famous "suzerain" speech, he articulates a major component of his philosophy—the overlordship of the world itself. He seeks the power of knowledge and mastery in an effort to forestall the "devouring" effect of nature.<sup>73</sup> As the speech continues, he explains his reasons why. Placing his hands down upon the ground, the judge makes this pronouncement: "This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation."<sup>74</sup> The judge dislikes it, nay, cannot permit it that livings things exist that answer to some other law than that which he pronounces. "The freedom of birds is an insult to me[.]" he says, and then responds, "I'd have them all in zoos."<sup>75</sup>

The judge's naturalism, then, is not so much an appreciation of nature but rather a desire to overcome it. He rigorously adheres to the scientific method but with a different purpose in mind. While his ultimate purpose is to gain knowledge useful to the conduct of war, he also hints at a metaphysical component to his philosophical outlook. He states:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, the passage "the smallest crumb can devour us" is used in other McCarthy works, notably McCarthy's play "The Stonemason."

<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 208.

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But the man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.<sup>76</sup>

Here the judge articulates a position that echoes antagonists in other McCarthy works. The leader of the grim triune in *Outer Dark* I have discussed in the previous chapter, the father in *Suttree* also makes similar claims about the idea of taking responsibility. The phrase has echoes throughout all of McCarthy's corpus and will be discussed directly in my chapter titled Agency. For the present moment, however, if we restrict the judge's statement to its immediate context, some helpful insights emerge.

While the character of Judge Holden is depicted as a sort of courtly and erudite country scholar for much of the novel, the scene quoted above gives insight into deeper motivations behind his ways. He proposes an answer to the novel's operative question ("whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will...") and it is that not only *can* it be, but that it *must* be. The alternative, Judge Holden suggests, is to consign oneself a lowlier position than that befitting man. Man's fate, as the logic runs, can be known and dictated. To what end? That the man who has set for himself this task may achieve sovereignty: the authoritative allocation of violence not simply over other men, but even the world itself.

Using the trappings of enlightenment rationalism, Judge Holden sets forward a sort of philosophy of subjectivity. Shaviro describes it thus:

*Our* order is never the world's order, not even in the Nietzschean sense of an order that we impose. We mark out paths in the desert or we read the tracks of others, but we cannot thereby master futurity or compel events to our liking. For subjectivity is not a perspective upon or projection into the world, not even a transcendental condition for our perception of the world; it is just another empirical fact, an inherence within the world like any other. There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence. The radical epistemology of *Blood Meridian* subverts all dualisms of subject and object,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 207-8.

inside and outside, will and representation or being and interpretation. We are always exiles within the unlimited phenomenality of the world, for we cannot coincide with the (nonexistent) center of our being[.] . . . And so, just as we can never possess the world (since we cannot even possess ourselves), by the same logic we can never transgress the order of the world or estrange ourselves from it—no matter how hard we try.<sup>77</sup>

Shaviro's comment points out that the judge's enterprise runs into problems almost immediately. His effort to use war as a way of *getting out* of the world in some way, to render all potentiality into the actual is, ultimately, a failure. Men are more than simply free to become suzerains over the world itself. McCarthy's concern for freedom in terms of human beings (and their behavior) turn on the essential interaction of two humans—demonstrated by the parable of the essential encounter with the other.

The freedom enjoyed by the characters of *Blood Meridian* is total insofar as they are able to act in the absence of any proscriptions at the hands of a sovereign authority. But their nihilism, their hostility, their belligerence would seem to indicate that their author finds such freedom as a thing to be feared. In a comment on place, the narrator makes the following political observation: "Here beyond men's judgements all covenants were brittle."<sup>78</sup>

To inquire into the relation between nature and convention is to ask whether there is a standard of right or good inherent in human life by which all the different laws and customs that the various peoples have established for themselves by agreement (convention) can be judged good or bad—just or unjust.<sup>79</sup>

The question of nature and convention in *Blood Meridian* turns on the issue of what Zuckert calls the "countertradition."<sup>80</sup> Does the "reason and morality" developed in civil society work a refounding? No, according to McCarthy. Indeed, the question McCarthy presents is whether the state of nature can ever be overcome at all, in society or apart from it.

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<sup>77</sup> Shaviro, "Darkness," 150 (Emphasis is original.) See also: Bell, *Understanding*, 22; Zuckert, *Imagination*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Zuckert, *Imagination*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Zuckert, *Imagination*, 5.

## Moral landscape

The desert upon which they were entrained was desert absolute and it was devoid of feature altogether and there was nothing to mark their progress upon it.<sup>81</sup>

The country in *Blood Meridian* is a proving ground of wills. History is its witness but holds no meaning beyond a scattering of bones across the desert sand. McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* presents this terrain as a battleground and the “desert absolute: is one of the absolutes of moral action. The law—the only law it would seem—is kill or be killed. And yet the kid proves unable, ultimately, to give himself fully over to war as practiced in its purest form. Where Nietzsche psychologizes this place, McCarthy renders it mythically, as a literal and metaphorical landscape. The central question that emerges out of this enterprise is whether there is such a thing as a natural moral law. It is from the orations of Judge Holden that this line of questioning comes to a point.

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. . . . Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all questions of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural.<sup>82</sup>

McCarthy is closer to Hobbes here than Nietzsche: the only solution to such a crisis would be a power mightier than that of absolute war. For him who desires peace, the only answer could possibly be the erection of a sovereign power with enough strength to overcome the forces of war and destruction. The kid’s longing for community toward the end of the story indicates his desire for peace; for a way out of the state of nature. Fate, personified in the form of the orphan boy named Elrod, forestalls this ambition (if we can call it that). There will always be more of

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<sup>81</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 307.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 261.

these “kids” to come along and test themselves upon the open plain. They seek it to be unrestricted by the fetters of civilization and society and they will, inevitably, run out of country. Contra Glanton, who acknowledges and embraces his eventual reckoning in a sort of *amor fati*, the kid, Toadvine, and others like them seem to think another world purer world, may yet exist in some as yet undiscovered country. Glanton knows that he will reach the western shore eventually. He just plans to fight back until he is destroyed. Glanton needs no further world. He is reconciled to have it out with this one. The judge, being unconstrained by time, is blithely content to dance between the western and eastern shores. His place is in the enduring *now* and he has all the time in the world.

*Blood Meridian*’s concluding images of the judge, as the immortal, shape-shifting dancer, the archetypal high-prophet of war and destruction, harkens back to allegations of McCarthy’s “ambiguous nihilism.” However, we also have the completed story of the kid—an innocent flung into the world and left to fend as he may by a mysterious, if not malevolent, will.

The kid’s death might be his undoing, but it is not his defeat. And yet, his is not the martyr’s spiritual victory either. McCarthy would never offer such a trite moral for a novel’s ending. Instead, he leaves the question entirely open through the creation of an abstract and loosely connected series of images.

As in several of McCarthy’s novels, *Blood Meridian* closes with an italicized epilogue, one of McCarthy’s many “moral parables.”

*In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the holes and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible*



*ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.*<sup>83</sup>

The line of holes stretching across a darkened plain serves to move the story on, drawing our attentions and our hopes for meaning further on to other voices and different landscapes.

*Blood Meridian*'s conclusion leaves McCarthy's audience with a daunting political question: On what ground can the kid ultimately resist the judge if he is, fundamentally, a blank slate? I do not find it sufficient to walk away from this novel resigned to saying that a single act of compassion generates cosmic ripples, even in the face of the gristmill of time. *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy's witnessing to basic questions of human identity and the ultimate question of the infinite, as the defining limits of human freedom and agency.

## **Conclusion**

McCarthy's prose often can be said to stand as a witness to the moral imagination of his audience. The reader is free, in an existential sense, and may extend or deny empathy to any or all of his characters in any particular work. Furthermore, the reader is free to assign condemning moral judgments on the culpability of McCarthy's troubled protagonists. They will find few possibilities for redemption within any text. Such a freedom, by the time *Blood Meridian* appears in the chronology of McCarthy's catalog, is likely to lead the reader toward a sense of doubt regarding his or her attachments to his or her national history and thus, to some extent, his own identity. This, I think, is McCarthy's point, but not his message or teaching in any of his

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 351.

works. Hope is an orphan in search of a home and few stories have happy endings in McCarthy's fiction.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the idea of matrix and mystery, the world of McCarthy's fiction is a colossal boneyard: a random midden of sediment and artifacts from which may be assembled the elements of a story. The question of whether meaning can be imposed upon this collage of loose fragments remains mostly open. This world is not simply 'primordial,' it cannot be ordered, at least in the traditional sense. The very idea of order itself only emerges out of the presence of the narrative that creates it. The only real human activity is to gather up bones off the plain and to move on, a migration of specters: nameless, faceless, and without origin or terminus, only nexus.

The effect of such passages is important because it heightens our awareness of the mysterious bonding and separation of the human and non-human, of a first rhythm of life that is antecedent to thinking and structures.<sup>85</sup>

The world to come will presumably be a more "ordered" reality, but ultimately it is just another story, another story about people trying to locate themselves by stars or the sun, tracks or postholes left in the sand. Each posthole contains a spark, a brief flicker of *something*: bearing no literal relation to the one that comes before or after it. Yet from this apparent sequence emerges a tale: the *only tale*, because there are and can be no others. Out of a billion "possible stories" (because a possible story is not a story) arises the one tale, which is the only tale. This is because storytelling is a human activity, every story is in some sense a story about men and what

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<sup>84</sup> NB: The idea of *getting somewhere* seems to encompass both mankind's problem and the answer to that problem in much of McCarthy's fiction. And this is a difficult lesson to comprehend, not to mention swallow. Still, McCarthy's reader will notice how the journey of characters like Culla Holme and Lester Ballard is motivated to a large extent by blame or condemnation from the larger society.<sup>84</sup> These men are hounded by an enraged community. Suttree is no less hounded, but his guilt is more internal. McCarthy's western protagonists, by contrast, are motivated to escape society and, to a greater extent, have the chance of doing so. On the frontier, they do not have to deal with community justice in the same way.

<sup>85</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 28.

they do—which is live and die. This is the reason life and death are the only subject matter of interest to McCarthy, because any story that does not deal with humans on this elemental level is not “the tale,” properly understood. “The tale” can be told and retold perpetually. Its basic elements can be rearranged in infinite combinations because nothing can negate “the tale,” nothing can un-tell it. The tale cannot be subsumed or overpowered by the world like an artifact can, because the tale creates the world. Without it there is no world at all. Thus, the storyteller bears witness. The tale does not re-create the world it only creates another one. As every tale is the first tale, it can never be told the same way twice. This is the poet’s first task: he is witness to the fire.

Every volitional act is ironically both meaningful and meaningless, meaningful insofar as it is an essential part of an ultimate destiny, meaningless since its consequences cannot be controlled. The course of history and human lives proceed independent of free will, and prediction is impossible in the closed and highly complex physical system that is the world.<sup>86</sup>

For McCarthy’s characters, to run out of country means that time has caught up to them. The world begins to intrude in these moments. In my next chapter, History, I return to conclusions reached in Narrative, regarding McCarthy’s concern for the personal experience of time. Here the conversation expands to the level of national mythology.

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<sup>86</sup> Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 162. NB, here Frye is discussing the agency of Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*.

### 3. History

This chapter serves as the second in a series of three chapters focusing on the politics of McCarthy's novel, *Blood Meridian*. Here, I interpret the historical elements of McCarthy's literary vision as well as the idea of history itself as it stands in relation to the story and structure of the novel. In this chapter, a review of existing scholarly literature on McCarthy's treatment of history serves to frame my own analysis. I then give a conceptual overview of history as an operative political concept in McCarthy's overall vision in the form of an introduction to the novel's most memorable character, the inimical Judge Holden. Third, I begin the political analysis of history by approaching history in *Blood Meridian* as an extension of the concept of optical democracy, developed in the previous chapter. I then use the insights established in the first analytical section to explore the manner in which McCarthy's fifth novel reveals an attempt to uncover the origins of war in the basic structures of language and myth. Finally, I draw conclusions about history with a recapitulation of narrative and nature, anticipating witnessing. I turn now to review the critical literature on the idea of history in McCarthy's work, particularly with regard to *Blood Meridian*.

#### Review of secondary literature

One cannot say precisely whether the novel is about the true nineteenth-century historical events it describes or about the nature of history itself.<sup>1</sup>

History, even in McCarthy's fictive world, does not so much stand opposed to nature, but rather it partakes in the same sort of ambiguities and deceptive qualities—rendering them elusive

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 80

to human conventions or even intellectual modes of description and analysis. One of these fallacies, presented in the last chapter, is that through knowledge the mystery of the world can be overcome. This idea is equally true for our modern sense of history. The doctrine of progress in historical thinking creates the false impression that history is a natural thing, rather than a purely human construct. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Blood Meridian*'s "optical democracy" scene puts into doubt the privileged position so often accorded to human identity in an impersonal world. Indeed, and as many scholars have noted, *Blood Meridian* presents the fullest expression of McCarthy's engagement with the idea of history. Luce notes: "*Blood Meridian* is seen by many as a culmination of McCarthy's career-long concern with humankind's dark history and with its feeble contention against spiritual wilderness."<sup>2</sup> In terms of national mythology, our dominant narrative asserts that American identity has been forged against the backdrop of such a natural and spiritual wilderness. McCarthy challenges this claim with his own mythopoeic enterprise. At the heart of this project of McCarthy's is a serious philosophical interrogation of things natural and things made by human art. To accomplish this, McCarthy's publication of *Blood Meridian* reveals a distinct shift in creative focus.

McCarthy scholars have been quick to point out that *Blood Meridian* represents a departure in terms of a change of setting due to the novel's appropriation of actual historical subject matter. Though earlier works deal with episodes taken from the pages of the newspaper and regional lore, *Blood Meridian* is a singular work in McCarthy's corpus due to its use of actual historical personages, places, and events. Scholars use the terms "historical novel," "historical or frontier romance," and "gothic pasquinade," among others, to describe the form, though no consensus exists on this point in the extant literature. Still, almost every critical

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<sup>2</sup> Dianne C. Luce, "Cormac McCarthy," *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Novelists Since World War II*. Third Series. Ed. James R. Giles and Wanda H. Giles. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994. 143: 118--136. [Revised and expanded version of Cox (1980), *q.v.*], 133.

approach to *Blood Meridian* attempting to classify it as a piece of genre fiction develops its paradigm by focusing on the preeminent themes of human history and natural violence in the novel.

One example of this trend in the scholarly literature comes from Dana Phillips. In dealing with the novel in terms of scale—epochal time and expansive geography—Phillips offers the following comment on the location of meaning and value. He writes:

Blood Meridian does not wholly reject the notion of value, but the values it describes are not ones for which we have ready terms. For McCarthy, the history of the West is natural history. This is a history of forces and the processes by which these forces evolve into the forms to which we give names are not our own. Thus the present is also a “time before nomenclature”<sup>3</sup>

Here Phillips touches back on the idea of “forces” that I discussed in the previous chapter. At the core of Phillips’ argument is an insight into McCarthy’s appreciation for language. From his analysis, it would seem that human impulse to assign names to things stands itself as a form of transgression, or even violence.

*Blood Meridian* shows us how history is destroyed, even as it is unfolding. And to this end, it stands as both a document and an illustration or allegory. The knowability of the world slips past in our impulse to contain it in language, what Vereen Bell describes as “the ordered categories of thought.”<sup>4</sup> The world, it would seem, is something *other* than what humans make of it—in both substance and mind. Timothy Parrish calls the novel “distinctly a-Derridaean in its insistence that nature, or the things of nature, have an equivalence with human constructions.”<sup>5</sup> History, then, emerges as something made rather than something that exists independently of the affairs of men. Against the Hegelian view, McCarthy sees history as a purely human construct.

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Phillips, “History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*,” in Lilley, ed. *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Parrish, 80.

While most of McCarthy's works are placed in the "real" or actual world, and often referenced with an exacting and precise specificity of geography and regional dialect, *Blood Meridian* is singular in this regard. No other of McCarthy's works documents actual historical events. Jarrett comments on this:

Why base a novel on the sordid history of Glanton's troop of Indian killers? The narrative's violence achieves not merely a revisionary western but something perhaps something superior to revision—an attempt at a dramatic and ritualized reexperience of American history as it was lived. Or as we wish it were not lived. It insists that readers not only be reminded intellectually of the violence of the nation's history but, in the form of the novel's dramatic representation of the living present, experience firsthand the horror and fascination of that violence. . . . Our postmodern detachment from our own history assumes a superior, "uninvolved" angle of vision that McCarthy *suggests may be an illusion of our historical distance (or ignorance)*. *Blood Meridian's* attempt at the reenactment of history through fiction is all the more tragic in its failure—for it is finally only a fiction—but as a dramatic fiction it may more successfully express the bloody tragedy of Western history than any historian.<sup>6</sup>

McCarthy's attempt to re-mythologize the American West (or, for some, the American Western) is a core issue for my interpretation of *Blood Meridian*. This idea of "an illusion of historical distance (or ignorance)" is, in my analysis, another formulation of the same idea found in the "optical democracy" of McCarthy's landscapes. The issue in both is the place of humans as situated in a world consisting of time and space created by narrative and charged with meaning. Of further interest is the issue of human consciousness in such a world. What is to be made of the issue human knowledge—how do we know what we know? Timothy Parrish offers the following regarding the epistemological question at the core of McCarthy's fiction:

For McCarthy, history is possibly the only means by and through which humans know themselves in a manner that can be communicated to others, but its insights obligate us to a kind of necessary form of collective self-deception about what is possible to know about humans' interaction with the world. In *Blood Meridian*, history can be known, but humans cannot necessarily know themselves through history. In this respect, the novel is neither postmodern nor premodern. It is instead an assertion about why history allows no

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 92-93, (emphasis added.)

progress and an astonishing attempt to create a narrative context that would contain within it the history of the world as it has been known and, paradoxically, not known.<sup>7</sup>

Noting the ambition of McCarthy's project, Parrish hits on themes pertinent to a political analysis of *Blood Meridian*. The idea of flawed perception and even deception is key here. Even divorced from the language of the Hegelian system, history is commonly understood as a progression of events and ideas. However animated, the substance of history lends itself to the language and imagery of linear forward movement. One's position in "the present" is understood in relation to a succession of prior positions, now relegated to "the past." Most significant to this most basic description of historicizing is the implicit suggestion that this movement is intelligible, if not intentional. In working out McCarthy's relationship to the tropes of *pre*, *post*, or, simply, modern fiction, Parrish delineates something integral to McCarthy's entire artistic outlook when he calls it "an attempt to create a narrative context."<sup>8</sup> Positioning humans in a world both familiar and strange, a world both known and not known, McCarthy engages in a fictional medium as old as the idea of history itself—that of mythmaking.

Approaching history as a product and/or form of myth brings the question of substance immediately to the fore. McCarthy's effort to recreate the world through language is more a project than a product; the process is more important than the outcome. Commenting on this, Thomas Pughe offers the following:

[McCarthy] employs a de-individualizing and de-historicizing language that draws on myth, legend, the Bible but also on geology and paleontology, and thereby outgrows the generic conventions of Westerns to which he also alludes. This language generates a powerful dialectical movement within his text, for it does not just signify a historical narrative of horrifying violence and human depravity, but that narrative also signifies the transgressive power of McCarthy's writing. I mean by << transgressive power >> the way in which his writing suggests a non-anthropocentric point of view, the way in which

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<sup>7</sup> Parrish, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



in their process of barbarization his characters become << other >>, like the territory through which they ride. Though *Blood Meridian* represents the history of the West negatively, as the destruction of a Eurocentric form of sense making, McCarthy's writing appears as (to quote a phrase from Bataille) a << commentary on [the text's] absence of meaning >>.\* It is here that we must look for justification of McCarthy's << stylization >> of violence and brutality.<sup>9</sup>

Here Pughe echoes several points of analysis from this dissertation's previous chapter.

The optical democracy of humans and natural landscape renders subjectivity questionable—even suspect. This is accomplished, Pughe asserts (along with others), through a “dialectical movement” of language. Narrative does not merely *signify* violence in McCarthy's text, it also engages in it. Like nature, history, for McCarthy, is compatible with violence. Both terms have dual purposes or meanings, as both invoke the *content* of human or natural or political history (ie., the content of the terms as well as the activity of doing the terms—historiography or historicizing). Both, as imputations of meaning, are meant to express inherently violent activities. Here James Dorson adds to this conversation:

*Blood Meridian's* violence, then, is not the result of a violent strain in the human genome, but the product of a chronic yearning for narrative meaning to make sense of the world. . . . Because this desire for certainty against the ever-baffling mystery of the world has a strong tendency to preclude critical reflection on where our beliefs and self-imposed laws are leading us, *Blood Meridian* leaves us with the uneasy feeling that we are trapped within an endless cycle of fear and mythical violence.<sup>10</sup>

My interpretation follows Dorson's in this regard. In *Blood Meridian*, history and nature do not stand apart as opposites, nor is there any tangible dialectical tension between them, though at times this may appear to be the case. Delineating where the two concepts stand

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Pughe, “Revision and Vision: Cormac McCarthy's “Blood Meridian”, *Revue française d'études Américaines*, No. 62, LE RETOUR DE L'HISTOIRE: FICTIONS AMÉRICAINES DES ANNÉES 80 (novembre 1994), 371-382. PUBLISHED BY: EDITIONS BELIN, 379-380. (Author notes: “I take this phrase from Derrida's essay on Bataille, << From Restricted to General Economy >> (261). {Derrida, Jacques. << From Restricted to General Economy. >> *Writing and Difference*. Transl. by Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978 251-77.)

[Formatting and style here are copied exactly as they appear in the article.]

<sup>10</sup> James Dorson, “Demystifying the Judge: Law and Mythical Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Volume 36, Number 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 116.

opposed and where they converge is a daunting undertaking, though worthwhile for an attempt to penetrate the novel for political insights. However difficult they may be to articulate, I agree with Dorson that such conclusions speak in favor of the novel as a source for political inquiry.

He writes:

The critical merit of *Blood Meridian* is that it confronts readers with the modern predicament of a social order that believes itself to be rational, but which is rational only to the extent that it has repressed its own mythical origins and metaphysical origins. By so doing, it calls into question the presupposed rational basis and value-neutrality that our law and social order are predicated upon.<sup>11</sup>

The place, value, and substance of this complex of myths is at the heart of my presentation of history in *Blood Meridian*. As demonstrated, the existing scholarly literature gives emphasis to this underlying epistemological question at the heart of McCarthy's vision. Through the relationship and interplay of the concepts of nature and history, McCarthy creates a field of mystery in which the position of man in a non-human world throws doubt upon the dominant narratives we rely on for our self-understanding. In this manner, *Blood Meridian* begins to question the basic legitimacy of the regime and its institutions at the level of their mythic underpinning. The primary voice McCarthy adopts to establish this profound uncertainty is in his remarkable character Judge Holden. To establish my analysis of history in *Blood Meridian* it will be necessary, then, to give the reader some additional context for the character.

### Notes on Judge Holden

McCarthy remains true to the historical source of his novel while reorganizing the material, unwinding threads in its maze, into the world of the historical romance. In Holden, McCarthy makes a fine distinction between historical authenticity, a mortal Holden, and the wildness, the romance, the immortality of the evil that is apparent in his fictional character. The novelist has, after all, used references to historical people and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

situations—Van Diemen’s Land, Sloat, the Anasazi—to involve the world beyond *Blood Meridian*’s temporal and geographic limits. As the Aztecs fell to the Spaniards’ guns, so too the buffalo, and hence the Native Americans, fell to the white hunters’ guns. *One senses a powerful universality in the novel.* A deepened sense of diabolical ubiquity in the magnificent yet monstrous Judge Holden could not be more appropriate.<sup>12</sup>

To orient the reader to history as a political and philosophical concept in *Blood Meridian* a brief return to the novel itself may be helpful. The exploits of the Glanton company on the Texas-Mexico border during the mid-eighteen thirties is the setting. Many of the personages are real historical figures, taken from published accounts from the period. Of all the novel’s characters the figure of Judge Holden seems the most fanciful or far-fetched, but he appears in Chamberlain’s account as much the same man: huge, bald, and pale, an accomplished geologist and botanist given to lectures on natural history, a fearsome shot with a rifle, and an outright scoundrel.<sup>13</sup>

The character of Judge Holden serves as a useful vehicle into the idea of history in *Blood Meridian* because, of all the novel’s characters, he is the most concerned with, and preoccupied by, it. Particularly important here is the status of the judge as a learned and enthusiastic exponent of Enlightenment rationalist philosophy. In his several sermons or orations to the company, Judge Holden’s supreme faith in the knowledge of natural history comes to the fore as the ultimate expression of human mastery over the natural environment. The following scene depicts one of the judge’s early lectures on geology. Here, some of the gang members challenge his speculations on the age of his geological specimens by quoting scripture:

Books lie, [the judge] said.  
God don’t lie.  
No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.  
He held up a chunk of rock.  
He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.

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<sup>12</sup> John Emil Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 127 (emphasis is mine.)

<sup>13</sup> See Sepich, *Notes*, 14-19.

The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools.<sup>14</sup>

Important to understanding this scene is the following observation: that while the judge is thoroughly committed to truth, as defined by reason rather than revelation, he uses his superior knowledge playfully, as a way of confounding his contemporaries for his own amusement. Of all the characters in the novel, it is “the expriest” named Tobin who appears to understand the judge better than anyone. It is from Tobin that the judge’s backstory is presented to the kid. The reader learns that he is enormous in stature, rotund, totally hairless, and a renaissance man.

Tobin speaks:

He glanced across the fire toward the judge. That great hairless thing. You wouldnt [sic] think it to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? God the man is a dancer, you’ll not take that away from him. And fiddle. He’s the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that’s an end on it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He’s been all over the world.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to this appreciation for the judge’s learning and cultivation, however, Tobin’s story reveals two other important characteristics of the judge: first, that he is endowed with certain more-than-human abilities (“Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sooty-souled rascal in some other place.”), and second that, on a very deep level, Tobin knows the judge is evil and fears him even more than he hates him, alleging that he cannot decide whether the judge had been sent among the gang for a curse.<sup>16</sup> One thing for certain is clearly established in this introduction and backstory episode from Tobin regarding Judge Holden: that the gang is involved in absolute warfare and that in this area of expertise, the judge is the indisputable master. Being something of a professor, the judge builds upon his worldview in occasional

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<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 137.

orations (or sermons). His early scientific insights gradually come to dwell on the subject of war: its cause, nature, and substance. Later in the novel, Judge Holden begins referring to war as a game:

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate game awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.<sup>17</sup>

Judge Holden is a character like no other in the novel, and perhaps like no other in all of literature. He stands in such stark contrast to the all too human other characters in the novel that McCarthy's reader may begin to conclude that he is, in fact, *not* human. A number of critical explanations are available: that he is the embodiment of evil, if not devil himself, that he is a gnostic demiurge sent to bring about the unity of existence, the Hindu god Shiva—a destroyer of illusions (if not worlds), a folkloric trickster figure, working at the margins to undo the deeds and affairs of humanity and, thus, expose their hubris folly. All of these readings are compelling. To understand the judge, however, in the terms of a political reading of *Blood Meridian*, I wish to consider as the embodiment (or perhaps agent of) the idea of history itself, which I intend to describe and analyze in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### **The illusion of historical distance (or ignorance)<sup>18</sup>**

In chapter two, Nature, I centered my analysis on the ideas of sight and of seeing, wherein McCarthy's idea of sight or of vision is more than a simple stylistic device or choice of aesthetics. McCarthy invokes something more philosophical with this device, he hints at the very idea of knowing. Evidence for this is found in McCarthy's dislocation of the human in the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>18</sup> Quotation comes from Robert Jarrett's *Cormac McCarthy*, 92.

allegorical spaces he creates through his attention to landscape, and the supposition of man's exile as man's primordial condition.<sup>19</sup> This challenge of knowing is a pervasive concern for McCarthy's critics as well.<sup>20</sup>

McCarthy is preoccupied with the idea of illusions. Sometimes his narrative voice slips into a kind of essentialism akin to that of Plato—things themselves versus their representations. And in this, amid the natural imagery of landscape, McCarthy always courts an atmosphere of hostility. The idea of illusion here is primary, and it may be helpful, then, to reflect on my earlier argument from chapter one, Narrative, in which I discussed the idea of distortion and time in *The Orchard Keeper*. McCarthy's use of allegories is again helpful to the analysis on this point. In the current context, allegory must be discussed as an essential element of McCarthy's myth-making or mythopoeic enterprise; a calling into question of our most basic assumptions.

In *Blood Meridian*, the idea of history itself is an allegory for the process in which the thing itself is destroyed by the creation of its narrative representation. Thus, *Blood Meridian* is a philosophical novel that puts the idea of history itself into question. History, particularly as Judge Holden presents it, seems to point toward meaning or intelligibility. Indeed, American idealism at its romantic core is fairly grounded in the Hegelian (among others) idea of linear historical progress—that from the study of the past, or natural history, we can come to know

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<sup>19</sup> See Shaviro, 147: "Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition. For there can be no alienation when there is no originary state for us to be alienated from." Op Cit., 150: "We are always exiles within the unlimited phenomenality of the world, for we cannot coincide with the (nonexistent) center of our being." See also Shaviro's invocation of Heidegger, 148: "*Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace. It is useless to look for ulterior, redemptive meanings, useless to posit the irredeemable gratuitousness of our abandonment in the form of some existential category such as Heideggerian 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*). We have not fallen here or been 'thrown' here, for we have always been here, and always will be."

<sup>19</sup> Neil Campbell, "Liberty beyond its proper bounds: Cormac McCarthy's history of the West in *Blood Meridian*," in Wallach, ed., *Myth, Legend, Dust*, 2000, 220.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 220.

ourselves and even our purpose in the present, perhaps even using this to shape the course of the future. Certainly all of the canonical American novelists take on this trope.<sup>21</sup>

The title of this section follows Jarrett's interpretation of the text. Jarrett takes his cue from this scene in *The Orchard Keeper*: "Lighting glared in threatful illusions of proximity and quick shapes appeared in the road, leapt from ditch or tree in configurations antic and bizarre."<sup>22</sup> Following this, Jarrett writes: "Our postmodern detachment from our own history assumes a superior, 'uninvolved' angle of vision that McCarthy suggests may be an *illusion of our historical distance* (or ignorance)."<sup>23</sup> By ignorance, we may take Jarrett to mean our modern belief in detachment—that we are somehow uninvolved in the violence of our present. In the reasonable assumption that McCarthy thinks of history as a narrative or story, what, if anything, does he indicate that history is a story *of*? Is it, we well might ask, a story of anything more than pure violence? Perhaps McCarthy is trying to question the whitewashed effects of the dominant myths of American national identity with counter-myths, or, anti-myths, designed to look our history's grim truths squarely in the eye.

*Blood Meridian* is unflinching in its "revisionist" account of the darker realities of westward expansion, as the Glanton Gang begins with a legal mandate to take scalps and assist in quelling the alien land. But any attempt to read the novel as a single-minded allegory revealing the avaricious impulses of Manifest Destiny is undermined by the character of the judge. He is a ubiquitous figure who transcends race, nationality, or political purpose, and he becomes many things, among them, the richly symbolic incarnation of "mindless violence," a propensity that lies latent even in the kid, in spite of his stoic resistance.<sup>24</sup>

The mythic complex we are accustomed to is one that requires a hero. This is particularly true in the context of the American frontier romance (stories embodying ideals of

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<sup>21</sup> See Zuckert on Faulkner and Bergson.

<sup>22</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Jarrett, 92-93.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 10.

rugged individualism, conquest of nature, native savagery, etc.) McCarthy's project with nature is to show us that the world is what it is and not what humans make of it. With history, McCarthy is saying that we are all who or what we are, and not what we believe ourselves to be. Textual episodes testifying to this are numerous: the idea expressed in the formulation "the child the father of the man," from earlier in the novel, the mirrored shields of the Comanche warriors, the necessity of a witness to substantiate the veracity of an event, come readily to mind. In these, McCarthy is not merely saying that human society is caught up in its own myth, but that it is constantly writing and revising this story to reflect our preferences of how to view ourselves. Our past is violent, as is our present, and our future is, if nothing else, uncertain. The novel's protagonist, known only as "the kid," is typified by that which he lacks: reflection, obedience to a moral principle, or acknowledgement that he is participating in acts of horrible violence. If a modern hero such as this is problematic for McCarthy's audience, I agree with Timothy Parrish's conclusion as to McCarthy's purpose. He writes:

In *Blood Meridian* no society exists for the kid to accept or reject; rather, the reader constitutes the society that determines what role the kid has played in the history of the novel. See the child; *see yourself*. The reader will want to see the kid redeemed, because otherwise the reader is implicated in a history that is very different from the one he or she has been taught to celebrate.<sup>25</sup>

Like the kid, we are all thrust into the world to be cleared of the usual determinants of identity: a personal past, a place to call home, a name. We are empty vessels to be filled by the "history" that comes to us.

The idea of the illusion of historical distance resonates with the concept of optical democracy in *Blood Meridian*: the thought that we are somehow *detached* from history, and not caught up in it. Indeed, one of the primary thrusts of McCarthy's overall corpus is to throw this

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<sup>25</sup> Parrish, 92.



supposition into question. The privileged position of the observer—the individual doing the *seeing*—is removed. The equalizing of the human and nonhuman causes us to doubt whether history can be said to be a thing made by us, or something that *contains* us—like a story. Meanwhile, the act of history itself is the larger process at work. The equivalence of all things seen, the “optical democracy” of things human and non-human in McCarthy’s fiction, is at work in the discussion of history. The illusion, of course, is that things have meaning. That history tells a story that is important to us, both corporately and individually. McCarthy’s creation of Judge Holden as a draftsman and a theorist of war is the at the center of this enterprise in the novel. I now turn to examine the relationship of history and violence in the context of Judge Holden. In the section below, titled, “The Origin of War,” I try to contextualize Judge Holden’s pronouncements as a series of aphorisms and parables expressing a vision of political philosophy.

### **The origin of war**

In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy seems to be saying something about the nature and origins of war. In the speeches of various characters, the reader suspects these origins may be traced historically. I contend, however, that they are presented philosophically, because that origin may be found in nature; or in the nature of humans. Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*’s grand theorist of war certainly locates it there. But is this an expression of the will to power or something else? Judge Holden is more of a metaphysician than Nietzschean in this regard. Furthermore, unlike Nietzsche, the judge is a *practitioner* of war. Judge Holden actually *does* the things he describes, or the ideas he promotes in his oratories. As a work of fiction, *Blood Meridian* stands forward most brilliantly because we, the audience, must believe what is being described. In the

fictional reality of the novel the primary interlocutor is the ultimate practitioner of unrepentant evil. And yet, he calls it holy.

This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.<sup>26</sup>

You came forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledge a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy then man is nothing but antic clay.<sup>27</sup>

The novel allows us to analyze characters not just by what they say, but also by what they *do* (or, in the case of the kid, *don't do*). But Judge Holden's nihilism does not encapsulate the world.

The origin of war is found in the essential encounter between any two individuals. It is a fundamental animosity between men. Here McCarthy is more like Hobbes, except, as John Gray notes, the violence of *Blood Meridian* is normal, not intolerable.<sup>28</sup> Inverting a formulation of Walter Benjamin's, Dorson offers the following:

*Blood Meridian* is a document of a barbarism that is also a document of civilization, a barbarism not external to law and order but one that pulses just beneath its surface. It undermines the distinction between savagery and civilization, chaos and order, war and peace. Each is related to the other, as two sides of the same coin, and *Blood Meridian* flips the coin to show us the darker side. It lifts the bar that we have constructed between violence and non-violence, showing us that our conception of violence is blinded to the violence of the order that sanctions it.<sup>29</sup>

Dorson's analysis is provocative. He hits on one of *Blood Meridian*'s most profound philosophical insights, and in explicitly political terms. The basis of law, the foundation of the regime, all within a unifying myth designed to explain away the inherent violence attendant in all

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<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>28</sup> John Gray, "A Time When Violence is Normal," BBC Magazine, 16 July 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Dorson, 110.

civilizational acts. Order cannot be brought to disorder without violence. And yet, while McCarthy accepts this, he does not celebrate it, even while much of the text of *Blood Meridian* would indicate otherwise. Indeed, McCarthy leaves a large space for skepticism, not merely of violence, but also for its concealment. Is order just a myth among myths? Judge Holden would seem to think so.

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists is one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others.<sup>30</sup>

Whether in its mythic dimension or a more purely academic sense, History is a form of ordering the world. Judge Holden loves natural history and sees in the rocks and trees the story of all creation.<sup>31</sup> In this I think McCarthy is attempting to call into question the veracity of history to illustrate how susceptible such a narrative is in the hands of an "old hoodwinker" like Judge Holden.<sup>32</sup> In an exchange with another of the novel's characters, Judge Holden offers insights into the origin of war. He begins by talking about trades. "My trade?" Davy Brown asks, to which Judge Holden responds:

War. War is your trade. Is it not?  
And it ain't yours?  
Mine too. Very much so.  
What about all them notebooks and bones and stuff?  
All other trades are contained in that of war.  
Is that why war endures?  
No. It endures because young men love it and old men love it in them. Those that fought, those that did not.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 256.

<sup>31</sup> See *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

Judge Holden has first identified himself as a practitioner or tradesman of war. In the quotation above he has proclaimed the state of war as eternal and natural to the affairs of mankind. As a polymath, Judge Holden responds to Davy Brown that “all other trades are contained in war,” and also that “war is the ultimate game.” In this speech Judge Holden begins to expound an erotics, or even, a metaphysics of war. This lust or zeal or eroticism springs from the passion and élan of young men who crave the test, engage in the struggle, and romanticize the outcome. War “endures” in the case of old men because these old men see themselves reflected in the young men—even if an idealized projection of their former selves.

Judge Holden then takes the discussion further:

Games of sport involve and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all.<sup>34</sup>

His remarks here take on the gnostic tone that culminates in the “unity of existence” speech, quoted below. War absorbs the individual, removing any sense of individuality and replacing it with its own totality. War is like a game—it partakes of the quality of a game—but it becomes something more. The “presencing” feature of war takes it out of time, and being outside of time renders man godlike. At this point, Judge Holden begins referring to war in terms of the dance: a perpetual coming together of partners moving in tandem but going nowhere.

History purports to chronicle or offer an account of what “really” happened. McCarthy’s myth of one man, absent any traditional signifiers of identity (i.e., name, place, history, norms), stands as a symbol for all men. To have no history is to *be* totally in the present. In this, the kid and Judge Holden are linked. And yet they also diverge in an important way: Judge Holden’s relationship to history is his effort to absolutize all the knowledge of existence and deprive other

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 260.

symbols of their power. The kid's is seemingly opposite: a solitary figure with no history, knowledge, or much discernible will confronting the problem of making choices. And in this divergence between the judge and the kid we once again may glimpse McCarthy clearing a space for moral action.

The metaphysics of violence, as depicted in McCarthy's world, stands in strong (if uncertain) relationship to nihilism. A violent action gives meaning to one's existence (example: if I can hurt you, then I must exist.) This action might be undertaken, not to accomplish some end, but to participate honestly in the world as it is. War, as the judge puts it, is the ultimate question because it beggars all other questions of right or wrong.

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. . . . Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural.<sup>35</sup>

The judge places a high value on the truth. The fact that this truth is brutal or amoral does not make it untrue. The law of life, it would seem, is negation. Only that which *is* can be said to be true, and that which has been negated is, thus, untrue. The ultimate triumph of the human will is to remake the world and to give it a name. His pursuit of this goal is his metaphysics. He actively and joyfully participates in negation. Parrish writes:

To the judge, history is the most powerful form of dominion because it seems to order the world. Actually, nothing orders the world, and this is why violence is the world's only sustained, permanent, form of expression. History, however, is the form by which humans displace this knowledge into something that we can claim to control. History is inevitably created as a consequence of destruction, just as the past enters the judge's book as it is destroyed. Moreover, if the judge can expunge from the memory of man what he puts in his book, then the judge's book becomes the only true record of the world. No rival versions can exist, because the judge's version will contain within it all possibilities. This point is important, because the judge lends order to what might otherwise be seen as

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 261.

chaos, random bloodshed, killing for its own sake. Yet the opposite to the judge does not exist—some readers may want to make the kid into the judge's opposite, but he can no more be opposed than the Hindu god Shiva can.<sup>36</sup>

Judge Holden actively and participates in negation. His metaphysical principle is the game. For him, war is the ultimate game because through it man participates in forcing the unity of existence. As a result of this, war stands paradoxically as both the ultimate creative and destructive act.

This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.<sup>37</sup>

The point in all of Judge Holden's extensive notetaking and attempts to appropriate the entire world to put into his book is not so much to preserve it or transmit it to future generations. Rather, it is to unify time. As he says, he will never die, and we should take him at his word. Like the mythological trickster figure, he will always show up in the margins or borders between things, because that's where the action is to be found. And what will the judge be doing there when we find him? He will be actively involved in un-doing whatever is, particularly whatever has been built or made by human art. A similar conclusion leads Parrish to say: "The judge is, arguably, human history incarnate."<sup>38</sup> He will put all the birds in cages in zoos. Why? Because once there are not free birds left un-understood to offend him he will have undone the thing with which he is truly at war: freedom itself. Freedom to Judge Holden is an illusion—a remnant of man's will to innocence. As long as war—or participation in the dance—can no longer be seen as a choice then there will no longer be any false dancers.

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<sup>36</sup> Parrish, 104.

<sup>37</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261.

<sup>38</sup> Parrish, 103.

This insight seems to be the more question *par excellence* of *Blood Meridian*. The disunity of truth, when men resist the recognition that freedom is an illusion or that man has a certain matter of choice, even when reduced to the most elemental and extreme circumstances, is the novel's animating spark. McCarthy seems to be positing that, by creating extreme doubt as to the existence of choice or free will, that man still retains some freedom in the face of overwhelming necessity. If the unity of existence is ever completely forced, then we are out of history; we will have run out of stories. The only reason for such a book as *Blood Meridian* is the fact that the question remains open. There are no terrains so wild and barbarous so as to settle the question of the true nature and substance of the human heart. This is the only question worth exploring, the only story worth telling for McCarthy. The question of right and wrong is beggared by negation because the question of men's hearts remains unresolved.

McCarthy's Judge Holden articulates a powerful argument in favor of negation. But why doesn't he just kill everyone and settle things? The answer is because as long as one person remains unwilling (or maybe even hesitant) to challenge the rules of the game, then the question persists. The judge, whether he or not he ever truly dies, can never kill himself and so end the game. There must always remain at least one other player, or the game will end. Negation, as a life's work, requires something to negate. This is why the judge functions best in many ways as a trickster figure. He can only blur the lines so long as there are lines to blur or boundaries to cross. Without them where would he go? Who, or what, would he judge? The final thing that the judge cannot undo is, ultimately, himself. His only hope, then, if he can even be said to hope, is to find the one who can undo him. He seems to see this potential in the kid. Why? The answer would seem to lie with the kid's innocence. The kid is never completely cleansed of his will to innocence. His resistance to the life of the darkness marks him a failure in the judge's

esteem. As the judge's chosen successor (if we can even call him this) the kid should accept his mantle as the judge's rightful heir to the father's death. When he refuses to kill him in the desert, the kid refuses to fully commit to the game. His inaction, then, *pluralizes truth*.

By the end of the novel we can clearly see the way in which the judge serves as the vehicle through which the two other main characters (the kid and Glanton) come into contact and contrast them. All three have alien hearts. The judge would kill Glanton even if Glanton might have lived to fulfill the destiny the judge has proclaimed for him. Losing Glanton is, for the judge, akin to losing a good horse. For the judge, Glanton is a vehicle, a puppet, a tool. With Glanton dead, the judge's one remaining task is either to erase the remaining records of their deeds together, or to recruit a new mentee and continue them. Does the judge's wooing of the kid extend beyond a mere stratagem for bringing him into his clutches? Not entirely. The judge's kinship of the kid, their predestined linkage, would seem to inhere in the kid's innocence—a history-less *carte blanche* with no discernible motives save a taste for mindless violence.

The master of time gobbles up everything that the kid is, has been, and will be. In this act the judge negates the kid and all that is contained within his history, save for one thing: the existence of the novel itself. The end of any poem (at least any good poem) leaves the reader changed. Such a change can be said to negate some shadowy corner of illusions still lurking in the recesses of the reader's mind, as it can be said to create an opening or a new vista for thought—a way of constructing meaning from the little fragments of bone, foundations of shelter, scratching on rocks, a face, a name. The essential substance of myth, legend, dust is human memory. And the truth of memories is that they have no meaning in themselves.



Memory, in the context of *Blood Meridian*, is equivalent the bones that are picked up and, certainly, the bones that are not.

They did not speak. They were men of another time for all that they bore Christian names and they had lived all their lives in a wilderness as had their fathers before them. They'd learnt war by warring, the generations driven from the eastern shore across the continent, from the ashes at Gnadenhutten onto the prairies and across the outlet to the bloodlands of the west. If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet and men of other colors and beings which no man has looked upon and yet not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts.<sup>39</sup>

The Glanton Gang is depicted allegorically here as the entire history of westward expansion on the American continent. This contains, however, the paradoxical reduction of their spiritual horizon as a result of their actions. The country they have found on the lawless frontier becomes less immense and was less alien to them than their own hearts. The “wilderness within” forms one of the great thematic linkages between *Blood Meridian* and McCarthy's successive works: The Border Trilogy. Any kind of storytelling is violent because in its creation of a world it negates all possible other worlds. The person who gains understanding of this, the storyteller, becomes the master of time.

The content of history, its subject matter, might be a natural, or human, or even a political accounting of the sum of forces contributing to shape the “present.” In the meta sense described above, the act of recalling, or recounting, is a pervasive feature found throughout *Blood Meridian*. This act or process of witnessing is inherently violent and violative with regard to its impact on the sphere of human reality or truth. McCarthy makes much of the divergence between what it is to know a thing, and how the truth of such knowledge is both fragmentary and vulnerable. The recreation of an event as history, through its mediation into language, or “witnessing,” as McCarthy frequently terms it, erases the objective historical fact; destroying it through the

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<sup>39</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 144.

inscription of meaning. What remains, even though it may be presented and even generally regarded as “true,” is only a representation; some that, ultimately, becomes the chattel property of the soul surviving witness. History, in McCarthy’s world, is the process through which nature is subjugated through the imposition of meaning.

For McCarthy’s sympathetic characters the task of narrating their biography, of choosing of a story, is similar to the task of McCarthy’s reader—a herculean effort to discern meaning and, eventually, to extend sympathy or empathy to the most despicable of human characters; or at least to be fascinated by them. McCarthy complicates this enterprise, asserting the implicit challenge that the appearance of such momentous choice is ultimately a great misconception, if not deception. Human activity is much less durable or lasting in the face of cosmic or natural forces than humans would prefer to believe. History, as such, is not an accurate reflection of meaning or value, but simply one possible story thought to convey some form of meaning. The authority or legitimacy of this sovereign power is derived from a purely human supposition that our ability to explain, describe, or, ultimately, predict the various phenomena of our world implies our natural fitness to rule, or our lack of it.

McCarthy’s nuanced style subtly subverts the foundation of this legitimacy without denying its potency. He directly parodies any claims to the legitimacy of conventional sovereign power or, for that matter, any legitimacy of the claim that life is inherently sacred. “In such a world,” he seems to ask, “how can life be defended for its own sake?”<sup>40</sup> Yet McCarthy also demonstrates the futility of this line of questioning, creating a world of humans with no discernible internal language of thought or reflection. Indeed, it is for this very reason that McCarthy’s style commends itself to the political imagination. When the form of the human is so reduced, the substance of action stands forward most visibly.

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<sup>40</sup> See Bell, *Achievement* on the sanctity of human life, 121.

## Conclusion

The image of the hole digger at the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* is a perfect metaphor for McCarthy's vision of history. History is the building of fences. It is the act of assigning meaning to things; of instituting order. But in its undoing of the chaos it enacts a kind of violence of its own. In terms both of the surface and meta-narrative, not only is the story of American history violence, but also the very nature of doing that history itself partakes in violence. In a related way, the fence is also a metaphor for law; it circumscribes freedom. But where absolute freedom is equated with absolute chaos, perhaps we ought to reappraise our valuation of freedom. Violence in history does not negate the potency of choosing moral actions and of taking responsibility. The rippling waves, or impacts, of this may never be known but there is always a witness because, undeniably, things *do* happen.

History relates to the concept of witnessing as an extension of McCarthy's myth-making enterprise. History invokes witnessing through the education and journey toward self-understanding of the reader, who also occupies the position (and responsibilities) of the witness. And in the reader's coming to accept the role of witness to history, he may once again encounter the problem of knowing and the lingering question of responsibility. For McCarthy, the witness to history is compatible with the problem of knowing. History may create a problem of meaning but can never eclipse the possibility of value. Progress, ultimately, is McCarthy's philosophical enemy. The illusion of progress is what gives rise to our collective self-deception of safety in a chaotic world. Yes, the wild and barbarous terrains of the western frontier are now tamed, but not really. The layered stories within stories of McCarthy's writing express the idea of witnessing, as it is in the exchange between the storyteller and hearer, and the hearer's retelling of the tale that gives the story its meaning. This becomes all the more poignant when one

considers McCarthy's position on the role of narrative in constituting life itself. The story only has meaning insofar as it is heard, to say nothing of its being understood.

In the specific context of *Blood Meridian*, the conceptual linkage between history and witnessing can most clearly be seen in the "lethal congruences" scene.

As they rode that night upon the mesa they saw come toward them much like their own image a party of riders pieced out of the darkness by the intermittent flare of the dry lightning to the north. . . .

They parleyed without dismounting and the ciboleros lighted their small cigarillos and told that they were bound for the markets at Mesilla. The Americans might have traded for some of the meat but they carried no tantamount goods and the disposition to exchange was foreign to them. And so these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other hand come, pursuing as all travelers must, inversions without end upon other men's journeys.<sup>41</sup>

Though different, the mirroring of the two groups embodies something of an essential encounter. While this phenomenon will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter, one fact remains inescapable. *Blood Meridian* must, on some level, answer for its obvious dependency on American national history. The novel's engagement with American national mythology must be addressed. How best to do this? The first avenue into this question is the *epistemological question*. And McCarthy engages this question mythically. Anti-myth and counter-myth are nice buzzwords. McCarthy does not pick apart the political structures or institutions that enacted the doctrine of Manifest Destiny so much as he sheds light or gives intimations toward the spirit that enabled it. My chapter on nature has set up this problem of knowing. What lies at its heart is the duplicities of reality and illusion: "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting."<sup>42</sup> In my next chapter, titled, Witnessing, I conclude the discussion of *Blood Meridian* and turn to examine McCarthy's next published novels, referenced collectively as The Border Trilogy. Across all of these works a deeper and richer moral vision comes to typify McCarthy's

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<sup>41</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 126-127.

<sup>42</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 238.

fiction. At the heart of this enterprise are more fully wrought considerations of essential confrontation between the self and the other than glimpsed in McCarthy's earlier works. As an act, witnessing expands the idea of self-narration discussed earlier in this dissertation, by invoking questions of what the self owes to the other in a world where mindless violence still persists. Is ethical action just another illusion embedded in our political or cultural mythology, or is it something irreducible? The tentative conclusions to this question offered in *Blood Meridian* find stronger expression and greater profundity in the trilogy's second novel, *The Crossing*. I turn now to examine this unmistakable pivot in the maturation of McCarthy's political vision.

## 4. Witnessing

This chapter continues and concludes my three-chapter examination of McCarthy's fifth novel, *Blood Meridian*, and inaugurates the discussion of his next major published work, the Border Trilogy. My focus on the concept of witnessing forms an interpretive key to *Blood Meridian* because it is presented as the central focus in some of the novel's most philosophically compelling scenes.<sup>1</sup> The concept of witnessing expresses three of McCarthy's most significant political formulations.

First, witnessing is seen as an extension of narrative and sets the course for more expansive directions of interpretation in the later chapters of this dissertation. Recalling some of the conclusions reached in chapter one, storytelling and witnessing are creative acts in McCarthy's vision. Within and between his texts, McCarthy uses the activity of storytelling to examine the place of the self and its relation to the world. McCarthy's pronouncement that all stories are one, and that there is only one tale to tell is significant here. Narrative emplotment implies a certain sense of activity, or agency, for the individual consciousness situated in the external phenomenality of the world. All of these are, in their ultimate impact, expressive of the political concept of freedom. The author of a story acts as a free agent, asserting himself into the world through narrating his own autobiography. To do this he must be endowed with a sense of authority to act, imposing upon the world yet another strand into a matrix of stories that is, in a very powerful sense, the substance of the world itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Another reason that I favor witnessing is more pragmatic, as it allows me to cut to the heart of my analysis without first having to account for the laundry list of "isms" dominating most of the critical and interpretive literature on McCarthy's fiction broadly, and *Blood Meridian* in particular (among which number Gnosticism, mysticism, determinism, historicism, eco-criticism, postmodernism, feminism, Marxism, etc.)

In an essay detailing this matrix of intersecting stories and the lives of the characters who tell them in *The Crossing*, McCarthy scholar Dianne C. Luce shares a revealing anecdote regarding this conceptual trend in McCarthy's biography and artistic vision:

McCarthy was thinking about the role of narrative in our lives and had done some reading in Hegel that seems to have influenced his ideas at least by Fall 1991, when he traveled by train from Washington D.C. to New York City with Douglas Wager. . . . Wager recalls that during their three hour trip McCarthy talked about "how narrative is basic to all human beings, how even people who are buried alive go over their life stories to stay sane. Verification of one's story to someone else is essential to living...; our reality comes out of the narrative we create, not out of the experiences themselves" (Arnold, *Stonemason* 121).<sup>2</sup>

This connection to Hegel is not to be missed. Storytelling is man's essential function for McCarthy. It takes on two significant dimensions. Luce writes: "McCarthy is concerned with the role or function of story in human experience of life, not only our own stories, our autobiographies, but our biographies of others, our witnessing."<sup>3</sup> This formulation is of particular use to an analysis of McCarthy's political vision, as it sets up the comparison of narrative as an expression of the human being in isolation against witnessing, invoking a basic impulse toward community.

Turning now to the second of McCarthy's political formulations. In the context of *Blood Meridian* witnessing expresses a kind of phenomenology in McCarthy's vision. It comes to stand as the grounds or authority that allows an event to be substantiated. The idea is presented by Judge Holden. Concluding a private discussion with a certain sergeant Aguilar, Judge Holden informs a member of the company that "it is consistent with right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be readily made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of

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<sup>2</sup> Dianne C. Luce, "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*" in Arnold and Luce, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi Copyright: *The Southern Quarterly*, 1999), 202.

<sup>3</sup> Luce, "Matrix," 195.

some third party.”<sup>4</sup> This idea of a third party, sometimes also described, significantly, as the “third path,” is of central importance in a number of important scenes involving Judge Holden and the kid. The relationship between two entities or “principals” and the third party, the witness, is reformulated a number of times throughout the text.<sup>5</sup> It comes to represent a way of grounding the real or the actual (a sort of re-theorization of the old “if a tree falls in the woods” paradox). McCarthy uses this formulation throughout *Blood Meridian* to enliven ideas expressed in his theory of narrative. This constitutes an attempt to place an isolated individual person, or consciousness, in the world toward a vision in which the individual lives among others. As such, witnessing expresses a social and ethical dimension to McCarthy’s theory of the self. If the impulse to tell stories is the essential act of humans and thus story becomes a medium or mediating force for how McCarthy places man in the world, then witnessing becomes the manner in which McCarthy places man among other men; an impulse toward community.

Intimations of these two ideas are peppered throughout much of McCarthy’s early fiction but it is not until the appearance of *Blood Meridian* that he starts using the term ‘witness’ or ‘witnessing’ to express the idea. Indeed, *Blood Meridian* famously opens with the phrase: “See the child.” Because of this, the idea finds strong resonance with the “optical democracy” construct through which McCarthy explores equivalences between the human and non-human world. To witness is, first and foremost, to *see*.

At its truest, narrative is equivalent to spiritual insight into the world itself: a vision that is not related to eyesight, but that penetrates to the black mystery at the core of things.<sup>6</sup>

The visual metaphor is key here. Whereas the idea of the tree falling in the forest is linked to the sensation of hearing, McCarthy’s formulation is expressed visually. In a key passage, found

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<sup>4</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> See three quotes below for examples.

<sup>6</sup> Luce, “Matrix,” 210 (footnote omitted.)



right in the middle of the novel and paraphrasing the judge, the narrator states: “what could be said to occur unobserved?”<sup>7</sup> As the novel works toward its conclusion, the usage of witnessing begins to shift somewhat. Increasingly, the idea of the witness or witnessing comes to indicate an activity of sharing or a having in common with other people; of testimony to what has been done. This new connotation is subtle, however, and easily missed, as *Blood Meridian* is certainly McCarthy’s most anti-social work. It must await later works for further and fuller development.

To witness is also to *hear*. The theme of storytelling is central to *The Crossing*. In this work McCarthy depicts an assortment of memorable characters whose sole function in the novel, it would appear, is to tell a story to the young Billy Parham, the novel’s protagonist. As the ethical and social dimension of McCarthy’s narrative vision, witnessing stands for the manner in which meaning, if not value, is transmitted between two people. While witnessing is to see, it is also to hear the stories of the others and, importantly, to then tell and retell these stories to others. McCarthy lavishes no sentimentality on this process, nor does he offer any hints as to what the content of a life might be in this exchange. Nevertheless, the pursuit of the one tale that is the tale of all inevitably leads back to the essential relationships between humans—and all of the moral baggage appertaining thereunto. Drawing on this general trend in McCarthy’s fiction, Lydia Cooper adds the following: “In the novels, stories construct meaning and instruct in empathy and as such form a bulwark against the overwhelming tide of human degeneracy.”<sup>8</sup> The autobiographies of our lives are not lived out in isolation, but rather are a part of a multiplicity of interconnected stories. McCarthy’s vision of man is not solipsistic, nor is it nihilistic, as some scholars contend. For him, human reality is socially constructed, entailing moral obligation and

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *Heroes*, 21.

freedom of choice, an individual's need for community as well as its attendant need to be needed by the community. What is the substance of this choice? A partial answer will suffice for now: it is the choice of story for a character. It is also, importantly, the choice of assigning empathy for McCarthy's reading audience.

Interpreted in this way McCarthy's novels read less like traditional prose narratives and instead display elements more closely associated with the traditions of epic and myth, particularly in the case of *Blood Meridian*. As has been shown, McCarthy works playfully with traditional conceptions of plot and character in a manner that subtly expresses something deeper, though constantly resistant to the imposition of meaning. Myths often appear in narrative form, but McCarthy subverts traditional conceptions of the tale as a means of expressing the deeper pools of terror and desire at the heart of the human experience. *Blood Meridian* thus constitutes a myth of evil and of tragedy clothed in the trappings of an American national epic, as well as a symbolic exposition of the most basic elements of human sociability.<sup>9</sup>

The third of McCarthy's political formations can be seen in the context of *Blood Meridian*, where witnessing comes to express an imaginative enterprise through which McCarthy envisions and continually re-envisions the essential human encounter. It is in witnessing that one finds McCarthy seeking out some possible solution to the problematic solipsism of human isolation. As always, the relationship between the rightful places of man and the gods is in

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<sup>9</sup> An example of this comes from Sara Spurgeon: "One of the many complex relationships...McCarthy explores in *Blood Meridian*...is between humans, especially Anglo Americans, and the natural world. He does so through the manipulation of several archetypal myths closely identified with the European experience in the New World, and most specifically with the border region of the American Southwest." Spurgeon continues: "McCarthy moves *Blood Meridian* through the dark and disordered spaces of what Lauren Berlant calls the "national symbolic." Unlike the familiar icons of mythic frontier tales, however, McCarthy characters seek no closure, nor do they render order out of the chaos of history and myth. The novel functions on the level of mythmaking and national fantasy as an American origin story, a reimagining upon the palimpsest of the western frontier of the birth of one of our most pervasive national fantasies—the winning of the West and the building of the American character through frontier experiences." Sara Spurgeon, "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness: Mythic Reconstructions in *Blood Meridian*," in Lilley, ed. *Cormac McCarthy, New Directions*, 75.

question—frequently invoked in McCarthy’s fiction by the idea of keeping promises in a world without gods requires the presence of a witness and some sense of moral accountability. But in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s narrators are deeply preoccupied by the notion of some intermediary. Shadowy traces of this intermediary or third party permeate the novel, invoking its moral philosophy. The ultimate function of this element of the novel is left ambiguous to the reader.<sup>10</sup>

As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under *consignment to some third and other destiny*.”<sup>11</sup>

You are fine caballeros, he said. You kill the barbaros. They cannot hide from you. *But there is another caballero and I think that no man hides from him.* I was a soldier. It is like a dream. When even the bones is gone in the desert the dreams is talk to you, you don’t wake up forever.”<sup>12</sup>

The tracks of the murderers bore on to the west but they were white men who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of savages. *Notions of chance and fate are the preoccupation of men engaged in rash undertakings.* The trail of the Argonauts terminated in ashes as told and in the convergence of such vectors in such a waste wherein the hearts and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up and carried off by another the expriest asked if some might not see the hand of a cynical god conducting with what austerity and what mock surprise so lethal a congruence. *The posting of witnesses by a third and other path altogether might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance, yet the judge, who put his horse forward until he was abreast of the speculants, said that in this was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?*<sup>13</sup>

McCarthy uses witnessing, at least in part, as a means of establishing the ground of ultimate reality. Without the witness, “what can be said to occur unobserved?” inquires *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden.<sup>14</sup> Indeed this paradox is frequently repeated or reformulated

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<sup>10</sup> It is not until *The Crossing*, the second installment of *The Border Trilogy* that McCarthy explicitly draws out witnessing as a necessary moral question. In the context of this work I find McCarthy’s technique of weaving interpolated tales used to its fullest effect. *Blood Meridian*, however, presents a prototype of this concept and presents it with slightly different implications.

<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 10 (emphasis added.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 108 (emphasis added.)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 159 (emphasis added.)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

throughout McCarthy's body of fiction, particularly in the later works. The testimony of some witness is at the basis of common law assumptions regarding the truth of any event disputed between two parties with competing claims. Thus the testimony of a witness, some uninterested third party, a spectator to the events in question, is required to establish the facts concerning any particular case. The validity of the witness's testimony, however, is often the subject of dispute in any case by questions of his proximity, the clarity of his memory, and the persistent threat of his latent prejudices that may, by extension, reveal some significant virtue or defect imbedded within his inner character. In other words, while the testimony of the witness is required to substantiate the very *fact* of the event in question that the matter in question actually *happened*, his testimony is always regarded with scrutiny if not outright skepticism. And though the reasons for this skepticism may cover an array of concerns, they are unified around the perpetual and inescapable problem of identity; the questionable objectivity of the uninterested observer. This is at the crux of witnessing as expressed by Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*:

The judge smiled. Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in *an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world*.<sup>15</sup>

Earlier in this dissertation I made the argument that the uniting strand for all of McCarthy's fiction is the image of the single man who stands in for all men. McCarthy continually returns to this imagery throughout his fiction. The formulation "every man is tabernacled in every other" represents a milestone in McCarthy's fiction, a fully articulated vision of witnessing. *Blood Meridian*'s language of "endless complexity" will be advanced in *The Crossing* to the idea of the matrix of stories and lives, of word and flesh. A further advancement of this idea is the ethical dimension endowed on it.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 147 (emphasis added.)

Witnessing in McCarthy's fiction instantiates a ground for the act of choosing: a complex terrain of moral obligation. While the one tale of all men inevitably portrays the essence of humanity through the deep isolation of the man on the road, the paired concept of witnessing to narrative necessarily invokes an equal need for community. What is it that McCarthy is witnessing to? Undoubtedly, it is the certain horror of each other's potential for denying the basic humanity of the other, thus enabling the same chaotic violence of a world that we can never fully understand. So much of what we make of this world amounts to ephemera. Our testimony is witnessed by our leaving behind only the faintest traces of our presence, the myth, legend and dust of our being.<sup>16</sup> Many of our acts and their anterior motivations may *seem* chosen, often entailing a critical moral dimension. Against this, Lydia Cooper asserts the following: "In general, McCarthy's moral characters tend to recognize—and often agonize over—the frailty of their belief in the worth of their own choices."<sup>17</sup> Yet this appearance belies a reality in which impersonal necessity compels our unreflective action.

The preceding considerations on the significance of witnessing to McCarthy's overall political vision round out this conceptual overview. McCarthy's artistic project invites the moral and political imagination of his readership. Its demands, however, are not always easily met. Page after page, McCarthy's prose assaults society's most basic norms, eschewing our most unquestioned taboos. His vision presents chaotic, irrational violence between humans on a level not commonly seen in American literature. For this reason, some scholars assert the charge of a nihilistic core at the heart of McCarthy's vision. I resist this interpretation, positing instead the social dimension embodied by the concept of witnessing.

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<sup>16</sup> Borrowed from McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 246.

<sup>17</sup> Lydia R. Cooper, *No More Heroes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 21.

## Secondary literature on witnessing

Inaugurated in *Outer Dark* and then used with increasing frequency in McCarthy's later works, the idea that the life of the protagonist being defined by the shape of his journey, his path, his road through the world, comes to serve as a dominant metaphor in McCarthy's humane vision. The journey undertaken is no simple heroic quest in the familiar or romantic sense.

Literary critic Edwin T. Arnold expands this idea in terms of McCarthy's fiction:

Cormac McCarthy's novels compose an extended journey. His characters travel the mountain roads and forests of east Tennessee, the city streets of Knoxville, the deserts and hills of Mexico and the Southwest. For the most part, their wanderings seem without immediate purpose, or purpose of the vaguest sort: an undefined desire to withdraw or to explore or to escape. They are descendants of Ishmael, both the biblical outcast and Melville's nomadic seagoer. I can think of no other author who so carefully charts his characters' movements from street to street or town to town -- you can follow them on maps if you wish. And yet his novels usually cease their telling in the midst of journeys, still on the road, short of destination, for, in the world of McCarthy, the only true destination is death.<sup>18</sup>

The principal and guiding image beneath all of McCarthy's fiction is the man on a journey, the dispossessed spiritual wanderer, the nomad, the drifter, and the wayward pilgrim.<sup>19</sup>

In each respective rendering, the arc of McCarthy's protagonist is determined and defined by this tendency toward displacement, a voyage of quest or antiquest.<sup>20</sup> In the most general terms, the character is homeless, not just literally so, but also homeless in a spiritual sense. Steven Shaviro characterizes this fundamental condition as "exiled." He writes: "Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition. For there can be no alienation when there is no originary state for us to be alienated from."<sup>21</sup> What is it, then, that impels this sense of exile and initiates the quest or search typical of a McCarthy protagonist?

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<sup>18</sup> Arnold, Edwin T., "Blood and Grace," *Commonweal*, Vol. 121, Issue 19.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Evenson's typology on this.

<sup>20</sup> Luce, *DLB* 143, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Shaviro, 147.

On this point McCarthy scholars are fairly unified in agreement, though differing in terminology. An exhaustive survey of the interpretative lenses employed here would do little to advance a political reading. Lydia Cooper comes very close in her summation, touching both on the need for metaphysical solace and human connection, and the correspondence between these two. She writes:

In the dark worlds of McCarthy's corpus, human affinity is always endangered if not practically extinct, but it is also the source of human hope. The urge toward connectedness with others becomes absolutely primal in these novels. When a character's internal thoughts and motivations are revealed, such revelations almost always serve to emphasize that character's visceral need for others. Even the narrative events underscore the importance of connection. Rinty's search for her child, Billy's search for his pregnant she-wolf in *The Crossing*, the father's love for his son in *The Road*, and so many of McCarthy's characters' despairing search for an extant God all suggest that these characters are implacably drawn toward some elusive sense of connection.<sup>22</sup>

Central to Cooper's argument is the central role played by storytelling or narrative in the construction of McCarthy's moral/ethical universe. She continues: "Narrative is thus a vehicle for bearing witness to moral courage, and at times narrative is the only means by which morality is recognized."<sup>23</sup> Affirming this, Stephen Frye adds the following:

The possibility of a universe absent of transcendent meaning is considered, together with the present potential of a creation dominated by evil. But alive as well in the world of *Blood Meridian* is the ubiquitous "voice" that binds the physical and spiritual into mysterious unity and reveals itself through discrete gestures of human decency and benevolence.<sup>24</sup>

Frye's concern with the absence of meaning is compatible with other interpretations that find the search for meaning as central to the quest narrative in McCarthy's fiction. Robert Jarrett advances a similar line of reasoning:

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<sup>22</sup> Lydia Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 67.

If McCarthy's fiction springs from a desire to assign meaning and value to the self and world, this desire cannot be fulfilled either by the journeys of McCarthy's protagonists or by fiction itself. Nonetheless the protagonists' tales must be told—and told responsibly.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of essential responsibility gets at the ethical dimensions of McCarthy's theory of narrative. A final attribute of the McCarthy hero worth mentioning here is that the fundamental loneliness and ethical quagmire, typical of his situation, is difficult to resolve in isolation. His homelessness is in one part his rupture with the continuity of identity. It is also a function of his wandering. His isolation serves to illustrate his need for community and throws him into an imbalance vis-à-vis his identity.

[In *Blood Meridian*] such a double displacement—exile so extreme that we are exiled even from the possibility, the hope and despair, of exile—characterizes the life of these wanderers in the desert. The oedipal myth of paradise lost and regained, of patrimonial inheritance and the promised land, has been abolished once and for all.<sup>26</sup>

Like his counterparts in other works, the kid's originary state is one of deracination. He is an isolated orphan on the move, impelled by no visible forces of motivation. Second, due to his vacuous subjectivity, the kid's basic ethical outlook is questionable. Thirdly, he lacks a clear sense of identity.<sup>27</sup> Here we get a sense of the mythic construction of the novel. Dwight Eddins adds the following:

Cormac McCarthy introduces...an ontological ambiguity into *Blood Meridian* to suggest a mysterious order of being of which the personae are emanations and a quasitranscendental agenda of some sort behind the pattern of events.<sup>28</sup>

The act of storytelling itself is a key feature of all McCarthy's novels, in which his wandering protagonists frequently encounter other less sharply drawn characters—an array of mystics, metaphysicians, hermits, and heretics—who freely engage the hero in prolonged

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<sup>25</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 153.

<sup>26</sup> Shaviro, 146.

<sup>27</sup> See also Evenson, 46, on the kid being absent from the violent action scenes in the novel.

<sup>28</sup> Dwight Eddins, "'Everything a Hunter and Everything Hunted': Schopenhauer and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Fall 2003, Vol, 45, No. 1., 28.



dialogic exchanges meant, perhaps, to advise and inform the wayward hero about certain verities and mysteries lying at the heart of existence, and thus assist him in shaping his own path. The structure and substance of these exchanges has been a consistent topic of interest for critics and commentators in the field of McCarthy studies.

Taking to the road, McCarthy protagonists frequently engage in roadside conversations with an odd assortment of prophets, visionary mystics, and fools who impart to them a kind of wisdom, though it usually has limited applicability and goes unheeded. As a plot device, however, this recurrent motif is a strong reflection back to the centrality of narrative to McCarthy's thinking. All of McCarthy's wandering sons are in search of a story (if not *the* story) that includes them. This fundamental concern is captured by the profound sense of isolation and loneliness that surrounds his protagonists, and indeed his work in general. But this is only one half of the equation. Jarrett writes: "From the early Southern novels to those set in the Southwest, McCarthy's fiction enacts the death, absence, or denial of the father."<sup>29</sup>

McCarthy's protagonists are not merely journeying. Quite often they are fleeing—pursued by mysterious and powerful agents of death, who wield total authority and pronouncing ultimate judgment. Most of McCarthy's works, in their broadest outlines, are plotted around the idea of a chase. I do not agree with Brian Evenson's characterization of these characters, however. Calling the grim triune a "cluster of wanderers," Evenson contrasts these to Culla Holme, who he typifies as "—a wanderer but not a nomad (as the desire to mend his ways revealed in his opening dream suggests) – to encounter in his search for his sister, the novel's other protagonist."<sup>30</sup> The protagonist, whether he knows it completely or not, is generally

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<sup>29</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Brian Evenson, "McCarthy's Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country," in *Sacred Violence*, vol. I., 45.

impelled to flee from an embodied (or disembodied) pursuer. Most of McCarthy's pursuing characters—the über predators—represent more of a totalizing principle, rather than displaying human characteristics. What is the difference between the protagonist and antagonist? Is it virtue? Not really. McCarthy's romances go to some length to deny the reader too much immediate identification, and thus empathy, with any protagonist. And as the antagonist is often only nominally a human at all, identification is denied here as well. Thus, the reader has a fair amount of objectivity in considering the idea of moral judgment in McCarthy novels. The ultimate conclusion of that tale is never written. Often as not, the action of McCarthy's novel closes on some representation of seemingly limitless possibilities of a road that has no end. Yet however much the journey of one man can stand emblematically for the journey of all men, all tales being but the same tale, the image of the man on a journey is only half complete. Indeed, it is perhaps only one-third complete, but this will take some further explaining.

McCarthy ended his seven-year hiatus after the publication of *Blood Meridian* in 1992 with *All the Pretty Horses*, the first installment of what has come to be called "The Border Trilogy." Taken as a single body of work (though McCarthy scholar Dianne C. Luce asserts that "it is doubtful that McCarthy himself conceived of the books as a trilogy in any usual sense"), the trilogy offers a much more approachable version of Western genre fiction than does its predecessor.<sup>32</sup> In *All the Pretty Horses* McCarthy features "the kind of protagonist he first explored in John Wesley Rattner in *The Orchard Keeper*—the young boy who represents an older way of life and values;" a more standard Western hero than *Blood Meridian*'s kid.<sup>33</sup> While the story of John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* has much to offer a discussion of

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<sup>31</sup> See also Dwight Eddins, "Everything a Hunter and Everything Hunted: Schopenhauer and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 2003, Vol. 45, No. 1; 25-33.

<sup>32</sup> Luce, *DLB* 143, 133.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

McCarthy's political vision, it is in the story of Billy Parham—the protagonist of *The Crossing*, the trilogy's second work—that McCarthy returns to the idea of witnessing.

To initiate a discussion of the scholarly interpretation of witnessing, the work of Dianne C. Luce is especially helpful and worth quoting here at length.

Like *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *Blood Meridian* (1985), and *Outer Dark* (1968), *The Crossing* is a road narrative, but more than in the earlier novels *The Crossing* employs the road as metaphor for the life journey or the narrative of a life. . . . *The Crossing* focuses on the course of life, sequential and linear, causative, perhaps fated and yet surprising, as narrative plot—as story. And McCarthy is concerned with the role or function of story in human experience of life, not only our own stories, our autobiographies, but our biographies of others, our witnessing.<sup>34</sup>

The question arises as to the substance of what exactly McCarthy—whether through his characters, or in the margins of ambiguity he creates in all his works—is witnessing to. In her essay on the matrix of word and flesh in *The Crossing*, Luce makes the connection explicit: it is a communal vision. Paradoxically, McCarthy is witnessing to our need to be witnessed by others. In doing so, he points not simply to a new value for human connectedness, but of meaning. To accomplish this, she cites the work of Guillemin. I quote:

The textual whole of *The Crossing* invites interpretation as not just a circle of stories, but a thematization of the *circulation* of stories as the sharing of experienced negative materiality [of death]. The novel does not simply revitalize old-fashioned storytelling—though it does that, too—but it illustrates how death remembered allegorically (i.e., in stories) and collectively (i.e., through the act of storytelling) modifies the very void of individual death informing these allegories.<sup>35</sup>

If *Blood Meridian* expresses *the* supremely negative vision, as many scholars contend it does (not just in McCarthy's corpus but in all of American literature), *The Crossing* would appear to present a countervailing vision: that of the hope and power of stories. This is not simply to project meaning across time but to correct the vision of death and negation *Blood Meridian* so

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<sup>34</sup> Dianne C. Luce, "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," in *Perspectives*, 195.

<sup>35</sup> Georg Guillemin, "*Et In Arcadia Ego*: On Violence and Death in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy." M.A. thesis. Ludwig-Maximilian-University [Munich], 1995; cited as "footnote 1" in Luce, "Matrix," 195, 213 (emphasis is original, ellipses are from Luce).

strongly creates. In doing so, this new vision of witnessing unites the various thematic threads this dissertation has traced up to this point.

The connection of witnessing to narrative is obvious but more nuanced than one might expect. While all of McCarthy's fiction is populated by characters who tell stories to the protagonists whose stories we are following, it is not until *The Crossing* that McCarthy arrives at the idea of the way in which stories may be seen to constitute meaning. The hearing character, along with the reader, becomes a receptacle, a witness to the story that has been told. In doing this, not only does McCarthy find a way of expressing meaning and, importantly, *value* in human life, but he articulates something about the mechanism by which this is transmitted. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy begins to trace out a very shadowy vision of ethics that, while arguably present in his previous works, was in need of a vocabulary. Attempting to correct this, Luce makes this following point:

*The Crossing* suggests that rather than any physical sense, the human capability for narrative—not for language, which is another kind of artifact, but for formulating the tale that carries our past, gives meaning to our present, and right intention to our future—is our primary means of accessing and perhaps communicating the thing itself: the world which is a tale. For McCarthy, “the thing itself” carries connotations of truth, ultimate essence, the sacred heart of things that inspires reverence, and he implies that humans access the thing itself only by transcending the obstacles posed by artifact, language, and physical sense in moments of spiritual insight that constitute a direct and immediate apperception of the “world as given.”<sup>36</sup>

Luce's interpretation here offers further illumination into points of analysis already reached in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. First, the idea that the world is a tale—complete with all the implications for time and space discussed in chapter one. Second, the idea that the fabric of the world is mysterious and, ultimately, unknowable. The implications of the mysterious *other realm* of nature established in *Blood Meridian* are heightened by the complexity of a world which is a tale. The thing itself reveals itself to be not some version of a sinister gnostic alterity,

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<sup>36</sup> Luce, “Matrix,” 208-209 (Luce then goes on to describe how this constitutes a pattern in McCarthy's fiction.)

but rather something deeply humane. The presence or absence of god remains an unresolved question, as one would expect, but the idea of a *world as given* points toward some sense of mystic unity of things human and the nonhuman world that contains us. Third, the idea of history as a function of chronological time, and the attendant questions surrounding meaning and intelligibility find resonance in the idea of a tale that subsumes rigid distinctions between past, present, and future, that dominate our thinking. Instead, the tale—simultaneously invoking ideas of the journey, the road, and the person upon that road—unifies all, and contains within itself a new insight. Luce expounds thus:

The long interpolated tales in *The Crossing*...place less emphasis on this conception of fiction as an esthetic object or monument. These tales instead stress that narrative is a means of establishing identity, of lending at least a provisional meaning to one's existence—an existence that is completed only in the listener's reception of the tale.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of identity arises here and must be addressed. In discussing the idea of identity in McCarthy's corpus care must be taken to avoid burdening the term with cognitive baggage from established discourses in the literature of political science. McCarthy typically deploys the concept in a context of *sublimation*, which is to say, mythically or allegorically; the particular comes to stand for the universal, each becomes the avatar of all. I turn once again to Luce's analysis to assist in structuring my own discussion. She writes:

This matrix of witnessing, in which individuals' tales encompass and are embedded in one another's, and *in which we are our lives* not only as we live them from day to day but also as we are tabernacled in the hearts and memories of others who participate in creating the meaning of our lives, validates the story as life itself even where particular stories may be seen as lies or fiction.<sup>38</sup>

The interconnectedness expressed by McCarthy's concept of identity is paramount. While McCarthy hints at this idea frequently throughout all of his fiction, it is in *The Crossing* that he

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<sup>37</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 144.

<sup>38</sup> Luce, "Matrix," 198 (emphasis added.)

adopts the term “matrix” to express the concept. Luce is quick to note the mythical dimensions of this. She writes:

If the world is a tale...then none of us ever quits it. We are embedded in it, and our time is a manifestation of that tale and us. . . . No one can know the shape of the road he himself travels; but we can and do witness the journeys and departures of others. To construct tales of others and of ourselves, not still artifacts but moving images of the living world that embody the value that is in our hearts, is to connect with life: it is, perhaps, to fulfill that aspect of human nature that is in God’s image—to imitate Him in His weaving the matrix.<sup>39</sup>

I begin the first of my analytical sections on witnessing by drawing on these very insights. Like Luce, I conclude that McCarthy’s philosophical motivation behind this formulation is to find a means of grounding not just the place of man in the world, but to couple this idea with some notion of man’s function. In an attempt to move expeditiously between two texts, I depart somewhat from the traditional mode of interpretation and analysis. To condense the idea to its most essential shape and function across all of McCarthy’s body of work, I attempt to interpret it archetypally, in the form of a brief parable.

## **Parable**

The idea of witnessing for McCarthy deals with the grounding of events in the real or actual order of things. The record of the thing itself, the representation, ultimately becomes the thing itself. This is what history is: the process by which the representation of the thing becomes the thing itself. And it is in this way that witnessing becomes a form of transgression. The primacy of language cannot be avoided here. Language plays an indispensable role in the mediation of thought and memory, through which random, chaotic chance becomes endowed with meaning. From then on, the original narrative is replaced each time the story is recounted.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 206.

After a thing happens, it is only this narrative that can exist as a proxy for the vanished original. Another way to explain it is with a parable. In chapter one, Narrative, I outlined the man on a journey motif that dominates much of McCarthy's fiction. In this model I attempt to isolate what happens to this man when he encounters another on his journey.

Imagine two strangers meet by chance while walking at night on a road that is no road in particular. Their immediate impulse, and inescapable course of action, is to kill the other for fear of being killed. In this, only one can be successful. For the man who is killed, an essential paradox becomes immediately apparent: Could he have taken any other road so as to avoid this meeting? Could he have made any other choices regarding his path that might ultimately have forestalled such a fatal encounter? Had any other contingency intervened, some other possibility been pursued, might he somehow have avoided this fate? There is no way to know, as his end is inevitable, and in McCarthy's fiction, possibly predetermined. This is where the text of *Blood Meridian* comes most directly to bear: the idea that when two agents, or principles, collide, one destroys the other. But the third thing is, as Judge Holden says, not merely the witness but, in truth, the author of the thing itself. The posting of witnesses by some third and other path might be used to argue that this particular chain of events could not result purely by chance because had either man's path intersected the path of this third party someone else would have been killed—one way or the other—and, thus, the outcome would be different. The judge responds to Tobin that in this encounter is expressed the very nature of the witness, and that his proximity is no third thing but rather the prime.<sup>40</sup> "For what could be said to occur unobserved?"<sup>41</sup> The witness, then, creates meaning out of something that, absent this witness, might as well have never existed.

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<sup>40</sup> Paraphrasing here McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

The judge says that the witness, the teller or recounter of the event, is no third or ancillary component, but rather constitutive of the encounter itself. In other words, what has happened is ultimately as irrelevant as any other possibility of what *could* have happened, as it represents nothing more than the larger game being played. Things are killed or negated by other things that come to replace them, and there is no part of this that stands outside of the grand design or nature of existence. All that matters is the presence of a witness to become a repository for the “facts.” By this logic, the person who *sees*, *hears*, and, importantly, *says* that something has occurred (rather than merely nothing) is himself the master of the story. “Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the utmost edge of the world.”<sup>42</sup> In the case of the two men of the parable described above, it is only after some third party comes upon the body or the tracks or hears the story told by some other party at some point in the future that the entire exchange is constituted. In the end, the story comes to be all that remains of whatever existed prior.

As set forward in the brief parable constructed above, the idea of the convergence of two paths or agents or lives or stories is typically resolved in the ending of one story and the continuing of another. It is not that McCarthy simply intends to expound upon the idea that morality or justice is simply whatever results from the interaction between stronger and weaker parties—the same basic outlook articulated by Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* (i.e., that justice is always in the hands of the stronger party). Rather, behind the imagery of the encounter on the road is the idea that the concept of justice itself is no less bound to the text as the stronger or weaker party. The idea of “posting witnesses by some third and other path” might be employed to argue that the outcome could not have been purely due to chance because had the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 147.



path of this third entity intersected the path of either of the two principle parties at some point anterior, the same essential kill-or-be-killed scenario would have ensued, and thus this later outcome would never occur. Had some contingency, some other course of events or trajectory of lives intervened it would no less result in the appearance of fated action due to the nature of the witness.

In McCarthy's world, truth is not exposed by dialogic exchange between two agents or entities, but rather by the presence of some third party, or witness (the position occupied by Plato the writer in the case of the *Republic*). Students of the humanities commonly read Plato's *Republic* as a basic primer for inquiry into the terrain of political philosophy. The dialog's great teaching, that our conceptions of things correspond, albeit imperfectly, to the essential forms of the things in-and-of themselves. These forms, being transcendent, retain their character in total independence and, we might say, indifference to their approximations in the immanent sphere. Yet the line of reasoning behind this explanation of the forms only holds up if a certain earthly consensus is maintained. In other words, while any particular tree might be said to correspond to the ideal form of the tree, they are mutually dependent upon the text of the dialog for their existence. Neither the idea of a thing nor any particular example of that thing can ever be truly said to exist independently of the text. The reality of an idea cannot be detached from the absolute sovereignty of the narrator. What can be said to exist unobserved? For an "action" to take place requires an individual with a will to choose between the imagined alternatives and select one. It also requires a witness to verify and *testify* that it happened. In the encounter between two "little nations" in the desert, the presence of a witness in such a moment can hardly be said to be the result of chance. It carries meaning and substantiates a claim that the affairs of men are pre-ordained by some higher power. This claim, of course, is refuted by Judge Holden

who says that the witness is no third thing but is in fact this higher power itself. Thus, the witness is prime to the encounter.

The testimony of the witness creates meaning out of events that, absent this testimony, would just as well never have happened. What has happened is ultimately irrelevant, as it represents nothing more than the game being played. Everything that comes into being will eventually, and inevitably, be negated by something else. There is nothing outside of this grand design, as it is the nature of existence itself. What ultimately matters is that some witness be present to become a repository for the facts. “The third party” corresponds to the third and other path. Refuted by Judge Holden is the idea that the person who “says,” signifying that something indeed has occurred rather than nothing, is himself the author of the story. In this sense, the third path or story is itself the agent that creates the scenario.

The text of *Blood Meridian* gives a powerful impression that the idea of the individual—a subjective, embodied consciousness—is mostly an illusion. And yet, paradoxically, it also points out that the base material of reality is dependent upon the testimony of the witness. The testimony of the witness, of the detached observer, constitutes a ‘third path’ in the course of events. This third path, neither principle nor agent, constitutes the ‘true history’ of a story and it, unlike the first two paths, is never terminated, as it is always being written. McCarthy believes that the idea of the novel, in terms of form and function, has sufficient power and utility to unite all the fields of thought: all notions, all the arts of discovering, documenting, and explaining the world. For McCarthy, the novel can be all things. The one story—taken as the testimony of a witness—is the fundamental expression of reality, or of truth, and constitutes totality of the world. The base material of this form is language and symbol. The novel’s preeminence resides

in its penultimate power to order events in time or, put another way, to construct meaning out of a midden of found objects, either natural or manmade.

### **The individual as an illusion**

The major philosophic project at work in *Blood Meridian* is to question “whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.”<sup>43</sup> Put another way, the voice of the narrator inquires whether the individual may be said to exist in some state separate from the forces of creation and, thus, may be said to exercise the very will by which he may be said to exist (without such a will, one might say, the individual would not, strictly speaking, be said to exist), or whether there is in fact no actual evidence for man’s separateness from nature, no privileged domain of the human in the world. Thus, notions of individuality and the will are merely illusions. But then, if they are, whose illusions may they be said to be? Herein lies the paradox of the novel’s great challenge: it sets up an either/or dichotomy only then to confuse the binary continually with the pressure of some needed ‘third space.’ If the answer to the first question in the proposition is “no,” then the second question must then necessarily be “yes.” But if this is true, man’s heart is indeed another kind of clay (i.e., something separate from creation), and, thus, subject to the same forces that act on the rest of creation, then the possibility of a distinctly human will must be rejected. The great opening question of *Blood Meridian* is that the textual enterprise of the novel will be to explore the very idea of the individual itself, as something distinct from nature, and possessed of a will. Such a possibility, if affirmed, would then necessitate a realm for the exercise of this will—something akin to a space for action—and McCarthy, contra the Classics, chooses the out of doors through

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.

which to explore the question—giving it legs and setting them in motion. But in doing so, the essential nature of judgment in the public sphere is never closed. Indeed, it is held the more widely open due to its conspicuous absence.

This idea of the individual as an illusion connects back to the idea of the man on a journey. As an avatar of all, he seems so singular, isolated, and self-contained. This is the illusion at work. What McCarthy wants his reader to come to understand, or at least consider, is that this isolate, this lone traveler, is indeed all men. Further, as Luce points out so astutely, the paradox of the image is further intensified when we realize that the traveler and the road that he travels are one. The traveler creates the road, or visa-versa. They are inseparable. And they rely on the presence of some witness for their very existence. Somewhere within this matrix of word and flesh, of chance and fate, and against overwhelming indications to the contrary, choices remain. And while this is an emotional reality, it is hardly a sentimental one. An individual exists *somewhere*, and he is designated by his ability and *freedom* to make choices.

Of course, we have good reason to be suspicious of the very idea of the individual to begin with. The regime creates the individual and thus endows him with rights. So, while McCarthy is not precisely about the state in a direct sense, his exploration of fundamental political themes (human nature, the state of nature, individual autonomy, human agency, the law) turns on the experience of both the character in question, *and* the reader. If the individual is nonexistent, then he cannot stand as the locus of sovereignty, and thus lend legitimacy to the modern liberal regime. Thus, the question of the *will* is primary to McCarthy's paradoxical position on the individual.

The individual *thinks* himself discreet, autonomous, particular, specific, and unique. He believes that the circumstances of his existence at any moment in time are uniquely his own

(provided, of course, that they proceed from a multiplicity of alternatives that, when combined, have given rise to form his reality), but this history (as the story of his particular originating circumstances) is merely a representation of what has actually happened, ultimately constrained by the medium of language itself. As such, whatever may be said to be ‘the truth’ in McCarthy’s universe will always remain somewhat illusory as it remains sternly dependent upon the words and thus the author of those words to bring it into existence. McCarthy would doubtless affirm that the power of the story is common to humanity, that storytelling is man’s essential activity. Thus provoked, his fiction turns to explore the substance and consequences of our desire to identify with a history—our impulse to narrate ourselves into the larger story of the world. And yet, the experience of this primordial encounter of the self with the world is never comforting, as again and again we come to find that even the substance of our own hearts is ultimately strange to us.

Ultimately, the impressions we have created are portraits that, because of our nature, are the “passable ghosts” we have conjured and choose to endow with the power to anchor (often as not they haunt us).<sup>44</sup> As long as we believe in these ghosts, we continue to harbor our illusions of individuality; of fate or destiny. And likewise we will always be haunted by the suspicion that the entirety of our experience is just as reasonably attributable to chance, a “trance bepopulate with chimeras,” as Judge Holden explains in a memorable passage.

This, we might infer, is the basic source of our existential angst as humans. Because of it we are incapacitated by the illusion of our individuality, of our autonomy, of our capacity for making choices in the face of the sterner substance of the chaotic universe. We believe ourselves to be the protagonist of a story that is being written without a witness, or at least, that this witness inheres in the same fact of our own existence. Perhaps our belief is that we can

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<sup>44</sup> Borrowed from McCarthy, *The Road*, 57.

somehow become the witness of the deeds of our own lives, but to what or to whom do we submit our testimony? One of McCarthy's basic insights into human nature is what he sees as our common respective need to construct a meaningful autobiography substantiating the reality of our existence, and that this is ultimately the great illusion with which all of his protagonists are in thrall. The story cannot exist without someone to hear it. And there is only one story. McCarthy's notion of the individual as an illusion, however convincing, recursively throws emphasis back on the concern for notions of fate and chance, or the dialectic of freedom and necessity, in all of his fiction. The man on a journey is not a particular man on any particular journey. He is every man and his journey is not simply the physical movement of an ego through space and time, but the totality of human experience and the idea of the road itself. Yet this totality also includes, nay *relies* upon the presence of some third party, some third and other path, existing independently of the former two. The intersection of parties A and B is a thing to be pondered. The congruence or intersection of the two paths may seem inevitable viewed a posteriori, and any possible contingencies that might have intervened, however compelling they might seem, is rendered null by the ultimate outcome of events. For McCarthy, the substance of history is the perpetual speculation as to the confluence of factors precipitating the encounter, and the ultimate meaning or consequence of their effects. From this intersection comes the event, and this is of singular importance for McCarthy. For humans, who appear to be endowed with an intransigent will to meaning, the event is never insignificant, however much the impersonal ordering of the larger world would seem to deny this idea. Yet the very existence of the event is totally dependent on the idea of the third party. Party C, then, is not the result of the interaction of Parties A and B, but rather their cause; not some third thing at all but rather the thing itself.

## Conclusion

McCarthy's body of fiction presents a dualistic image of the individual human in which the particulars of any character's identity or situation may occasionally converge with a more general image of mankind, each becoming the anonymous avatar of all. In such moments McCarthy's reader is likely to sense the pressure of some larger philosophical question at work beneath the text. Yet such scenes rarely ever resolve in univocal symbols, expressing neither meaning nor moral. "Ultimately every man's path is every other's," says one of *The Crossing's* oracular hermits. "There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell."<sup>45</sup> Narrative is created when certain events in time are rendered coherent by their ultimate outcome, implying the sense of an ending, and the presence of some witness. This sublimation of men, journeys, and tales is of special significance to an understanding of the question of individual freedom raised in McCarthy's work.

The idea of witnessing establishes the terms of inquiry into freedom and fate in McCarthy's work. In a world which is itself a tale, and in which the outcome of any interaction is already foreordained, how can the individual feel free to choose or to act? In word that is itself a tale, and in which all is telling, who can be said to be the agent of any story, the protagonist or the teller, assuming these two are not, ultimately, the same person?

McCarthy's vision of natural man, of the autonomous individual who rejects those laws that do not come from within or from nature, but from civilization, is complicated by this idea of witnessing, in which our recognition of the basic humanity of the other becomes the basis of ethical responsibility. While McCarthy's protagonists' journeys are often animated by their desire to escape this responsibility, they are thwarted in this attempt by the ethical realities of

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<sup>45</sup> McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 156-157.

witnessing (and being witnessed by) other people. To paraphrase *Blood Meridian*'s narrator, even though the substance of our hearts may be alien within us, we cannot escape our destiny which seems to be our inevitable discovery that our interconnectedness to others is woven into the very fabric or substance of our own hearts. Thus, the idea of individual autonomy becomes the supreme illusion that springs from our faulty perceptions regarding nature and history. The image of the man on a journey is one of existential loneliness and exile. And while this image typifies so much of McCarthy's work, particularly his road narratives, his developing concept of witnessing begins to shift this imagery.

As I have discussed in this chapter, witnessing emerges as a multifaceted or multidimensional philosophical construct in McCarthy's fiction. A first sense of witnessing emerges in the context of narrative, in which McCarthy uses the idea to convey the sense of seeing *and being seen by* others and projecting these memories into the future by retelling the story to another. The second sense is the phenomenological one in which witnessing is the mode establishing that something has in fact happened. McCarthy is careful to present this dimension of witnessing in the most impersonal language and in doing so calls attention to the deeply humane aspect of this concept. The illusion of the impersonal world, much like the illusion of historical distance, is the effect of trying to take the presencing of narrative out of the order of things—pondering a world that exists independently of human consciousness, or time that is not in some sense of a function of human memory. With witnessing, McCarthy establishes that world as tale, and as such, all is contained: the entirety of time and space, within a tale that is all tales, and contains within it both beginning and end. What, we might then ask, is left of the sphere of human action? How is man to act in a world that is a tale that is, at least in a sense, already written? I turn now to address this very question.



## 5. Agency

If fate is the law then is fate also subject to that law? At some point we cannot escape naming responsibility. It's in our nature.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I outline the question of agency. Politically, this term designates the grounds for moral choice and a theory of action in McCarthy's fiction. Agency is a problem for many of McCarthy's protagonists who, for a variety of reasons centering on the identity and moral position of the self, fail to see the possibility and necessity of choice in moments of praxis. Failing to recognize the imperative to name responsibility, they suffer consequences that, paradoxically, seem inevitable. This latter paradox results from an inherent difference in worldviews between McCarthy's protagonists and antagonists and in McCarthy's later novels comes to define the main point of moral conflict both existentially and geographically. This trend would suggest that the origins of human motives are not the same everywhere. Like *Blood Meridian*, the Border Trilogy is set in the open and boundless expanse of the frontier. Perhaps there is no better stage wherein the extent of man's beastliness or godliness can become fully visible. In such a setting—expansive, uncivilized, and limitless in potential for the growth or decline of human sociability—the deep and often troubling paradoxes of philosophy and human existence can be explored, though often without resolution. The frontier aesthetic is appropriate in studies of the origins and limits of law because it is precisely such a setting that “magnifies and clarifies what is at issue” in novels of this kind.<sup>2</sup>

Free from the constraints of conventional or legal society, McCarthy's protagonists engage in social relationships unfettered by the mores or expectations that typically govern the

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 241.

<sup>2</sup> Earnest Yanarella, “Introduction,” to Yanarella and Sigelman, eds., *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 10.

lives of most ordinary men. Thus, the spatiality (read landscape) of McCarthy's fiction is endowed with special philosophical significance for his characters as well, no less, for his readers. The "country" as a causal force—directing how men act at certain times and in certain places—is taken here as an inextricable component of the American mythic universe. It is here that the Western ideals of absolute freedom and rugged individualism are allowed to run to their fullest extent and where the mysterious forces that constrain this vision have their profoundest effects. It is also significant that McCarthy is interested in what happens when men "run out of country" at the western limits of the frontier.<sup>3</sup>

Approaching this question of agency in McCarthy's fiction, this chapter focuses on the road narrative found in the first work in McCarthy's border trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*. Moving through the novel fairly sequentially, I examine key scenes of dialog in which McCarthy's concept of agency is expressed by two related ideas. The first of these is the question of freedom and choice versus fate and necessity in the relationships between McCarthy's heroes and villains. Here again, McCarthy's ongoing preoccupation with the overall question of freedom and its relationship to moral action in the face of overwhelming violence remains a prominent consideration. The second idea, intimately related to the first, is the question of naming responsibility, an omnipresent concern in all of McCarthy's fiction. The idea of naming, or of taking responsibility, serves as the dominant motif for morality throughout McCarthy's early fiction. In later works, this same idea come to be expressed in the idea of carrying the fire. The choice of the Border Trilogy, apart from appearing next in the chronology of McCarthy's publishing, is altogether appropriate because in it McCarthy adheres more closely to the archetypal form of the hero's journey in the Western literary tradition than in previous works. It is in the course of the hero's journey that agency is most clearly seen as a political and

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<sup>3</sup> See also McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 297; *All the Pretty Horses*, 299.

ethical concept. The novels of the Border Trilogy, while of equal philosophic complexity, are generally considered more approachable than *Blood Meridian*.

The idea of agency builds on witnessing. While witnessing expresses the moral stakes of a self that comes to find itself enmeshed in a matrix of other lives, agency expresses the realization of choice and the necessity of action along with the consequences. What are the rules that govern action and where do they come from? Where are they applicable and where not? Who gets to say? Throughout the trilogy, McCarthy is deeply concerned with the interplay of chance and fate in the unfolding of narrative events, both on a personal and on a broader societal level. One of the greatest challenges of McCarthy's fiction is whether, philosophically, his worldview is constrained by the rules of his aesthetic or stand as a comment on the world of reality external to his texts, or both. Here again, he continually brushes against the political in his questioning of causality. The issue of the Divine is persistent and, as always, deeply questionable in the chaotic violence of McCarthy's works. In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy raises these stakes with his repeated allusions to chance and fate. In the laying out of these events, McCarthy is eminently concerned with the position of the hero; a new and improved version of the *man on a journey* from his earlier works. Building on the conclusions reached in the previous chapter, I first establish the terms of the discussion of agency with a brief thematic survey of the secondary literature.

### **Review of secondary literature**

All of McCarthy's journeying protagonists are innocents abroad, typical of the *bildungsroman*. Working within this genre McCarthy lays out the parameters of a vision for

action; compellingly against the backdrop of the U.S. Mexico border, one century after the conclusion of *Blood Meridian*. John Blair frames this new development thus:

Whereas the author's earlier novels dealt primarily with adults in a single relatively changeless physical circumstance, *All the Pretty Horses* [the first novel of the trilogy] details a journey that is both literal and, at least to some extent, a bildungsroman, a movement from innocence to experience, from purity to knowledge, from the known world into the unknown world—and the unknown world in this novel is Mexico. For John Grady Cole, [the novel's protagonist,] the border between Texas and Mexico is the line between childhood and its end, at least in the somewhat limited sense that the border country he crosses through and lingers within becomes the medium through which he comes to understand certain truths about himself and the world.<sup>4</sup>

While I disagree with Blair's comment on the primacy of adults in McCarthy's earlier novels, he is correct to note that the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses* differs from earlier versions of a McCarthy hero. While John Grady Cole, like his earlier counterparts, journeys through an allegorical space of moral development, his progress is chartable and the boundaries of his world are more clearly defined. McCarthy's earlier works tend to blur the edges of time and space and resist the reader's attempts at empathetic attachment. In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy offers a much more straightforward rendition of a traditional romantic hero. Specific places come to represent coherent and opposing worldviews. Driving this point home, Blair continues:

Mexico represents the alien-ness of the Other for McCarthy's young protagonist, and his movement away from Texas and away from home is movement in to the signature state of isolation in which virtually all of McCarthy's characters live. But Mexico and the borderlands become something more in this book; they become tierra, a second homeland, no stranger in reality than the place-from-which-you-come, but by the same token no less strange and no less hostile. The end of that process of maturation is the realization that no home is really home, that the Other is really oneself looking out, and that the details of life—birth, death, love—happen, and in much the same way everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

This trackable movement across charted boundaries is singular and suggestive. The protagonist's waking up to moral accountability is, to a large extent, the motivational animus of

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<sup>4</sup> John Blair, "Mexico and the Borderlands in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42, no. 3:301; 2001. *Sociological Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 18, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

many, if not most, of McCarthy's narratives. Further, the "Other" Blair notes here points back to the theme of witnessing, a theme that develops in McCarthy's corpus. Still, it is not until *All the Pretty Horses* that McCarthy offers his audience such fully realized glimpses into the place and power of empathy in his moral vision. Lydia Cooper writes:

Given that all three novels conclude with the protagonists having failed comprehensively in their respective quests, it is hard to deny that, despite the heroic protagonists, the cosmos of the Border Trilogy is bleak. The trilogy problematically presents good people coming to sticky ends, good people committing bad deeds, and good people dying abandoned in shacks, much as a very bad person, the kid, dies in an outhouse in *Blood Meridian*. The novels thus seem to suggest that morality is a puny and futile force at best, at worst, a completely pointless endeavor. However, the narrative events—the deeds and deaths of the novels—are not the only litmus test for interpreting the significance of morality.<sup>6</sup>

The manner in which McCarthy's protagonists resist naming responsibility, or, their "*will to innocence*," is most suggestive in this context because here I find McCarthy asserting a more obvious social commentary than in the works immediately previous.<sup>7</sup> In McCarthy's road narratives, the search for an authentic or more natural source of law or right is often (if not always) paired with a retreat from the need to name responsibility. This is clearly visible in *Outer Dark*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian*. Cooper continues:

In a world ruled by arbitrary fates as this literary universe seems to be, these novels propose that personal responsibility and ethical intentions may be the only effective measure of a man's morality. Not surprisingly, then, *All the Pretty Horses* foregrounds the role of personal responsibility more than any novel since *The Orchard Keeper*.<sup>8</sup>

The problematical question of responsibility emerging from McCarthy's use of the *man on a journey* motif attains significant political relevance in the context of witnessing. Here the self/other dialectic presents itself not merely in terms of discreet individuals but of nations or

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<sup>6</sup> Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> The expression comes from Timothy Parrish "The First and Last Book of America," in *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 78.

states, invoking further and deeper questions of identity, and with increased theoretical implications.

The confrontation of wills, forming the substance of the exchange between the self and other, now takes on the dimension of action, framing McCarthy's preoccupation with narrative in more explicitly political terms. Cooper here comments on the manner in which narrative expresses heroism through action:

McCarthy's novels suggest that even though the deed may count for more than the spoken word, the internal thought process, the moment of a single choice, may in the end be the most significant measure of the human condition. However much an apocalyptic despair seems to brood over the novels' blasted landscapes, interior revelations of morality suggest that hope may be a defining characteristic of humanity. And since narrative is the means by which these interior moral commitments are valorized, the novels suggest that heroism and narrative are inseparable from each other and, by extrapolation, from human existence.<sup>9</sup>

This "moment of the single choice" is of political significance because it invokes the deeply embedded system of ethics at play in any of McCarthy's works. How do McCarthy's protagonists come to realize they have a choice to make, particularly when they have no authority in a world in which they do not belong? How, then, should they act?

The idea of moral choice invokes the further themes of destiny and fate, also prominent throughout McCarthy's corpus, representing unreckonable forces of constraint for many of the characters and circumscribing their absolute freedom of choice and action. In this dialectic, the concept of fate expresses the polar opposite of freedom and casts doubt on the possibility that the individual is in fact defined by his capacity for reasoning or making choices. Indeed, McCarthy uses these concepts to question the idea of individual autonomy altogether. On this point, Elizabeth Andersen interprets McCarthy as combining "an Existentialist's appreciation for heroic self-determination with a darkly remained Christian metaphysics stripped of eternal

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<sup>9</sup> Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 22.

redemption.”<sup>10</sup> Of McCarthy’s novels, she observes “that the shape of a life is predestined, even as they advocate the heroism of the outlaw who claims agency and defiantly struggles to shape his own fate.”<sup>11</sup> This trope is engaged repeatedly throughout McCarthy’s canon and is typified by the inability of ‘sympathetic’ characters to attain full agency or the freedom and authority of action by naming responsibility for themselves and the lives of others. James D. Lilley is less optimistic on this point:

McCarthy’s texts form the same narrative shapes time and time again, mapping the repetitive movements of pawn-like protagonists who are dragged around an uncompromising landscape by forces completely beyond their own control.<sup>12</sup>

Edwin T. Arnold differs with this conclusion. Though never explicit, each of McCarthy’s works contains “a moral gauge by which we, the readers, are able to judge the failure or limited success of McCarthy’s characters.”<sup>13</sup> Arnold continues:

In none of McCarthy’s novels is the division between good and evil easily distinguished nor are the agents easily identified and cast. It is, however, the state of the soul that is being examined and narrated.<sup>14</sup>

This problem of distinguishing good and evil results from a deep lack of certainty as to the substance of those ideas themselves.

The central problem of evil in McCarthy’s fiction invokes the ancient tradition of theodicy. McCarthy’s fiction shares many affinities with Greek Tragedy, including the theme of individual moral choice constrained by the forces of chance and fate. One of the important differences with McCarthy’s fictional form of the novel and that of the tragic drama, however, is

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<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Andersen, *The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy: A String in the Maze* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2008), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> James D. Lilley “‘The Hands of Yet Other Puppets’: Figuring Freedom and Reading Repetition in *All the Pretty Horses*, in Wallach, ed. *Myth, Legend Dust*, 272.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, “Parables,” 46. [Full quote: “McCarthy’s characters are clearly motivated by those emotions we all share—love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope, despair; the narratives are driven by distinct thematic concerns and move *at least in the direction of* some form of resolution; and there is in each novel a moral gauge...”]

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, “Parables, 54.

the location of the chorus, as an ersatz arbiter of judgment and the rational ‘voice’ of the audience. McCarthy’s use of the impersonal, omniscient narrator serves this same purpose. His reflexive use of naturalist imagery lays bare the base material of human nature and challenges traditional assumptions. The answer he provides, however, is not simply “look at how violent we are.” Nor is it to assert or critique some national mythology of conquest and redemption covering up our sordid history of violence and exploitation in terms of an appeal to an even more transcendent power—a power to which kings or emperors or any other regime must answer. A poetics of this kind must rely upon a convention: some socially acknowledged principle of moral or ethical judgment by which to characterize the deeds of sympathetic or villainous characters.<sup>15</sup>

Luce writes:

Though more secularized, the issue of judgment is central to *All the Pretty Horses* as to *Blood Meridian* and *Outer Dark*. All of John Grady’s troubles derive from errors in judgment or, worse, his refusal to make conscious choices instead of sleepwalking through Mexico.<sup>16</sup>

John Grady’s journey, like those of so many of McCarthy’s protagonists, is an initiation into evil. He has rejected his boy’s fantasy of the world as potentially an Eden, and he knows now that he inhabits a mysteriously fallen world and is part of it. . . . [H]e must thereafter wander uncertain and unsure.<sup>17</sup>

A number of McCarthy’s protagonists confront moral choices involving killing in which their inability to give themselves over to Boehme’s “life of the darkness” constitutes both the

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<sup>15</sup> In ancient tragedy, this role is most often played by the presence of the chorus, which serves as the eyes, ears, heart, and judging moral conscience of the community and, by extension, the viewing audience. The words and deeds of gods, kings, and men of all stations are held up to the light of collective scrutiny. The chorus, invested with a necessary objective distance to stand apart from the action, contributes to the shaping of the dramatic action by serving as intermediaries and interlocutors for the principle actors. McCarthy’s fiction frequently abandons this familiar paradigm, preferring the out of doors to the domestic, the private or personal sphere to the public, the power of personal consequence and transgressions of nomos, to the public execution of justice.

<sup>16</sup>Dianne C. Luce, “‘When You Wake’: John Grady Cole’s Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*,” in *Sacred Violence*, Vol. 1, 159.

<sup>17</sup> Dianne C. Luce, “‘When You Wake’: John Grady Cole’s Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*,” in *Sacred Violence*, Vol. 1, 162.



limit of their agency and the absolute ground of their humanity.<sup>18</sup> For this, they are typically killed; their tragic suffering never redeemed, their possible heroism never affirmed. Vereen Bell's trailblazing chapter on *Blood Meridian*, displaying remarkable strength of prose in its own right, is enormously helpful for my own analysis here. Bell and his allies find in *Blood Meridian* a compulsion, "To call forth from ourselves a capacity for understanding evil that the various meanings of our lives otherwise cause to be suppressed," and, importantly, "to summon up an American tradition—the compulsion to make war upon the unknown, to challenge destiny itself—that helps us make sense of it."<sup>19</sup> In this way McCarthy's fiction dramatizes the perpetual confrontation between the embodied ego and its relationship to the impersonal ordering of the world. Through this mode of storytelling McCarthy explores political questions by dramatizing individual and collective experience.

McCarthy's universe is one of profound emptiness, a void. The story is the pulsation of human will against the vacancy of the non-human world. This is the basis of the imputed nihilistic impulse so many readers find in McCarthy's fiction. Stories are the positive principle—the pulsation against that void. An illustration of this comes from political theorist Hannah Arendt, who writes:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not the author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.<sup>20</sup>

Through fiction the political theorist gains access to a new world. This imaginary world is often much like the real one in which we live. But it is also different, as it is the creation of an artist. The parameters of a fictional world are set only by the artist's vision and thus are purely

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<sup>18</sup> One of three epigrams to *Blood Meridian*.

<sup>19</sup> Bell, *Achievement*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 184.

imaginative. Though they owe little or nothing to the real world they must bear some correspondence for a reader's sake or else they have nothing to offer him. Even the highest flights of pure fantasy are instructive, for they must always bear some correspondence to social or political reality. However, the artist chooses to alter or bend the rules of the known universe, he must always begin with those same rules. Thus, the literary imagination is always in some sense a commentary on reality. Political theorist Catherine Zuckert has noted, in a manner similar to Arendt, who called novels "the only entirely social art form," the way in which novels offer a particularly useful vantage point upon the field of political inquiry.<sup>21</sup> She writes:

The greatest novels teach by showing rather than preaching, and they raise the most penetrating questions about the foundations and effects of the political regime, i.e., human nature and its implications for society.<sup>22</sup>

Fictional characters, like us, must deal with a world that they can never completely apprehend or truly understand. They, like us, must seek out a home or reject one completely. In any case, the fictional world is always in some sense *our* world, and insofar as any story is a story about human beings, it is a story about mortal finitude and the brief spark of conscious reason in the midst of boundless mystery.

The idea of the matrix partially serves as a means of expressing the omnipresent concern with running into the hidden rules in the boundless expanses of McCarthy's Southwest. What *Blood Meridian* points toward, and *All the Pretty Horses* begins to affirm, then, is the recognition that the "Why?" of how we act is determined by others and not ourselves. In the end, Frye writes, "individuals can respond to others with justice and decency."<sup>23</sup> Frye continues:

John Grady's heroism is derived from his unwillingness to be defined as [being more than commonly brave or heroic], from his belief that his choices, though they seem uncommon and virtuous, are nothing more than the expression of every man's obligation

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Zuckert, "On Reading Novelists as Political Thinkers" *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 43, 1981, 685.

<sup>23</sup> Frye, *Understanding*, 113.

to act within an elaborate matrix of cause and effect, one that in the end reveals itself in sublime order—the beautiful tapestry that is the world.<sup>24</sup>

It is to these competing demands and the necessity of recognizing by the need and, importantly *capacity* for choice in a resistant world, that I turn now to begin this chapter's analysis.

### **“Existential heroes” in a fated landscape<sup>25</sup>**

In this section I trace out the manner in which McCarthy's imagery of the fundamental encounter translates into the form of a hero's romantic quest. Important to this discussion is the insight that McCarthy tends to return to established tropes, character types, and situations intertextually. Certain characters begin to resemble each other in important ways across his corpus. Famously, the protagonists of McCarthy's early works are defined by their lack of reflection, of self-consciousness. Their motivation is more like a vague impulse than a defined quest. They want a different world from the one in which they find themselves yet they never appear to have any clear sense of what this might be or where it might even be found.

The general trend for a McCarthy “hero” is a general lack of awareness toward the object of his search. For most of his young protagonists, the ultimate object of this search takes on a vague but discernible shape only after each has distanced himself from home. Simply put, his protagonists seek. All of his novels are structured around a quest of some sort. McCarthy's characters' motivation for such questing is the deeply human impulse for freedom, or, frequently, to escape the physical and spiritual domain of conventional laws. The hero's journey is typically an unreflective movement across a natural landscape that is both alien and familiar, rendered

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> This expression comes from Vereen Bell. “[A group of sympathetic characters in *Suttree*]—considered together form an odd little band of existential heroes, each defining life in his own exclusive terms and each finding his own symbolic leverage against necessity. Each acts out in some specific way the principle of not having any real choice about things makes it necessary to choose.” (*Achievement*, 81.)

with such crystalline detail as to throw the opacity of the inner-workings of human consciousness and the real possibilities of agency—of willed, conscious action—into stark relief.

McCarthy's protagonists suffer because they fail to take responsibility, to accept their complicity, to fully commit either to the life of darkness, or to embrace their full humanity—with all its ethical entanglements. Thus, they wander. To be able to act in a meaningful way with total freedom and legitimate authority serves, ultimately, as the ground whereupon the mortals of McCarthy's prose must measure themselves against the divine and the diabolical.<sup>26</sup>

Freedom in McCarthy's fiction is usually expressed through the language and imagery of movement.<sup>27</sup> Frequently, the concept is intimately connected to problems and possibilities surrounding the idea of the individual will, often expressed through action in the absence of reflection. A final dimension of freedom is one through which a character accepts moral obligation for his actions through some recognition of a shared humanity. This latter sense of freedom then necessarily invokes linkages between the concepts of witnessing and narrative.

Freedom can also be interpreted in this context as the absence of restraint. In this sense it is compatible with liberty and, taken to its logical extreme, to license. But this freedom, or ability to act, commonly termed agency, carries with it some implicit sense of authority. Freedom's connections to agency and to authority is informed by the idea of keeping promises. McCarthy prefers to work this question out by deploying what I term his predatory characters. One of the common attributes of these stock characters is their superior knowledge compared to the other characters. Whereas McCarthy's protagonists are typically pursued and, thus, constitute prey, they are typified by a certain naiveté or *will to innocence*. However, the

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<sup>26</sup> See also Evenson.

<sup>27</sup> Suttree reflects: "In my father's last letter he said that the world is run by those willing to take responsibility for the running of it. If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent." McCarthy, *Suttree*, 13-14.

predatory characters' knowledge so often supersedes the constraints of time and place, often bordering on omniscience. Because they often display superhuman abilities to move throughout the landscape in a way unachievable by any other character, and an inhuman lethality, I must challenge the conclusion of Vereen Bell that McCarthy does not use character types.<sup>28</sup>

McCarthy uses his predatory characters allegorically. They represent, among other things, fate. McCarthy deploys this character type to force the protagonists into dialogs of existential philosophy. The predators don't simply wish to devour or negate their prey, they first pronounce judgement on them. They will not allow the protagonist to persist in his will to innocence by refusing to name his sin. This is seen as a failure of choice or a refusal to take responsibility, to honor a promise; even one made involuntarily. These considerations would be interesting enough when left at the level of character, but McCarthy raises the stakes by moving the conversation into the realm of myth with his constant preoccupation with notions of fate and chance, which also falls squarely within the purview of the predatory characters.

Like many of McCarthy's young male protagonists, the kid in *Blood Meridian* is typified by his lack of reflection, of will, and of agency to do more than apparently disappear from the scenes in which his confederates engage in acts of murderous depravity. If *Blood Meridian* can be said to embody the general character of the epic, its protagonist is far from heroic. If the responsibility to choose a right course of action when confronted by equal and opposing goods exemplifies tragic suffering in the classic sense, then the kid is hardly a tragic hero. In this he is not alone.

The story of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy's sixth published novel, opens in 1949; exactly one hundred years after the main action of *Blood Meridian*, its predecessor. Perhaps by coincidence (though probably not) the novel's protagonist is another sixteen-year-old cowboy

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<sup>28</sup> Vereen Bell, *Achievement*, 8.

named John Grady Cole. While the general tone of *Blood Meridian* invokes a world of portent and dread, *All the Pretty Horses*, like the Border Trilogy in general, is characterized by a pervasive sense of *ubi sunt*: a world of loss and absence, haunted by the ghosts and dreams of those who came before and are now gone. Along with this sense of loss, however, is an accompanying romantic sense of expectation; a better world to come. The last of a long line of pioneering Texans, John Grady's introduction comes in the context of his physical and spiritual displacement. With the death of his grandfather, and failing subsequently to convince his mother to allow him to take over the ranch, John Grady is denied what, for him, is his natural path. Lacking this sense of continuity, and with few appealing options to sustain him, John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins decide to run away on horseback and to seek their fortunes in Mexico.

John Grady is a different sort of protagonist from his predecessor, the kid. The former is almost uniformly blank, if not vacant, and propelled into the events of his life as though by accident. By contrast, John Grady is endowed with a certain personal sense of fate, if not destiny. After he and Rawlins cross into Mexico, now accompanied by a wastrel runaway youth who calls himself Jimmy Blevins, having made camp and turned in for the night, John Grady is seen in contemplation (something usually reserved for the narrator in *Blood Meridian*): "He lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within."<sup>29</sup> It is this wildness that gives McCarthy's All-American cowboy hero his romantic charm. But is also, ineluctably, the source of his downfall. Dianne Luce has characterized John Grady as "the romantic dreamer who gradually awakens to reality, which always lies waiting to test him, and who responds by abandoning his quest for dominance and courageously embracing instead a quest for understanding. This is his true heroism."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Luce, "When you Wake", 155-6.

The great difference in personality or spirit between John Grady and Rawlins, his best friend and traveling partner, is most visible early in the novel, as the two argue over what to do with the self-destructive Blevins. In a scene in which Blevins insists the trio must steal back his lost horse from a Mexican town peopled almost exclusively by armed toughs, the stark difference between the two comes to the fore. Rawlins speaks: “Ever[sic] dumb thing that I ever done in my life there was a *decision* I made before that got me into it. It never was the dumb thing. It was always some *choice* I’d made before it. You understand what I’m sayin?”<sup>31</sup> This realization illustrates perfectly the difference between these two characters. Rawlins, a pragmatist who refuses to abdicate his freedom of will throughout the novel, sees action as the result of deliberation and choice. He sees the outcome of events in terms of consequence flowing from wrong decisions he has made.

Typified by a general instinct for self-preservation, Rawlins knows that Blevins (who embodies another character type of McCarthy’s) is marked by catastrophe in a way that will draw all of them into danger. John Grady recognizes this and, while knowing his friend is right, cannot abdicate what he sees as his responsibility for the boy. “He looked at Rawlins asleep in his soogan and he knew that he was right in all he’d said and there was no help for it[.]”<sup>32</sup> The passage draws upon a number of McCarthy’s most established themes, imparting a sense of the character’s helplessness to do other than he is compelled due to some inner workings of his makeup. He cannot choose to do other than he does. He is helpless to act other than he must.

McCarthy’s romantic hero is constrained by the necessity to act according to his principles and is oblivious to the transgression of boundaries. His refusal to bend seals his fate. In the Trilogy’s third work, *Cities of the Plain*, he responds to his partner Billy Parham’s calling

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<sup>31</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 79; emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

him crazy over his plans to marry a prostitute with the simple recognition that he “cant [sic] help it.”<sup>33</sup> Even in the role of the romantic hero John Grady reveals a reluctant acceptance of his choices’ inescapable outcome. He seems to view his fate as a sort of sickness, later asking Billy: “You think I’ll outgrow whatever it is I got?”<sup>34</sup> Billy responds that he does not. “I used to but I dont [sic] no more.”<sup>35</sup> What is wrong with John Grady Cole is not simply a flaw in his thinking, or a lack of maturity, but an orientation of personality or spirit that puts him at odds with a world that resists those who refuse to bend. Like Billy’s brother Boyd (who follows a similar path in *The Crossing* that leads to his own tragic death). Like all whose relationship with the world is to know things in fact, rather than in representation, he must test the world constantly. He must put his hand into the flame to verify that it will burn him. He must exhaust the limits of the world.

In his role as romantic hero, John Grady Cole must negotiate the forces and institutions of order that stand opposed to his idealistic worldview. His difficulty stems, partially, from his lack of knowing the rules, or knowing that the rules can be different when one crosses the frontiers between worlds. Nowhere is this more evident than in John Grady’s experiences on the hacienda in Part II of *All the Pretty Horses*. Here, the issue of who holds or exercises sovereign power or authoritative utterance comes to the fore. While compelling, John Grady’s captivation with horses and brief romantic affair with the hacendado’s daughter, Alejandra, offers little toward a critical appraisal of agency in the novel. In the latter instance, however, we do see John Grady crossing a line as a result of his ignorance or ambivalence toward the rules. In his conversation with Alejandra’s great aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, we see in the cagey dialog the philosophical outlines of opposition. The result of which sets into motion most of the violent events that are to follow in the novel.

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<sup>33</sup> McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



### **A matter of who must say...**

Over the course of the trilogy, as in most of McCarthy's fiction, sovereign power is often located in the power of speech. He who has the authority to pronounce what is and what will be. Throughout McCarthy's border fiction, the opposition of viewpoints, Mexican and *Anglo* (though this term may effectively be interchanged with "Americans," "Texans," and, frequently, *pilgrims* in McCarthy's Southwestern novels). Typical of McCarthy's style, however, it is seldom the hero and more usually the villain who does the talking. McCarthy's loquacious antagonists are almost always philosophic types. From the trio of outlaws in *Outer Dark*, to Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, on to Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's predatory characters represent more than simply a "principle of evil."<sup>36</sup> These characters represent a principle of judgement and force the protagonist to pick a side and accept the consequences of that choice. It is just these characters who present the hero with the greatest impediment to the absolute they desire as a result of their will to innocence. The predators always have something to teach to their prey.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy offers a new rendition of this character, coincidentally, in the form of an old woman, Señorita Alfonsa. Robert Jarrett comments on this, pointing out that John Grady learns a lesson about freedom when "this desire to write freely one's own identity must yield to the will of others and to the opposition of historical and cultural forces."<sup>37</sup> In the Mexican viewpoint, the idea of authority is indistinguishable from the idea of truth as an objective reality. Authority is most commonly exercised through speech in these novels. In *All the Pretty Horses* it can be glimpsed tellingly in scenes of dialog between John Grady Cole and a Mexican interlocutor who is motivated to instruct the young cowboy about the

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<sup>36</sup> Phrase comes from Dianne Luce, "Heroism," 160.

<sup>37</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 110.

flaws and limits of his perception of the world. The most forceful and circumspect agent of authority John Grady encounters is the Dueña Alfonsa of the Hacienda de Purísima.

Of all the characters in *All the Pretty Horses*, Señorita Alfonsa articulates the most compelling articulation of what could rightly be called a will to power, as a means of exerting one's agency in the violence and chaos of the world. In the first of two scenes with John Grady, Alfonsa invites John Grady into the house to play chess as a pretext to size him up. Over the course of their conversation she articulates to him that, while she is sympathetic to her grandniece's determination to live and love on her own terms, the relationship cannot be continued. Hearing John Grady's objection that he never meant to damage Alejandra's reputation by his being seen with her, she responds: "This is another country. Here a woman's reputation is all she has."<sup>38</sup> For women in Mexico, a damaged reputation can never be overcome. To this John Grady retorts that such a thing does not seem right, weighing the situation in Mexico against his own standards. Her response reframes the issue in her own terms: "No. It's not a matter of right. You must understand. It is a matter of who must say. In this matter I get to say. I am the one who gets to say."<sup>39</sup> Her pronouncement has the power to reframe the issue from terms of right to the terms of authority. Luce comments:

Alfonsa is less interested in control than in responsible choices, and she does not insist on her right to say until John Grady demonstrates that he does not understand her warning about consequences to Alejandra if her reputation were to be compromised. He attempts to dismiss the aspects of reality that do not match his idea of what seems right.<sup>40</sup>

Over the course of this conversation Alfonsa sketches a vague outline of a life in which she has known the unhappiness and injustice of being dominated by others. The dueña has given great thought to the role of agency in the lives of her family and of their place in the history of

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<sup>38</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>40</sup> Luce, "When You Wake," 159.

Mexico. She has felt these very forces in her own life and reflects that while “the names of the entities that have the power to constrain us over time” may change, their collective force to inhibit the individual will does not.<sup>41</sup> Though “convention and authority are replaced by infirmity” over the course of her life, the Señorita Alphonsa maintains that her regard, her “attitude toward them has not changed. Has not changed.”<sup>42</sup> The reader easily perceives the passionate and vengeful relish with which she claims for herself the role of decider-in-absolute in this one area. Though history has rendered her nearly powerless to enact any meaningful word or deed, in this privileged area, her word is sovereign. It is left to the reader to assess how justly she decides in the matter. Jarrett writes:

While she appears to represent a hardheaded realism against the idealism of the young, the aunt remains a radical idealist who denies fate by emphasizing the possibility of the individual to define herself, even in the face of the disastrous constraints of culture and history that have scarred her own life[.]<sup>43</sup>

As a character, Senorita Alphonsa embodies certain characteristics common to antagonistic characters in McCarthy’s fiction. In this regard, she is particularly interesting because of the lack of physical or material threat she presents. She is an old woman, but a powerful one. Her opposition to the young cowboy’s suit of her niece would be a predictable plot device in the tradition of the romance, but it runs deeper. McCarthy uses characters like these as mouthpieces for little dialogic exchanges through which fundamental principles come into play. In two scenes of dialog in the novel, her pronouncements on history touch on familiar issues in McCarthy’s fiction: the questionable position of the individual in the world, and thus, the idea of truth in terms of reality versus appearances or representation. Of course the notions of chance and fate, and of the possibility of action in the face of conventional restraint abound.

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<sup>41</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>43</sup> Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, 114.

For his part, John Grady does not grasp the nature of his situation. Caught up in a world of open frontiers, mustang horses, and teenage infatuation, he is heedless to the net consequences that are drawing ever more tightly around him. It is easy to agree with Luce's assessment of the conflict between these two characters. He is a child playing in an adult's world, wherein the stakes are higher than he realizes. Thus, Luce writes: "John Grady wants to be the one who must say. He has yet to outgrow the grandiosity and self-centeredness of childhood, and his journey into Mexico is an exercise in self-will."<sup>44</sup> The conclusion of their dialog serves as the beginning of the end of the good times in Mexico for John Grady in Mexico.

John Grady's sense of purpose and entitlement begins to break down almost as soon as he returns to his bunk after his chess game with the Dueña. Rawlins, with typical levelheadedness tries his best to counsel a friend who seems intent on playing with fire. Tellingly, against Rawlins' anticipation that a courtship with the boss's daughter will get them both "fired and run off the place," John Grady responds with dreamy nonchalance:

Did you give her your word? said Rawlins.  
I dont [sic] know. I dont know if I did or not.  
Well either you did or you didnt [sic].  
That's what I'd of thought. But I dont [sic] know.<sup>45</sup>

For a character who has heretofore sought to define himself by exercising his own will in the face of the traditional culture of Mexico, John Grady seems incapable of even knowing where he stands in his suit. This becomes all the more complicated when he and Alejandra begin sneaking away at night. Throughout their trysting scenes of moonlight romance on horses, "[s]weeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for the betrayal," John Grady finds himself without the resources to make choices for his future.<sup>46</sup> In his moment of being tested, he lacks the ability to

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<sup>44</sup> Luce, "When You Wake," 159.

<sup>45</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 139.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

translate the immediacy of his desire for Alejandra into a concrete plan for the future. Repeatedly he finds himself without words in her presence. She presents him with her dilemma and all he can offer is to do whatever she says. She later asks him what to do in the same words. And then, she is gone. A few days later, without explanation, John Grady and Rawlins find themselves arrested and taken to jail. Their brief, stolen season at the Hacienda Purísima ends with their arrest by the Mexican authorities. Part III of the novel begins with the two reunited with Blevins in a Mexican jail in the town of Encantada. It is here that they learn that Blevins, attempting to get back the horse and pistol he lost in the storm, has shot three men, one of whom has died. It is in Part III of *All the Pretty Horses* that John Grady and Rawlins begin to learn about the hard realities of Mexico.

From the captain of the rurales in Encantada, John Grady learns that the rules in Mexico extend beyond the courtly norms of the hacienda. In a manner reminiscent of Alfonsa, the captain's power of authoritative utterance extends to the very nature of what is "true" in Mexico. He tells John Grady: "We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it."<sup>47</sup> John Grady is incredulous. "There aint [sic] but one truth," he replies. "The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody's mouth."<sup>48</sup> The truth the captain is looking for, however, is different. He is looking for a truth that will allow him to summarily execute Blevins on the way to the federal prison in Saltillo, which he does. A passage here reflects on the relationship of agency to the deeds of the rurales in the desert with Blevins.

[T]he captain inhabited another space and it was a space of his own election and outside the common world of men. A space privileged to men of the irreclaimable act which while it contained all lesser worlds within it contained no access to them. For the terms of election were of a piece with its office and once chosen that world could not be quit.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 179.

This lesson in truth begins a more prolonged section in the novel wherein the economies of violence and exchange that govern the Mexican prison at Saltillo establish a new reality for the embattled Americans. It is in this section that the roles of fate and chance begin to take on a much more pronounced role.

### **This is another country...**

A crucial scene from *All the Pretty Horses* invokes the question of agency and the possibilities for action in the world of McCarthy's fiction. Here, Emilio Pérez, the prison potentate, or "Papazote," as he is known around the prison, seeks to instruct young John Grady Cole about certain realities of their shared existence. At the core of this dialog is a philosophical discussion about the differences in worldviews between the world of Mexico and the world of the United States. As a mentor figure, Pérez instructs John Grady about the new set of rules that apply to his situation as an Anglo in a Mexican prison.

Pérez is a "prisoner of means," and exists somewhat above or outside the hierarchy of the Saltillo prison, he admits that his purview does not extend indefinitely. Even for him, he indicates that any number of contingencies are possible in the ultimate outcome of events, an awareness to which he feels an American in such a place may be blind. Pérez divides the people of his world into two groups: those faithful to him and who come within the scope of his powers and protection, and those who exist outside that sphere. For the former group, Pérez "can say certain things."<sup>50</sup> Those outside it, however, "are simply outside."<sup>51</sup> "They live in a world of possibility that has no end."<sup>52</sup> "Perhaps God can say what is to become of them. But I cannot."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 188-9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 189.

Pérez's world is organized around the exchange of money. Wherever the basic rules of commerce or mercantile ethics apply he has political capital enabling him to make certain predictions. By implication, the second half of Pérez's equation—those who live 'simply outside'—their affairs are determined by powerful nameless forces of cause and effect alien to him. In this world, wherein he exerts no power, anything and *every* thing is possible and Pérez notes how little ability he has to predict what outcomes will follow.

Once again, McCarthy enforces the motif of making choices in a world in which the rules are not known. As long as the individual has knowledge of the basic forces of motivation or parameters for action, power may be said to reside in the hands of those with the greatest means in any society. Beyond this sphere, however, lies another larger sphere in which human behavior is unpredictable as it is ungovernable. Pérez deals in the affairs of men who have *something to lose* or, one might say, a reason to live. This is a world he understands well and, as a consequence, is capable of mastery. In such a world a man like Pérez is capable of living relatively well although he insists that this is in fact untrue. "Let me be clear with you," he abjures John Grady. "I do not live here so very good. I must make money to make my own arrangements and this is a very expensive business. A very expensive business."<sup>54</sup> The implication here is that he would like to take John Grady and his companion, Rawlins, on as clients because he needs their money to ensure his own safety.

Beneath this exchange, however, is a deeper point at work throughout the scene. This is that in all societies the mechanisms of knowledge are the same as those of power, all of which function to reduce human sociability to the basic terms of transaction. When such logic carries with it the power to manipulate the norms of order, he is powerful who can make arrangements for himself and for others. To underline this fact, Pérez asks his naïve American interlocutors a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 187.

childishly simple question regarding their situation. “If you don’t have no money how can you be release [sic] from your confinement?”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the whole basis for the boys’ confinement in the Saltillo prison is predicated, not on the outcome of some trial in a court of justice, but simply upon their ability to pay the required sum to affect their release, and without which they will surely die quickly.<sup>56</sup>

Even in a place like this where we are concerned with fundamental things the mind of the anglo is closed. . . . It is not that he is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see.<sup>57</sup>

Pérez is a philosopher of prison life and his pronouncements reveal yet another facet of McCarthy’s concern for the way in which human will is deceived by its romantic attachment to individualism, if not the illusion of its individuality itself. The juxtaposition in setting, between the boundlessness of the frontier and the confinement of the Saltillo prison, produces an extreme contrast. On both levels, as Pérez points out, the reconciliation or mediation of this tension turns on the question of agency, the problem of making choices when confronted by forces of fate and necessity: “Your case is not decided . . . You think there are no crimes without owners? It is not a matter of finding. It is only a matter of choosing. Like picking the proper suit in a store.”<sup>58</sup> Here Pérez invokes a seamier side of the looming question of agency that pervades the Border Trilogy.

In Mexico, everything is *other*. The powers that be are not constrained by any truth as concerns evidence or facts. The Mexican authorities are, however, constrained by the need to uphold the formal aspects of law and order (“even in Mexico they cannot keep you indefinitely.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>56</sup> Note that at the time of their initial arrest, the boys are informed that regardless of the truth, an ownerless crime can be found to ensure their guilt.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 193.



That is why *you must act.*”)<sup>59</sup> The agents of authority in Mexico can and do uphold the trappings of an ordered state of affairs, and ensure a kind of distributive *and* retributive justice within their jurisdiction; they are not inhibited by the “facts,” as John Grady knows them. Their behavior here echoes the pronouncements of the Dueña Alphonsa (who is by no coincidence behind the Americans’ capture in the first place) in that in such an affair, it is not who is right or wrong, but who in fact is in a position to *say*. The sovereign authority of the state of Coahuila and its representatives is not constrained in the exercising of its will—which, however presented, embodies the collective will of the people. It is free to choose a guilty party for an un-owned crime, a fairly straightforward matter from the state’s perspective. Summary judgment and the swift execution of sentence in this case have a curious relationship to the truth. Pérez appreciates John Grady’s position and pronounces the moment: “you must act.”<sup>60</sup> In the absolute equanimity of Pérez’s outlook, the world does not honor bravery or stoic resoluteness. In the worldview he typifies, there is but one good in the world and that is to stay alive. The world offers no privileged position for heroes. If bravery cannot be broken or bought off, it can still be negated. The fact that John Grady and Rawlins have not actually committed a crime is not important. Justice in McCarthy’s Mexico is not predicated on truth, or on what is deserved. Justice in this vision is built upon transaction.

In the opposing worldview presented by McCarthy’s Mexican characters, the flaw in the deeply “superstitious” mind of the “godless” nation north of the river is born of romantic idealism, a tragic fixation on the national mythology of regeneration through violence, and in the predestined fulfillment of its transcendent purpose.<sup>61</sup> The radical individualism of such a regime

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.; emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>61</sup> The concept of ‘regeneration through violence’ is developed by Richard Slotkin’s work on the Frontier. Cf. Frye, *Understanding*, 93, 111.

strengthens the illusion of personal destiny, blinding the pilgrim to the realities of the world as it is. Such a world does not conform the laws of logic or of reason. In fact, it is hostile, resisting them with an agency of its own. Stephen Frye's conclusion on this point is instructive.

Although the novel forces recognition of the omnipresent power of destruction, predicating the hero's stature upon his understanding of this mysterious conspiracy of opposites, McCarthy resolves the story on a principle of value that is by no means strictly scientific or philosophical. The notion of transcendent purpose finds its most poignant expression in tangibly human terms, as John Grady sees to live by a strict and definable code of ethics.<sup>62</sup>

The Mexican view, as Pérez sets it out, is that of 'realism' in contrast to the 'idealism' endemic to Americans. The American superstition to which Pérez alludes is that individual choices matter or that misfortune can be avoided by right intention. Though the mind of the Anglo is closed to these 'fundamental things' he is not stupid, but rather: "It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see."<sup>63</sup>

Pérez indicates that he finds Americans to be a 'godless people,' given their common belief that the world can contain 'things' that, within themselves, are inherently good or bad; that through some objective judgment regarding the means through which an item (a car, or simply money) was obtained, then the thing itself could be said to be pure or corrupt.

I hope you will give some thought to your situation. Americans have ideas that are not so practical. They think that there are good things and bad things. They are very superstitious, you know. . . . It is the superstition of a godless people.<sup>64</sup>

Mexicans don't believe things like cars can be good or evil. He knows where good and evil have their home. The Anglo thinks the Mexican is superstitious. But who is the lost one? Evil is not in a man. He cannot be tainted. It is not his own evil. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. [Not a representation or reflection but the thing itself in the actual.] It goes about on its own legs. Maybe someday it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 111.

<sup>63</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 192.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-5.

How is this so? In the viewpoint Pérez espouses, the imperialist mentality of the ‘American,’ the things of the world are assigned moral qualities inasmuch as they can be appropriated for the transcendent purposes of the agent. The Mexican, by contrast, does not attempt to divine meaning from a story in which he is both the protagonist and the author. For the Mexican, the story is already written, and the circumstances of fortune are neither affirming nor condemning of the individual. Evil is not a thing to be pondered in Mexico, but a thing to be avoided or embraced. This supposed godlessness of Americans, then, stems from the fact that they do not truly understand evil for in Mexico evil is not circumscribed by fate, but has a will of its own.<sup>66</sup> Things like cars or money do not have inherent moral properties and the story of their relationship to the human is circumstantial.

Another possible explanation for this superstition on the part of Americans, as presented by Pérez, is that Americans tend to believe that their actions are endowed with divine purpose—that they are enacting the will of some higher power and that as long as they are successful then the divine will withhold misfortune. The superstition lies in the constant will to innocence—that somehow war and conquest are foreordained and not the result of the basic will to dominance (or *libido dominandi*) motivated by a passion common to all men—the desire for power. Such a will makes war on the world itself and believes itself legitimately capable of victory. Such a will seeks to exercise sovereignty, claiming for itself the legitimate use of unlimited force as a means of achieving limited ends (peace, prosperity, liberty, etc.). Americans believe that the will of such a power can be known by all men and that, significantly, this relationship is personal.

The Mexican view of evil, by contrast, implies that evil, or simply *the bad* in opposition to the good, is not the outcome of human choice or action. It is not, then, the absence of the good, but rather a positive force that acts of its own volition, when and where it will. Evil, says

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Pérez, “has its own home,” and has legs upon which to move about in the world. Such a force might correspond to a character like *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden: an active presence in the world with no origins or reckonable limits. This “embodiment of darkness,” however conceived, is certainly the kind of evil that goes about on two legs and dabbling in the affairs of men as it will.<sup>67</sup> The Mexican, then, knows to expect the occasional visit from evil and how to recognize it when it arrives. He may attempt to guard against it with whatever talismans or rituals he takes to be effective, but ultimately mysterious external forces that can never be predicted determine the outcome. The American would not suspect this evil and, ironically, would view the Mexican’s proscriptions against evil to be superstitious and highly irrational. “But who is the lost one? Evil is not in a man. He cannot be tainted. Not his own evil.”<sup>68</sup> This is why, for Pérez, Americans are a godless people. They lay claim to the rightful place of God themselves.

Important to note here is that Pérez sees distinct boundaries or fundamental differences between the two groups (Mexicans and Anglos) and the divergent accounts of reality they represent. While his pronouncements do not preclude the possibility of a common human nature, they do assert a sort of mutual exclusivity between the two camps. There is only one true explanation for the way of things. This is possibly the result of his acknowledged curiosity or preoccupation with the ways of Americans. It is also possible that he has become influenced by the stance of the other over and against all of his purported perspicacity.

Pérez’s pronouncements to John Grady in the Saltillo prison section of *All the Pretty Horses*, insofar as they may be regarded as candid, stem from the manner in which the two different societies perceive the relationship between God and man. The Anglos believe that the material aspects of the world are endowed with inherent properties of good or bad. This is at the

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<sup>67</sup> Stephen Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 194.

root of their ‘superstition’ and evidence of their ‘godlessness.’ The Anglo mentality, then, is not simply materialistic, but blinded by its desire to see the world conform to a grand narrative; a narrative that centers on the individual and the exercise of will. The Anglo believes himself capable of discerning the true nature of the world based upon his understanding of his own story. All of the things of the world, then, are essentially props in a play—they contribute to the meaning and outcome of the story and have a personal meaning for the individual. In a certain sense, Pérez’s characterization of the Anglo draws out the legacy of Calvinism in shaping the American outlook. Divine approval takes material form and indicates either favor or rebuke. The ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of things encountered along the course of the Anglo’s life can be determined by their value to him, and reflect his state of soul. The Anglo has a strong inclination to view himself as the author of his own existence; life lived as autobiography. As such, the Anglo’s personal relationship with the divine is directly connected to his immediate material circumstances. Thus, the Anglo can only conceive of ‘good’ or ‘evil’ in terms related to himself, and not as external or impersonal forces. The things of the world, then, he reckons to be his own, as they must somehow or another be seen to represent the ongoing drama of the individual’s pursuit of the divine.

The final conversation between John Grady and Pérez concludes with John Grady using what money and friendship he has in the effort to purchase a knife. He is aware that what will likely come next will be a move by Pérez to test his value. The fight comes that evening at dinner in the form of a hired cuchillero. John Grady “knew the cuchillero had been hired because he was a man of reputation and it occurred to him that he was going to die in this place.”<sup>69</sup> In the ensuing knife fight, John Grady manages to kill his attacker but is very badly wounded himself. Staggering into the prison yard and waiting for the inevitable sound of alarm

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 200.

bells and the searchlights to come on, he is assisted by Pérez's mayordomo and helped into Pérez's little house in the prison yard. He is treated for his wounds and several days later handed an envelope full of money and released from prison along with Rawlins. When Rawlins asks who has posted the money for the release, John Grady responds: "She paid us out."

The señora?  
The aunt. Yes.  
Why?  
I dont [sic] know.  
Is that where you got the money?  
Yes.  
It's got to do with the girl, dont it?  
I expect it does.<sup>70</sup>

Discussing what to do next, John Grady informs Rawlins that he intends to go back to the hacienda. Although John Grady realizes that in all likelihood Alejandra has made a deal with her aunt to never see him again in exchange for his life, John Grady is determined. "I know. But she's going to have to tell me herself."<sup>71</sup> The two boys reflect over all they have seen, and of their regrets over the fate of Blevins, and of the killing of the young cuchillero. John Grady, in particular, feels a sense of remorse. When Rawlins tells him he had no choice. While John Grady retains a wish that things could have been other, he tells Rawlins: "You don't need to try and make it right. It is what it is."<sup>72</sup> He accepts what has happened, but something about him seems changed. Rawlins boards a bus for home and John Grady leaves Saltillo headed back to confront whatever waits for him at the hacienda.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 209-210.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 215.

## The Hands of Other Puppets

The conversation between John Grady and Alfonsa in Part IV of *All the Pretty Horses* unites many of the various representations of agency in the novel. Over the course of the long scene, the dualities of freedom/necessity and fate/free will, come to the fore and are entertained at length. It is in this scene that John Grady's heroism is subjected to its harshest criticism. The individual will that has typified him as a romantic hero earlier in the novel is examined as a lapse in judgement, and a failure to take responsibility. As interlocutor, the character of Alfonsa also is clarified. Ultimately, it is she who stands as the hero's penultimate antagonist in the novel. While many of the overarching themes of this dissertation are addressed in their conversation, some in new and interesting ways, it is the subjects of fate and of responsibility that are given most attention, and these are the subjects that contribute most to an understanding of agency in the novel.

After having described to John Grady how the society of Mexico has been shaped by the misdirected loves of freedom, truth, and honor of the Spaniard, Alfonsa hits on a point that she feels is worth discussing with John Grady.

[T]he question for me was always whether the shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact. Because otherwise we are nothing. Do you believe in fate?<sup>73</sup>

When John Grady responds that he does, she begins to tell him about her father. Expressing how the world functions through connections relating to causality, she describes his position: "He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences."<sup>74</sup> Her father's worldview expresses a sense of agency in which every event followed from the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

making of a single choice. For Alfonsa, however, “the world has always been more of a puppet show.”<sup>75</sup> The strings that dictate the movements of the figures on the stage extend upward where they “terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on.”<sup>76</sup> In this imagery, Alfonsa finds an allegory for the history of Mexico. In this story, which she intends to relate to John Grady, she tells John Grady that she finds the reason why she has seen fit to reject his suit of her niece.

Alfonsa’s story about the Mexican revolution details her childhood acquaintance with Francisco and Gustavo Madero. It is colored strongly by her brief romance with the latter brother. In the Maderos, Alfonsa sees the kind of revolutionary fire that she herself had embraced from a young age. In the failure of the reforms, their betrayal and martyrdom, she perceives a certain fatalism:

In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the dream and the thing the world lies waiting.<sup>77</sup>

And yet, earlier in this same speech she states that in her life she has embraced a goal to be a person of value. A revolutionary herself, she believes that the goals the Maderos pursued were not wrong, but perhaps misguided. She will not reconcile herself to the flat realism that has come to dominate the Mexican worldview espoused by characters like Pérez. The love of Gustavo Madero led her to see the value of principles, an insight she realized she had always known: “That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily.”<sup>78</sup> Even in the loss of her youthful

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 235.



idealism, she has steadfastly clung to her principles. Her will to power in the world springs from these.

Alfonsa tells John Grady that while she had sympathy for his suit, and was even open to considering it, the revelation that he had both lied to the family about his association with Blevins, and that he had failed to take responsibility for his actions causes her to reject it.

You won't let me make my case.

I know your case. Your case is that certain things happened to you over which you had no control.

It's true.

I'm sure it is. But it's no case. I've no sympathy with people to whom things happen. It may be that their luck is bad, but is that to count in their favor?<sup>79</sup>

Thus, she implies, choice is always a matter of necessity. And yet how does she intend to mitigate this intolerable and abject state of woman in the rigidly hierarchic social structure of her time and place?

Here the reader confronts a puzzle as to her meaning. On the one hand, it can be reasonably inferred that her pronouncements indicate that the idea of individual, or even collective freedom (qua agency) is life's great illusion. On the other, as a later dialog between these two antagonists will show, the very nature of a *choice* implies a sense of the individual will—to abdicate the will is unacceptable. While casting strong doubt as to whether the individual has a legitimate ground for action, her pronouncements are no less insistent that the will exists and, inevitably, will be forced by nature itself into action, however futile.

I don't hate you.

You shall.

We'll see.

Yes. We'll see what fate has in store for us, won't we?

I thought you didn't [sic] believe in fate.

She waved her hand. It's not so much that I don't believe in it. I don't subscribe to its nomination. If fate is the law then is fate also subject to that law? At some point we cannot escape naming responsibility. It's in our nature. Sometimes I think we are all like

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 240.

that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making.<sup>80</sup>

In the end, she tells John Grady that she judges him unfit for her niece due to the fact that he has failed to exert his will in the face of his circumstances. That he has exhibited a kind of moral or spiritual blindness toward the world that, rather than commending him as a kind of virtuous romantic idealist, points to his inability to confront the truth that the natural origins he seeks are but illusions, and that his actions have consequences. “Between the dream and the thing itself the world lies waiting,” she instructs him.<sup>81</sup> The logic presented, if correctly interpreted here, concludes in an inescapable dilemma. And while it is also possible that her paradoxical stance can be attributed to some latent impulse of passion or defect of character, which the words of other characters’ would support, Alphonsa’s calm insistence that John Grady’s critical flaw is the result of some choice to live in the world of his dreams rather than her family’s reality remains highly compelling. Indeed, as the case of John Grady is drawn into comparison with various other adolescent protagonists in McCarthy’s fiction, a common trend emerges: all of them, at least at times, appear as lacking some important knowledge about the world that would enable them to make critical choices or act in such a way as to take control of their own story from the forces of circumstance, chance, and fate. Their lack of will manifests in a failure to act. These, for Alfonsa, are the rules and they do not change or make special concessions. “If fate is the law then is fate also subject to that law?”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 238. “In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. I’ve thought a great deal about my life and about my country. I think there is little that can be truly known.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 241.

John Grady encounters Alejandra one last time. They meet in Zacatecas, where he proposes to her and makes promises for her future safety and happiness. He tells her everything that has happened to him and she weeps. She tells him that she has told her father of their affair and that she had never realized that her father could stop loving her. Expressing her love for him and her belief in the things he has told her, Alejandra gives John Grady her final answer. Though torn, she cannot do what he asks. Here, the narrative voice offers a brief glimpse into the insights of a McCarthy character, and relates to the theme of fate:

He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave.<sup>83</sup>

In his lack of knowing a direction to go, John Grady returns to Encantada for the horses he and his two companions had left behind. A brief gunfight ensues and, shot through the leg, John Grady barely escapes with his life. His hostage, the captain who had shot Blevins, is released to some men of the country. John Grady does not kill him. “I aint like you,” he says.<sup>84</sup>

Returning to Texas, John Grady is unable to locate the owner of the Blevins horse. After asking around he is called into court and tells his story. The judge in the case believes him and lets him keep all three of the horses he has with him. That night, after the hearing, John Grady returns to the judge’s house. He informs the judge that he does not feel justified in being considered totally in the right in the eyes of the law. He regrets the dishonor he brought to Alejandra and her family, and the killing of the young cuchillero in the Saltillo prison. He even expresses guilt over wanting to kill the Mexican captain. “The reason I wanted to kill him was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the street and shoot him and I never said nothin,” he tells the judge. “Would it have done any good?” the judge asks. “No sir. But that

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 278.

don't make it right."<sup>85</sup> John Grady here expresses the nature of his guilt: that he failed to take responsibility for Blevins in life, even though, as he tells the judge, "I didnt hardly know him. I felt bad about it. But he wasnt nothing to me."<sup>86</sup> His guilt over his lack of agency in the moment of Blevin's death burdens him and leads him to wander the countryside looking for the horse's owner, whom he never finds. The novel concludes with John Grady attending another funeral and then riding on, through a country that is much changed. He rides out west "into the darkening land, the world to come."<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

Geographically, the world of *All the Pretty Horses* is set in many of the same locales of *Blood Meridian*, but it is not the boundless, uncharted border country of the earlier novel. A twentieth century cowboy, John Grady Cole knows of the West of his predecessor, the kid, only through anecdote, legend, and myth. This is the world he seeks on his trip to Mexico. What he finds along the way are fences. And while these fences are easily cut to allow a rider to pass, John Grady fails to see the metaphor even as it affects him: even in the open country, there are rules. John Grady's journey is one of moral instruction, lessons in which he is forced to lay aside his romantic notions of boundless freedom in a world open to the expression of the individual will. Brutally, he learns that actions have broad reaching consequences, and that the world he seeks is as inaccessible to him as the world within his own heart.

In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy's fiction becomes increasingly focused on unique theoretical possibilities surrounding the political questions of individual freedom and agency.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 301.

He questions whether our actions and our failures of action amount to much the same thing in the big picture. What may seem like fated outcomes may, in retrospect, reveal themselves to be the result of choices, made or unmade, that can affect the lives of many others than the individual self. This is where the recognition of the other, through witnessing comes most directly to bear. To love another human or to even care about another human is a bold if not transgressive move in McCarthy's world. Such actions seem to provoke the world to extinguish the agent and all he stands for. Our failures to meet up to our obligations may condemn us, but we are going to die either way; and it is seldom pretty when we do. We bear witness and move on. In my next chapter I turn to consider conclusions about McCarthy's concern for the idea of order.

## 6. Order

If we keep ever-present in our minds the idea of a veritable human order, if we think of it as something to which a total sacrifice is due should the need arise, we shall be in a similar position to that of a man travelling, without a guide, through the night, but continually thinking of the direction he wishes to follow. Such a traveler's way is lit by a great hope.<sup>1</sup>

Political theorist Paul Cantor describes how nineteenth-century British and American novelists display a tendency to emphasize human activity in the private rather than public or essentially political sphere.

These writers focus intensely on certain provocative issues of private life only because they take it for granted that more fundamental issues of political life have been settled; that is, they think within a political context defined for them by their regimes. In short, it is precisely because these novelists take for granted the right-ness of the democratic regime and its concomitant bourgeois way of life that they devote themselves to exploring the complexities of life under that regime. Here we see how useful the concept of the regime can be in analyzing literature: it alerts us to the possibility that what is omitted from a work of literature may be as important as what is included.<sup>2</sup>

Tragedians have carefully rendered a normative space for action, insisting on the presence of a public sphere or commons, and an established nomos as prerequisite. McCarthy, by contrast, subverts and challenges this dictum. Human action in his world is set in the negative space of absolute freedom, an apparently ungoverned and ungovernable moral universe in which transgression becomes difficult to recognize.<sup>3</sup> Without a chorus to witness the deeds of heroes without thoughts, traditional notions of free will and moral restraint tend to become obscured in

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, "The Needs of the Soul," excerpt from *The Need for Roots* (1949), printed in Siân Miles, ed. *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Paul A. Cantor, "Literature and Politics: Understanding the Regime," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Jun., 1995), 192-195, in particular his discussion on 194.

<sup>3</sup> What Brian Evenson calls "sovereign negativity." Brian Evenson "McCarthy's Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country" in Hall and Wallach, eds. *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 2nd ed. titled *Sacred Violence*. 2 vols. Vol. 1: *Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Works*. Vol. 2: *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. 2002. Citing here Vol. 1, 46.

the fog of fate and chaotic chance. Indeed, I contend that McCarthy's vision goes so far as to obscure the very form of the individual self, the embodied *cogito*, in its commitment to a moral terrain that is, as he puts it, "desert absolute."<sup>4</sup> His fiction continually explores an idea of evil that moves about in the world on legs, compelling, judging, and condemning his protagonists for their inability to offer an accounting of themselves, naming their transgressions and accepting judgment. In some cases, the protagonist's only redemption is expressed through an unreflective action in resisting this power; some attempt to rebel, or at least demonstrate a reluctance to acquiesce to "the life of the darkness," as the quotation by Boehme states in the epigram to *Blood Meridian*. It is undeniable that McCarthy intends this moral question as a significant philosophical problem for his reader. I contend, against a number of McCarthy's critics, that the posing of such a nihilistic proposition does not support the conclusion of a deep existential nihilism at the core of his vision. It does, however, pose a strident challenge to the authority of the established order. But what is the outcome of this challenge, and of what use is it?

McCarthy's political vision demonstrates the general failure of politics to do what politics is supposed to do. The political or sovereign power in McCarthy's world may be said to attempt to provide for an ordered environment for human existence, even with nominal liberty. But it fails in any meaningful way to protect men from each other and from themselves or to advance any notion of the good life. Indeed, his reader is frequently left to ponder exactly what might even be said to constitute the good life in McCarthy's fiction. Is this failure of the political the result of some deficiency in our laws or political institutions? No. The failure results from our gross misunderstanding of our place in the order of the world. It results from our inability to

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<sup>4</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 307.

accept our fundamental loneliness in the world. The ‘optical democracy’ of natural and human landscapes overpowers human will, action, and defies our attempts to impose meaning.<sup>5</sup>

A general assumption governing all of McCarthy’s fiction is that the world is generally mysterious and chaotic. To attempt to ascribe categories of morality or right order into the matrix of the human relationship to the world is a false claim and a hopeless enterprise.

However, this foregrounding of chaos does not exert any simple nihilistic solution to questions of how best humans ought to live or, for that matter, how humans can understand or even describe the world or our place in it.

McCarthy’s fiction never precludes a world in which a sense of order and moral judgment endures, even in the face of overwhelming chaos.<sup>6</sup> The question is, then, what is this order and what does it offer to the study of politics? If human actions do in fact have consequences, where might these be glimpsed in human affairs? To employ the logic of cause and effect, what can we say may result from any specific human action of good or evil? Answer: We can never know—and this lack of surety endows all our decisions with possibility. McCarthy’s apocalyptic backdrop serves to emphasize the durability of possibilities in a world of unknowns. Nothing can ever completely erase the story, provided it has some witness. Perhaps this witness is provided by nature itself, perhaps not. Even if some later civilization or intelligence might stumble upon our own pictograms or hieroglyphs, the symbolizations we have made of our world—which, of course, stems from our natural impulse to tell stories—bears a certain nobility and beauty, and represents our refusal to acquiesce to the omnipresent darkness

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<sup>5</sup> See also Daniel Weiss, “Cormac McCarthy, Violence, and Borders: The Map as Code for What Is Not Contained,” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 8, No 1 (2010) 73-74.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin T. Arnold, “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” Arnold and Luce, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. Copyright: *The Southern Quarterly*, 1999) 46.



surrounding us. While McCarthy's political vision is ultimately just a critique, it is a very fine one.

In this chapter, I lay out the final thematic concept in my presentation of McCarthy's political vision. In it, I examine McCarthy's two most recently published novels: *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. While these works differ greatly from each other—the former is, essentially, a more cinema-friendly distillation of *Blood Meridian*, while the latter constitutes a unique and altogether new direction for McCarthy's fiction. They are unified by the appearance in each of the highly suggestive symbol of man carrying fire. Both works concern civilizational collapse, the demise of one moral horizon and the rise of another. In *No Country for Old Men*, the reader finds a pervasive motif of epochal change. Through the eyes and voice of an aging and disabused country sheriff, the novel depicts the imminent collapse of the established order in the face of a harsh new reality in the borderlands of West Texas at an early stage in the narco-wars of that region.

### **Things losing shape: *No Country for Old Men***

*No Country for Old Men* (2005) interrogates the themes of agency and order. Here McCarthy depicts the extent of human understanding confronting the limits of human agency. Its operative question, posed by the villain, a psychopathic assassin named Anton Chigurh, to one of his many victims, is a succinct statement of this theme: "How does a man decide in what order to abandon his life?"<sup>7</sup> At issue here are the competing obligations that conspire to thwart an individual's capacity to control a situation, order a life, or to align one's purposes with one's values. It revisits the theme of agency in McCarthy's work: the common human desire to

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage International, 2005), 177-178.

reshape the world and the limits to which such an activity is ever possible. In one sense, this question turns on the basic hierarchy of human needs and desires when confronted with difficult ethical decision making; the underlying values that propel human behavior when circumstances are at or beyond the edge of comprehension or control. Such situations are commonly misunderstood by the human actors who, with imperfect knowledge, find themselves in their midst.

The “Moss Case,” as I term it, serves as the catalyst for the narrative in *No Country for Old Men*. One day in 1980 while out on an antelope hunting trip, Llewelyn Moss, a welder and Vietnam Veteran in his late thirties, stumbles upon the scene of a bloody shootout in the desert of the Texas borderlands. Deducing the scene to be the aftermath of a drug deal gone awry, Moss tracks down the last man standing. When he finds him, the man is dead and has with him a heavy leather document case. Moss looks inside. “It was level full of hundred dollar banknotes. They were in packets fastened with banktape stamped each with the denomination \$10,000.”<sup>8</sup> Moss’s decision to take the money sets into motion a chain of events that will ultimately have calamitous results. The case contains a radio transponder that enables it to be tracked by those to whom it belongs. In the ensuing chase, Moss confronts forces of violence far exceeding anything in his experience. Most notable among the various parties involved who join in the hunt is a predatory villain worthy of rank among McCarthy’s finest.

While Moss is undoubtedly the man at the center of the action in the narrative, it is the sheriff, ultimately, who comes to occupy the novel’s moral focus. McCarthy uses Moss as a vehicle for driving the plot. But it is through the eyes and voice of retired sheriff Ed Tom Bell that McCarthy elaborates on the larger forces in play. Bell will decide that the changing world that this case exemplifies is no country for a man who is not ready or willing to “put his soul at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

hazard.”<sup>9</sup> The Moss Case forces Bell to confront the “new” reality, and the new kind of men that it brings to his world. Confounded by his inability to comprehend, let alone get ahead of the violence wrought by those pursuing Moss and the stolen money, Bell reflects continually on his life and career. He feels outmatched to exchange fire with those who embrace the life of violence for the sake of it. He sees no place for himself in a world in which the traditionally understood notions of freedom and justice are thwarted by the implacable will-to-power of the drug traffickers and those in their employ.

Structurally, the text of *No Country for Old Men* is divided between two distinct narrative modes. The first are the italicized passages at the opening of each of the novel’s thirteen parts in which Bell speaks in the first person, presumably to some interviewer, or perhaps the reader herself. These monologues reflect on the primary events of the novel from a position later in time and read much like the first draft of an autobiography or memoir. Bell’s monologues constitute a form of testimony, as Bell has witnessed these events in his life and in the lives of his community and the impact it has made. His reflection is telling. In his first monologue Bell delineates how his exposure to an unforeseen force of evil, something beyond his experience, feeds his growing suspicion that the basic norms of lawfulness, decency, and respect for law and order in his community are on the verge of collapse. His recent experiences lead him to conclude: “*there is another view of the word out there and other eyes to see it and thats where this is goin. It has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I’d come to.*”<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on “eyes to see” invokes the prominent theme of witnessing in McCarthy’s corpus and Bell’s monologues constitute another formulation of it. Throughout the novel, his

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<sup>9</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (hereafter cited as *No Country*, 4. I have adopted to quote McCarthy’s text here as it appears in the novel without cluttering the pages with corrections in grammar or punctuation, as these are a part of McCarthy’s aesthetic.

monologues (the reader is never sure whether these are spoken or thought; possibly both) reflect his remembering and reflecting on the events of the novel.

A persistent mood of anxious expectation pervades much of the italicized passages in which Bell reflects on his life and career in addition to some of the details of the case. As a public servant and community leader in a small West Texas border county, Bell presents himself as a man of respectable public intentions and deeply felt private regrets. In his ruminations, he returns repeatedly to the idea that he sees his role as that of a shepherd or guardian watching out for his people. He feels himself to be part of an old and proud tradition of Texas lawmen that includes several members of his own family. Bell likes his role as a community figure, such as it is, and he likes the general predictability of the world in which he operates. But as the novel opens, something has changed.

Throughout the novel, Bell speaks of a changing world and of his lack of certainty within it. He begins by describing the one “*and only one*” execution he has confronted in his career. A teenaged boy who killed a fourteen-year-old girl without any sense of passion or remorse: “*And he told me he had been plannin to kill somebody about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again. Said he knew he was going to hell.*”<sup>11</sup> Bell imparts that he has no sense of how to relate to such a person and, because of this, begins to wonder if this person is “*some new kind.*”<sup>12</sup> Here Bell expresses one of the major themes of the novel in general, the possibility of fundamental shifts, a new world of irrational and overwhelming violence. In such a world, as Bell sees it, traditional notions of the good, of justice and, importantly, of order, are overrun by forces that cannot be constrained by any of the existing institutions of law and its enforcement, or even the political community that gives said

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<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 3. [Cited hereafter as *No Country*.]

<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 3.

institutions their legitimate sanction. Important to understanding this aspect of the novel is the recognition that while avid readers of McCarthy's body of work are likely to recognize this theme of nihilistic violence immediately, Sheriff Bell does not. Throughout the novel, both in his interior monologues and in the main body of the story, Bell reveals his deep perplexity. He feels himself to be living in new times and confronting men of a new type, to say nothing of the larger social and economic forces in play. And it is in this very misapprehension that Bell invokes the novel's relevant political themes.

Visiting Moss's wife in an Odessa cafe hoping to get information as to Moss's whereabouts and having seen the path of destruction left by those pursuing, he orders them both coffee. "The face that lapped and shifted in the dark liquid in the cup seemed an omen of things to come. Things losing shape. Taking you with them."<sup>13</sup> By this point in the novel, Bell has a sense of the principal actors in the unfolding case. Though he does not yet know (and never will know) who Chigurh is, he has begun to get a sense of his capabilities. And here he betrays his basic fear: that he will not be able to stop a man like Chigurh even by using all the means at his disposal. Bell offers a glimpse into the kind of evil he feels so unprepared to face, embodied in a "*true and living prophet of destruction.*"<sup>14</sup> The two never confront each other. Bell's attempts to find out more about this prophet come to no end. He has no fingerprints in the FBI database. Bell cannot help but conclude: "*He's a ghost.*"<sup>15</sup> Bell indicates that his misgivings spring not out of fear, but out of his reluctance to become something other than who he is. "*I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I won't do that. I think now that maybe I never would.*"<sup>16</sup> In essence, Bell realizes that to be able to confront Chigurh, he must first be willing to

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<sup>13</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 127.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 248.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

behave like Chigurh, to abandon his principles and embrace chaos. And yet, even in Bell's steadfast refusal to take this step, the reader cannot fail to notice a certain interrelationship or codependency between the two characters. Much like the kid and Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, the opposition of Bell and Chigurh reveals a strange parallelism. Noting this, Mangrum observes that "McCarthy's device of revealing the interrelations of Chigurh and Bell's identities indicates, among other things, that human constructs (particularly regarding the just and the good) often inadvertently affirm a common view of reality."<sup>17</sup>

In his monologues, Bell states he is convinced of the existence of the good, in the classical sense, and describes it in strongly Platonic terms; its permanence, its incorruptibility. While not a religious man *per se*, Bell's monologues return again and again to his belief in the transcendent character of truth and in his love for his wife. Regarding the truth, Bell affirms that it can be neither altered nor extinguished.<sup>18</sup> He later states that he believes that the truth is simple: "It needs to be simple enough for a child to understand."<sup>19</sup>

Bell is also a liberal democrat in the modern sense, placing his faith in the goodness of people—provided they are instructed by law and the institutions of civil government. But in his role as a county sheriff Bell operates somewhat beyond the law in a sort of unspoken or unlegislated gray area:

*It's an odd thing when you come to think about it. The opportunities for abuse are just about everywhere. There's no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for being a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law. You think about a job where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not. Because I say that it is. Does it work? Yes. Ninety percent of the time. It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all. Or if they could I never heard of it.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mangrum, 117.

<sup>18</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>20</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 64.

While Bell seems to put strong faith in himself, and even more his people, his horizon is predicated upon a notion of justice that requires the mutual acceptance of certain norms; a *nomos* of the community. It is the unraveling of this, Bell purports, that is the cause for his greatest concern. And yet in this position critic Benjamin Mangrum finds the “disingenuous grounds” of Bell’s outlook to be a mode of McCarthy’s for expressing the tragic, vis-à-vis Nietzsche’s critique of Plato in *The Birth of Tragedy* and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Mangrum sees in Bell’s often contradictory views regarding his role as sheriff a “shrouded skepticism,” that emerges when Bell’s monologues wax nostalgic about old time lawmen.<sup>22</sup> He writes:

The juxtaposition between the “*old timers*,” and the instances of abuse are “*peculiar*” to Bell, for even the good lawmen “*have pretty much the same authority as God*” while they are paradoxically “*preservin nonexistent laws*” (64). Like Bell’s previous inability to explain his unease regarding the execution (63), the role of a Texas sheriff presents him with a contradiction. Those serving the state have unrestrained authority—the same as God’s—and thus can use any amount of force to preserve order. Yet this order is conspicuously “*nonexistent*”—that is, without a definable system of law to determine the civic dimensions of the just—indicating that the force that serves the democratic state is displace from any ultimate *telos* (64). Like the God-Shepherd of the Psalms, the Texas sheriff protects the herd, but he does not lead them “in right paths” because there are “*no requirements put upon*” him (Psalm 23:3, *NCFOM* 64). For this figure of democratic justice, there are, in other words, no defined “right paths.”<sup>23</sup>

Mangrum uses terms like “contradiction” and “aimless” to describe Bell’s position, which might even extend as far as his core values. Bell is a deeply unreliable narrator, but the extent of his flaws are couched in the nuances of the narrative, indeed in the text itself. Bell’s valorization of the bygone older times, in which sheriffs didn’t need to carry guns and knew and looked out for

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Mangrum, “Democracy, Justice, and Tragedy in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*,” *Research and Literature* 43:3 (Autumn 2011), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Mangrum, 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

their people in a very personal way, fails to appreciate what Mangrum terms the “democratic hegemony of that time.”<sup>24</sup> Mangrum continues:

Therefore, Bell’s retirement not only expresses his doubts about the democratic state that he represents but also concedes to the Nietzschean view that power and self-interest govern human relations—that the essence of democratic justice is keeping stronger wills in check in order to preserve the herd’s liberty. If justice depends upon “*a bad enough dog*,” human nature is more concerned with dominating others than pursuing individual freedom (299).<sup>25</sup>

For all his pronouncements on the transcendent nature of truth and goodness, then, Bell ultimately betrays an underlying ambivalence toward them. His often cranky pronouncements about the loss of basic manners, “*Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight*,” are a symptom of a larger problem he refers to as a “breakdown in mercantile ethics” and results in chaos.<sup>26</sup> Underlying this, however, is a deeper recognition that the justice he has served and worked to uphold over the course of his career has very little grounding in a transcendent notion of the good. This is not to conclude, however, that Bell’s position is an argument in favor of the chaotic nihilism of Chigurh, who I will examine below. Rather, I conclude with Mangrum that McCarthy’s understanding of justice is tragic—a pursuit that, ultimately, is most likely to fail in a world where “the smallest crumb can devour us.”<sup>27</sup> While Bell reveals an underlying ambivalence regarding the good in a Platonic sense, he nevertheless believes that it must be pursued and the temptation to give in to this “other world out there and other eyes to see it” must be resisted if he is to retain his humanity.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout his monologues, Bell’s reflections are the key to McCarthy’s presentation of order in the novel and its interpretation as a political concept. His loss of faith in himself and in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 304.

<sup>27</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 4.



the goodness of his people are certainly important to this. But McCarthy's most compelling statements on order come late in the novel, after the conclusion of the Moss Case. These are found in the revelations about God found in Bell's conversation with his uncle Ellis, along with Bell's final monologue on the novel's last pages, in which he describes a dream about his father. However, before concluding this section with my interpretation of these scenes, it will be necessary to pivot briefly to examine the political implications latent in the philosophy of Bell's opposite number.

Like so many of the "hero" versus "villain" relationships in McCarthy's corpus, the essential tension between the two characters and the ideas they represent are generally most revealing about the philosophical questions McCarthy is engaging in any particular work. And in this regard, *No Country for Old Men* presents a curious specimen due to the fact that its protagonist and antagonist never meet face to face or exchange words. Bell never remotely understands Chigurh. Still, the reader gets a very clear sense of the latter's rigidly defined worldview, because, like all McCarthy's great villains, Chigurh is both a philosopher and an orator. I turn now to examine the character in one of his most emblematic scenes.

Anton Chigurh is a hitman as remorseless as he is lethal. The only comparison one of his associations can make of him in this regard is to the bubonic plague.<sup>29</sup> Chigurh conducts his life according to a strict set of principles allowing him to function as a sort of deterministic envoy of death. A skilled and merciless killer, he is also an ascetic adherent to a rigid code in his life. He maintains his anonymity by killing just about anyone with whom he has dealings. And this is not limited to those in the narcotics trade or law enforcement. In one of the novel's early scenes, Chigurh begins to antagonize a gas station proprietor who makes the mistake of noticing that the car he drives carries Dallas plates. The car is stolen from a previous victim. When Chigurh

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<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 141.

learns the man “married into” his ownership of the business, he presents the man with the following question: “What’s the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?”<sup>30</sup> Perplexed, the man asks *what, how, and why* of the game Chigurh proposes. “How would that change anything?” Chigurh responds to him. “Call it, he said.” The man is hesitant, so Chigurh insists:

I can’t call it for you. It wouldnt be fair. It wouldnt even be right. Just call it.”

I didn’t put nothin up.

Yes you did. You’ve been putting it up your whole life. You just didnt know it. You know what the date is on this coin?

No.

It’s nineteen fifty-eight. It’s been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it’s here. And I’m here. And I’ve got my hand over it. And it’s either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.

I don’t know what I stand to win . . .

Your stand to win everything, Chigurh said. Everything.<sup>31</sup>

By “everything” here, Chigurh of course means, the man’s very life. And the man calls it correctly: “Heads then.” Chigurh congratulates him tepidly. Before leaving, Chigurh gives the man the “lucky” quarter as a souvenir, and a lecture.

Anything can be an instrument, Chigurh said. Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there’s an accounting. And after that nothing is the same.<sup>32</sup>

The phrase “anything can be an instrument” stands forward as a fairly emblematic expression of Chigurh’s philosophy. However chaotic the nature of the coin toss, for him it is no more chaotic than the circumstances that led to the encounter itself, or for that matter, the creation of the coin. Chigurh’s philosophy does not acknowledge traditional moral categories like good or evil. In this outright embrace of his code, Steven Frye describes Chigurh as both psychopathic and sociopathic, “insofar as he lives a life unencumbered by social obligation or responsibility to any

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<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

preconceived moral precepts.”<sup>33</sup> In the asocial worlds of McCarthy’s fiction, Chigurh acts as a force of nature, revealing the limits and apparent absurdity of human will and choice-making. His elimination of his own will in the equation marks him as psychologically unhinged, but the system he observes is nevertheless consistent. Frye asserts: “Chigurh contends that his free choice to kill is mitigated by an elaborate system of cause and effect that renders individual agency largely inconsequential.”<sup>34</sup> Even within the purview of his own deterministic philosophy of death, mediated only by the coin toss, he seems himself ultimately as an instrument.<sup>35</sup> But an instrument of what? Jay Ellis sees in Chigurh’s conversation with the gas station man a sort of teaching, a Socratic-styled education in philosophy as preparation for death:

What he offers the man by choosing to toss the coin amounts to a gift, if a hard one to take. If ethics and morality (let alone religion) are indeed human creations in a cosmos that cannot recognize us at its center, Chigurh is teaching the man that fact. We need not dismiss the value of those creations simply because they have no ultimate foundational origin. That all life, including our values for how one should live it and respect it in others, may be the result not only of our collective choices, but also of myriad chance events, leads some of us to celebrate and value it all the more so. To live without knowledge of this, however, to substitute for our own limits of knowledge a created certainty that our little lives have necessary, inevitable, meaning, however, squanders life.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Frye, 160.

<sup>34</sup> Frye, 156.

<sup>35</sup> While villainous characters in other McCarthy words have also embraced a deterministic outlook, particularly the character of Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*. In her final conversation with John Grady Cole she expresses this idea of the remoteness of cause and effect in the imagery of the puppet show, wherein “if one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets. Alfonsa adopts this metaphor as a way of countering a parable of her father’s, a man who “had a great sense of the connectedness of things.”<sup>35</sup> Her father’s explanation of fate was to construct the example of a tossed coin. For the father, the coin itself is not the autonomous decider of an outcome, but merely a point in a larger process beginning with a coiner placing a slug in a mint. The coiner’s choice of how to press the slug, determines the coins to sides, and all else follows this, “cara y cruz,” she says. “No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes.”<sup>35</sup> The moral for her father’s parable is that the responsibility for any decision was never simply the result of chance or misfortune, but rather “human decisions more and more remote from their consequences.”(231) For Alfonsa, however, there is no such access to the causal origins of things. For her, the causes of events are ultimately unknowable, and what matters most is that an individual have the courage to stand up to his fate, even challenging it if necessary. Her philosophy emphasizes will over fate.

<sup>36</sup> Jay Ellis, “Do you see?: Levels of Ellipsis in *No Country for Old Men* in Sara L. Spurgeon, ed. *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (Continuum, 2011), 101.

As Chigurh drives away, the gas station man is depicted thus: “He laid the coin on the counter and looked at it. He put both hands on the counter and just stood leaning there with his head bowed.”<sup>37</sup> Whether the man has learned anything or not from the exchange is never explained, in typical McCarthy fashion, but Ellis’s suggestion is worth considering, as it pertains to order. While Chigurh’s role in the novel is that of a harbinger of death, he is, at least in the scene with the gas station man, also a harbinger of reflection, of weighing the limits of our knowledge, of possibly glimpsing the extent of our hubris. In a world where control can be seen as an illusion, albeit a convincing one, hubris comes to represent our failing to recognize the inevitability of death, and our utter vulnerability before it. More than simply pride or vanity, this type of hubris may be seen as a failure to recognize mortal limits before the gods or, as Jay Ellis terms it, “an excessive inclination toward violence.”<sup>38</sup> Simone Weil in her classic essay “The Iliad or The Poem of Force,” makes the following connection to violence: “Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men’s eyes.”<sup>39</sup>

Chigurh’s regard for those people he encounters has little normative content. The reader never gets a clear sense of his motivations, or even his underlying pathology—the precise mechanism of disregard that allows him to exercise his role as a psychopathic and sociopathic killer so effectively. In his mind, he is not altogether different from any other possible cause of sudden death: undetected carbon monoxide leak, aneurysm, or stray bullet from a shootout in the street; it matters little. When Chigurh offers Moss the opportunity to save his wife by returning

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<sup>37</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Simone Weil, “The Iliad or The Poem of Force,” 173. Jay Ellis pursues this connection. He sees in Chigurh’s conversation with Carson Wells—another hitman retained by the Maticumbe Petroleum Group and a former colleague of Chigurh’s—an effort by Chigurh to convince Wells of his own foolish vanity (Ellis, “Do you see?”, 105-108).

the money, Moss refuses. Chigurh remains bound to kill Moss's wife, Carla Jean, whether the money is recovered or no. And, some months after Moss's death, he makes good on his promise. For Chigurh, even the death of Moss does not relieve him of his promise. He makes the following pronouncement to Carla Jean: "Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact."<sup>40</sup> His statement here is in response to her objection that he has no reason to kill her. Chigurh's idea of God in this sense is that He is beholden to his rules and cannot make exceptions, even as He observes unspeakable injustice and suffering among His children. The inability of God to change His own rules is of critical importance to McCarthy's vision of order. The horizon of the gods in McCarthy's fiction is one in which however much they (or He) must know, no intervention can be made in the immanent sphere. This insight returns us the character of Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* and anticipates the major conclusions of *The Road*.

In one of *No Country for Old Men*'s final scenes, Ed Tom Bell returns to the dilapidated family homestead to pay a visit to his uncle Ellis, a paralyzed former deputy sheriff himself. Over the course of a dialog that ranges from Bell's decision to retire, their respective regrets in life (Bell reveals a story from WWII in which he acknowledges a lifetime of lingering guilt over a decision to abandon his fallen comrades in order save his own life), and God, the two engage several of the novel's most compelling themes.

Central to their conversation is the possibility that the destructive force of evil in the world cannot be accounted for within themselves or in the nature of the country, as an active force. Ellis relates that he has always thought that, with age, "God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didnt. I dont blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me

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<sup>40</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 256.

that he does.”<sup>41</sup> While Ellis has not found the redemption he has sought, some way to make sense of the world’s pain and injustice, he does not blame God. Bell asks him:

Do you think God knows what’s happenin’?

I expect he does.

You think he can stop it?

No. I dont.<sup>42</sup>

And here at last is the logical extension of Chigurh and Bell’s worldviews. They ultimately have the same conception of God. For the former, God is a being bound by His own and unable to make exceptions. In Chigurh’s formulation, wherein he models himself on God in his inability to break his words, he indicates that a promise made even to a dead person is still a promise. “...my word is not dead. Nothing can change that.”<sup>43</sup> While Chigurh finds it convenient, or “useful,” as he says, to adopt this God-like view of the world in a way that overlooks the role his own will plays in the proceedings, his logic holds. When Carla Jean Moss, pleading for her life, tells him that he does not have to kill her, he responds that his way of life “doesnt allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps.”<sup>44</sup> His entry into her life has brought with it her demise and there is no other possible outcome. He concludes his argument:

You can say things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You’re asking me to second say the world. Do you see?<sup>45</sup>

According to Chigurh’s code, just as God cannot unwrite or rewrite the rules of the world, Chigurh cannot unmake his promise. In this vision, God is held to a very high standard; the *highest*, in fact. By endowing humanity with free will, He has sentenced himself to watch the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 259-260.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 260.

bloody spectacle of human history repeat itself generation after generation because He cannot alter His own path.

Bell's vision of God is ultimately the same. In his agreement with Uncle Ellis about whether or not God can stop the perceived collapse of civilization, Bell affirms a vision of God in which He cannot intervene, though he suffers the knowledge of what is happening. In Bell's vision, like Chigurh's, God cannot break his own word, his own oath. Thus, while both characters have explicitly compared themselves to God in the novel, it is ultimately only Chigurh who is prepared to commit fully to the role. Bell's failure to uphold his role as sheriff and shepherd his children to safety follows his earlier failure to keep his "blood oath" to look after his men during the war.<sup>46</sup> In both instances of Bell's failure, he has been forced to contend with overwhelming circumstances and reckon his own best course without divine omniscience, omnipotence, or assistance. Ultimately he fails to achieve the god-like status he may have aspired to, but in doing so he retains his humanity. His condition, therefore, can be seen one of tragic suffering. In this view,

It follows that the noblest ethic of calculation cannot encompass death. When faced with death, or rather when faced with a choice between death with honor and survival with ignominy, it is impossible to ascertain an Aristotelian mean. The situation itself admits of nothing but extremes. The truly tragic situation is always of this nature; it is almost by definition a case in which the ethic of calculation admits insufficiency.<sup>47</sup>

Bell's insufficiency, then, marks him out as human. Chigurh's ambition to transcend this state and achieve for himself some plane above the lot of man requires him to risk nothing in the way of his own vulnerability to fate and chance. In his final appearance in the novel, he is wounded in a car wreck he simply fails to see coming, proving, if only partially, his own mortality.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>47</sup> Richmond Y. Hathorn, *Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 71.

Interestingly, Jay Ellis sees in Bell a vision of God in McCarthy's fiction. His concerns as sheriff mimic those of God in the book of Jeremiah. First, he fails to protect his people from a foreign enemy (Mexican drug cartels). Second, he begins to mistrust his own people—schoolkids are willing to buy the dope. Finally, Ellis contends that in Bell's patriarchal tone throughout the novel, the reader can see a vision in which the world for both of them as become a country unwelcome to old men:

Bell is a model for the god in McCarthy's philosophy: a slightly doddering figure old before his time, worried first about the evil from without the space he keeps for his people, but then secondly worried about the evil taken into that space, and ultimately worried that, quite apart from whatever evil might exist outside that space, his people have lost their way—they have forgotten to listen to him. But it also the case that he may have forgotten how to speak to them. Thus the third, inmost worry of God and Bell is that their children have given up their acknowledgement of what is good and righteous because of some failure on the part of God or Bell; the parent ultimately owns all the failures of the child.<sup>48</sup>

These tragic and prophetic interpretations of Bell are consistent with his overall sense of resignation and sadness toward the civilization collapse he believes he witnesses. His retirement manifests his recognition of the failure of the civil institutions of justice, and of law enforcement to keep the people safe. Further, by expressing his view that the cultural fabric of society is fraying, Bell no longer feels confident that he understands the people he has been elected to serve, reminding an impertinent reporter that "*you cant have a dope business without dopers.*"<sup>49</sup> Frustrated and fearful, he walks away from his thirty-nine-year career a defeated man. But this is not the not the novel's final scene.

In Bell's final monologue, he talks at length about his father. He concludes the monologue by sharing the two dreams he had about his father after he died. The first one is brief and poorly remembered. The second is worth quoting at length.

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<sup>48</sup> Ellis, 245.

<sup>49</sup> Here I affirm Mangrum's analysis, 115.



*...it was like like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothing. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.<sup>50</sup>*

Here Bell invokes a theme expressing the most hopeful possibility for ordering the universe found in all of McCarthy's fiction. The carried fire, here appearing in a dream, symbolizes the unattainable *something* that, while lying beyond human apprehension in the immanent sphere, projects hope for its continued existence in the future. Important to understanding the nature of this symbol is the observation that it is carried by his father. While the relationship between fathers and sons is a major motif throughout all of McCarthy's work, the idea of succession—of ineluctable things of value passed by the older generation to the new in hopes of their survival—comes to the fore in his most recent two novels. As will be shown below in my analysis of *The Road*, this symbol comes to stand for the final promethean spark, the last hope of divine order on earth, amid the ravages of apocalypse. In the road, McCarthy presents his most nightmarish reality to date.

While this nightmare scenario of humanity's final collapse exceeds any precedent in McCarthy's work, it is not altogether unanticipated. The decimation of nature, and of people depicted in *Blood Meridian* stands as an antecedent. The events of *The Road* are a logical extension: a world, "cold and growing colder," in which chaos and depravity reach their ultimate climax. A reader moving sequentially through McCarthy's corpus might naturally anticipate the final triumph of existential nihilism; the final coffin nail of hope for civilization. And yet, not so. If anything, *The Road* stands apart from the rest of McCarthy's corpus. It is, ultimately,

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<sup>50</sup> McCarthy, *No Country*, 309.

McCarthy's most hopeful work to date, but it is a hope borne of the most limited of all circumstances. In such a world as we find in *The Road*, the lingering flame of hope—the father's tragic love for his son and the commitment this requires of him—establishes the last, best principle of order for all humanity to be found in all McCarthy's work.

### **A thing that even death cannot undo: *The Road***

Fittingly, *The Road*, published to great acclaim in 2006, is yet another of McCarthy's journey novels. A father and his son, "each the other's world entire," journey through a post-apocalyptic nightmare world.<sup>51</sup> Their journey is necessitated by an increasingly harsh climate, and the fact that the man, as he is called throughout the novel, is dying. This landscape, an "ashen scabland," is a remnant of the former, or, "late world," world, most likely some version of contemporary America, though this is never made clear.<sup>52</sup> Whatever the apocalyptic scenario, global nuclear holocaust, meteorite or asteroid strike, or some other cataclysm, the damage is apparently global and irreversible. In Steven Frye's analysis:

The language as articulated seems selected for its ambiguity, allowing for both possibilities (natural or manmade disaster), which have vastly different implications. A nuclear holocaust would be the result of human evil, and the meteor or asteroid the outcome of natural evil and the destructive capacity of the universe broadly construed. This blending suggests perhaps that the two are complicated and inseparable.<sup>53</sup>

The text offers few details, but they are suggestive: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions."<sup>54</sup> The man and his wife, pregnant at the time with their child, survive by virtue of the man's instincts for survival. Other survivors are few. Many died in their cars and are encountered in the ruins of a city as "incinerate corpses shrunk to the

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<sup>51</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Frye, *Understanding*, 169.

<sup>54</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 53.

size of a child and propped on the bare springs of the seats. Ten thousand dreams ensepulchered within their crozzled hearts.”<sup>55</sup> Northern cities have been abandoned, “looted and exhausted,” and the refugees survive with varying degrees of success.<sup>56</sup> But the general collapse of civilization is not far behind:

Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes on the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it.<sup>57</sup>

After this, the world is largely empty of people and what people there are the father and son refer to as “the bad guys.”<sup>58</sup> The nameless “bloodcults” are the remaining loose bands of society, armies of men carrying bludgeons and lances, who march four abreast and “all wearing scarves at their necks. . . . Red or orange, as close to red as they could find.”<sup>59</sup>

Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of the them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each.<sup>60</sup>

Against all hope, and facing his own death from illness, the father sets out south in effort to find safety for the boy. He promises him that they will find “the good guys” repeatedly throughout the novel. The distinguishing characteristic between these two groups constitutes the final choice. The good guys do not cave into the final necessity: they refuse to become cannibals.

Confronting such horror, the man feels ill-equipped to carry his enormous burden all alone. His wife has already made her consolation, opting to take her own life rather than face the unspeakable. With the child still a toddler, she reaches her limit. On the last night of her life the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 92.

couple argues. Calling his attention to the fact that they only have two bullets left in the gun, she tells him she has made her decision and tells him why his inability to follow her is irresponsible.

She speaks:

Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. . . . Maybe you'll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself.<sup>61</sup>

She uses a flake of obsidian to take her own life, saving the man the two remaining bullets. She does not say goodbye to the child. Saying she has decided to take death as her new lover she wishes him well and is gone, "and the coldness of it was her final gift."<sup>62</sup> And while the man is determined to carry on alone, he has no true sense of hope himself. He can't imagine the two of them being lucky beyond controlling the circumstances of their deaths. Even if his wife was right, "that the boy was all that stood between him and death," he cannot take that final step.<sup>63</sup> As long as the boy lives, the man cannot die and abandon him. Nor can he take the boy's life, even when it appears for a moment he will have no other choice. They are stuck in a sort of Samuel Beckett-esque absurdity, wherein life is the thing most dreaded, and death the thing that cannot be embraced. Having acknowledged the sacredness of his pledge, he struggles not to resent the boy for dooming him to life and all the suffering, privation and fear it entails. "If only my heart were stone."<sup>64</sup> While they live, the man is committed to preventing the boy from falling into the hands of the bad guys. He will not let anyone touch him and is prepared to kill to keep this pledge.

Amid the flimsiest of circumstances, the man claims agency for himself unto death, and in doing so, acknowledges his transcendent purpose. "He knew only that the child was his

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 11.

warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”<sup>65</sup> He sees the world and his lot in it as a great, perhaps *the greatest* of all injustice. His private thoughts (or speeches, we are never sure) are lamentations directed to the god who has abandoned him: “Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.”<sup>66</sup> What answer he receives is the great darkness and silence of the world and the assurance that each day will be colder than the last: “barren, silent, godless.”<sup>67</sup>

Among the most unaccountable things confronting the man in this new world, perhaps none is more spectacular than the boy himself. Born after the cataclysm, the boy has never known any other world. “Always so deliberate, hardly surprised by the most outlandish advents. A creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end.”<sup>68</sup> Having only faint memory of his mother, his father is the only person to whom he has ever spoken. This journey and its travails are the sum total of his life’s experience. And the child is not always the most willing travel companion. He complains constantly of cold, of hunger, of wanting to stop. He mentions wanting to be with his mother, and he knows where she has gone. He is constantly fearful, and the man cannot leave him alone, even in moments in which their survival may depend upon it. He needs constant reassurance and the man often is forced to bend the truth to accommodate this, if not lie outright. Yet for all the poverty of their circumstances the child insists upon a moral code of truth, of sharing, and of keeping promises between them. This innate sense of right will not be compromised, however impractical. When the father hands him a cup of cocoa, their last and perhaps the last on earth, the boy objects that he has not poured any for himself. Instead of the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 59.

expected five-year-old greediness, the boy insists that they must share. It is a promised part of their code. "If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said."<sup>69</sup>

Even more surprising is the boy's unswerving benevolence toward others. In a world where nothing grows, scrounged cans of food are all the sustenance available. When the pair encounters a solitary old man limping down the road, a typical McCarthy mystic who calls himself "Ely," the boy insists they share some of their food with him even though they have none to spare. Ely, for his part, is dumbfounded, but he takes the food. When the man says he should thank the boy because he would not have been so generous, Ely replies that he would not have shared his food either, had he any, but asks if it will hurt the boy's feelings. The man responds:

No. That's not why he did it.

Why did he do it?

He looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man. You wouldn't understand, he said. I'm not sure I do.<sup>70</sup>

The father sees in his son a glimmer of something he thinks may have been lost in the world forever. The boy's concern for others, his insistence that the two of them continually affirm their status as "the good guys," for now and for always, becomes apparent in this exchange and develops over the later stages of their journey.

Following them, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the possibility that their journey is as much or more a metaphysical one as a geographical one. Confronting a thief who has stolen their food, clothes, and blankets, the father orders the man to strip naked before them and leaves, even taking the man's shoes. The child is distraught. He complains that the man they've accosted was hungry and scared. The man responds that he is going to die. The child cannot comprehend this and the man loses his patience: "I'm scared, he said. Do you

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 173.

understand? I'm scared." In his moment of anger, he snaps at the boy: "You're not the one who has to worry about everything." And it is here that the boy's response sets the tone for the duration of their relationship. In a manner reminiscent of Christ's response to his mother's objection when he goes to the temple to speak to the learned men (Luke 2:49-52), the boy is immovable. "Yes I am, he said. I am the one."<sup>71</sup> The boy hints here at knowing something about the future that has never been spoken between them—that he will ultimately carry the mantle of responsibility for all that has been done for his survival, and everything that is to come.

The odds of the man and the boy surviving as long as they have or making it as far as they do cannot be attributed merely to luck or even skill. They buoy their spirits repeatedly with small reaffirmations of their code and their mission. The boy continually seeks to reaffirm whether the two are, after all, "the good guys." Further, the two have a sort of mantra they continually repeat between them "We are carrying the fire."<sup>72</sup> The fire in question is never explained by either character. What is known is that they are seeking other "good guys" and the father assures his son they are out there and that, when they find them, they too will be carrying the fire. They agree that to find these people they must be vigilant and to this end the father increasingly empowers the boy to make decisions, and to take on greater responsibility for navigating their way. He has good reason for this.

As their journey progresses and the man becomes increasingly weak, conversations between he and the boy become increasingly difficult to disentangle. Shifts between third and first person in the narrative become more and more difficult to decipher. But a pattern emerges. In a manner reminiscent of phrasing found in *Blood Meridian* and certain sequences found in The Border Trilogy, McCarthy introduces the idea of succession in *The Road*, of a line of fathers

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>72</sup> Instances are found in the novel at 83, 216, 278, 283.

and sons stretching back through time and sitting in judgement on the present. Whereas the earlier works portray this judgement in a largely negative sense in *The Road*, perhaps due to the uniquely brutal circumstances attending the man in his fight to protect his son, they are more forgiving. I quote them here in series.

He kicked holed in the sand for the boy's hips and shoulders where he would sleep and he sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.<sup>73</sup>

Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground.<sup>74</sup>

He rose and built back the fire and sat beside the boy and pulled the blankets over him and brushed back his filthy hair. I think maybe they are watching, he said. They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back.<sup>75</sup>

He lay watching the boy at the fire. He wanted to be able to see. Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right.<sup>76</sup>

What is distinctive about this series of passages is not simply the interruption of the narrative voice with the voice of the man, but also a developing theme. For the man, one of his great tasks as a parent is to try to be both a guardian and a mentor. How does one educate a child in this world? The truths of the old world, complete with its "old stories of courage and justice," have little meaning here.<sup>77</sup> And yet, perhaps they do. The "fathers"—watching for some sign that all good has not gone out of the world—do not completely withdraw. In the father's determination to provide his son with a reason to endure, he makes a spiritual connection with the transcendent.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 41.



And perhaps in doing so he establishes a means of transcendence for his son once he has gone on.

In a manner very similar to that presented in *No Country for Old Men*, the efforts of the father to fill his son with hope and a will to endure in *The Road* present the reader with a sort of existential philosophy for a world in which God observes, but cannot intervene in human affairs. In this sense, God comes to stand as a witness. The narrative never makes clear whether God is represented here as one of the “fathers” or not. Perhaps these are merely the lesser “prophets” mentioned above. If so, then they would correspond very directly to the dream of Ed Tom Bell at the conclusion of *No Country for Old Men*, in which the assistance of the ancestors becomes a mysterious image of hope. In the final scenes of *The Road*, the father knows he is near death and pulls the boy to him to give him his final instructions:

You have to carry the fire.  
I don't know how to.  
Yes you do.  
Is it real? The fire?  
Yes it is.  
Where is it? I don't know where it is.  
Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. . . . You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to you. You'll see.<sup>78</sup>

Once again the image of the closely held sacred fire being passed from fathers to sons invokes McCarthy's most hopeful theme: a transcendent order that cannot be extinguished by the ravages of the dying world. In McCarthy's world, justice is never upheld by the intervention of divine powers. The carried fire is fragile and its journey perilous. Though always in danger, it remains all that stand between mankind and the dark and cold of the world.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 278-279.

## Conclusion

The political and philosophical resonance in McCarthy's philosophy of narrative is inherent. At its core, McCarthy's entire narrative enterprise begins with the most basic of questions: *Who is man?* To explore this question McCarthy creates worlds of fiction in which man is generally the least known aspect of the landscape. His characters frequently "threaten to become eerily unselfconscious" due to their lack of transparency.<sup>1</sup> Little is discernible in them as to their intellect, reason, or motive. As Bell states, "we remain as mystified and as suspended as they are in a seemingly perpetual hermeneutic adventure."<sup>2</sup> Thus, to attempt generalization in a political analysis of McCarthy's novels one must deal with a vision of man in which very little information is available in the way of emphatic statements or interior monologues on the part of his characters. This problem is further complicated by the nature of his impersonal narrative voice. The reader is presented with a field of vision that is acutely precise, detailing mundane human acts of work with exacting specificity in a baroque and highly technical vocabulary. And yet, for all the care lavished on the direct narrator's presentation of *how?* in the novels, the question of *why?* remains "tantalizingly obscure."<sup>3</sup> Thus, to approach an answer to the question of *Who is man?* in McCarthy's fiction, it becomes necessary to work backward from the available data. Thus, I opened this dissertation with the guiding question of *What does man do?* in McCarthy's novels. In the broad scope of McCarthy's corpus, the most fundamental answer to this question is: *He tells stories.*

Stories and storytelling are signature features in all McCarthy's works. The defining structures of individual and communal existence are revealed largely in anecdote. And while the

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<sup>1</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

meanings of these tales within the narrative often go unremarked by the character hearing them (and perhaps even the character telling them), they often have the quality of prophetic utterance, and McCarthy's reader is right to suspect an attempt to express some deep and mystic truth about the world beyond the text. The stories within McCarthy's texts consistently hint at the existence of some *other* order in the world, a realm beyond what is known or even knowable to the characters in any specific work. And because McCarthy's novels are so typically devoid of any definitive representations of the state, of formal institutions, or of the legitimate exercise of justice, it is to this hinted at *other realm* that one must turn to make conclusions regarding the political vision of McCarthy's texts. In it, and *only* it, perhaps, can one come to some conclusions regarding the most pervasive themes found in all of McCarthy's work: the omnipresent threat of irrational and nihilistic violence, and the disorienting boundlessness of human freedom unconstrained by traditional norms. Unifying all of these considerations is the increasing significance in McCarthy's more recent works of the idea of the *one tale that is the tale of all*. McCarthy's understanding of man as a narrative being begins to crystalize in a mythic sublimation of man and story, in which the individuality of a specific man at any certain place or time converges with a larger presence: one man becoming a symbolic avatar of all men, and *his* story, such as it is, with *the* story, which is universal.

Having established that narrative is the central theme of McCarthy's political vision, I began my analysis by articulating a set of foundational principles for reading McCarthy politically. In an effort to explain the peculiarities of style and aesthetics that make McCarthy's writing so distinctive, my first chapter examines his first three novels across a set of prominent themes. *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's first published novel, offers a vision of time in which the reader is kept in a state of uncertainty regarding the temporal sequence of events. *Distortion*,

as I term it, expresses this idea. McCarthy's fiction displays an omnipresent concern for memory in the shaping of reality in human experience. From this, his earliest novel, in which we find the protagonist reflecting on a formative period in his life, McCarthy is consistent in his assertion that that which is "true," in a human sense, can only be perceived and expressed in the context of memory and the medium of story. The claims of the past on the present are a powerful check on John Wesley Rattner's freedom of choice. In *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's representation of the gap in the cemetery fence provides a visual metaphor to express the symbolic wrenching apart of the continuity of events that precede John Wesley's moment of praxis. Deciding that he "no longer cared to tell which things were real and which dreamt," John Wesley turns away from the gravestone on which his family name is inscribed, and heads out to the western road and begin his journey.<sup>4</sup>

In a manner similar to *The Orchard Keeper*'s distortion of time, McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, engages in a similar reimagining of space. Here, the parallel journeys of its dual protagonists, the siblings Culla and Rinthy Holme, are presented in a manner that leaves the reader as uncertain as to their location or destination as they appear to be. *Displacement* signifies the manner in which McCarthy uses particular flora and fauna, regional dialect, and a narrative style replete with biblical and mythic overtones, to establish an allegorical space for his characters. Thus, what might appear to be a chronicle of a person's encounters on a journey on a specific road, in a specific region, becomes a mythic exploration of the self's movement through a morally charged—though altogether mysterious—landscape.

In *Child of God*, McCarthy's third published novel, the triad of rules for reading McCarthy is completed with an examination of empathy. The novel's protagonist, Lester Ballard, is a wholly unlovable individual, whose dark sexual proclivities and utter rejection by

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<sup>4</sup> McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 245-246.

the larger community raise extreme difficulties for the reader to identify, let alone empathize with a protagonist in any traditional sense. The brutish deeds and lack of reflection that surround so many of McCarthy's characters are used intentionally to create a sense of discomfort, challenging the established norms of morality and ethics. It is important to note, however, that this is not an effort on McCarthy's part to reconstitute a new foundation for morality. Rather, it is a part of a larger philosophical enterprise, visible in all his works, to challenge the dominant modes of perception and judgement, and subtly move his reader to reconsider his or her suppositions regarding questions of ontology and epistemology. The problematics surrounding the position of man in the world are best analyzed, then, from the perspective of the non-human in his fiction.

The strange alterity of the natural world confronts the horizon of human perspective with a frightening possibility regarding its perceived uniqueness. McCarthy creates a fictional landscape both familiar and strange in all his novels, causing his reader to contemplate the eerie possibility that the world is much more hostile and chaotic than one might think. Nowhere is this more vividly displayed than in *Blood Meridian*. The desert terrain upon which his nameless protagonist joins his fellow scalphunters in enacting a grotesque enterprise of genocide is of a piece with the orgies of violence found throughout. The "desert absolute" of the novel's setting is endowed with certain characteristics, paralleling the moral ambivalence of its characters.<sup>5</sup> It is a world governed purely by force and indifference, and it does not have the capacity to care. The natural laws of chaotic force and destruction that govern the events of the novel throw a pale light on any attempts to constrain them through the use of human art. So much of what is taken as natural by the characters in the novel: the legibility of the terrain, the pacification of aboriginal violence through "legitimate" allocation of force by the sovereign state, the ethos of Manifest

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<sup>5</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 307.

Destiny, becomes spurious. The total lack of preference for right or good is visible in this world, and the novel manages to elevate this nihilistic indifference to operatic and apocalyptic levels. This “optical democracy” of the human and nonhuman spheres creates a strong impression for the reader that what can be known by human perception or reason is ultimately a fleeting anomaly of consciousness and of no importance at all. The demonic Judge Holden argues persuasively that, despite man’s deeply held desire to find some mystery in the world that could, by its existence, hold open the possibility of the divine, “the mystery is that there is no mystery.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, for all the force of his argument, and the support it finds in the gang’s bloody deeds notwithstanding, one final mystery remains, and this is found in the kid’s ultimate failure to lose his humanity.

*Blood Meridian*’s indictment of human reason as a legacy of enlightenment philosophy charted to its logical conclusion is most clearly visible in its presentation of history. Using actual historical events as the subject matter of the novel enables McCarthy to create an interesting dialectic between that which has *actually* happened, and that which has been created by mythopoesis. Finding a cast-off piece of armor from the Spanish Conquests, the Judge sketches it in his book and then tosses the artifact into the fire. In this, I find an allegory for McCarthy’s view of history and myth: that every representation of the past is, to some extent, a destruction of it. To create a world with language is an inherently *violent* act, because what is, or what *was*, is replaced by its representation. And this is made all the more problematic by the contemporary regard for “objective” historical facts. If we see the events of the past shaping the present and discern in these a motive or a movement—something we might call “progress”—we lose sight of the inherent limitations of our horizon. But it would be a misreading of *Blood Meridian* to conclude that its philosophical vision calls us to reject any notions of moral progress, siding with

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 262.

Judge Holden's Nietzschean position on morality: as an "invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak."<sup>7</sup> However compelling its villain, the notion that the universe is all chaos and force, while persuasive, is not its final statement.

Whether in the words of its characters or the voice of its omniscient narrator, *Blood Meridian* is replete with references to the necessity of a witness in substantiating the verity of any interaction between two impersonal "vectors," or independent human agents. Whether in the context of a clash in the desert, in which "the hearts and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up and carried off by another," or a verbal dispute between two "principals," contesting ownership a matter of property, the outcome of any exchange can only be legitimated by the testimony of some uninterested third party, or witness. The text of *Blood Meridian* tends to express this notion in either legal verbiage or terms familiar to the philosophic school of phenomenology. In later works, however, the idea of witnessing is increasingly endowed with moral and spiritual significance. In *The Crossing*, witnessing comes to represent a narrative exchange: the interaction between speaker and hearer, a telling and retelling of a story in which meaning and value are imperfectly transmitted *ad infinitum*. This formulation constitutes a matured version of McCarthy's concept of narrative, in which the image of the solitary man journeying down a road is expanded to include a moral and ethical dimension when he encounters another. In a world as violent as McCarthy's, one might well expect that the outcome of such an encounter would inevitably result in one party's killing of the other simply for his being there, but this would be incorrect. McCarthy's later fiction displays an increasing concern for those areas of human existence that can transcend the horizon of mortality.

The formulation of interpolated tales-within-tales becomes an essential component of the human experience in The Border Trilogy. In *The Crossing*, the trilogy's second work, these are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 261.

seen to constitute a form of expressing the human relationship to the Divine. In the midst of a collapsed church in the Mexican village of Huisiachepic, Billy Parham encounters an anchorite who, in telling him the tale of another man, a pensioner who had gone to *another* fallen church in *another* Mexican town, Caborca, to dare God to kill him. In this story, the heretic encounters a priest, “both of them heretics to the bone.”<sup>8</sup> The heretic refuses to convert and the priest’s mind “had become clouded by the illusion of its proximity to God.”<sup>9</sup> In the course of hearing the pensioner’s tale, in which the act of witnessing figures prominently, the interconnectedness of all lives and that life itself is in fact a story.<sup>10</sup>

In the telling and retelling of stories, or witnessing the journeys of others and then passing on what has been seen, the solipsism of the lone man on a journey becomes a tapestry of words and flesh, and this, Billy is told, is the fabric of the world. “Ultimately every man’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell.”<sup>11</sup> As for the relationship between the immanent sphere and that of the Divine, this scene and others found throughout *The Border Trilogy* present a vision of God “weaving the world” and much removed from the affairs of men.<sup>12</sup> “A God who seemed a slave to his own selfordained duties. A God with a fathomless capacity to bend all to an inscrutable purpose. Not chaos itself lay outside of that matrix.”<sup>13</sup> It is in this telling and retelling of stories, of witnessing and being witnessed by others, that McCarthy’s heretofore bleak vision begins to entertain a notion of hope, albeit a very precarious one. The spiritual imperative to engage in this matrix, to accept that all interactions are moral and that the *other* is

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<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



not in fact a stranger, but one's brother, is an expression of McCarthy's tragic understanding of the human condition.

In the world of McCarthy's fiction, the horizon of the gods remains an inscrutable and capricious mystery. The romantic attachment to freedom of movement and moral autonomy sought by his cowboy protagonists in *The Border Trilogy* is constantly circumscribed by the vicissitudes of fate. The image of the border itself carries with it an implied sense of transgression, in which the outcome of any choice has consequences far exceeding the considerations of the moment, and they are often terrifyingly violent. In McCarthy's unsentimental vision, justice is seldom aligned with virtue. In pursuing the objects of their desire, his protagonists feel themselves protected by a blanket of good intention and basic decency, but this armor proves inadequate to shield them when they cross over into the "other" world represented by Mexico. Here their expectations of finding a truly authentic experience of natural freedom is thwarted by a worldview that harbors no notion of right, and no sense of law beyond *kill or be killed*. The lawless frontier becomes less a proving ground for the will as a battleground for the soul.

Of all McCarthy's novels, *All the Pretty Horses* is perhaps the most readily classified as a work of genre fiction. Its teenaged protagonist, John Grady Cole, fits readily into the mold of the romantic hero, a certified cowboy in a story that features many of the classic tropes of the American Western. It is fitting, then, to examine McCarthy's take on heroism for insights into the political concept of agency. As a romantic hero, John Grady is easily one of McCarthy's most sympathetic characters. His virtue inheres in his sincerity, his instinctive desire to seek out and protect innocence, and his inability to compromise with anything he perceives as false, even unto death.

What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise.<sup>14</sup>

His journey to Mexico is motivated by his dissatisfaction over his family's changing circumstances. His desire to reclaim for himself the free life of the cowboy leads him to run away to Mexico, pursuing of a vision of freedom defined by an absence of conventional restraint. What he finds in Mexico, however, is a world in which he does not ultimately belong. While John Grady is able to taste the promise of this other, better world momentarily in his brief romance with Alejandra, he fails to recognize that in doing so, he has crossed a line. And it is here that *All the Pretty Horses* loses much of its apparent affinity for the tradition of the western and reveals instead its affinities for classical tragedy. Almost instantly, the splendid natural beauty of the hacienda is replaced by the brutal flatness of the desert and this is equally true at the level of politics and philosophy. While the choices that lead John Grady to the Saltillo prison may not have been obvious to him at the time, they were made nonetheless. Everything that follows, whether described by the interplay of chance and fate in the deterministic philosophy of the Dueña Alfonsa, or the more gnostic pronouncements of the prison kingpin, Pérez, who declares "Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe someday it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has," reveals that the romantic pursuit of individual autonomy will be thwarted by a world that insists on being what it is.<sup>15</sup> This is a world intent on trying to break the courageous, and willing to kill those who will not bend or break. John Grady will not bend, but in this refusal displays a form of tragic heroism. In McCarthy's world, agency is difficult to perceive. The choice of *resistance* is as close to heroic action as McCarthy's chaotic universe will permit. Nevertheless, the recognition of this necessity to resist is shown to

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<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

be all the more meaningful for what it costs. And this faint glimmer of hope, always imperiled, comes to symbolize the hope of order amidst chaos in the world of McCarthy's fiction.

Throughout all of his fiction, but especially in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, McCarthy teases the issue of order itself, though never eclipsing the classical formulations of *right order* or the *good life*. The lack of any possibility for eudaimonia seems telling in this regard. There appears to be no better life possible for men—but this question is entertained again and again throughout all of McCarthy's later fiction, usually from the mouths of solitary oracles and storytellers. Justice in McCarthy's world begins as the omnipresent concern for naming responsibility. This theme, found throughout his early fiction, and on into *The Border Trilogy*, is the verdict pronounced on his journeying (or fleeing) protagonists by predatory agents of retribution. They demand an accounting, and their knowledge of evil is near omniscient. As a principle of order in McCarthy's fiction, justice cannot be confined to strict or essentialist definitions. The cosmos of McCarthy's fiction depicts world-immanent justice meted out in the most extreme terms, violence and death from without is the end result for almost every case of internal evil. The hope for a more humane (one might say "civilized") order in McCarthy's fiction comes from beyond the immanent sphere in the form of a precarious lamp: a fire carried forward into the dark and cold with only the frailest chance of survival.

The humane world of McCarthy's fiction, ultimately, is doomed. These are the things we leave behind: inscrutable cave paintings, a few buildings, many of our assumptions about human society and a structured ordered whole in the cosmos. Whether our intentions are swallowed up in the "desert absolute" of the Southwestern border country, or in the "spectral waste" of a swamp somewhere in the old Confederacy, "a faintly smoking garden of the dead," matters

little.<sup>16</sup> McCarthy uses these “landscapes of the damned” to impart a sense of the utter inconsequentiality of human existence, but in doing so he creates a vacuum into which solitary acts of decency shine like torch fire. McCarthy offers no solutions for salvation and thus the rare glimpses of hope and redemption he offers stand forward with luminous intensity.

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<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, *Outer Dark*, 242.

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## **Vita**

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