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Cormac McCarthy and the Cities of God, Man and the Plain

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE MAIN TEXT

Cormac McCarthy:

<i>ATPH</i>	<i>All the Pretty Horses</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>Blood Meridian</i>
<i>COG</i>	<i>Child of God</i>
<i>COTP</i>	<i>Cities of the Plain</i>
<i>NCFOM</i>	<i>No Country for Old Men</i>
<i>OD</i>	<i>Outer Dark</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Suttree</i>
<i>TC</i>	<i>The Crossing</i>
<i>TGS</i>	<i>The Gardener's Son</i>
<i>TOK</i>	<i>The Orchard Keeper</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>The Road</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>The Stonemason</i>
<i>TSL</i>	<i>The Sunset Limited</i>
"WAM"	<i>Whales and Men</i>

In addition, drafts from the McCarthy Archive are identified by the relevant box and file number. Occasionally, page numbers may be underlined, double-underlined or triple-underlined.

Eric Voegelin:

<i>A</i>	<i>Anamnesis</i>
<i>CW5</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 5: Modernity Without Restraint</i>
<i>CW11</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 11: Published Essays 1953-1965</i>
<i>CW12</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 12: Published Essays 1966-1985</i>
<i>CW28</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 28: What is History?</i>
<i>CW29</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 29: Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949</i>
<i>CW30</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 30: Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984</i>
<i>CW33</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 33 Drama of Humanity</i>
<i>CW34</i>	<i>Collected Works Volume 34: Autobiographical Reflections</i>
<i>FETR</i>	<i>From Enlightenment to Revolution</i>
<i>NSP</i>	<i>The New Science of Politics: An Introduction</i>
"OT"	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism. In The Review of Politics</i>
<i>OH1</i>	<i>Order and History Volume 1: Israel and Revelation</i>
<i>OH3</i>	<i>Order and History Volume 3: Plato and Aristotle</i>
<i>OH4</i>	<i>Order and History Volume 4: The Ecumenic Age</i>
<i>OH5</i>	<i>Order and History Volume 5: In Search of Order</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Political Religions</i>
<i>SPG</i>	<i>Science, Politics and Gnosticism: Two Essays</i>

ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy seeks to understand human community, the bonds of love which mark humanity, and the impact when those bonds are broken. Throughout his career, however, his work has increasingly focused on a quest for some spiritual core to existence, unfolding against a backdrop of modernity in crisis. These preoccupations can be read in the context of St Augustine's *City of Man* and the search for passage into the *City of God*: there is the dualistic nature of man, with his ability to love and his capacity for destructiveness, driven by the promise of salvation beyond the material realm.

I examine what appears to be a sustained sense of hostility in McCarthy's fiction to modernity. I use the philosophy of Eric Voegelin to demonstrate that McCarthy's fiction synthesises elements of what Voegelin describes as modern gnosticism, a sense that modern humanity has usurped God and seeks to establish an immanent heaven-on-earth. These preoccupations begin to dominate McCarthy's writing and, in his continual search for passage to the City of God, he begins to lose those notions of community which informed his earlier work.

McCarthy's understanding of human community is acute and challenging. *Suttree* is a search for love, meaning and redemption in a hostile world. However, when his preoccupation with spiritual understanding is at its fullest, notably in *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*, it runs the risk of overwhelming the narrative. There is, in the relentless malignancy of judge Holden or the failed prophets of the *Trilogy*, a tendency towards didacticism which ultimately compromises the fiction. Therefore, despite the consensus among most McCarthy scholars that *Blood Meridian* is his masterpiece, I argue that it is flawed. Moreover, it marks a development in his writing which means that, in subsequent fiction, he fails to reach the heights achieved in *Suttree*.

INTRODUCTION

The World I've Seen Has Not Made Me A Spiritual Person

The worlds created by Cormac McCarthy present a crisis in modernity, in which a hubristic humanity has sought to usurp God and establish an immanent heaven-on-earth, and in which a loss of connection with its spiritual core has left humanity dangerously disposed to evil. McCarthy's entire oeuvre can be read as a palimpsestic metaphysical search for the truth of what it is to be human. In prosecuting this analysis, he begins to explore deeply uncomfortable provinces of the human experience. He examines life and death, love and fear, good and evil, tradition and modernity, science and nature, rational and supernatural, an understanding of the before and the beyond, the ultimate questions. He appears to do so, simultaneously, as a scientist, a philosopher and a pilgrim. He evinces a profound love of but ambivalence towards the idea of a God. Everywhere in McCarthy one sees apparent contradictions, an exploration of the same questions from different standpoints, always seemingly seeking the same thing, some Rosetta Stone through which to interpret what human beings are. These contradictions make McCarthy a difficult read: he appears to be a rationalist mystic, a pessimistic optimist, a spiritual scientist, a heretical believer. They also, ultimately, compromise the quality of his fiction as his metaphysical preoccupations and scepticism about the nature of modernity come to overwhelm his narrative. Of all the unsettling prophets who inhabit his fiction, it may be Cormac McCarthy himself who is the most unsettling.

His earliest works are studies in community, or rather a particular sense of community often highlighted through its lack, such as the tale of the feral Uncle Ather in *The Orchard Keeper*, the descent of the psychotic Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, the social outcasts Rinthy and Culla in *Outer Dark*, and Buddy Suttree and his gang of

reprobates in *Suttree*. These novels, southern in setting and feel, are rooted in the human realm, the City of Man.

With McCarthy's southwestern turn, starting with *Blood Meridian* and concluding with the Border Trilogy, one begins to see a different focus. If the southern works are stories from the City of Man, then *Blood Meridian* undoubtedly resides in a city of the plain, a hell on Earth in which all conception of humanity or community or goodness or decency has been obliterated.¹ The Border Trilogy picks up this troubled story of the west one hundred years later and, while the inhumanity has undoubtedly dissipated, it is clear that a capacity for violence remains. The Trilogy represents a sustained search for access from the travails of the City of Man, that in-between state, towards the City of God. While goodness is unrealisable in *Blood Meridian*, it remains a tantalising possibility in the Trilogy. With McCarthy's subsequent fiction, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, there is a further exploration of the possibility of goodness, of the viability of ascent to the City of God. The prognosis, however, is not optimistic. As Sheriff Bell says in *No Country*, "*The world I've seen has not made me a spiritual person [his italics]*" (303).²

In this thesis I wish to explore the preoccupations of one of America's leading literary figures. McCarthy is a deeply spiritual writer whose fiction can be read as a systematic exploration of a series of interlinked questions: to what extent can humans be said to exercise free will? Does free will (or its lack) intersect with the evil that exists in the world? Is modernity to blame for these evils? What is death? Who, where and what is God? And what is there before this existence and, most pertinently, after our mortal measure has been made? In attempting to answer these questions Cormac

¹ The cities of the plain are Sodom and Gomorrah, so called in both the *Bible* and the *Koran*. Yahweh condemned both cities to destruction by fire and brimstone. They thus have become symbolic of sin and the fall. The *City of Man* and the *City of God* are terms coined by St Augustine of Hippo to identify the realm of humanity and the realm of the divine.

² Most of Sheriff Bell's monologues in *No Country For Old Men* are italicised. Hereafter, quotes from Sheriff Bell can be presumed to be italicised in the original unless otherwise stated.

McCarthy restlessly explores the cities of Man, God and the plain in search of the human soul itself. Through this search, he may be revealed as the most existentially afraid writer in present-day American letters and his natural pessimism comes to infuse his writing. Nonetheless, even in this darkness some sense of hope seems to impel him. Although he appears to believe it impossible, through his characters he continues to search for access to a beyond, some transcendent realm, the residence of a greater spirit, presumably because, however impossible that journey may be, the alternative is even more unimaginable. Over and over in his fiction he presents an analysis of free will and the possibility of redemption. This search for redemption typically fails. It must, because the 1958 twenty-five cent piece the author uses to play out his coin toss with destiny appears to be double-headed.

Template For The World

Albert Einstein is often misquoted as saying, as though he were some precocious undergraduate, that “[r]eality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.” The genuine quote is more profound. In a letter to the family of his friend, the engineer Michele Besso, following his death in 1955, he wrote:

He has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubborn illusion. (Quoted in Isaacson 540)

This is the illusion which haunts the work of Cormac McCarthy. His fictional universe is a troubled and troubling space. It is famously dark, embracing necrophilia, incest, the prosecution of murder on an industrial scale, evil in its manifold forms and, in his most recent novel, a post-apocalyptic living hell. But these events, however distressing, are merely the *physical* manifestations of the darkness of McCarthy’s

vision. Beneath the violence and mayhem which subsists throughout his fiction is something darker yet, and it resides at that nexus articulated by Einstein and pondered by artists for millennia. It is, in T.S. Eliot's words, "the point of intersection of the timeless with time" (*Poems* 199). William Blake suggests a similar sense when he describes the material world as a "sea of time and space" (337). This rootlessness of humanity in history occurs again and again in McCarthy's fiction, and a particularly clear articulation of it is given by the narrator to Billy Parham at the conclusion of *Cities of the Plain*:

But what is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more. When you look at the world is there a point in time when the seen becomes the remembered? How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show. It is that which is missing from our map and from the picture that it makes. And yet it is all we have. (273)

The narrator goes on to explore this territory at length. "The world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand generations and more," he tells Billy. "What has no past can have no future" (281). With this, McCarthy is beginning to articulate a sense of the timelessness of time, the unstoppable flux of history, what it is to be a part of this world. The present is inextricably linked to both the past and the future, and time becomes an "everywhen" in which the continued presence of human ancestors, the ancients, is palpable. Reminders of these ancients are everywhere in McCarthy's fiction, in pictographs and paintings, troughs hewn from stone, the ancient Knoxville lying coterminous with that present-day city inhabited by Buddy Suttree. In a recent radio broadcast discussing the Chauvet cave paintings in France, McCarthy stated, "artefacts come from cultures. You have to have the culture first" (*Science Friday*). Werner Herzog, in the same broadcast, called the Chauvet paintings the "origins of the modern human soul". Thus, one can see McCarthy uses these references to the

ancients in order to help define who we are as modern human beings. For him, they represent our continuing existence in this earthly realm. This sense of time as an image of the eternal springs from antiquity. In particular, it features in Plato's *Timaeus*:

[God] resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call time. For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he created them also. (37-38)

And now time, as a human construct, used to describe the human experience, becomes separated from the notion of God. Before the creation, God existed but time, because it is merely an image, did not. And after the apocalypse, when all returns to Godness, time will cease to exist again. McCarthy explores this in *Cities of the Plain*, too, when the narrator tells Billy:

At the core of our life is the history of which it is composed and in that core are no idioms but only the act of knowing and it is this we share in dreams and out. Before the first man spoke and after the last is silenced forever. (281)

This hints at a major preoccupation of McCarthy's fiction, the sense that existence is an in-between state, bounded by the existential poles of a Before and a Beyond. This in-between state is our worldly existence, Eliot's point of intersection, and humanity remains fixed within it, while constantly straining to understand, even glimpse, what exists beyond its limits, both before and after time. As well as references to the ancients, then, McCarthy's works are replete with references to some atavistic time-before-time, from the ancient beings in *The Orchard Keeper* to the vanished seas of *Child of God*, Suttree's hallucinated snapping saurians and the nightmare landscape

that begins *The Road*. Thus, there are prehistoric, even pre-cosmic, images which, for a particular, reactionary strand of philosophical thought, are resonant of a spiritual underpinning to existence. Such thought comes increasingly to influence McCarthy's writing.

In the context of these limiting poles of a time-before-time and time-after-time, there is a sense that McCarthy's characters are trapped in their earthly existence. This is interpreted by many critics as being symptomatic of their (and, by extension, our) entrapment in a gnostic hell-on-Earth.³ While such gnostic interpretations are valuable, they do not address the full range of McCarthy's preoccupations. In particular, I would suggest that McCarthy's concerns in his fiction are entirely modern and, as I will demonstrate in Chapter One, if his work is a critique of anything it must surely be a critique of modernity. Thus, parsing it in terms of long-dead religious sects seems unconvincing. Other critics suggest either nihilist or existentialist interpretations. The charge of nihilism was first laid against McCarthy by Vereen Bell (*Achievement*) in 1988 although exemplary criticism, from Edwin Arnold onwards, has largely countered this. One more recent critic who still suggests nihilistic leanings is D.S. Butterworth, who writes of a "quasi-nihilistic void" (136) in *Suttree* due to the novel's "dehumanized view" (137) brought on by its consistent equating of humans with inanimate objects. In terms of existentialism, William Prather gives acute readings of *The Orchard Keeper* ("Glass" 37ff) and *Suttree* in terms of Camus's existential philosophy of the absurd, noting, for example, that "clearly, the universe depicted in *Suttree* is existential" ("Absurd" 104). Meanwhile David Holloway's Marxian analysis of McCarthy draws heavily on the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre (*Modernism*), while Dianne Luce argues convincingly in terms of existential

³ The first serious discussion of gnostic influences in McCarthy is in Leo Daugherty's essay "Gravers False and True". John Grammer deals with the subject in "A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail". More recently Dianne Luce has produced a study of gnostic tendencies in McCarthy's early southern writing in *Reading the World*. Petra Mundik has completed a couple of explorations of McCarthy's gnosticism, focusing specifically on *The Crossing* and *Blood Meridian*.

themes throughout her corpus of fine McCarthy criticism. Even so, these analyses seem deficient in terms of understanding the range of McCarthy's references.

Rather, I would suggest that McCarthy is exploring the tension of existence within an earthly realm while seeking knowledge of, and even a path towards, transcendence from it. A more useful framework for examining this tension, I would argue, is the work of German philosopher Eric Voegelin, who adapted from Plato the term *metaxy* to describe our living world and coined the expression *modern gnosticism* to express what he saw as a degradation of contemporary spiritual life as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the resulting secularisation of human society. This concept of modern gnosticism, I will argue in Chapter One, is a more useful framework through which to examine McCarthy's preoccupations than the ancient gnostics cited by many McCarthy scholars. For both McCarthy and Voegelin, the modern world is a dangerous place in which humanity has somehow lost its connection to its spiritual core. Life on Earth becomes troubled and troublesome. This serves only to increase the need, for both men, to fashion some means of reconnecting with that spiritual core and, through so doing, creating the possibility of redemption and transcendence.

A crucial means of effecting this is the use of myth and symbol. Myth-making appears to have been central to the human experience for as long as they have been capable of abstract thought. The Chauvet caves suggest a complex mythology based around animals, for example, and mythology has been used for millennia to try to understand and explain our place in the cosmos and our human history. McCarthy's profound use of mythology will be explored in Chapter Two. For Voegelin, human history is "a mystery in process of revelation" and humanity is "existence in tension toward divine reality" (*OH4* 6). Mirroring this quest for knowledge, I will further explore in Chapter Three how, increasingly in his work, McCarthy and his characters strain for evidence of and access to God. This symbolic search for understanding is called by Voegelin "the Question", that quest for something to make our human

condition explicable which has been at the root of human mythology as far back as recorded history permits (*OH4* 330ff).⁴ I would suggest that McCarthy's fiction is littered with characters seeking answers to "the Question." For example, in *Cities of the Plain*, the narrator says to Billy:

The template for the world and all in it was drawn long ago. Yet the story of the world, which is all the world we know, does not exist outside of the instruments of its execution. Nor can those instruments exist outside of their own history. And so on. This life of yours is not a picture of the world. It is the world itself and it is composed not of bone or dream or time but of worship. Nothing else can contain it. Nothing else be by it contained. (287)

In other words, some means of understanding the mystery is required. For that, McCarthy's characters go in search of the divine.

A Doll. A Dish. A Bone. Searching For God

John Cant describes McCarthy as "a religious writer in a Godless world" (15). While there is some truth in this, perhaps *spiritual* would be a better term. McCarthy's stated view on his religious belief, as described to Oprah Winfrey, is that it depends which day it is; and yet religion is undoubtedly woven into the fabric of each of his novels. In terms of *organised* religion, however, his work consistently gives an impression of impotence. Ruined churches litter his landscape, while the rejection of Lester Ballard by the church congregation in *Child of God* leads to his exile and extraordinary decline – a modern-day washing of hands.

⁴ It is also consonant with Martin Heidegger's ontological enquiries into human existence (*Dasein*).

Questions of spirituality therefore become central to McCarthy's vision. Allied to this is his characters' search for knowledge of what and where God is, and of what he is and is not capable. This comes increasingly to dominate McCarthy's fiction, particularly in the Border Trilogy, in which there is a quest for knowledge of and access to the City of God. In *The Crossing*, the most overtly religious of the three novels, Billy Parham is confronted by a series of almost interchangeable and largely impotent prophets whose concern for Billy in the face of incomprehensible cosmic forces is reminiscent of Eliphaz and Bildad offering their futile advice to Job in the *Book of Job*. In *Cities of the Plain* the Blind Maestro, the most tedious character in the whole of McCarthy's oeuvre, plays an identical role, as does Ely in *The Road*.⁵ In McCarthy's dramas and screenplays, meanwhile, the search for knowledge of the beyond becomes ever more pressing, overwhelming Ben in *The Stonemason*, confusing both Black and White in *The Sunset Limited* and forming the basis of numerous conversations in the unpublished screenplay "Whales and Men". The heretic in *The Crossing* could stand as spokesman for them all with his plaintive explanation to Billy:

I was seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world. I had come to believe that hand a wrathful one and I thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction. Into disasters of a certain magnitude. I thought there might be evidence that had been overlooked. I thought He would not trouble himself to wipe away every handprint. My desire to know was very strong. I thought it might even amuse Him to leave some clue. (142)

Of course, he finds "[n]othing. A doll. A dish. A bone" (142). Nonetheless, much of McCarthy's fiction is premised on just such a search, an outlet from the City of Man into the City of God. What becomes increasingly evident, however, is that if the hand

⁵ Most critics tend to equate Ely with the prophet Elijah, but it is equally possible he could be related to Eliphaz.

of God is not a wrathful one, the hand of humanity all too often is. The in-between world of the *metaxy* is a fraught, often hostile environment. Few McCarthy characters experience happiness, and none of them do so for long.

The Source Of Evil Must Be Ourselves

McCarthy's western phase begins with one of the most violent novels ever written, *Blood Meridian*. Famously, Harold Bloom failed to complete it on his first two readings (Bloom *Introduction* vii) although he has subsequently become one of its greatest champions. For Bloom, the "continuous massacres and mutilations" are "appalling", yet the book is "magnificen[t]" and "none of its carnage is gratuitous or redundant" (viii). He may be correct that the violence is not gratuitous but I would argue that, such is its scale, such is its overwhelming, repulsive, ultimately repetitive, nature, the law of redundancy assuredly *must* apply. Long before its conclusion, much of the novel's graphic detail becomes banal. Perhaps, echoing Hannah Arendt, that is McCarthy's intention.⁶ But, if so, then one must be clear that Arendt's point is that the banality of evil resides foremost in those criminals who *commit* it, not in individuals who are forced either to endure or view it. Such criminals, like the Glanton gang in *Blood Meridian*, become so inured to overwhelming violence and cruelty they no longer ascribe any moral judgement to it: and it is this banality to which Arendt refers. While such a definition of banality *can* be argued to apply in *Blood Meridian* – the complicity of those in authority who must have suspected what the Gang were up to must inevitably leave them vulnerable to the same charge of evil – the true banality of *Blood Meridian* is of a different order: its repetitive violence numbs the senses to such a degree that, long before the end, the message has already been transmitted so

⁶ As I shall explore in Chapter Five, McCarthy is well aware of Arendt's phrase and appropriated it for one of his characters in an early draft of "Whales and Men".

clearly, consistently and repeatedly there is no more message to deliver. Yet still it will not desist. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

It can be seen, then, that evil is one of the overriding concerns of McCarthy's fiction. It is evident in his earlier works, too, of course, particularly in the acts of Lester Ballard and of the triune of *Child of God*, but it is in *Blood Meridian* that McCarthy gives free rein to his exploration of how the City of Man can descend into a city of the plain. And, from this moment, the study of evil becomes a key McCarthian trope: humanity has an inherent capacity for evil and it has existed throughout our history and prehistory and it will regularly re-emerge and triumph in times of societal rupture. One of the epigraphs in *Blood Meridian*, citing a news report detailing evidence of a 300,000 year-old scalping gives evidence of its inherency, while the gang warfare that underlies *No Country for Old Men* provides a clear indicator that, for McCarthy, evil remains endemic to mankind. In "Whales and Men" the central character, Peter, talks at considerable length about the nature of evil. "I knew enough biology that I couldn't attribute evil to animals," he says. "I knew that a shark attack was not a manifestation of evil but simply of hunger.... [I]t appeared to me that the source of evil must be in ourselves" (54).

This, of course, could be read as a straightforward description of the Roman Catholic conception of original sin.⁷ However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, time and again in McCarthy this original sin is specifically and deliberately located within *modern* humanity and a *modern* outlook. Thus, in his analysis of evil, McCarthy is prosecuting once more a critique of modernity. While, in *Blood Meridian*, the barbarity is equally shared between the Indians and the whites, nonetheless the sense persists that, in the malignancy of the Nietzschean judge Holden and the laying bare of the reality behind (westernised, modern) Manifest Destiny, McCarthy is offering an appraisal of Enlightenment humanity and its capacity for evil. This is further explored

⁷ McCarthy is a lapsed Roman Catholic.

throughout the Trilogy and then, most pertinently, in *No Country* and *The Road*. In *No Country*, there is no remedy for the evil of humanity; in *The Road*, the troublesome ending of the novel suggests some prospect of transcendence, but only at the expense of humanity as it is currently perceived. Modernity and its results are abjured. There is a sustained assault on the nature of modern humanity.

William Faulkner, one of McCarthy's great influences, suggested the problem for a writer is to:

save mankind from being desouled as the stallion or boar or bull is gelded; to save the individual from anonymity before it is too late and humanity has vanished from the animal called man. (Quoted in Gwynn 245)

In his pursuit of evil, it may be argued that McCarthy comes close to desouling mankind. He reins back, of course, and in Sheriff Bell in *No Country* and the man and the boy in *The Road* there is a conception of humanity that is worth celebrating but, along the way, McCarthy's reactionary critique of post-Enlightenment modernity offers little scope for humanity to flourish.

Yet There Are No Crossroads

There is often a sense, in McCarthy's fiction, that he seeks to have it both ways. He could be characterised as a puppeteer manipulating his characters hither and thither to a dance of his own making. Such is the prerogative of the writer, of course but, as Thomas Mann demonstrates through the binary opposition of Naphta and Settembrini, totalitarian and humanist, in *The Magic Mountain*, philosophical explorations may be entertained while maintaining a semblance of balance. McCarthy's view of modernity, however, is almost universally hostile; his conception of human nature is

overwhelmingly sceptical; his God is absent, perhaps impotent, but still transcendent; his view of life in the *metaxy* is jaundiced. Whenever his characters try to transcend their lot they are repelled. Mostly, they are defeated by their own natures – Lester Ballard and his descent into madness, Uncle Ather’s Canute-like attempt to deny progress, John Grady Cole’s immature idealism – but, in order to ensure the dance is choreographed appropriately, McCarthy attaches to his marionettes a further string, that of determinism.

A study of determinism, then, becomes an increasingly important feature of McCarthy’s philosophy as his career progresses. While the book-ends of *The Orchard Keeper*, presenting a moment from the end of the novel’s chronology as its opening and closing scenes, serve to give a sense of inevitability, and the choices made by Rinthy and Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* inform their progression – for good or ill – through the story, it is only in the later novels that issues of free will come to the fore.

It can be seen in the kid’s actions (and inactions) in *Blood Meridian*, most notably in his refusal to kill the judge when he has the chance. It can be seen in *All the Pretty Horses*, in Rawlins’ futile imprecation to John Grady to leave Blevins behind. It can be seen in *The Crossing* with Boyd and the *corrido* which foretells his fate. And John Grady’s fate is so clearly prescribed in *Cities of the Plain* in truth it becomes a significant structural fault. Even so, lest the point be missed, the narrator repeats it at the end: “Yet there are no crossroads. Our decisions do not have some alternative” (286). This is demonstrated most forcibly in *No Country* where, from the instant he chooses to take the money, Llewelyn Moss is lost. The entire novel is a gradual unfolding of his fate, and there is nothing he, nor anyone else in the novel, can do to alter it. But, while this may make for striking fiction, it is borne out of a weak philosophical basis, because of which McCarthy is forced to manipulate his characters and their actions and the repercussions of those actions in order to prosecute his agenda. In Chapter Four I will explore the ways in which he explores matters of fate.

The concomitant of fate is death, and death is another constant in the work of Cormac McCarthy. According to Richard Woodward, McCarthy's list of good writers "precludes anyone who doesn't 'deal with issues of life and death'" (Woodward) and it is certainly the case that death is at the forefront of all of his works. At its best, this is deeply moving and profound, such as the unimaginable grief which overwhelms Suttree at the death of his son:

Pale manchild were there last agonies? Were you in terror, did you know?
Could you feel the claw that claimed you? And who is this fool kneeling over
your bones, choked with bitterness? And what could a child know of the
darkness of God's plan? Or how flesh is so frail it is hardly more than a
dream. (154)

At other times, however, McCarthy's explorations of mortality slip into portentousness, such as the description of wolves in *The Crossing*: "He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (45). While, on first reading, this may sound impressive, if one removes the high register language the sentiment expressed here is frankly platitudinous. Such contrasts in McCarthy's handling of his themes grow increasingly evident throughout his career.

The Simple Human Heart

In summary, in this thesis I will present a critique of the metaphysical questions posed by the fiction of Cormac McCarthy. His work presents a discontent with modernity and life in the City of Man; it suggests an ongoing search for passage to the City of God; it portrays the susceptibility of mankind to evil and the consequences of that

evil; it creates a pessimistic worldview in which man, while seeking transcendence, seems fated to failure; and it betrays an obsession with death. These combine to present a reactionary view of the modern world, and it is my contention that this moral conservatism ultimately compromises the quality of his fiction.

This is unfortunate because, at his finest, McCarthy is capable of genius. *Suttree* provides a masterful, and largely balanced, evocation of the City of Man, symbolised by 1950s Knoxville and by the character of Buddy Suttree himself. In this novel, McCarthy achieves a perfect balance between humanity and God. His reactionary doubts about the capacity of humanity to achieve goodness remain, and Suttree is a genuinely flawed individual but, more than any other of McCarthy's novels until *The Road*, *Suttree* is a novel that examines the capacity and need for and the achievement of love. Through Suttree's existential crisis, a sense of hope endures, and near the end:

He had divested himself of the little cloaked godlet and his other amulets in a place where they would not be found in his lifetime and he'd taken for talisman the simple human heart within him. (468)

When McCarthy, too, allows himself the luxury of that talisman, his writing ascends to greatness. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I will explore his masterwork in detail because I believe that it is for this novel that he should be remembered.

CHAPTER ONE

In Search Of Modernity

Introduction

The fictional world of Cormac McCarthy is a harrowing place. If external forces are not downright hostile, they are merely indifferent. Love is a rare commodity. It can be seen in its purest form in the man and boy in *The Road*. It can be seen in Llewelyn Moss and Carla Jean in *No Country For Old Men* and between Sheriff Bell and his beloved Loretta. Ben Talfair's devotion to his Papaw in *The Stonemason* is undoubtedly borne of love, while familial ties also bind Martha McEvoy to her brother Robert in *The Gardener's Son*. The emotional attachment of Rinthy to her "little chap" in *Outer Dark* is profound and innate, mirrored by the devastating sense of loss endured by Buddy Suttree at the graveside of his dead son in *Suttree*. Suttree finds romantic love, too, if only briefly, during his liaison with the child-woman Wanda.¹ And surely Billy Parham's connection with the pregnant she-wolf in *The Crossing* represents a love of sorts? But, other than these examples, it is hard to identify true, enduring love across McCarthy's oeuvre. Perhaps John Wesley's attachment to Uncle Ather and Sylder in *The Orchard Keeper* comes close. The relationship between Boyd Parham and the (never named) Mexican girl in *The Crossing*, too, seems to be loving, but it mostly develops outside the narrative so it is difficult to be certain. Some may argue for John Grady Cole and Alejandra or Magdalena in *The Border Trilogy* but, for all his admirable traits, it is hard to accept John Grady as anything other than a selfish and solipsistic teenager infatuated with the *notion* of love, rather than love itself. The idea of John Grady as a romantic hero

¹ This will be covered in more detail in Chapter Six.

strikes me as absurd.² There may be other representations of love, largely involving minor characters, but across a body of work spanning ten novels, two plays, one screenplay and sundry unpublished materials, this is undoubtedly a sparse list. It is overwhelmingly tragic, too: only the love of Sheriff Bell and Loretta remains unencumbered by death while, of the deceased, Papaw alone is permitted an easeful passage at the end of a fruitful life.

And yet Cormac McCarthy is responsible for one of the finest works of American twentieth-century literature, *Suttree*, a raggedly beautiful study of community and love and dignity and respect, made all the more powerful because, unexpectedly, the locus of those noble attributes is the community of deadbeats and down-and-outs who populated 1950s Knoxville. There is nothing starry-eyed or nostalgic about this evocation. On the contrary, the foibles and weaknesses of humanity are shown in sharp relief: but it is through this that its triumphs are also allowed to emerge. *Suttree* is a search for love, meaning and redemption in a changing and hostile world. How, then, can one reconcile the near loveless “neuter austerity” (*BM* 147) which prevails in much of McCarthy’s later work with the humanity that drives *Suttree*? The answer lies in the metaphysical motivations which appear to compel McCarthy, and in the highly critical analysis to which he subjects the modern world.

In this chapter, I will present an overview of McCarthy’s critique of modernity and the attendant spiritual quest on which he embarks in his fiction, and I will show how he establishes the locus of his fictions as the in-between of mortal existence, an existence in tension, straining for access to what lies beyond in the transcendental realm. The chapter will lay the groundwork for the remainder of this thesis, in which I

² I explore the character of John Grady Cole in more detail in a paper, “*A Snare and a Delusion*”: *Constancy and the Character of John Grady Cole in The Border Trilogy*, presented to the Cormac McCarthy Society Conference in Berea, Kentucky, in March 2013. An extended version of the paper will be included in a Cormac McCarthy Society monograph on *All the Pretty Horses* to be published in 2014.

will demonstrate that, as his career progresses, McCarthy begins to lose touch with those notions of community and humanity that informed his earlier work.

An Indispensable Symbol

As a writer broadly concerned with metaphysical matters Cormac McCarthy has consistently explored spiritual, human and social questions. In this, one begins to see interlinked preoccupations in his work. Firstly, he seeks to understand human community, the bonds of connection and understanding that mark our civilisation, and the impact when those bonds are broken. Secondly, as his career has progressed, his work has increasingly focused on a quest for goodness, on both a human and an extramundane level, seeking to identify a spiritual core to existence. All of this is played out against a backdrop of modernity in crisis. These preoccupations can be read in the context of St Augustine's *City of Man* and the search for passage into the *City of God*: in other words, there is the dualistic nature of man, with his ability to love and his capacity for destructiveness, driven by the promise of a greater good beyond the material realm. The search proves troublesome and there is an increasing sense from McCarthy's fiction that humans cannot dictate the passage of their own lives, leading to a sustained analysis, particularly in later works, of free will and determinism.

In this, McCarthy mirrors novelists whom he is on record as admiring, such as William Faulkner, Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Woodward). At his peak, principally in *Suttree*, McCarthy's understanding of human community is both acute and challenging. However, when his preoccupation with a quest for spiritual understanding is at its fullest, most notably in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, it runs the risk of overwhelming the narrative. There is, in the relentless malignancy of judge Holden or the parade of failed prophets in the Trilogy, a tendency towards

didacticism which ultimately compromises the quality of the fiction.³ Throughout McCarthy's work, but with greater frequency in each succeeding novel, there is a search for God or, to use McCarthy's term, *godhood*.⁴ *Life in the City of Man* is problematic and there is a straining for some higher spiritual truth. And in this, McCarthy's view of modernity is broadly hostile: concepts of progress are identified as harmful or undesirable, and the nature of modern humanity is subjected to critical scrutiny.

In a recent interview, Cormac McCarthy was asked about the God he presents in *The Road*. "I have a great sympathy for the spiritual view of life," he replied, "and I think that it's meaningful. But am I a spiritual person? I would like to be. Not that I am thinking about some afterlife that I want to go to, but just in terms of being a better person" (Jurgensen). Previously, on the *Oprah Winfrey Book Club*, he asserted that his belief or otherwise in God depended on what day of the week it was. These quotes suggest a degree of ambivalence about religion, and yet McCarthy's work returns continually to evaluations of secular modernity from a spiritual perspective, examining again and again the question of God in the world.

In this, there are strong echoes of the work of German political philosopher, Eric Voegelin, who believed that modern humanity was facing a spiritual crisis. Voegelin, a German political philosopher who worked at the University of Vienna in pre-war Austria but escaped to the United States in 1938, repeatedly probed questions of spirituality, of what he saw as a dangerous desecralisation and secularisation of society, of the loss of connection with transcendent truth. And yet for Voegelin, too, there was an underlying sense of doubt. In his memoirs, Voegelin's long-time friend, Robert B. Heilman, quotes Voegelin as saying: "Of course there is no God. But we

³ Although one would ordinarily capitalise Judge, McCarthy does not do so in *Blood Meridian* and I therefore adopt his convention.

⁴ McCarthy used this term in a written marginal correction to the manuscript of "Whales and Men" (58).

must believe in Him.” With this contradiction, Heilman explains, Voegelin is establishing God as an “indispensable symbol” (102). The restlessness with which Cormac McCarthy pursues his own God suggests a similar symbolisation. Voegelin and McCarthy both write critically of a world ostensibly without God and seek an uneasy accommodation with a God who lacks concreteness but not direction. It is as though they are trapped in a teleological journey which they suspect can have no end. At the same time, the world is beset by dangers wrought by modernity and what Voegelin described as the modern gnostic tendencies of Western man. And thus it is possible to see, in the work of Cormac McCarthy, a synthesis of elements of modern gnosticism as defined by Voegelin, as opposed to the concepts of ancient gnosticism previously identified by a number of McCarthy scholars.

In Search Of God

For both McCarthy and Voegelin, then, there is a genuine tension attendant in questions of the existence and nature of God. McCarthy’s metaphysical landscape could be characterised as a search for meaning in existence. He refuses to be drawn to definite conclusions, and his characters display starkly the array of faults and failings that social conservatives ascribe to modernity. McCarthy is no optimist, but nor has he shut the door completely on hope and while, as I shall explore in more detail in Chapter Three, he may have made clear his doubts about the existence of God, religion is undoubtedly woven into the fabric of each of his novels. However, *organised* religion is not a positive force in McCarthy’s world. The Reverend Green in *Blood Meridian* is fatally traduced by judge Holden, while ex-priest Tobin finally proves powerless against the judge’s assaults on morality. Suttree insists to the priest who chastises him for sleeping in church that “[i]t’s not God’s house” (255). Ruined churches are a regular feature, and it is symbolically significant that descriptions of a cathedral book-end the passage in *All The Pretty Horses* in which John Grady Cole

and Rawlins are held in the Mexican prison: the extreme violence they endure unfolds beneath the helpless gaze of the church.⁵ By the time one reaches *The Road*, the church (though not God, who is invoked 22 times (Sepich and Forbis)) has been reduced to such a state of irrelevance the word is not even mentioned in the text.⁶ Yet, despite the failure of the church in McCarthy's world, his characters continue to seek, if not redemption, then at least some spiritual accommodation with existence, an understanding of the "darkness of God's plan" (*TR* 154). Thus, while McCarthy's Catholic upbringing can certainly be identified in his work, there is no sense of religious dogmatism in his writing, no Catholic or Protestant or even overtly Christian sensibility. On the contrary, religiosity infests his writing on a spiritual level beyond the intervention of man. It is an innate spirituality that can perhaps best be described by Carl Jung's term, adapted from Rudolf Otto, the *numinosum* – "an invisible presence causing a peculiar alteration of consciousness" (*Psychology* 4). McCarthy's characters are stranded in worlds where God no longer exists or, if he does, he exists only as an impotent god, reduced to the role of helpless observer, present but inactive, a religious phenomenon which is dormant but residing in all earthly matter, the rocks and bones of existence. This impotence is suggested time and again. Ellis and Bell, for example, in *No Country For Old Men*, conclude:

Do you think God knows what's happenin'?

I expect he does.

You think he can stop it?

⁵ "They parked on the square opposite the cathedral" (179).

"Down the street he could see the arched buttresses of the cathedral dome and the minaret of the belltower beyond" (208).

⁶ Furthermore, the only use of "Christendom" is a negative one, pointing to its loss: "It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom" (13).

No. I don't. (269)

In an early draft of a screenplay for *No Country* in the Cormac McCarthy Archives, Bell and Moss, who never meet in the final novel, share a similar conversation.⁷ Bell believes in God “pretty strong”, although he “dont always agree with his decisions” (79/2 142). In *Suttree*, the Ragpicker and Suttree have a similar debate when discussing what they would say to God if they met him:

Well, I think I'd just tell him. I'd say: Wait a minute. Wait just one minute before you start in on me. Before you say anything, there's just one thing I'd like to know. And he'll say: What's that? And then I'm goin to ast him: What did you have me in that crapgame down there for anyway? I couldnt put any part of it together.

Suttree smiled. What do you think he'll say?

The ragpicker spat and wiped his mouth. I dont believe he can answer it, he said. I dont believe there is a answer. (158)

In *All The Pretty Horses* it is the turn of Rawlins and John Grady to ponder the question, and although they answer in the affirmative, it is ultimately qualified:

You think God looks out for people? said Rawlins.

⁷ The archives are housed in The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas. McCarthy's papers are held in 98 boxes, arranged in two series, covering his published and unpublished works. Each box is subdivided into a number of folders. In this thesis, archive materials will be identified by the box number followed by a slash and the folder number and, where appropriate the page number. It should be borne in mind, however, that McCarthy's numbering in the draft material is often eccentric and there may be multiple pages with the same pagination. A guide to the papers held in the Wittliff Collections can be found at <http://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/research/az/mccarthypapers.html> [Accessed 30 December 2011].

Yeah. I guess He does. You?

Yeah. I do. Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. (92)

In the screenplay, "Whales and Men", John and Guy have the same conversation:

John: Do you believe in God?

Guy: (Smiling) No. But I dont think the world is made up of things. I dont think it's that simple. I used to. I dont anymore. A whale is not a thing. ... I dont believe in God but I think the whales force you into these theological metaphors. (24)

Later, as the principal characters congregate in a mansion in Ireland, belief in God is again the main topic of conversation, culminating in Lady Kilgore questioning Kelly about her beliefs. Kelly is "surprised, embarrassed, amused" by the intervention (41). In the play, *The Stonemason*, Ben says "I know nothing of God. But I know that something knows" (97). In an early draft in the Archives, he spells it out even more plainly: "I think it must be hard for them to believe in God who have never see (sic) real goodness in a man. Who have never seen it in its purest form, glowing in a human soul. I'm not sure there's any other true evidence for God's existence at all" (67/5 149-50). Meanwhile in a much earlier draft, in novel form, Billy, a transsexual character, also ponders the difficulty of accepting God:

I had trouble with the God thing. A lot of people do. And then I woke up one night in the middle of the night and I was just there and I thought: If there is no Higher Power then I'm it. And that scared the shit out of me. There

is no God and I am she. So I began to work on the God business. I'm still working on it. I probably always will be. (68/4 96)

Those final three sentences could almost stand as an evaluation of McCarthy's literary career. Later, Billy also has the "do you believe in God" conversation:

You believe in God.

The truth? [said Billy].

Sure.

I dont know who God is or what He is. I just dont believe that all this stuff got here by accident. It may evolve just like they say it does, but somewhere behind it all there has to be an intention. (97)

Billy, who does not feature in the final published play, is made of sterner stuff than some of the McCarthy men, and again this serves to reveal a sense of God's impotence. She continues:

Do I know better than the Creator?

What's the answer?

The answer is You bet your sweet ass I do. He fucked up, that's all.
(97)

In *The Crossing*, Billy Parham asks Quijada if he believes in God. "On godly days," he replies (387). Even in those of McCarthy's works where God is not a conspicuous

presence, he can still be felt. In *Outer Dark*, for example, God is largely absent but that is by no means the same as saying the novel is devoid of his presence: on the contrary, God is a brooding, troubled, troublesome presence throughout this novel precisely because of his continued and high-profile absence. Even when he does feature – for example when a storekeeper refuses to serve Culla because, “We still christians here. You’ll have to come back a weekday” (26) – it serves only to amplify the godlessness of the main characters: immediately following this reverse, Culla is seen, “sat on a stone by the side of the road and with a dead stick [he] drew outlandish symbols in the dust” (27). Meanwhile, an old woman asks Culla’s sister, Rinthy, “I don’t believe you been saved have ye?” (109). This, then, is a world of darkness, where morality is compromised and God is unknown and unknowable.⁸ The reader is presented with a cosmos in which there is no free will but only predestined fate, a sense that evil is pervasive and unavoidable. Thus, McCarthy’s dangers are dangers to all, and his landscapes are peopled by failed prophets who repeatedly voice their doubts and terrors. The heretic in *The Crossing* “knew that the world would forget him but that God could not. And yet that was the very thing he wished for” (148). The Ragpicker in *Suttree* tells Sut, “I always figured they was a God.... I just never did like him” (147). Ellis, in *No Country*, tells Sheriff Bell: “I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didnt” (267).

Thus, there is considerable evidence of ambivalence in McCarthy’s work regarding organised religion, and yet a spiritual element, the *numinosum*, still pervades it. In this, there are strong echoes of one of the writers McCarthy considers to be among the greatest, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who described his *The Possessed* as an exploration of “the main question... I have been tormented by consciously and unconsciously my

⁸ In this context, McCarthy uses the term “unknown and unknowable” in an early draft of *The Stonemason*:

Pointing to a blackness unknown and unknowable both in truth and in principle where God and matter are locked in a collaboration that is silent nowhere in the universe and it is this that guides him as he places his stone one over two and two over one as did his fathers before him and his sons to follow and let the rain carve them if it can (66/11 56).

whole life – the existence of God” (*Letters* 248). More than proof of his existence, of course, there is the theodicean quest to comprehend his nature in a world where evil manifestly exists. Chapter Five will explore in more detail this sense of evil as it relates to man, while Chapter Three will relate the idea of evil to God. Although the heretic in *The Crossing* is the most insistent searcher for the truth of God’s nature in McCarthy’s work, questions of theodicy abound. As Suttree kneels weeping at the grave of his son, the narrator asks: “And what could a child know of the darkness of God’s plan?” (*S* 154). Peter and Guy have an extended discussion on God and evil in “Whales and Men” which will be explored in detail in Chapter Five. In *The Gardener’s Son*, Patrick and Whipper discuss God’s justice:

PATRICK: They say God is just. I reckon if he wasnt there’d be no justice.

WHIPPER: If men were no more just than God there’d be no peace in this world. Everywhere I look I see men trying to set right the inequities that God’s left them with. (67)

Even God’s grace is troublesome: as the (admittedly mad) reverend says to Culla Holme in *Outer Dark*, “[t]he grace of God don’t rest easy on a man. It can blind him easy as not” (226). In these ruminations on the nature of God there are strong resonances with Dostoevsky’s argument between Alyosha and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Citing “unatoned” tears to “Dear, kind God”, Ivan makes the famous declaration: “It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket” (251). And it is to here that McCarthy’s fiction leads: the obsessive search for godhood in a world where God does not appear to exist or at least where his nature cannot be fathomed. In seeking to understand McCarthy’s quest, a key starting point may be found in the gospel of Matthew: “I am the God of Abraham, and

the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob[.] God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (*Matthew* 22:32). In other words, God gave the land of Israel to Abraham and his people and, because he gave it to them, he has given it also to their children. This introduces notions of time and inheritance and the flow of humanity and it also poses key questions and observations that McCarthy, through his conglomeration of blind prophets and seekers and mystics, worries at throughout his oeuvre: who is God? Is he still alive? What is his message? How can it be sustained in a world where God is no longer revered? Evil exists. God is good. Humanity has the capacity to be good. Humans appear to have killed God. McCarthy’s fiction is an attempt to reconcile these conflicting truths. Mitya’s plaint to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* could stand as a commentary on McCarthy’s fiction: implicitly attacking “science” and warning of the coming of a Nietzschean “new kind of man”, he says “I am sorry to lose God!” (622). There is a strong sense that McCarthy’s characters, too, are wholly dissatisfied with life in the modern City of Man and there is a straining for contact with the City of God, towards a God who can in some way connect with them and offer something more than a silent presence.

This divine silence is linked by some McCarthy scholars to the absent or alien god seen in ancient gnosticism, through which any suggestion of divine goodness in the material world becomes troublesome. Steven Frye, for example, comments: “Release [from gnostic entrapment] and an apprehension of the divine Good, which exists outside the material world, are difficult matters and are achieved only through gnosis, which is direct experience or knowledge of God” (*Understanding* 83). Brian Evenson, meanwhile, suggests McCarthy synthesises existentialist alienation with “earlier Gnostic ideas of the world having been formed not by God but by an imperfect and perhaps evil demiurge (“Philosophy” 54). Allen Josephs specifically

links Jay Ellis's assertion of god "as a kind of absent parent" with Leo Daugherty's gnostic interpretations of *Blood Meridian* (136). Petra Mundik suggests: "McCarthy's preoccupation with God's refusal to 'interfere in the degeneracy of mankind' is thoroughly Gnostic" ("Striking" 78). Leo Daugherty, in the first comprehensive analysis of gnosticism in McCarthy, notes that "the Gnostic god, being totally not of this world, generates no *nomos*, no law, for either nature or human activity" (161). I would argue, however, that McCarthy's work appears to be suggesting that the void created by God's silence has been filled by humanity, and in particular modern humans and the rationalist, hubristic movements that have unfolded since the Enlightenment. And in so doing they have turned the City of Man into a city of the plain.

McCarthy's Gnostic Traces

Much has been written about gnostic influences in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy. It is not my intention to rehearse these discussions as they have been amply covered elsewhere, but it is important to set McCarthy's work within this particular purview. The consensus is that, in much of his work, McCarthy is investigating gnostic impulses and contemplating a sense of evil that exists in our culture. There is an impotent God presiding over a world of chaos in which humanity experiences a sense of abandonment and alienation and seeks a means of escape or redemption. The alienation that is apparent in McCarthy's world clearly does have gnostic resonances, and the God he represents displays the impotence of the gnostic Yahweh in the face of evil. Leo Daugherty explains that for Gnostics, on Earth, "the good and the light are eternally trapped inside the evil and the dark" (160) and "evil was simply everything that *is*, with the exception of the bits of spirit imprisoned [on Earth]" (162). This analysis can clearly be evidenced in *Blood Meridian* or in the mindset of Anton Chigurh.

Dianne Luce, in her fine monograph on McCarthy's Tennessee novels, sees gnostic influences in all the early works. She cites, for example, the influence of ancient gnosticism and myth in *Outer Dark* and a Platonic flavour of the gnostic in *Child of God* and locates a blend of neo-gnosticism and twentieth century existentialism in *Suttree* (*Reading* viii). She describes Suttree's Knoxville as a "purgatory or gnostic netherworld like the outer dark of Culla and Rinthy Holme and the cavernous underworld of Lester Ballard" (197), while Suttree's experiences have a "gnostic aura" and his actions demonstrate a "gnostic rejection of the Roman Catholic Church" (168).⁹ Although she provides a valuable comparison with Camus's modern existentialist alienation, Luce's focus in this text is largely on ancient religious gnosticism in which "outer dark is a spiritual state... also conceived as a physical reality" where "cosmos, not Hades or hell, is the realm of darkness" (171). With this contention, she allies herself with the interpretation of gnosticism formulated by the gnostic scholar, Hans Jonas, whose key text, *The Gnostic Religion*, played a major role in popularising scholarship in the subject. Jonas identifies in ancient gnosticism a number of characteristics: firstly, movements were essentially religious; secondly, a core belief was one of salvation; thirdly, their conception of god was transcendent, which also meant that those notions of salvation were other-worldly; fourthly, they demonstrated a "radical dualism of realms of being – God and the world, spirit and matter, soul and body, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death." Jonas sums this up as "a *dualistic transcendent religion of salvation*" [his emphasis] (31-2).

Much of the literature exploring McCarthy's synthesis of strands of gnosticism takes Jonas's work as its basis. *Blood Meridian*, in particular, has been much parsed in

⁹ Indeed, such is Luce's insistence on identifying evidence of gnostic thought in McCarthy's fiction, at times her examples stretch credibility, such as when she suggests: "Because [his sexual relationships] are tainted with materialism, they pose to Suttree the gnostic threat of entrapment" (*Reading* 239). His relations may indeed be tainted and threaten him with entrapment, but to adduce from this that it is somehow a *gnostic* entrapment is unconvincing.

terms of gnostic mysticism, due in part, no doubt, to the use as an epigraph of a quote by Jacob Boehme, a sixteenth and seventeenth century German Christian mystic whose work is often characterised, or perhaps caricatured, as gnostic. While he isn't a gnostic, where Boehme's mysticism and gnosticism clearly overlap is in their preoccupation with theodicy, as hinted at in the phrase McCarthy uses for his epigraph: "It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness" (*BM* n.pag) And this darkness undoubtedly engulfs the world of *Blood Meridian*, to such an extent that the gnostic interpretations of the novel, most notably by Daugherty and Mundik, have much to commend them.

Nonetheless, too much critical analysis of the novel is swayed by the overwhelming presence of judge Holden. Just as his towering personality unbalances the novel, he has come to dominate to an unhealthy degree the literary criticism of McCarthy's fiction. He does indeed, as Daugherty suggests, display the "characteristics of Yahweh as the Gnostics saw him: he is jealous, he is vengeful, he is wrathful, he is powerful and – most centrally – he possesses and is possessed by, a will. And he is enraged by any existence or any act outside that will" (163). And the Anaretic landscape of *Blood Meridian* over which he presides as suzerain is undoubtedly a gnostic hell. McCarthy's gnostic musings, then, do resonate with ancient gnostic teachings. Existence is beset by the presence of evil, surrounded by, in Jonas's articulation, the "noise of the world" which is created by the demiurge to prevent the dormant *pneuma*, or spirit of man, from being awoken (Jonas 73). But there is more to McCarthy's fiction than judge Holden and Jacob Boehme and arcane references to ancient gnosticism. To prosecute an analysis of his fiction primarily in terms of ancient gnosticism ill serves the depth of his vision. Harold Bloom, for one, warns against too literal interpretations of McCarthy's gnosticism. Of judge Holden he says: "McCarthy gives [him] the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that

the Gnostics call archons, but he tells us not to make such an identification” (Bloom *Introduction* 4). The reason for this is that, in the judge, McCarthy is not examining ancient gnosticism, but contemporary malaises.

McCarthy is a modern writer and his focus, even in his historical fiction, is modern: his concern is as a chronicler of current crises. Thus, while there are indeed many references to ancient gnosticism, they are of a shape which is coterminous and commingled with modernity. One example among many will suffice: at the end of *Suttree*, the old area of McAnally Flats is being razed to make way for a new highway. This work is being fashioned by “Gnostic workmen... who would have down this shabby shapeshow that masks the higher world of form” (464). Progress – knowledge, advancement – is fashioning a new future, a highway “curved out into empty air... among the vectors of nowhere” (471). Meanwhile, however, Suttree “knew another McAnally, good to last a thousand years. There’d be no new roads there” (463). This is the McAnally that Suttree is finally fleeing – morally compromised, flawed, tainted. Build your new worlds, McCarthy is saying, your cathedrals to progress, but you are building them on the invisible and indivisible foundations of turpitude and those will last a thousand years. Moreover, it seems as though the world has been forsaken by God. “Good to last a thousand years” could be an adaptation of the conclusion of Part One of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*:

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown,
yet putting down here what might be left to say
in time come after death,
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in
the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the
suffering of America's naked mind for love into
an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone
cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio

with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered
out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand
years. (22)

The Aramaic phrase in the earlier line, (properly, “Eli eli lamma sabachthani”) comes from the *Gospel of Matthew* and translates as “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Matthew* 27:45-46). These were the words spoken by Jesus on the cross at the ninth hour and their meaning is the subject of considerable theological debate. This is the only section in the whole of the *New Testament* to be quoted in the original Aramaic, and it is the only one of Jesus’s seven utterances on the cross to appear in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark. It would therefore appear to be highly significant. Although it could be construed as a cry of despair, even doubt, it has been interpreted as the key moment in the redemption and salvation of mankind. Thomas Mann, for example, suggests Jesus’s words were:

evidently not in the least an outburst of despair and disillusionment; but on the contrary a lofty messianic sense of self. For the phrase is not original, not a spontaneous outcry. It stands at the beginning of the Twenty-second Psalm, which from one end to the other is an announcement of the Messiah. Jesus was quoting, and the quotation meant: “Yes, it is I!” (“Freud” 376)

In truth, there is a touch of St Anselm’s *credo ut intelligam* in this: one would need to already be a believer to accept Mann’s interpretation. Thus, there remains an ambivalence about the initial enquiry, “why have you forsaken me?” and this seems entirely in keeping with the sense of doubt that pervades much of McCarthy’s fiction. It is no coincidence, for example, that in *The Road*, there is a character called Ely who proclaims, “There is no god and we are all his prophets” (143). God may be absent, then, but is he, as the gnostics would have it, powerless? Has he forsaken humanity? Or has humanity forsaken him? These are the questions which inhabit McCarthy’s

fiction, the doubts which fuel it. But to suggest from this that McCarthy is pursuing an analysis of Jonasian ancient gnosticism in his work is insufficient. There are two areas of thematic tension that dominate McCarthy's fiction: the presence or otherwise of God, and the role of modernity in God's absence or weakness. To understand these it is helpful to examine, not Hans Jonas's ancient gnosticism, but the threat of modern gnosticism as expounded by the German philosopher, Eric Voegelin. As Murray Jardine points out in his assessment of modern gnosticism, "whereas the otherworldly mysticism of the ancient gnostics was relatively harmless, the activist attempts by modern gnostics to create heaven on earth have been murderous, indeed genocidal" (7). Such violence, surely, is connotative of the worldview that prevails in *Blood Meridian* and the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre?

Modernist Context

What is often interpreted as a gnostic impulse in McCarthy's fiction is, rather, a more specifically focused critique of modern humanity; that is to say, instead of concerning himself with the battles of the gods, as critics who seek to discover evidence of the demiurge and archons and gnosis in McCarthy's words might suggest, he is more exercised about what mankind is doing. It is not a look outwards, transcendently, but inwards, immanently. Judge Holden or the bearded leader of the Triune in *Outer Dark* are not gnostic demiurges battling Yahweh for dominance: they are representative of the evil McCarthy suggests is inherent in humanity and manifested in modernity. In this, his viewpoint stands close comparison with that of Eric Voegelin.

Voegelin is generally regarded as socially conservative, and his views on modernity follow from a reactionary strand of thought that grew out of the first half of the

twentieth century.¹⁰ This held that contemporary Western society was in a state of crisis. The First and Second World Wars had left scars that would not heal. Culture, politics and spirituality were thought to have become debased, losing some essential core of humanity. Max Weber identifies this juncture as the “disenchantment of the world”, at which the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment promoted a shift towards rationalism and away from mysticism, a move towards secularisation of everyday life (155). Literary modernism was identifying a malaise in a society that was becoming increasingly desacralised. In 1920 Georg Lukacs described the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88); George Orwell, meanwhile, wrote of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “here is life without God. Just look at it!” (508). Thus, a strand of modernism came to be associated with atheistic rationalism. Weber may have asserted that godhood and mystical mythologising had been replaced by rationalism in a new age of science, but some saw in this a dangerous de-divinisation of the world and, with it, a de-humanisation of experience, a loss of the essential spirit of humanity.

In this way, for political and religious conservatives, modernity came increasingly not just to *identify* a malaise in society, but to *represent* it. Such concerns were not restricted to conservative viewpoints, however. The Marxist-leaning Frankfurt School of critical social theory, led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, similarly saw in modernity a worrying potential for totalitarianism. Their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written while the authors – both German – were exiled in America during the Second World War, critiques the malign effects of an unfettered approach to reason and rationality, suggesting that the resultant concentration on technology

¹⁰ Voegelin himself would dispute the appellation of conservative. He wrote: “On my religious “position,” I have been classified as a Protestant, Catholic, as anti-semitic and as a typical Jew; politically, as a Liberal, a Fascist, a National Socialist and a Conservative; and on my theoretical position, as a Platonist, a Neo-Augustinian, a Thomist, a disciple of Hegel, an existentialist, a historical relativist and an empirical sceptic; in recent years the suspicion has frequently been voiced that I am a Christian. All these classifications have been made by university professors and people with academic degrees. They give ample food for thought regarding the state of our universities.” (Quoted in East 131).

and science was leading to a dehumanisation of human beings. Whether left or right wing, reactionary or revolutionary, there was a feeling of despair at the prevailing preoccupations of humanity. Thus, while being politically poles apart, what these critics have in common is a profound pessimism. This sets the template for a school of thought in which secularisation is blamed for the travails of modernity. Jacob Taubes, for example, ascribes to modernity a sense of alienation:

With the First World War a “world” broke into pieces. Man experienced himself as estranged in his social and cosmic setting and did not feel at home in a world he had so painstakingly cultivated to make his own. When the facades of culture and civilization crumbled under the impact of the First World War man was confronted with the realities of life: hunger, destitution, and death. (14)

Thus, for Taubes, the process of modernity, the uncoupling of humanity from God, led directly to the industrial slaughter of the First World War. T.S. Eliot brought the argument up-to-date during the Second World War when he presented a classic slippery-slope fallacy: “If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin” (*Idea* 63). Similarly, Pope John Paul II used the Holocaust to present an appeal-to-fear fallacy declaring that man’s hubris leads to catastrophe: “If man can decide by himself, without God, what is good and what is bad, he can also determine that a group of people is to be annihilated” (110). Voegelin, too, employed similar arguments. In a letter to Alfred Schütz, he suggests:

If one insists long enough that the only knowledge of reality we have is that which can be known through the categories of natural science, then the reality of moral substance does indeed disappear, and the bombs are the result. (CW29 439)

And in *Autobiographical Reflections*, he claims:

The phenomenon of Hitler is not exhausted by his person. His success must be understood in the context of an intellectually or morally ruined society in which personalities who otherwise would be grotesque, marginal figures, can come to public power because they superbly represent the people who admire them. (CW34 46)

While there is a degree of truth in the statement, the cases of Hitler and Stalin are particulars, from which it is dangerous to extrapolate to establish general truths. Nonetheless, for critics such as Voegelin, the secular world that modern humanity have created in their own image cannot live up to expectations. In this, these critics reflect a long-running theological despair against secularisation. As far back as 1840, Sören Kierkegaard wrote in his journal: “One day the moment arrived at which mankind said to God, like the son to the father in the gospel: Come on, share with us, let us have the inheritance that belongs to us” (41). For religious reactionaries, the collection of horrors during the twentieth century gave malign shape to that inheritance. And so, in the context of a troubled century, the debate circled, encompassing rationalism and spirituality, science and art, good and evil. For a Western society traumatised by a century of warfare, Nietzsche’s proclamation that “God is dead” (*Science* 120) was becoming problematic. Increasingly, the debate seemed to settle on a sense of alienation. Carl Jung noted in 1961:

[the] rationalistic European finds much that is human alien to him, and he prides himself on this without realizing that his rationality is won at the expense of his vitality, and that the primitive part of his personality is consequently condemned to a more or less underground existence. (CW13 245)

The problems with modernity, its critics argue, are a continuation of the steady degeneration of spiritual life since the ascent of the Enlightenment, through which hubristic humanity place themselves at the centre of the world and usurp the place of God. From this thinking is engendered the myriad wars and conflagrations and disasters which beset modern man. Such views are often presented in largely unhistorical terms. They present *post hoc* and false-cause fallacies, inaccurately construing the aims of the Enlightenment through a series of stunted and warped representations of its true ideals. What happens is that the worst elements of Enlightenment thinking are promoted and used as representative of the whole movement, in order to bring those ideals into disrepute. True enlightenment thinkers did not portray humankind as perfect: Rousseau, for example, was clear that the best humankind could claim was that it was *perfectible* – that it had the *capacity* to become better and improve its environment. And he was equally clear that this capacity for improvement was also simultaneously and inevitably responsible for man's greatest failings, because a capacity to improve must inevitably encompass its inverse, a capacity to decline. Good and evil are inextricably linked, and where one can flourish, so may the other. Human beings are not predictable: as Tzvetan Todorov notes, quoting Rousseau, "they are always capable of 'acquiescing or resisting'" (85).

While thinkers like Voegelin or Adorno offer complex and subtle arguments against modernity, not all such interpretations are so persuasive. Ultimately, they are reduced to simplistic platitudes like those espoused by the Tea Party. Too often, there is a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy in the way that rationalism is blamed for the decline of spirituality and thereafter every subsequent misfortune is blamed on a lack of spirituality and therefore on rationalist conceit. Alleged rationalist aggrandisement is used as something of a straw man with which to gather together any aspects of modernity which are seen to act against religious sensibility. Often, the language is beguiling and the arguments complex but, in the end, it is a form of sophistry.

Not all critics were so irredeemably pessimistic, however. Thomas Mann, for example, perceived that the twentieth century was falling into irrationality but still maintained the hope of a new form of humanism, “standing in a different relation to the powers of the lower world, the unconscious, the id: a relation bolder, freer, blither, productive of a riper art than any possible in our neurotic, fear-ridden, hate ridden world” (“Freud” 377). For observers such as Jung, however, an era of worldly materiality was approaching, in which resides the devil, “whose hellish hearth-fire burns deep in the interior of the earth, while the shining spirit soars in the aether, freed from the shackles of gravity” (*Evil* 53). For Jung, then, the earth, our existence, has become a metaphysical battlefield. In pursuing his analysis of twentieth century ideologies as political religions exhibiting modern gnostic tendencies, Eric Voegelin reaches a similar conclusion.

Voegelin’s Modern Gnosticism

The term modern gnosticism is largely associated with Eric Voegelin. The political violence in pre-war Germany, which grew to infest the German psyche at that time, informed his entire career. *Political Religions* (1938), his first attempt to address the issue, concluded that National Socialism and other repressive, totalitarian regimes, are “political religions” (9). In such states, Voegelin argues, “man is transformed into a cog in a machine” and the “power of the State is primal.” The existence of humanity loses reality and, instead, it is the State which becomes real, with men reduced to the status of parts of a suprahuman reality. The state is supreme, in a sense divine. It is, he concludes, a mystical process.

This is the genesis of Voegelin’s argument that twentieth century political and philosophical frameworks are essentially modern gnostic political religions which seek to transform reality and create an immanent heaven-on-earth. In a de-divinised

world, the uncertainty and mystery that lie at the root of Christian faith become unendurable and thus the promise of Christian transcendental fulfilment seems impossible. In its place is developed an immanent understanding of reality:

The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the *cognitio fidei*, the cognition of faith, will afford; and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man. (*NSP* 124)

Thus, Voegelin begins to adduce a gnostic strand in modern life. Like Hans Jonas, he traces gnosticism back to its Hellenic roots. Of God, for example, he notes that, “[t]here is only one God but he is not omnipotent; he is opposed by the primordial force of chaotic matter; and even when order is imposed on matter, there still remains the Innate Desire which, if it follows its own tendency, will revert to chaos” (*OH3* 153). This is clearly reminiscent of the ancient gnostic conception of Yahweh. In *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Voegelin further develops his thesis of a gnostic strand in modern life. The most important aspect of this, he claims, is “the experience of the world as an alien place into which man has strayed and from which he must find his way back home to the other world of his origin” (*SPG* 7). While ancient gnosticism looked to the hidden, “real” god to usurp the evil interloper god who has imprisoned humanity in this alien earth, the modern gnostic human “must carry on the work of salvation himself” (8). This may be achieved through gnosis, the process from alienation to consciousness of oneself and thus the assumption of an absolute spirit, or the attainment of a free, fully human existence. For the modern gnostic, this is effected by “the assumption of a will of nature which transforms man into superman” (8). Gnostic humans belong to the world, or *nomos*, through their souls (*psyche*) and are impelled to seek deliverance by their spirits (*pneuma*). In doing this, the goal is to destroy the old, alien world and fashion a passage to the new world. The

attitude of the gnostic is one of aversion, which Voegelin suggests is manifested through six characteristic features:

- dissatisfaction with one's situation;
- belief that this situation obtains because the world is intrinsically poorly organised;
- belief that salvation from the evil of the world is possible;
- belief that the order of being will have to be changed in a historical process (and not through salvation after death)
- and that such change – that is, salvation – is possible through human effort
- if the gnostic can obtain the required knowledge and come forward as a prophet. (59-60)

However, as I have explained, Jonas's ancient gnosticism is a radically dualist religion, in that it separates spirit and matter, God and the world, life and death, good and evil. Voegelin's modern gnosticism, on the other hand, seeks to transform reality and establish a heaven-on-earth – that is, immanence and not transcendence. Eugene Webb observes that the first three of Voegelin's characteristics correspond with the essence of ancient gnosticism as enunciated by Jonas. The idea that an immanent change in the order of being can be effected through a historical process, however, is Voegelin's own, while the notion that salvation can be found within this world is clearly different from Jonas's view of the ancient gnostic. Thus, Webb argues, Voegelin is not simply reinterpreting gnosis, but transforming it. He concludes, therefore, that "gnosticism" has become an inappropriate term for the phenomenon which Voegelin is describing, although he maintains that Voegelin's intention – to help explain the phenomena which he believed were afflicting the modern world – remained valid (48). Other critics are not so charitable, and this has led to strong criticism of Voegelin for creating a category so large it could be argued to encompass

virtually any movement in modernity.¹¹ Voegelin himself later came to recognise this in accepting that gnosticism, while prevalent in modern society, did not define its essence.¹²

Nonetheless, he remained trenchant in his belief that the new, rationalist West is spurning the past in its quest for a glorious, abundant, immanent future. The problems arising from the post-enlightenment new world order are, Voegelin argues, “of such a magnitude that even today [after the Second World War] it is not realized in all its dimensions” (*FETR* 5). Thus, it is his belief that modern humanity is facing a spiritual crisis. This presents a particularly reactionary view of modernity in which hubris and self-aggrandisement have taken root. Humanity stands, so it believes, at the pinnacle of progress. Science and rationalism have conquered superstition and myth. Everything is explicable. Humanity is at the centre of a universe in which the history of humanity progressively unfolds. The Enlightenment has ushered in a new age of civilisation. So goes the rationalist litany of self-congratulation. But no, argues Voegelin (6ff). The replacement of the sacred by the profane as a means of

¹¹ For example, Ioan Culianu wrote:

Once I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity...I was soon to learn however, that I was a naïf indeed. Not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the Catholic authors were gnostic, the Neoplatonic too, Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism, existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka were gnostic.... I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic...Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic (290).

Thomas Altizer notes:

On the other hand, in Eric Voegelin's attack upon modern Gnosticism, the phenomenon is portrayed in such all-encompassing fashion that its specific identity is lost. Voegelin sees secularism, scientism, positivism, political totalitarianism, and the mass social movements of modern times, as so many varying forms of Gnosticism. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that the essence of modernity is the growth of Gnosticism (20-21).

It should also be noted, however, that the term gnosticism itself is a neologism without any reference in antiquity. Michael Williams notes:

The term 'gnosticism' seems to have originated in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the words 'gnosis' and 'gnostic' are Greek terms that are actually found in some of the ancient sources... However, when used for the modern category 'Gnosticism,' 'Gnosis,' or 'the Gnostic religion,' *none* of these terms has an ancient equivalent. Antiquity quite literally had no word for the persons who are the subject of the present study—that is, no single word. The category is a modern construction” (7).

¹² For a good summary of Voegelin's changing perspective and the importance of this on understanding modern gnosticism, see Wiser.

understanding human history results in Christianity, far from being at the centre of our spiritual understanding, instead being reduced to a mere event in history. And the inevitable concomitant of this is the dissolution of the traditional dualism between sacred and profane history, leading to the two perspectives becoming merged into a generalised secularisation of history. He sums it up: “Christianity becomes historized and history secularized” (18). This, for Voegelin, is the greatest danger facing the Western world. Indeed, he goes as far as to describe the Enlightenment which promulgated it as an “apostatic revolt” (3), and its outcome is that humanity is reduced to a level of utilitarian existence in which its intellectual and spiritual substance is atrophied. Thus arises, he contends, the curious paradox that the Enlightenment, the so-called advance of humanity, has resulted in an already mature Western civilisation being reduced to a level of “utilitarian immaturity” (95-6).

One can find an application of this critique in McCarthy’s fiction and, perhaps, McCarthy’s own worldview. His work is streaked through with a socially conservative analysis of the present day. Often, this can best be seen in some of his Archive drafts which, because they are not a final, polished version, tend to reveal rather more didactically the general thrust of his thinking. For example, in an early draft of *The Stonemason*, the Minister says:

I’m sure that many of you feel as I do that these are particularly troubled times. The old ways seem more and more to be put aside by the young people coming up and that is a worrisome thing to folks who have lived long enough to see where such a putting aside can lead. Because it always leads from and never to. It leads from the example of Christ and what it leads to we have no way to know. We know that he has given us freedom. And freedom means freedom to pull down and destroy just as surely as it means freedom to build up and preserve. So before you set aside. Before you pull down. Before you

undo the labor of your fathers and their fathers before them. Had you not better ask what are you goin to put up in its place? (66/7 36)

It is important to reflect that these are the words of a character, not of McCarthy himself. Nonetheless, so frequently do such sentiments appear in his fiction, it is hard not to see them as representative of his general direction of thought. Although the Archive material contains little of McCarthy's ruminations, there are exceptions. Among the notes for *The Road*, for example, he makes the following observation: "Liberalism is the politics of the radical by definition and so the politics of the juvenile" (97/4 Notes Sept 5). On a separate sheet with the same date, he adds: "The politics of egalitarianism is not a separate issue from the solipsism of modern art and poetry, architecture and music." There is something Nietzschean about these observations, for example recalling Nietzsche's aphorism, "Liberalism: in other words *herd-animalization*" [his emphasis] (*Idols* 74). This is not surprising, since one of the conceits of *Blood Meridian* is the bastardisation of Nietzschean philosophy by judge Holden. For example, in *Twilight of the Idols*, the "*herd-animalization*" quote is followed by a statement which could have come from the mouth of the judge himself:

it is war that produces these effects, the war for liberal institutions, which, as a war, permits *illiberal* instincts to continue. And war educates for freedom. For what is freedom? That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself. That one maintains the distance which separates us. That one becomes more indifferent to difficulties, hardships, privation, even to life itself. That one is prepared to sacrifice human beings for one's cause, not excluding oneself. (74)

For Voegelin, then, the spiritual crisis is ongoing and increasing. The West is in a process of internal decay which is overseeing a "gradual decomposition of civilizational values" (*FETR* 143). Periods of destructive upheaval are interspersed with periods of stabilization but, crucially, these periods do not repair any of the

spiritual damage already done; rather, the stabilisation occurs afresh at each enhanced level of spiritual degradation.

In this, one sees a clear reflection of the use by Cormac McCarthy in his fiction of periods of rupture. Typically, he depicts society at calamitous moments, such as the era of scalphunting in the 1840s in *Blood Meridian*, the Mexican drug wars of the 1980s in *No Country*, the deleterious effects on rural southern life of development arising from the Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933 in *The Orchard Keeper*, the apocalypse of *The Road* and so on. These are low points in American civilisation, McCarthy is explaining, but one should not draw comfort from this, nor assume that they are serial nadirs from which it has subsequently risen and advanced. That which is present in society and which culminates in these periods of rupture is a constant effect of the secularisation of history, and the evils which emerge during these moments remain an ever-present threat. Thus, the threats that McCarthy presents in his novels are not those steeped in ancient philosophy but, in his conception, clear and present dangers. Again, this is Voegelinian in outlook rather than traditionally gnostic.

Humanity may have created a secular universe, Voegelin argues, but cannot live within it because it cannot cater for the spiritual longing which Voegelin suggests has been evident in humanity from earliest times onwards. He points, as evidence, to the petrographic symbols of the Palaeolithic era which, he suggests, indicate a human awareness of a divine presence as early as 20,000 BCE (*CW12* 293).¹³ And a sense of religious wonder does seem to exist in the human psyche. Nicholas Wade, in a recent book, *The Faith Instinct*, posits the idea that religion is an evolved behaviour, favoured by natural selection, in which a God gene, through encouraging altruistic actions, helps to establish social communities. Even Richard Dawkins, a leading proponent of atheism, agrees that there may be a “misfiring” gene in our evolutionary

¹³ McCarthy’s fiction, of course, is also replete with such symbolism of ancients and their spiritual traces. He also explored his interests in our earliest art and symbolism in a radio discussion with Werner Herzog on the Chauvet cave paintings (*Science Friday*).

makeup which psychologically disposes humans to religion (208-9). As Voegelin describes it, “[s]omewhere in the depths, at the *umbilicus* of the soul, there where it touches the cosmos, it strains. This is the place of those stimuli which are inadequately referred to as ‘feelings’ and which are therefore easily confused with similarly named, superficial movements of the soul” (*PR* 10-11).

Jung’s term, the *numinosum*, may again be invoked to reflect this invisible presence which impinges on our feelings. Spirituality, then, is a state of consciousness and, Voegelin suggests, to recover a meaning to existence, a resolution of the dehumanising effects of secularised history, will require a “gigantic effort of interpretation” (*FETR* 5). More specifically, he adds that some reconnection must be made with those sensual myths that form part of the Christian tradition which have been weakened by two centuries of secularisation. Voegelin, like Taubes, reaches a questionable *post hoc* conclusion when he suggests that the spiritual inhibition he has detected is somehow responsible for the “orgiastic” “movements” and “great wars” with which the twentieth century was afflicted (*A* 26). From this, his conclusion is that Western society has succumbed to a spiritual disorder which he describes, appropriating a term coined by Schelling, as a “pneumopathology”.¹⁴ If it is to escape the resulting “putrefaction” and “foulness” (*CWI2* 15) then it must reconnect with the spiritual essence of our existence. Any understanding of the mystery of transcendence, he concludes, is now attainable by only a small minority, while the rest are “lost” in a world without “fixed points in the myth”, with no means of contributing to a positive transition for humanity (*A* 26). At this point, such is Voegelin’s distaste for the gnostic trends he sees in modernity, he is in danger of appropriating their beliefs himself. This notion of an elite which is somehow closer to the mysteries of God while the remainder wallow in their ignorance is not only

¹⁴ Voegelin wrote: “And this opens up the problem of the strange, abnormal spiritual condition of gnostic thinkers, for which we have not as yet developed an adequate terminology in our time. In order, therefore, to be able to speak of this phenomenon, it will be advisable to use the term “pneumopathology,” which Schelling coined for this purpose.” (*CW5* 305-306).

invidious, but practically indistinguishable from gnostic belief in the pneumatic carriers of the light of knowledge which he so assiduously opposed throughout his career. His reactionary pessimism and his need to counter what he sees as flawed utopian ideology leads him to adopt what becomes, effectively, a totalising ideology of his own. Liberalism, he argues, is akin to totalitarianism because of their shared essential immanentism. “The true dividing line in the contemporary crisis,” he writes in his critique of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “does not run between liberals and totalitarians, but between the religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other side” (“OT” 75). Arendt provides a robust rebuttal of this argument, decrying the false premise of critiquing purely secular matters from a religious perspective which they do not share and which therefore misrepresents them (157-164). And Arendt’s analysis begins to get to the root of the difficulties with Voegelin’s (and, as this thesis will explore, McCarthy’s) outlook. Voegelin finds it impossible to contemplate any aspect of humanity without reference to an overseeing divinity. Far from being omnipotent overlords of an immanent paradise, Voegelin’s mankind is left incapable of independent thought.

Voegelin’s conclusion, then, is that “[t]he gnostic revolution has for its purpose a change in the nature of man and the establishment of a transfigured society” (*NSP* 152). It is, he believes, seeking salvation for mankind in an alien world, in the context of a loss of religion: the secular political state has instead adopted the role once assumed by the Church. Thomas Altizer, concurring with Voegelin’s thesis, asks: “May we then define twentieth-century Gnosticism as a search for an authentic redemption from an alien cosmos in the context of the death of God?” (22). Here, one begins to see strong resonances with the work of Cormac McCarthy. What could better describe Sheriff Ed Tom Bell’s existential crisis in *No Country*, or the “helpless” and “impotent” “dumbshow” of *Suttree*’s McAnally Flats (14), or the dueña Alfonsa in *All The Pretty Horses* who says:

It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God – who knows all that can be known – seems powerless to change. (239)

For Billy Parham, in *The Crossing*, notions of God's love provide scant protection from the ways of the world, as demonstrated in this summary conversation with Boyd's girlfriend:

He asked if God always looked after her and she studied the heart of the fire for a long time... she said that God looked after everything and that one could no more evade his care than evade his judgment. She said that even the wicked could not escape his love. He watched her. He said that he himself had no such idea of God and that he'd pretty much given up praying to Him and she nodded without taking her eyes from the fire and said that she knew that. (324)

The blind man Billy encounters earlier has similar reservations:

He said that while one would like to say that God will punish those who do such things and that people often speak in just this way it was his experience that God could not be spoken for and that men with wicked histories often enjoyed lives of comfort and that they died in peace and were buried with honor. He said that it was a mistake to expect too much of justice in this world. He said that the notion that evil is seldom rewarded was greatly overspoken for if there were no advantage to it then men would shun it and how could virtue then be attached to its repudiation? (288)

In such a spiritual void, the outcome is the violence of *Blood Meridian*. It is the “*baby in a trash compactor*” of *No Country* (40). It is a world changing for the worse: Sheriff Bell “*never had to kill nobody and I am very glad of that fact. Some of the old time sheriffs wouldnt even carry a firearm*” (63). But, when comparing contemporary disciplinary contraventions in schools with those a generation before, he notes the change: “*Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature... Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide*” (196). Thus, the modern world distresses him: “*I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train*” (159).

White, in *The Sunset Limited*, echoes this fear and repeats the tendentious Pope John Paul II argument by suggesting: “The things I believed in dont exist any more. It’s foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now” (27). Thus, there is an explicit criticism of western, enlightenment thinking. In case the reader has missed it, White labours the point: “The Germans contributed a great deal to civilization. (Pause) Before Hitler” (110). The same argument is used by another Catholic writer with whom McCarthy is sometimes compared, Walker Percy. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith asks Dr More: “Do you know where tenderness always leads? To the gas chamber.... [I]f you put the two together, a lover of Mankind and a theorist of Mankind, what you’ve got is Robespierre or Stalin or Hitler and the Terror, and millions dead for the good of Mankind” (128-9). No matter how often this is proclaimed, it is, of course, a spurious argument: firstly, it rests on the false premise that the Enlightenment was an exercise in hubris with the aim of establishing humanity as immanent gods of their own world; and secondly, it is no more the fault of the Enlightenment that lunatics like Hitler bastardised its tenets than it is the fault of Allah that al-Qaida fly aeroplanes into skyscrapers or of God that the IRA blow up innocent shoppers in Enniskillen. It is a sloppily reductive view of history, intent on

bending the facts to suit a particular set of beliefs. Modernity is abjured. Its principles are distorted, made into something they are not, and then used against it in a grand kangaroo court commissioned by the self-appointed moral and the just.

What is then depicted is a world in which God is absent, perhaps dead, and humanity is struggling against the dangers of evil, the putrefaction of modern life. In such circumstances, there is almost an inevitability to the apocalypse which portends the events of McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*. The reader is presented with the "ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (9-10) after an apocalypse described thus:

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? (28)

Suttree concludes with the imprecation "Fly them" and, with it, a sense of hope. The message of *The Road*, it would appear, is that flight may be impossible. The world has turned too far. The City of Man has become a city of the plain, while the City of God is a fading dream. McCarthy presents a bleak vision, informed by his preoccupations with God and evil. The notions of community that informed his earlier work – fragile though those may have been – are now being severely challenged. Our mortal existence is troubled, focusing on mundane strife and a preoccupation with understanding what exists beyond it. And in this, too, there are strong echoes of Eric Voegelin.

Voegelin's Community of Being

“God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being” (*OHI* 1): this quaternarian matrix defines Voegelin’s understanding of the human condition and, he argues, it can only be understood in its totality. Voegelin, of course, takes the Augustinian view that God is unknowable and the nature of divinity cannot be fathomed by humans, and therefore mystery remains at the core of being.¹⁵ Man “is an actor, playing a part in the drama of being and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is.... The role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision on the edge of freedom and necessity” (1). Thus, an understanding of the quaternarian structure of being can only be reached through participation, because “participation is existence itself” but even from this perspective humans cannot fully penetrate the divine mystery. In other words, it may be only through the process of participation in history that the order of reality can be understood, but precisely because humans are participants in existence, it is impossible for them to step aside and form any objective view of their own experiences. In *Blood Meridian*, judge Holden hints at this difficulty when he tells Brown, “existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others” (245). As a result of this inability to penetrate the mystery, Voegelin contends, humanity begins a process of symbolisation through which it attempts to understand the meaning of existence. From this arises his dictum that “[t]he order of history emerges from the history of order” (*OHI* ix), and the symbols that humans invent to try to discover this order are his attempt to interpret the experience of the unknown.

However, later in his life Voegelin began to adapt his philosophy. In the first three volumes of his magnum opus, *Order and History*, he explored the successive ways humanity has attempted to symbolise order, from the cosmological myths of the

¹⁵ “If you comprehend it, it is not God.” St. Augustine.

Ancient near east, through Israel and Revelation, into the world of the Polis and the development of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. *Volume IV* was intended to mark the ascendance of human symbolisation to the heights of Christianity but, by the time Voegelin reached this stage, he had come to the realisation that history was not unilinear and that the tenets of Christian thought could actually be traced through experiential sources into a number of different preceding civilisations. Christian revelation was not, then, the summit of human understanding, the end point in the search for meaning in history. Rather, “[h]istory is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man’s participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction” (*OH4* 6). Thus, “the process of history, and such order as can be discerned in it, is not a story to be told from the beginning to its happy, or unhappy end; it is a mystery in process of revelation” (6). Although humanity is engaged in the search for meaning in history, and the order of history has an eschatological direction, Voegelin came to the conclusion that no end could be reached: the search, the journey, was all that humans could aspire to. Eternal being, meanwhile, the goal of humanity, “realizes itself in time” (*A* 116). It “irrupts into time” through the “soul of the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, who desires eternal being and, in love, opens his soul to its irruption” (*A* 116). Again, Voegelin begins to flirt with beliefs dangerously close to gnosticism, establishing an elite who have a vision and a means of access to the revelation of eternal being. Quoting St Augustine on the Chosen People, he describes the

historical processes of exodus, exile, and return as figurations of the tension of being between time and eternity. Whichever figure the exodus may adopt – that of a real emigration or that of a collision, within the society, between the representatives of higher- and lower-ranking orders – the dynamism and direction of the process stem from the love of eternal being. (*A* 140)

This is troublesome in two regards. Firstly, the assumption of higher and lower ranking orders – the philosophers, the pneumatics, the gnostics, the saved, call them what you will – versus the rest of humanity – the underclass, the hylics – has unpleasant overtones; and secondly, there appears to be an underlying assumption that rupture in society is an inevitable concomitant of the search for eternal being. And it is exactly this sort of fatalism which informs Cormac McCarthy's location of his novels at just such moments of rupture. The search for revelation and divine transcendence is premised on violence.

In order to develop this theory of human consciousness, in Volume IV of *Order and History* Voegelin adopts and adapts the Platonic concepts of *metaxy* and *noesis*. Consciousness is, in effect, an acknowledgement of mortality, of a beginning and an end. For Voegelin, of course, humanity exists within an unknowable transcendent reality. Therefore, for him, consciousness relates to both the finite and the infinite, and our human existence can be characterised as an in-between state, in which humanity experiences a tension between life and death, ignorance and knowledge, matter and spirit, nothingness and transcendence (A 103ff). This in-between reality, the *metaxy*, can be defined by its limiting poles, the *apeiron* and *nous*, depth and height, dark and light, creation and eschaton; and humanity's existence between these poles is at once an anxious search for earthly meaning and a pull towards transcendent reality through which humans tend beyond their imperfections towards divine perfection. Voegelin suggests:

the in-between – the *metaxy* – is not an empty space between the poles of the tension but the 'realm of the spiritual'; it is the reality of man's converse with the gods... the mutual participation... of human in divine, and divine in human, reality. (A 103)

Voegelin quotes from Eliot's *Four Quartets* to symbolise the In-Between: "History is a pattern of timeless moments" and "the point of intersection of the timeless with time" (*CW12* 77). This timeless juncture is, as I noted in the Introduction, Einstein's "stubborn illusion" and it is the same point that Flannery O'Connor, a noted reader of Voegelin, refers to as the locus of the writer, the "peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet" (*Mystery* 59). Such a conflation of time and place and eternity could, too, be said to exemplify the work of Cormac McCarthy. Human existence, then, is an attempt to overcome, or at least accommodate, the tensions in being, and outside the known *metaxy* are the unknown and unknowable, the "Beginning" and the "Beyond" which represent the divine presence. The beginning is the primary experience of the cosmos, as first articulated through creation myths. The beyond suggests a waking of the divine presence in the soul, leading towards the transcendent realm to which humanity is eschatologically bound. Humanity is "existence in tension toward divine reality" and the experience of this in-between reality is meaningful since it "constitute[s] a Before and After within time that points towards a fulfillment, towards an Eschaton, out of time" (*OH4* 6). Thus, again, one sees that Voegelin's perception of humanity is refracted through the prism of his unknowable (and possible non-existent) divinity, and humanity is viewed as heading inexorably on a teleological journey towards an eschatological conclusion. Life, then, becomes only a means to this particular end: a spiritual calculation is imposed upon it, and secular notions are not given room to breathe. The community of being that Voegelin proposes is able to exist only within his quaternarian matrix of "God and man, world and society". Such a view reduces humanity to passive bystanders in their own existence and reality to a kind of waiting room before the last train to revelation.

McCarthy's Metaxy

The fictional worlds of Cormac McCarthy can be viewed as *metaxical*, demonstrating a profound sense of the tension of an in-between reality, along with a pervasive, unknowable Beginning or Before – the primordial swamps and remnants of prehistoric ancestors – and a brooding, untouchable beyond, the realm of the God who is such a pressing concern to McCarthy’s characters. In *The Stonemason*, Ben sums this up neatly in one of his chautauqua monologues: “The world was before man was and it will be again when he is gone. But it was not this world nor will it be, for where man lives is in this world only” (104-5). The in-between of McCarthy is typified, too, by a relentless searching, an endless journey. His characters travel from place to place, moment to moment, generally in a state of unreleasable tension. This, however, is frequently to the detriment of the novels, and it represents a significant weakness in McCarthy’s writing. There are moments throughout his fiction when narrative is submerged beneath a ponderous religiosity and characterisation becomes subservient to a reactionary theologising and philosophising which could come directly from Voegelin himself. As I shall explore in Chapter Two, Billy’s repeated encounters with itinerant prophets in *The Crossing* give a particularly striking example of this failing.

McCarthy’s view of modernity is not an optimistic one. Previously, he has expressed his admiration for writers who examine the “soul of the culture”, but suggests that any “notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea.” Those who believe such notions, he suggests, are the first to “give up their souls” (Woodward). And the reason for this is that there is “no such thing as life without bloodshed.” Nor is society improving. “The world”, he said in 2007, but with reference to the 9/11 bombings, “is in a very unstable situation”. He explained: “If you were to take thoughtful people on, say, January 1st, 1900, and tell them what the twentieth century was going to look like, they’d say, ‘Are you shitting me?’” (Kushner). These beliefs would appear to lie behind the sentiments expressed by McCarthy in notes for *The Road* held in the McCarthy

Archive. In Voegelinian terms, he delineates the modern crisis with Muslim fundamentalism:

The answer to the problems with the Muslim terrorists would seem to be to halt fossil fuel consumption – by whatever means – and let the Arabic countries descend into that poverty which will proscribe the purchasing of armaments to use against the West. But this only puts off the problem to a future date. You would have to go to the jungles of Brazil to find a human being who does not understand that the true tools for the destruction of Islamic fundamentalism are everywhere at hand. They are blue jeans, rock and roll music, hollywood movies, McDonald hamburgers, DVD's (sic), color television. The people of Islam are not fighting for world domination. They are fighting for their lives. They are fighting for the survival of a three thousand year old culture which in their hearts they may well know is doomed. A constantly evolving world pop techno culture is an historical imperative of a scope Spengler could only dream of. (97/4 Notes)

Oswald Spengler argued that Western civilisation had not yet completed its life-cycle but was considerably advanced and was by now, inevitably, in decline (34ff). McCarthy would seem to concur. In his most recent interview, with Mario Paul Martinez, he says:

“Right now, they are very dangerous times for the world, we do not know what will happen. If someone came from another planet and we show them a short version of the twentieth century ... It's crazy. There is no reason to think that things will get better and that all will end happily, that seems unlikely. Sorry”. (Martinez)¹⁶

¹⁶ This interview was for a Spanish journal and McCarthy's words were translated into Spanish. That translation has then been re-translated back into English, so the quote should be considered only a paraphrase.

This is classically Voegelinian, presenting a world in flux, in a constant state of tension, and a modernity which has brought itself to a state of crisis.

These notions, of the inherent violence of humanity and of the instability of the modern world, are explored by McCarthy in each successive work, to the extent that it becomes a teleological journey which can be viewed almost as a palimpsest, with the individual stages of that journey remaining clearly evident throughout his career. In this, as I shall explore in later chapters, there is an insistent critique of the tortured existence in the In-Between. The ambivalence towards modern, ordered society displayed by Uncle Ather or Sylder in *The Orchard Keeper* can be seen clearly in the independence of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in the Border Trilogy. The voice of judge Holden, a unique presence in *Blood Meridian*, nonetheless echoes through succeeding works, particularly in the form of Anton Chigurh in *No Country*: the anachronistic, almost archaic, formality and brutal logic, for example, when Chigurh enquires of Wells, “If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?” (175), mirrors the inhuman coldness of the judge. But, for all the old-fashioned exactitude of their language, it is the failings of modernity that McCarthy is symbolising through the judge and Chigurh. And who is Ely, in *The Road*, but the latest incarnation of the succession of (often blind) prophets who have pronounced on the failings of McCarthy’s world since the old woman enquired of Rinthy in *Outer Dark* whether or not she had been saved, or the fatalistic Ragpicker in *Suttree* who “might” believe in God but “I got no reason to think he believes in me” (258)? This is Voegelin’s desacralised modernity, a world where hubristic humanity can find, at best, alienation and, at worst, violence and death. The symbolism is repeated over and over. The peregrinations of the man and the boy in *The Road*, for example, are a reiteration of Culla’s blind wandering in the conclusion of *Outer Dark*. Indeed, so marked are the similarities between the language in these novels that sections of

Outer Dark, taken in isolation, could easily be mistaken for *The Road*, written over thirty-five years later. Take, for example, the ending of *Outer Dark*:

The road went on through a shadeless burn and for miles there were only the charred shapes of trees in a dead land where nothing moved save windy rifts of ash that rose dolorous and died again down the blackened corridors.

...

Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place. (242)

The mood, language and landscape evoked here clearly match the opening lines of *The Road*: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3).¹⁷ This descriptive passage then moves on to another familiar trope in McCarthy's work, a depiction of the marks of the ancients, symbols of what has been lost, and mentions of primordial existence, life before the interference of humans, the Before. The passage continues:

Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient

¹⁷ In one of the earliest drafts of *The Road* in the McCarthy Archives there is a further resonance, when the man says to the boy "I'm sorry I brought you to such a place" (87/3 2 Sep [F]). This immediately recalls the final line of *Outer Dark*, suggesting each has emerged into a living hell.

lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. (3)

Again, the mood and subject matter presented here can be found elsewhere in McCarthy's work. Consider, for example an early passage from his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*:

...the floor of the forest – littered with old mossbacked logs, peopled with toadstools strange and solemn among the ferns and creepers and leaning to show their delicate livercolored gills – has about it a primordial quality, some steamy carboniferous swamp where ancient saurians lurk in feigned sleep. (11)

Ancient lakes and carboniferous swamps conjure a time before time, stretching into pre-history and beyond. This notion of a “before” suffuses McCarthy's work. In *Child of God*, for example, there is a similar depiction of a dried-up landscape with “great tablets on which is writ only a tale of vanished seas with ancient shells in cameo and fishes etched in lime” (128). There is nothing idyllic about these evocations. The sightless creature with dripping mouth from *The Road* could be a companion to the vision hallucinated by the typhoid-struck Suttree of “[g]ray geometric saurians ... snapping in a pit” (461). Characters in McCarthy's fiction are caught in an alien world where modernity is a soulless, bureaucratic monster hurtling them towards the apocalypse of *The Road*, but any notion of a fabled edenic past into which there can be some retreat towards goodness is equally problematic.

And although there is a clear eschatological progression to his work, the concepts of revelation or salvation or grace are presented as both unknowable and almost unattainable. Just as he obsessively looks backwards to a “before”, McCarthy's work

demonstrates a millennialist preoccupation with a “beyond”, some otherwhere and othertime beyond the reach of humanity. These tensions form the bedrock of McCarthy’s entire oeuvre and such preoccupations are presented time and time again. What one sees is a sustained attempt to define existence in the here and now through the prism of a time before and a time to come. Thus, it can certainly be argued that his work is informed by an intellectual coherence, but while this metaphysical pursuit of meaning makes McCarthy a significant writer, it becomes, at times, so overwhelming that stylistic deficiencies arise which weaken the quality of his work. These will become more apparent in the next chapters, when I discuss in more detail McCarthy’s approach to myth, religion, determinism and evil.

CHAPTER TWO

Symbolisation, Mythology And The Time Of The Tale

Introduction

The reputation of Cormac McCarthy, once seen as a new advocate of the southern gothic and considered to be literary rather than populist, began to change with the publication of *All The Pretty Horses* in 1992. Steven Frye notes that it sold 190,000 copies in hardcover within the first six months of publication (*Understanding* 96), compared with fewer than five thousand for any of his previous hardbacks (95); it won the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award; word of mouth approbation began to spread; here was an author, it seemed, whose time had come. McCarthy, always a significant literary figure, was now becoming recognised in the mainstream too. Central to this change in perception is the narrative and apparent romanticism of *All The Pretty Horses* itself. After the darkness of his earlier works, the lack of sympathetic characters, the studied bleakness of McCarthy's vision, *All the Pretty Horses* and its enigmatic, apparently likeable central character, John Grady Cole, seemed to represent an emotional shift, perhaps suggesting a lightening of this notoriously reclusive author's dark imagination. Gail Morrison goes as far as to say the novel is "set in a world of comparative normalcy" (177), while Brian Evenson notes that McCarthy has moved from the child killing triune of *Outer Dark* and the necrophiliac Lester Ballard in *Child of God* to a character who "finds himself so bothered over having killed a man in self-defense that he feels the need to discuss the matter with a minister of God" ("Wanderers" 58).¹ While there is merit in these

¹ In fact John Grady did not discuss the killing in Saltillo with the Reverend Jimmy Blevins, but he did discuss it earlier with the judge.

arguments, it is important not to overlay the romanticism of *All the Pretty Horses* or to suppose that the violence, although undoubtedly on a lesser scale than in previous works, is any less cardinal, or to assume that John Grady Cole is a hero in the traditional literary sense. As with his earlier works, there remains a brooding sense of menace in the first volume of the Border Trilogy, and the reader knows, of course, that this unsettling malignancy increases as the trilogy progresses. The reason for this is that, as with his southern novels, McCarthy is exploring the City of Man. Increasingly, however, he is also beginning to quest for passage out of the City of Man into the City of God. This begins to take McCarthy into ever darker metaphysical territory.

The Cities of Man, God and the Plain

It is perhaps instructive to consider a tripartite development in McCarthy's work. This is not to suggest that these triads are rigid and formulaic, or that McCarthy has consciously structured his work in this way: on the contrary, I think McCarthy would positively avoid such mechanistic approaches. Nonetheless, because of the preoccupations of his fiction, such a broad categorisation can be made. In the Border Trilogy as a whole, then, one might categorise the tripartite strands as the City of Man – idealistic, questing, living in and for the present but also tending to violence; the City of God – the search for something more meaningful; and the Cities of the Plain – failure, the fact of violence, those fallen who must face God's wrath. Again, broadly speaking, these can be separated into the discrete volumes of the trilogy, with *All the Pretty Horses* being rooted in the City of Man, *The Crossing* representing a relentless search for passage to the City of God, and *Cities of the Plain*, where disenchantment and disaster befall everyone.

Taken more broadly, McCarthy's oeuvre can be seen in this light, too. The Appalachian novels, more rooted in community and character – even flawed characters such as Lester Ballard – are stories in and around and seeking accommodation with the City of Man and our mundane existence. I showed in Chapter One how the destruction of McAnally Flats in *Suttree*, overseen by “Gnostic workmen” (464), is strongly suggestive of the morally compromised basis on which modernity attempts to build its edifices. Beneath this modern facade, *Suttree* “knew another McAnally, good to last a thousand years” (463). The echoes of the Nazi Thousand Year Reich are palpable, leading to the terror of McCarthy's next novel, *Blood Meridian*, in which the City of Man has fallen into evil. The result of this human degradation is a search for something different, somehow less defiled. Thus, one enters the Border Trilogy where, increasingly, there is a search for the City of God. In the first novel there is John Grady Cole, a young man of uncompromising opinions, ill-equipped to exist in a world that is equally uncompromising. Confrontation is inevitable. Then, in the second novel, there is Billy Parham, in search of a purity he knows cannot exist, trying to transcend the travails of the City of Man. The increasingly theological nature of the narratives points to the insistent border crossings being, not just a search for the old ways and the old West, as some critics suggest, or some secular mythologising, but a means of ascent towards something higher, ultimately towards access to the City of God itself. The search, of course, proves fruitless, as indeed the title of the final volume of the trilogy portends. McCarthy's late novels, and his plays *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited*, having approached the City of God but failed to find access, become rooted in pessimism. The plays present flawed men, broken by disenchantment. *No Country for Old Men* depicts a world in which violence is endemic, a localised and mechanised recreation of the hand-to-hand, knife-to-scalp perdition of *Blood Meridian*, while *The Road* ushers in the ultimate city of the plain, a world which has reaped the wrath of God and has been stripped of anything resembling civilisation.

I would argue, then, that what can be seen in the Border Trilogy is a playing out of the narrative of humanity in the City of Man, the City of God and the cities of the plain. The outcome is not positive, nor do the novels offer more than the merest possibility of it being made so. Rather, the reader is presented with a mythologised representation of life in a Voegelinian In-Between, bounded by an unknowable Before and Beyond. Although many McCarthy critics point to his use of mythology and, in particular, his penchant for inverting or otherwise revising standard mythologising tropes, I wish to argue that his use of myth is only a part of a much deeper symbolisation. Further, I will demonstrate that this profound symbolisation is inextricably linked to his Voegelinian concerns about the nature and future of modernity, and that, ultimately, these concerns, and the symbolisation he uses to prosecute them, have an adverse effect on his writing. It is my belief that McCarthy's westward turn with *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy marks a significant deepening of the conservative nature of his philosophical thought. *All the Pretty Horses*, as the first novel in the trilogy, is therefore a key transitional point in his career. That being the case, there is a strong need to examine the nature of this complex novel and those that follow it.

Pretty Horses as Western

Most critics begin their analysis of *All the Pretty Horses* by assessing its place in the canon of Western fiction. Whether it is truly a Western is debatable, although it undoubtedly uses (appropriates, subverts, bastardises) many of the tropes of the Western genre. However, as I shall explain, McCarthy's end is not the same as that pursued by the standard Western. Nonetheless, *Pretty Horses* is routinely read and acclaimed as such. Sarah Gleeson-White posits that part of the reason for its success is that it is written within an "internationally recognized and popular genre: the Western" (23), citing in evidence McCarthy's own declaration, in an interview the

year *Pretty Horses* was published, that there is nowhere in the world that doesn't know about "cowboys and indians and the myth of the West" (23). At the same time, Gleeson-White notes, the history of the American West was undergoing a period of revision. Therefore, she argues, *Pretty Horses* sits firmly within the Western tradition. She does stress, however, that it is not a straightforward Western. While not going as far as Susan Kollin, who describes it as an "anti-western" (561) or Mark Eaton's description of *Blood Meridian* and the trilogy as "very different kinds of Westerns" (157), she concedes that *Pretty Horses* operates within a context of revisionism, challenging the traditional Frederick Jackson Turner vision of Manifest Destiny. She endorses Richard Slotkin's observation that the West was already a mythologised space when turn-of-the-century moviemakers began to build the now familiar Western iconography (24) and argues that *Pretty Horses* "depends for its meaning on just such Western 'icons' and 'keywords'" (25). It does, however, manipulate the Western's constitutive codes and "revises the genre", doing so, she continues, "with great affection" (25). Brian Edwards, meanwhile, suggests that the novels of the Border Trilogy "deconstruct simple versions of the cowboy hero and the morality play" (8). Although they cannot agree exactly what kind of Western *Pretty Horses* represents, then, most critics do at least concur that it is *some* kind of a Western, and it is undoubtedly the case that it rehearses many of the tropes familiar to readers of that genre.

Foremost among these is the representation of the wilderness, the unexplored frontier, that mythical west which belongs to real men and to discovery and freedom and self-determination. Barclay Owens presents the boys heading south ("traditionally a wrong move for the American cowboy") "in search of the Old West that they can no longer find in the western United States.... To find frontier adventures, McCarthy's cowboys have only one choice" (*Western* 65). However, this frontier is by no means a straightforward space: as Owens notes, "Americans have consistently perpetuated two frontier myths, one that champions progress and Anglo-American might and one that

champions the preservation of wilderness and its idealized natives” (68). Thus, the trope of the frontier appears, simultaneously, to look forward and backwards, and this duality presents a highly curious ambivalence at the core of American self-mythologising. In *Pretty Horses*, Owens concludes, the principal mythic mode is one of American progress (whereas, he argues, *The Crossing* is a primitive pastoral) (66). For Gail Morrison, however, the frontier of *Pretty Horses* seems to be a backward-looking space: the novel is “fundamentally a *Bildungsroman*... that archetypal American genre in which a youthful protagonist turns his back on civilization and heads out ... into the wilderness where innocence experiences the evil of the universe and risks defeat by it” (178). In it, she suggests, McCarthy is depicting a “changing land and dying people” (176). Morrison’s interpretation would appear to be the more pertinent and, in truth, Owens’ declaration of a mythic mode of progress seems unconvincing. Indeed, he appears to contradict himself when he later describes the howl of a lone wolf as a signal that the boys “have arrived in the primitive pastoral wilderness” (77). John Grady Cole may be, as Owens avers, a young romantic “American Adam” in the R.W.B. Lewis mould (*Western* 66) and he may be possessed of “naive, impossible dreams” (67) fuelled by the inspiration of his pioneering grandfather’s stories (73) but to suggest that he is an exemplar who “represents our national hopes for the future as he battles the foreign Other in defense of Anglo-American dreams” (66) seems to me to misread a significant thematic strand of the novel. Mexico, as I will explain later, is not a straightforward Other and, whatever John Grady stands for (other than his own childish stubbornness), it is certainly not Anglo-American aspiration.

For Steven Frye, part of the novel’s function is to chart “the slow tragedy of historical change” (*Understanding* 102) and he suggests that the novel’s tension derives from “the mental distances that separate past and present, that distinguish the idyllic world of ranches and horses from oil companies, banks, and ubiquitous corporate interests” (104). Ashley Bourne picks up this same sense of timelessness, a mythical articulation

of everywhen: “even as the characters pass through [the landscapes of the southwestern United States and Mexico] in the present, attention is called to the primitive vestiges of the landscape” (109). Gleeson-White also touches on this element when she suggests that “the land and its original inhabitants and stories have not been completely ‘scoured’; they exist yet as hauntings and scars, to imaginatively enthrall John Grady Cole” (26). This is an important point, but neither Gleeson-White nor Frye nor Bourne quite develop it as fully as they might. I shall return to this later when I consider the role of myth and time in McCarthy’s work. For now, suffice to say the novel is not simply about the loss of the time of the cowboy, but the inexorable flow of time itself.

Thus, there is frontier as wilderness, presented in terms of an appealing agrarian past. So much so, in fact, Vereen Bell suggests: “It is not difficult at all to lapse into thinking of this story as taking place in the nineteenth century, or even earlier” (“Waiting” 926). However, it is a past that is diminishing. For Dianne Luce it is a “vanishing world” in which a “lullaby [is] singing to sleep the vanishing cowboy” (“Vanishing” 164). This sense that John Grady’s crossing the border represents a retreat into an agrarian past is a strong theme in much McCarthy criticism. Georg Guillemín suggests that in *Pretty Horses*, *contra* the desolate purgatory of the wilderness of *Blood Meridian*, the frontier is a “last pastoral stronghold against civilisation” played out through McCarthian mainstays such as “the dispossessed yeoman and Jeffersonian agrarianism, the last cowboy and the frontier, the New Adam and rugged individualism” (107). In contrast to the “anthropocentric land management” they leave behind in Texas, the novel seeks to “visualize an ecopastoral alternative” (103). Gleeson-White concludes that the novel is a lament for the demise of the Old West, a “persistent Edenic fantasy” (27).

This nostalgia is not restricted to sentimentalised or mythologised representations of the old West, however: the loss of the old agrarian past in general is mourned, and the

rise of new, industrialised processes is abjured. Jay Ellis suggests the novel builds on anxieties already apparent in McCarthy's work regarding civilisation in general: "How much refinement can be allowed human life without losing an honest relationship with the natural world? How much distance can be allowed human beings from their natural conditions as animals?" The analysis of these questions in the Border Trilogy leads, says Ellis, to "cowboy existentialism" (*Home* 201). Humanity may be seen, in Rousseauian terms, to be losing touch with the natural impulses and instincts which shaped its early experience. It has, in Sara Spurgeon's description, become a "disordered humanity" introducing chaos into the natural order (55).

Critique of modernity

Thus, in its apparent craving for a lost past, the novel can be seen as a critique of modernity, as discussed in the previous chapter. A number of McCarthy critics concur: Susan Lee suggests John Grady is motivated by a desire to retreat from "the intrusion of modernity" (189). Brian Edwards equates modernity with technology: "McCarthy's young cowboys on horseback are losing, death-laden figures of nostalgia in a world marked increasingly by fences, freeways, cars and aeroplanes" (3). When a bedraggled John Grady arrives from Mexico at Langtry, Texas, thus returning to "civilisation", the first people he meets are two men with the hood of a pickup truck up, trying to start it. The symbolism is clear: John Grady's search for a more authentic way of life may have ended in failure, but modernity is equally fractured (*ATPH* 287). More than this, the novel can be interpreted as attacking the very beliefs that modernity extols. Don Héctor even spells out a critique of Western Enlightenment thinking when he says to John Grady: "People of my generation are more cautious. I think we don't believe that people can be improved in their character by reason. That seems a very french idea". He continues with an explicit warning to John Grady which names the danger that the Enlightenment has apparently wreaked

on the world: “Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason” (146). Nick Monk suggests that the dueña Alfonsa has disavowed her youthful belief in myth and “abandoned herself to the certainties of modernity” (90-1). For Sara Spurgeon, “[t]he signs of change... all indicate a relentless advance of history, technology, and capitalism” (45).

Sarah Gleeson-White suggests the novel establishes a binary opposition, opposing old and new, agrarian and modern, rural and urban. This opposition is bound up in the concept of the Frontier which “ideally marks the border between civilization and the wilderness” (28). Thus, the binary opposites can be extended to include “history/the United States” and “myth/Mexico” (29). Sara Spurgeon makes a similar claim when she describes John Grady’s “unfixed liminal status, betwixt myth and reality, truth and history, Mexico and the United States” (51). The Frontier, then, becomes an essential space in which the themes of the novel are played out. Broadly, Gleeson-White’s interpretation of the novel’s themes can be summarised as a lament for the loss of Eden and a jeremiad against the ascendancy (and pending crisis) of urbanised modernity. The closing of the Frontier by fences and settlements “present[s] the crisis of modernity in terms of loss, loss of a specifically agrarian past”. She concludes: “In this way, the nostalgia of *All the Pretty Horses* might offer a searing critique of American late capitalism” (28). In McCarthy’s hands, she says, the Western retains its theme of escape from consumerist, modern culture but also provides an escape from history into myth.

As far as it goes, this argument is sound: as I explored in Chapter One, the issue of modernity is certainly germane to McCarthy’s work in general and it is clear that *Pretty Horses* is no different. However, to critique the novel in terms of “American late capitalism” runs the risk of defining McCarthy’s critique of modernity in too narrow a way. In particular, it runs the risk of neglecting the broader metaphysical questions the trilogy poses. Similarly, critiquing it purely in terms of a desire to retreat

from modernity into a more accommodating agrarian past does not do justice to the breadth of McCarthy's vision. The modernity he attacks is not simply a capitalist and consumerist imposition but a spiritual wasteland. Gleeson-White does begin to approach these questions when she discusses McCarthy's approach to myth, and this forms her most valuable critique of the novel. Indeed, I will argue later that this is key to understanding McCarthy's work.

Nick Monk, in his perceptive analysis of the trilogy and *Blood Meridian*, notes that: "Cormac McCarthy uses landscape and character to forge a devastating critique of modernity – in particular a version of modernity that owes its existence to the European Enlightenment" (83). He is correct in McCarthy's target of post-Enlightenment secular modernity, and he accurately identifies ways in which McCarthy prosecutes his argument. In addition to landscape and character, however, one could add McCarthy's use of myth.

While critics are correct to identify a yearning for a return to a pastoral, agrarian way of life, McCarthy is as clear as Jean-Jacques Rousseau that such a return is impossible. This is spelled out early in the novel in an exchange between John Grady and Rawlins. Rawlins tells John Grady that his father ran off from home when he was fifteen, "[o]therwise I'd of been born in Alabama". John Grady points out he wouldn't have been born at all, because his parents wouldn't have met. Rawlins is confused. John Grady explains:

If your mama had a baby with her other husband and your daddy had one with his other wife which one would you be?

I wouldn't be neither of em.

That's right. (27)

Ostensibly, this is a humorous diversion, but the underlying message is clear: you are a product of your roots, and what is inside you is what makes you. John Grady may hanker after an agrarian past, but he is John Grady *Cole*, containing his mother's genes as well, the mother who abjures these old ways of life. In a sense, conflict is built into John Grady from the moment of his birth. The world that John Grady wants to inhabit is a contrivance.

Gleeson-White accurately identifies the Cole family ranch as a symbol of "a West that no longer exists" and points out the chimeric nature of the painting of the "picturebook horses" which are not based on any genuine breed (28). Having made this point, however, Gleeson-White fails to pursue it to its logical conclusion: if the pastoral image of the West is not real, what is? What is the novel about? Would McCarthy really invest so much effort in the creation of what is no more than a chimera? Gleeson-White simply accepts John Grady's misconception about the unreal West, suggesting mythologising is taking the place of reality. However, this is to misunderstand the essence of myth. Myth is not solely a retrospective act, a means by future generations of remembering the past, but a forward-motivated attempt to explain the past, and simultaneously understand the present and predict the future in the same terms. In *Pretty Horses*, John Grady's mythologising and search for a 'more authentic' life come from a sense of loss in the present. True myth comes from a sense of exploration. They are polar opposites.

Mexico

As well as being a chimera, the West that John Grady seeks to recover is also grievously distorted. As Sara Spurgeon explains:

Despite the way in which many have read the novel, [it] is not a matter of juxtaposing innocent American romanticism with the brutal, violent realities of an inherently corrupt Mexico. American culpability in Mexican history and politics is clearly established in *Blood Meridian* and openly alluded to in *Pretty Horses*... Nor, I believe, is McCarthy attempting to posit America as the site of modernity and Mexico as simply a dream of the romanticized past, as Vereen Bell suggests, although John Grady may initially see it in just that way. (44)

This leads to another essential question. What is the role of Mexico in *Pretty Horses* (and the entire trilogy)? Why does it appear to have such a hold over John Grady Cole in *Pretty Horses* and Billy Parham in *The Crossing*? For Chad Spellman, John Grady's journey is an archetypal transition point: the end (his grandfather's death) becomes a beginning (a new life), with Mexico standing for Eldorado, a place that exists only in dreams (167). While that may be so, this is not in itself sufficient to explain the intensity with which McCarthy depicts Mexico. Susan Lee considers it to be a "return to the human emotions and internal desires displaced by the intrusion of modernity" (189). Daniel Cooper Alarcón agrees, noting that the boys are forced to turn south because industrialisation in America "has placed too many obstacles in their path and erased the storybook Wild West" (149). Barclay Owens describes Mexico as "a primitive setting where boys may be tested by wilderness experiences. By turning south, the protagonists are turning back history to the frontier conditions of the Old West" (*Western* 70). For Gleeson-White, "Mexico is clearly constructed in terms of both escape from the modernity of an increasingly urbanized Texas and the desire for a rapidly vanishing, yet ever-lingering, world" (28). While there is validity in this argument, it is flawed in two respects.

Firstly, it overstates the differences between Mexico and America. McCarthy's narrative is much more ambiguous than this and the two nations are not presented as

wholly separate. Early in the novel, for example, a young Mexican in a Texan town just north of the Devil's River tells the boys "I never been to Mexico in my life" (34). And near the end, the wife of Reverend Jimmy Blevins, that symbol of American evangelism, tells John Grady that his radio station is based over the border in Mexico (297). These examples suggest a rather more complex inter-relationship between the two nations.

Secondly, modernity, for Gleeson-White (and Owens, Alarcón and Lee) is being parsed in terms of economics and urbanisation but, as I have already argued, there is more to McCarthy's critique of modernity than mere disdain for the vagaries of capitalism. In the insistence with which McCarthy explores concepts of evil, free will, determinism, fate, life, death and the before and the beyond, there is a sustained attempt to understand the essence of our existence. And Mexico, that dark and unknowable expanse, is crucial to this. Vereen Bell, for example, misinterprets McCarthy when he comments:

John Grady and Rawlins escape for a time the dissociating effects of the technology and capital of the new American order, but what they get from their adopted ancient culture is an attractive but totalitarian hierarchy – the autocratic rule of families, at best, and at worst, of brute power instead of law. In Enlightenment terms, a dignified ancient culture is also, inescapably, a primitive one. ("Waiting" 926)

Barclay Owens also describes Mexico as "primitive" (*Western* 70). Viewed in Enlightenment terms this may be the case, but the critique of modernity that McCarthy pursues in his fiction is premised on a deep scepticism about the inheritance of that very Enlightenment. It is therefore inappropriate to gloss the nature of Mexican civilisation in terms of Enlightenment sensibilities, because those are the very sensibilities that McCarthy is seemingly rejecting.

The depiction of Mexico as primitive, then, is too simplistic. Daniel Cooper Alarcón's contention that it is a Manichean "infernal paradise" which provides "a symbolic backdrop against which a spiritual quest is played out" (143) comes closer to an understanding of Mexico in McCarthy's work. It is something unknown: thus, the map Rawlins picks up in a cafe is completely blank on the Mexican side of the border. "It don't show nothin down there, does it?" he says, and continues, "You reckon it aint never been mapped?" (34).²

For some critics, Mexico is simply the alien other. Gleeson-White describes it as a place where "John Grady will lose his innocence" (29) and for John Blair it "represents the alien-ness of the Other". He goes on:

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 where they happen, and in much the same way everywhere. (301-2)

This is too reductive. For one thing, it is not at all evident that John Grady matures through the progress of the novel: certainly, if a definition of maturity includes the ability to learn from experience, then John Grady remains as immature at the conclusion of the novel (and indeed the trilogy) as he is at its commencement. And the Other, if there is an Other, is clearly not merely something inside looking out:

² This trope of the lack of mapping of the Mexican landscape, suggesting it exists as an unknowable expanse, is repeated in *The Crossing*, when an old man draws an elaborate map in the sand for Billy and Boyd, only for the rest of the watching men to inform the boys that it is complete fantasy and therefore useless. "One needed to know the country itself and not simply the landmarks therein", Billy is told. (184-5).

John Grady Cole may have the outlook of a solipsistic teenager but Cormac McCarthy does not. Rather, the Mexico McCarthy portrays in *Blood Meridian* and the trilogy offers something deeper than a symbolisation of an individual's existential angst. Mark Busby points to McCarthy's use of the border "as a metaphor for a complex and oxymoronic melding of nihilism and optimism, good and evil, illusion and reality, and several similar contrasts" (141). This sense of connection, rather than opposition, is important in terms of understanding McCarthy's fiction. Mexico and America do not exist in an either/or situation: that is too simplistic; that would give rise to false certainty.

Sara Spurgeon begins to explore this territory when she notes that "[t]he United States and Mexico are not opposite ends of some nostalgic timeline here. They are, in fact, more properly twinned versions of each other. What John Grady and Rawlins find restored to them in Mexico is simply a magnification of what they left behind in Texas" (46). Writing of the depiction of Mexico in *The Crossing*, she goes on to explain:

Mexico then is more than simply the savage Other, a role it has played in many Westerns; it is an inappropriate Other, more disturbing in its closeness to Billy and Boyd than in its distance from them. Crossing into Mexico is both a trip into the exotic and unknown and a return to tantalizingly familiar roots. (64)

Again, however, this does not fully explain the extraordinary care with which McCarthy introduces the Mexican experience into his fiction. Mexico is such a vivid presence in the novel, effectively a character in its own right, that its role becomes almost metonymic, representing a sense of timelessness, a means of accessing the myth that is central to our human natures and from which humans are (social conservatives may argue) increasingly becoming isolated in their modern, secular,

capitalist lives. It provides a means of “knowing” things that is different from rationalist western ways, that is somehow still linked to a more spiritual path. Therefore, the way McCarthy approaches myth is key to understanding his work.

Approaches to myth

Both Gleeson-White and Spurgeon comment on the specific myth-making sensibility of Mexico. Gleeson-White explicitly identifies the United States as representing “history” (and, by definition, progress, change, industrialisation) and Mexico as representing “myth”, or the vision of the wilderness, a pastoral past (29). She qualifies this by citing Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s identification of an anti-pastoral strand in the novel, in which John Grady’s Eden, the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, becomes an “Infernal Paradise” (30). Nonetheless, she is firm in her assertion that the concept of myth-making is crucial to the novel. Although, as I have already argued, her delineation of America-progress and Mexico-myth is too polarised, she is correct in her identification of the mythic significance of Mexico.

By myth, I do not merely mean the myth of the West or the myth of the cowboy. Gleeson-White writes: “It is in the space of the West that myth and mass culture intriguingly combine to become substitutes for history. And this is the very trajectory that *All the Pretty Horses* traces, in its drive to sidestep modernity and move into an ahistorical West” (24). This is true only up to a point. It misunderstands the role of myth. Myth isn’t a substitute for history, it is a way of understanding, even reconciling history. And myth is not about sidestepping modernity: that is a separate issue. One needs to be clear what is meant when talking about myth.

Critics of Cormac McCarthy have an abiding fondness for citing Richard Slotkin’s work on the myth of the frontier in the context of McCarthy’s western novels but,

while Slotkin undoubtedly offers valuable insight, there are, nonetheless, attendant dangers.³ In *Gunfighter Nation*, his work most often cited by McCarthy critics, Slotkin defines myths as “stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness” (*Gunfighter* 5). He further describes ideology as “the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society’s way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history” (5). I would argue that both these quotes could more usefully be combined into a single definition of myth.

Thus, when McCarthian critics appropriate Slotkin’s language and expound his theories, their interpretation of myth is not always accurate or comprehensive enough. The “mythologised space” they refer to is little more than a bowdlerised version of history that has been moulded into a shape which is palatable to modern ways. That is not myth in the true sense. Myth moves forwards, not backwards. There is a difference between invented myth, post-hoc, and myth that is established by, with and through the community, evolving almost synchronously with the society it represents. It is not revisionary, so much as elucidatory. As Claude Lévi-Strauss explains:

a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages-anyway, long ago. But what gives

³ See, for example, Parrish (72), Frye *Understanding* (73), Gleeson-White (24ff), Owens *Western* (21). Holmberg suggests Slotkin reduces mythology “to a basic theory of a contextualized human experience” (144). Spurgeon discusses Slotkin throughout her monograph, considering issues such as American imperialism, captivity narrative, alteration of myth, regeneration through violence, savage war etc. John Cant discusses Slotkin’s myth of American exceptionalism in the context of transferring “the values of the past” to a “present in which they are no longer viable” (9).

the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting;
it explains the present and the past as well as the future. (430)

John Gunnell similarly points to the timelessness of myth: “To describe the ‘time’ of the myth as cyclical is a misleading rationalization, for there is not only an absence of historical time but no time as such, no perpetual duration and no regular recurrence or succession” (25). In this timelessness of the myth itself, there must be a strong sense of creating, of shaping the world through the myth. Part of the role of myth, then, is transformational and, if that is the case, then it must be forward looking. Slotkin understands this. In *Regeneration Through Violence* he makes the distinction clearly: “the process of mythogenesis in a culture is one of continuous activity”, he writes (*Regeneration* 4). It is “a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture” and that “recapitulates that people’s experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm” (6). He points out, however, that America is an “artificially created” nation whose mythology post-dates the invention of printing. This establishes a fundamental difference between the mythopoeic mode of older cultures and the “hack” mythologising of the American landscape. Critics who write about the myth-making of McCarthy often have an unfortunate tendency to conflate the two approaches. McCarthy’s use of myth does, indeed, have a revisionist intention and, of course, he is attempting to rewrite those myths, to create anti-myths. However, the myth-making of the old West is the least interesting aspect of McCarthy’s approach to myth in *The Border Trilogy* and beyond. Witness throughout his oeuvre his insistent evocations of the ancients and those who went before: these are the myths and the mythopoeic arenas which matter.

Why, then, does McCarthy make such earnest use of Mexico as a ground for his exploration of myth? To answer that, it is instructive to look at the meaning of myth to humans. Karen Armstrong describes it thus:

A myth was an event which, in some sense, had happened once, but which also happened all the time. Because of our strictly chronological view of history, we have no word for such an occurrence, but mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality. (7)

As Mark Busby notes, the Mexican sense of time, unlike western linear time, is circular, and therefore more attuned to the timelessness of myth. Busby goes on to quote Alan Riding: “For Mexicans, neither birth nor death is seen to interrupt the continuity of life and neither is considered overly important. In songs, paintings and popular art, death is even mocked” (Quoted in Busby 145). One sees this consistently in the Border Trilogy, not least in the *corridos* which spring up mythologising the life and death of Boyd Parham. Mythology, then, has always existed as a means of explaining and understanding human existence. However, in modern times, as society has changed and humanity has become more rational, the role of religion has undergone a profound change. Armstrong suggests:

the West developed an economy that seemed, potentially, to be indefinitely renewable. Instead of looking back to the past and conserving what had been achieved, as had been the habit of premodern civilisations, Western people began to look forward. The long process of modernisation, which took Europe some three centuries, involved a series of profound changes: industrialisation, the transformation of agriculture, political and social revolutions to reorganise

society to meet the new conditions, and an intellectual ‘enlightenment’ that denigrated myth as useless, false and outmoded. (126-7)

Her view is that, since the Enlightenment, humanity has focused on science and rational thought rather than the traditional element of mythologisation – that is, a focus on *logos* rather than *mythos*. This belief informs a strain of conservative thinking exemplified by philosophers such as Eric Voegelin, in light of whose work I explored McCarthy’s fiction in the previous chapter. The belief is that Western society is in a state of crisis and the process of modernity has given rise to a dangerous uncoupling of humanity from God. Voegelin claims: “The world finds itself in a severe crisis, in a process of decay that has its origin in the secularization of the spirit and the separation of a therefore merely worldly spirit from its roots in religious experience” (*PR* 3). Carl Jung, writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, makes a similar point:

one thing is certain – that modern man ... has lost the protection of the ecclesiastical walls carefully erected and reinforced since Roman days, and on account of that loss has approached the zone of world-destroying and world-creating fire. Life has become quickened and intensified. Our world is permeated by waves of restlessness and fear. (*Psychology* 59)

Voegelin’s thesis is that, whatever post-Enlightenment, rationalist man may believe, a spiritual sense – be it Christian or one of the other redemptive religions or a generalised sense of some transcendent “other” – resides within the psyche and must, somehow, be catered for. It is eternal and unchangeable and, because it exists transcendently out of time, it is a universal presence, both throughout time itself and within each and every man. Thus, mankind is a “universal community within historical time” (*FETR* 96). And, even if God is removed, the *sensorium* within which this spiritual sense resides will remain, and something else must take its place.

Men can allow the contents of the world to grow to such an extent that the world and God disappear from view, but they cannot eliminate the problems of human existence. These problems live on in the individual soul and when God has dropped out of sight behind the world, then the contents of the world become the new gods; when the symbols of the transmundane religiosity are prohibited, there appear in their place new symbols that have been developed out of the innerworldly language of science. (*PR* 50)

The broken connection with the collective *mythos*, Voegelin argues, is what has led to the ruptures in a desacralised society. He writes: “Only in the shelter of the myth can the sectors of the personality that are closer to the waking consciousness unfold their personality” (*OH3* 186). And modern humanity, divorced from their mythical past, are ill-placed to comprehend reality. Voegelin explains:

so many people today, since we don’t have a myth of our own in our civilization, will now go back into archaeology, into comparative religion, into comparative literature and similar subject matter because that is the place where they can recapture the substance which in our acculturated and now decultured civilization is getting lost. That is why people all of a sudden become Zen Buddhists. (*CW33* 178)

There is, in McCarthy’s fiction, a deepening pessimism about modernity and the nature of civilisation. Writing about fascism and Nazism in 1940, English philosopher R.G. Collingwood noted:

When travellers are overcome by cold, it is said, they lie down quite happily and die. They put up no fight for life. If they struggled, they would keep

warm; but they no longer want to struggle. The cold in themselves takes away the will to fight against the cold around them.

This happens now and then to a civilization. The vital warmth at the heart of a civilization is what we call a religion. Religion is the passion which inspires a society to persevere in a certain way of life and to obey the rules which define it. (168)

The vital warmth, he continues, dissipates. People lose faith, they lose heart, they no longer see civilisation as anything of value, nor do they feel any religious sense of obedience to rules. “Obedience degenerates into habit and by degrees the habit withers away” (168). That could almost be Sheriff Bell speaking.

It is reasonable to assume that Cormac McCarthy shares Collingwood’s pessimism about the state of modernity.⁴ In *Blood Meridian*, of course, he shows a civilisation which has abandoned any sense of civility but, in his other works, too, there is a sense that the City of Man is not a healthy place and the lights of the cities of the plain grow ever brighter. Partly, however, this may be because McCarthy does *not* share Collingwood’s trust in the power of religion, or at least *organised* religion. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, the Church is more frequently an impotent bystander in McCarthy’s world.

It is in this context that McCarthy explores myth-making. But while a modernist like Thomas Mann could describe the writer’s use of myth as “a smiling knowledge of the eternal, the ever-being and authentic” (374), McCarthy’s appropriations of myth afford scant opportunity for smiling: his mythical world is one of darkness, shaping itself around our fears and deepest guilt. In Mann’s conception of myth, the character

⁴ Indeed, McCarthy himself would probably agree. In the *Science Friday* broadcast in 2012, he joked: “Some of my friends would say that making me more pessimistic would be a difficult chore indeed.”

who is embarked on a mythical role emerges from depth into light: in McCarthy, the journey seems more often to be the reverse. Certainly, for John Grady Cole, the “sacred cowboy” appears doomed from the start. McCarthy’s myth and the violent history of the west become inextricably linked and John Grady can neither embrace nor escape either mode.

Transcendence and the mysterious beyond

That is not to say there is no hope in the trilogy. Steven Shaviro rightly points to the fact that in *Blood Meridian* there can be no transcendence: “we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace” (148). In many ways, then, the Border Trilogy is the contrapositive of the nihilism of *Blood Meridian* and it is therefore instructive to think of its themes in terms of transcendence.⁵ Dianne Luce notes in her excellent commentary on *Pretty Horses* that there are a number of moments of grace in the novel. The examples she gives all come from Mexico: “the boys’ ransom from prison, the appearance of Perez’s man to carry John Grady, seriously wounded, to safety... and the appearance of the ‘men of the country’ to relieve John Grady of his ‘loathsome charge,’ the captain” (“Wake” 70). Another moment of grace, of course, comes late in the novel with the judge’s response to John Grady’s story when he says: “I’ve sat on the bench in this county since it was a county and in that time I’ve heard a lot of things that give me grave doubts about the human race but this aint one of em” (289). What these incidents attempt to portray is the *possibility* of goodness in the world. They are firmly rooted in the City of Man; *Blood Meridian* depicted a city of the plain, abomination; but the trilogy offers the prospect of salvation, of ultimate entry into the City of God. It is a faint prospect, perhaps, but none of the procession of mages who populate the trilogy ever wholly give up hope, unlike, for example, the

⁵ As many critics have noted, *Pretty Horses* begins exactly 100 years after the main events of *Blood Meridian*, suggesting McCarthy intends a direct correlation.

Ragpicker in *Suttree*, for whom “[w]e’re all fucked” (366). As the trilogy progresses, this search for passage to the City of God becomes ever more insistent.

John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are different from other main characters in McCarthy’s fiction. His characters tend to take two forms: either existential questers like *Suttree* or Sheriff Bell, or unthinking drifters like the kid or Culla Holme or Lester Ballard or even Llewelyn Moss, who live each day without thought of tomorrow. John Grady and Billy (and probably Uncle Ather, whose similarity to John Grady has previously been identified by Vereen Bell (“Waiting” 925)) appear to offer a middle way. They are inquisitive, sensitive, open to discussion about theological matters. But they do not themselves particularly pursue the goal of understanding, of attaining knowledge.⁶ Instead, they might be characterised, in Keats’s term, as possessing “negative capability” through which “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (277). Keats coined the term in opposition to what he saw as Coleridge’s overdeterministic approach, through which Coleridge felt compelled to know or understand the truth behind everything instead of being content to accept the *Penetralium* of mystery. In the same way, while the dueña or the captain discuss theology with John Grady, and the heretic, the gypsy and others with Billy, the boys patiently listen but offer little insight themselves. The mystery is sufficient; it needs no solution. One might ask, then, how such passivity can help in the search for the City of God? But it is precisely this openness, this lack of a pre-conceived philosophy of existence that gives them the objectivity to view the natural world and accept its mysteries. It is an irony, of course, that these characters’ author seems more Coleridge-like than Keatsian.

⁶ Those who promote gnostic readings of McCarthy’s fiction will, of course, categorise this knowledge as gnostic and identify these individuals as potential pneumatics, able to attain gnosis. In these terms, some argue that at the conclusion of *Blood Meridian*, the kid/man finally attains gnosis. Leo Daugherty, for example, suggests the kid will not submit to the judge because “he feels the “spark of the alien divine” inside him (Daugherty 164). As I argued in Chapter One, such interpretations of gnosticism in McCarthy’s work are useful but perhaps overplayed.

What this is exploring, then, is a means of living in the present in a moral sense. Neither John Grady nor Billy share Suttree's morbid preoccupation, even obsession with the dread of Hamlet's "undiscovered country". Rather, they seek to find an accommodation with a mortal existence that is challenging and troublesome. They do not overtly seek religious experience but it is clear that they wish to mediate between it and everyday reality, aiming to satisfy, in Bernard Paris's description of George Eliot, "the individual's demand for a moral relation to the universe" (*Experiments* 3-4). In this, as with Eliot herself, there is something Feuerbachian in McCarthy's approach although, if so, it is a profoundly pessimistic approach to Feuerbach. If, as Feuerbach believes, the ethical potential of God resides within humanity (as perhaps the spark or fire that famously preoccupies Sheriff Bell and the boy in *The Road*), then for McCarthy the realisation of that potential is a very different matter. Indeed, it is only with *The Road*, at the very nadir of humanity, that finally Feuerbach's dictum that "love is God" (14) comes to fruition. Prior to this, McCarthy's characters reside in a troubled present which is persistently overlayed with remnants of the past and portents of the future. The fictional universe of McCarthy's creations operates on multiple levels, with multiple meanings and multiple outcomes.

Historical and mythical modes

Jay Ellis confirms an important point about McCarthy working simultaneously with the historical and the mythical: "It is regularly McCarthy's practice to build onto history stories whose meanings reach a mythic level" he explains ("Country" 91). This presents a particular feature of the Cormac McCarthy reading experience, the sometimes unsettling way the narrative shifts from chronicle into parable. Experienced readers can identify the moments when these shifts take place, and are aware that something of deeper significance is about to be imparted. Indeed, it is

essential for a full understanding of McCarthy to be able to parse the different narrative, historical, mythical and allegorical levels he introduces. For example, the moment when John Grady and Rawlins head out of Texas towards the wilderness of Mexico in *Pretty Horses*, the narrative suddenly shifts into a different register:

They rode out along the fenceline and across the open pasture-land. The leather creaked in the morning cold. They pushed the horses into a lope. The lights fell away behind them. They rode out on the high prairie where they slowed the horses to a walk and the stars swarmed around them out of the blackness. They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing. (30)

The portentous tone alerts the reader to the fact that the boys' journey is important in the narrative sense, but also operates on a mythic level. Nancy Kreml points out McCarthy's use of language in order to develop multilayered and complex narratives, explaining his use of a transparent style, plain and unadorned, for the principal narrative, and a more opaque style to indicate a thematic shift to another level of meaning (38). In particular, she notes John Grady's conversation with Don Héctor in which the first suggestion is made that the ranch is not Eden and John Grady's fate is not to be a happy one: "The opaque is so clearly marked", she notes, "and... so clearly associated with the intrusion of another element, that McCarthy can achieve a powerful effect with only a single sentence" (47). Kreml is correct in her analysis of the way McCarthy uses language to implant deeper messages. However, the first absolute portent of John Grady's doom comes not in this conversation with Don

Héctor, but two pages earlier, when John Grady and the vaqueros are in the mountains trailing horses and Luis tells “tales of the country and the people who lived in it and the people who died and how they died” (110). He goes on:

He’d loved horses all his life and he and his father and two brothers had fought in the cavalry and his father and his brothers had died in the cavalry but they’d all despised Victoriano Huerta above all other men and the deeds of Huerta above all other visited evils. He said that compared to Huerta Judas was himself but another Christ and one of the young vaqueros looked away and another blessed himself. He said that war had destroyed the country and that men believe the cure for war is war as the curandero prescribes the serpent’s flesh for its bite. He spoke of his campaigns in the deserts of Mexico and he told them of horses killed under him and he said that the souls of horses mirror the souls of men more closely than men suppose and that horses also love war. Men say they only learn this but he said that no creature can learn that which his heart has no shape to hold. His own father said that no man who has not gone to war on horseback can ever truly understand the horse and he said that he supposed he wished that this were not so but that it was so.

Lastly he said that he had seen the souls of horses and that it was a terrible thing to see. He said that it could be seen under certain circumstances attending the death of a horse because the horse shares a common soul and its separate life only forms it out of all horses and makes it mortal. He said that if a person understood the soul of the horse then he would understand all horses that ever were. (110-1)

This passage is revealed to be one of the most important in the book because of the relatively unusual register in which it is delivered. This technique of employing reported speech, relayed in highly formal, almost archaic language, with the

repetitions of “He said” is used consistently throughout *The Crossing* for the voices of the cast of wise men and women who pronounce to Billy Parham on matters of ontology, but apart from this passage it is not used to any great extent in *Pretty Horses*. Even the conversations of the dueña Alfonsa and Don Héctor, who convey the most significant philosophical messages of the novel, are not delivered in this manner. Therefore, given McCarthy’s use of shifting register and tone to highlight key passages, one can infer that an important message is being relayed here. What is it? Luis’s tales reveal the preoccupations of almost McCarthy’s entire oeuvre. They deal with death and war, Christ, the soul, nature, horses, the source of godliness. They traverse the City of Man and the cities of the plain, they aspire to the City of God. Here, there is a love of war familiar from *Blood Meridian*.⁷ There is an exaltation of nature common to McCarthy’s fiction from *The Orchard Keeper* to *The Road* and a preoccupation with the soul and death and the nature (and possibility) of transcendence. In this passage the truth is revealed that, although ostensibly *Pretty Horses* presents a less overtly Manichean dystopia than the world of *Blood Meridian*, still the similarities remain. Whatever it is the mysterious figure in that novel’s epilogue is placing in the ground, traces of it linger. And those similarities, the need for blood, for violence, for vengeance, will haunt the life of John Grady Cole. The City of Man remains a dangerous and troublesome place and passage to the City of God is but a distant hope, and it is through McCarthy’s complex melding of myth and narrative that this is made clear.

Thing-reality and It-reality

⁷And, indeed, the Trilogy itself. John Wegner notes the centrality of war to McCarthy’s southern works: “*The Crossing* begins between World War I and World War II with America on the verge of the Depression, and *Cities of the Plain* essentially ends in 1952 as America’s presence in Korea grows. John Grady Cole’s father returns from a World War II POW camp sick and dying; *The Crossing* ends with Billy’s witness of the “strange false sunrise... of the Trinity Test”; and *Cities of the Plain* begins with John Grady’s drinking with Troy, a war veteran (32).

In their analyses of McCarthy's simultaneous adoption of differing modes, Ellis and Kreml are beginning to explore McCarthy's most complex use of symbolisation, as a means of understanding consciousness. If the *metaxy* is, in Voegelin's description, the "realm of the spiritual", the In-Between of existence "in tension toward divine reality", then it follows that it must be the seat of consciousness in man. In his later career, and particularly in the fifth volume of *Order and History*, *In Search of Order*, Voegelin elaborated an extensive study of the structures of consciousness, which he considered to be the key to his entire oeuvre.⁸ There is, he claims, a paradox at the centre of consciousness which is fundamental to an understanding of personal, social and political experience.⁹ Consciousness can be broken down into two dimensions, intentionality and luminosity, which correspond to a "thing-reality" and an "it-reality". Intentionality relates to that consciousness directly experienced by human beings "in their bodily existence" (*OH5* 29), in which an object, or "thing" is perceived, hence "thing-reality". There is a degree of intentionality to it – it is an act the subject sets out to do. Voegelin explains it thus:

we speak of consciousness as a something located in human beings in their bodily existence. In relation to this concretely embodied consciousness, reality assumes the position of an object intended. Moreover, by its position as an object intended by a consciousness that is bodily located, reality itself acquires a metaphorical touch of external thingness. We use this metaphor in such phrases as "being conscious of something," "remembering or imagining something," "thinking about something," "studying or exploring something." I shall, therefore, call this structure of consciousness its intentionality, and the corresponding structure of reality its thingness. (*OH5* 29)

⁸ As quoted by his wife, Lissy Voegelin, in the Foreword to *In Search of Order* (cited here as *OH5*).

⁹ For good introductions to Voegelin's conception of consciousness, see McMahon and Heilke. For Voegelin's own analysis, see "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme" in *CW12*; and *OH5*, particularly pp. 27-31.

Luminosity, on the other hand, is a more complex experience, perhaps exemplified by an artistic encounter or a prayer or contemplation, or some intellectual examination of an issue, the sort of experience explored, for example, by McCarthy's prophets. Voegelin explains:

we know the bodily located consciousness to be also real; and this concretely located consciousness does not belong to another genus of reality, but is part of the same reality that has moved, in its relation to man's consciousness, into the position of a thing-reality. In this second sense, then, reality is not an object of consciousness but the something in which consciousness occurs as an event of participation between partners in the community of being. (*OH5* 29)

By "partners in the community of being", Voegelin is referring again to the quaternarian matrix of God and man, world and society which I discussed in Chapter One. He notes that in philosophical language there is no term to denote this reality, and so he uses the "mysterious" term "It-Reality" (*OH5* 30). Voegelin then sums up the difference between these two modes of consciousness:

Consciousness...is a subject intending reality as its object, but at the same time a something in a comprehending reality; and reality is the object of consciousness, but at the same time the subject of which consciousness is to be predicated. (*OH5* 30-31)

This is akin to the central notion of "intentionality" that is seen in phenomenological thinking, as developed by Edmund Husserl under the influence of Franz Brentano. Indeed, for Husserl, intentionality is the "fundamental property of consciousness" (Quoted in McIntyre and Woodruff Smith 147). His conceptions of *noesis* and *noema*, respectively the interpretive part of an act and that act's meaning, are broadly similar

to Voegelin's two modes of consciousness, although Voegelin's may be (narrowly) the easier to grasp. Robert McMahon summarises the difference between Voegelin's two modes:

the very notion of participation demands conscious apprehension both of the whole in which one participates and of one's own part in it. Therefore, consciousness must, paradoxically, be simultaneously *apart from* the whole, in order to apprehend it, and *a part of* the whole, in order to act in it [his emphases]. (118)

Thus, the two structures of consciousness are simultaneously present in all human experience. They are, in McMahon's terms, "polar opposites, paradoxically copresent in all experience" (119). He gives the example of watching a sunrise: the act of doing so might be intentional, a deliberate observation of a thing; but at the same time the act illuminates consciousness, the outer reality impinges on the inner reality of the observer. In a sense, then, the object (sunrise) becomes the subject. This becomes significant for Voegelin – and for a study of the work of McCarthy – because an understanding of the modes of experiencing consciousness correspond to "both conceptual analysis and mythic symbolization as complementary modes of thought in the quest for truth" (OH5 32). He equates intentionality to conceptualising science and luminosity to mythic and revelatory symbols and suggests that philosophical discourse depends on both modes. Voegelin argues, however, that since the Enlightenment, in the rush to advancement, the symbolisation of It-reality experiences has become degraded and humanity's understanding of reality beyond the knowable In-Between has been compromised.

Cormac McCarthy's fiction, as I will show later, is at once intentional and luminous. He is not a straightforward teller of tales, and his works do not consist solely of a linear narrative thread. He is telling his story of surface while simultaneously striving

for luminous depth, an understanding of It-Reality, the mythic strands which subsist in our collective consciousnesses, a striving for the ultimate meaning, total understanding. In a sense, of course, all literature does this, but for McCarthy it appears to become an all-encompassing obsession.

Symbolisation

For Voegelin – and, I would argue, McCarthy – the reality of human existence in the In-Between can only be elucidated through symbolisation. There is, Voegelin argues, only one reality, but it may be symbolised through a variety of means, including myth, philosophy, language and religion. And for what better description of the complex character of McCarthy's oeuvre could one ask than this? Each of these symbolisations has a specific role and they are mutually inter-dependent, but the role of myth, in particular, bears considerable significance as a means of explaining the tension in existence. And it is this role of myth, rather than a trite re-evaluation of the myths of the west, or an attempt to identify some ancient gnostic postulations in McCarthy's work, which is crucial to an understanding of Cormac McCarthy. In *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin writes:

The classic manifestation of the tension is Plato's creation of the philosopher's myth. ... Since the philosopher cannot transcend these limits [of noetic height and apeirontic depth] but has to move in the In-Between, the *Metaxy*, delimited by them, the meaning of his work depends on an ambiance of insight concerning the divine presence and operation in the cosmos that only the myth can provide. (*OH4* 11)

Thus, he suggests that myth is the primary symbol available to the *metaxical* human being to comprehend the experience of the divine and the pull of the Beyond. The

truth of such symbols, he argues, is not informative, but evocative (*CW12* 344), in as much as their meaning can only be understood if they *evoke* reality for the reader. In this way, the symbols allow a society to order its experience. He explains:

A mythical symbol is a finite symbol supposed to provide transporence for a transfinite process. Examples: a myth of creation, which renders transparent the problem of the beginning of a transfinite process of the world; an immaculate conception, which mediates the experience of a transfinite spiritual beginning; an anthropomorphic image of God, which finitizes an experience of transcendence; speculations about the pre-existence or post-existence of the soul, which provide a finite formula for the beyond of birth and death; the fall and original sin, which illuminate the mystery of finite existence through procreation and death and so on. (A 21)

Myths, then, establish the narratives which explore the problem of consciousness. In this way, they allow a search for an explanation of existence and understanding of, firstly, the experiential Thing-reality and, secondly and more importantly, the divinely inspired It-reality. Mythical narratives explore the Thing-reality of the In-Between and allow humans to apperceive themselves and their condition. And because anything in the realm of the Beyond must, by definition, be unknowable to humanity, it can only be apprehended through metaphor. The entire concept of a “beyond” must be metaphorical because it is “expressing the participation of the temporal story in the dimension of the It-reality out-of-time” (*OH5* 44). This symbolic search for understanding is called by Voegelin “the Question”, that quest for understanding of what it is to be human that has exercised mankind stretching back into prehistory. And throughout history, humanity has used a complex mythological conflation of time and times to explain the process of life and death, the ebb and flow of seasons, the mysteries of creation and the beyond. Karen Armstrong, in her study of myths, describes this as a simultaneous “everywhen” (7). This sense of “everywhen” suffuses

the work of Cormac McCarthy, with his mythic underpinnings of the remnants of the ancients and worlds lost and times before the knowledge of man, and with his constant searches for some connection to the divine beyond, a passage from the City of Man to the City of God. However, it is not in mythical time, but in the Time of the Tale, that McCarthy's connection to the work of Eric Voegelin can best be seen.

Time of the Tale

The Time of the Tale is the conception that Voegelin uses to explore the connection between myth and philosophy.¹⁰ Examining Plato's *Timaeus*, he suggests that the meaning of its symbolism can only be understood by reflecting on the relationship between the overt creation story it presents and the "drama of the soul" it simultaneously symbolises. Did Plato intend to advance a "doctrine" of creation in time, he asks, and with it a "beginning" of the cosmos? If so, such a creation "must occur as an event in the inner time of the tale" (*OH3* 199). He explains Plato's position in the *Timaeus*: time is an icon representative of eternity, and if that is the case it therefore stands that creation cannot be a process within time. He then quotes St Augustine to provide a solution: "If before heaven and earth there was no time, how can one ask what Thou didst then? For there was no Then, when there was no time.... Thou hast made all times and before all times Thou art; and not at any time was time not" (*OH3* 199-200).

Voegelin thus seeks to make a distinction between the Time of the Tale – in which creation does exist in time – and the time of the cosmos in which it cannot, and suggests that the Time of the Tale

¹⁰ A good analysis of Voegelin's use of the Time of the Tale as an account of the connection between literature and philosophy can be found in Embry.

symbolizes the in-between of time and eternity. Being does not precede Becoming in time; it is eternally present in Becoming. The flux of Becoming... has a dimension pointing out of time toward eternal Being. Along this dimension moves the process of Incarnation, intersecting at any given time with the process of Becoming. This process that intersects the time of Becoming at the point of its present, but is not part of the process of Becoming itself, is the process of the psyche; and the time of the tale is the “form of the object” into which consciousness casts this timeless process. (*OH3* 200)¹¹

Thus, man, in his desire to place himself in the world, to understand the beginning and apprehend the beyond, will always approach such pursuits through symbolism derived from the mythic imagination. Existence beyond the limiting poles of the In-Between, the cosmos, eternity, time, the search for meaning, the search for purpose, these are, he says, the concepts which have preoccupied mankind since its earliest days, and this quest is given shape in the Time of The Tale. Voegelin later refined the idea in a letter to Robert B. Heilman:

The basic form of myth, the “tale” in the widest sense, including the epic as well as the dramatic account of happenings, has a specific time, immanent to the tale, whose specific character consists in the ability to combine human, cosmic and divine elements into one story. I have called it, already in *Order and History*, the Time of the Tale. It expresses the experience of being (that embraces all sorts of reality, the cosmos) in flux. ... [T]he basic Tale ... expresses Being in flux. Time, then, would not be an empty container into which you can fill any content, but there would be as many times as there are types of differentiated content. Think for instance of Proust’s *temps perdu* and *temps retrouvé* as times which correspond to the loss and rediscovery of self,

¹¹ By *psyche*, Voegelin means the “sensorium of transcendence, that organ of man, by which he experiences or in which he experiences the various tensions [of existence]” (*CW11*, 230).

the action of rediscovery through a monumental literary work of remembrance being the atonement for the loss of time through personal guilt — very similar to Cosmological rituals of restoring order that has been lost through lapse of time. I believe the regrets of Richard II (I wasted time and now does time waste me) touch the same problem. This reflexion would lead into a philosophy of language, in which the basic Tale would appear as the instrument of man's dealing with reality through language – and adequately at that. Form and content, thus, would be inseparable: The Tale, if it is any good, has to deal with Being in flux, however much differentiated the insights into the complex structures of reality may be. (CW30 471)

Thus, one can see that Voegelin is using the conception of the Time of the Tale to examine the tension of life in the In-Between, the eschatological straining towards a divine Beyond and an insight into the cosmological creation of time and history. Charles Embry summarises Voegelin's interest in the Time of the Tale as:

1. myth as the primary literary form of Cosmological civilizations' differentiation of insights into the structures of reality and subsequent literary forms as a historical event
2. the relation between myth, Time of the Tale, and other literary forms
3. the Time of the Tale in relation to other types of time
4. the Time of the Tale and Being in flux
5. the persistence of the Time of the Tale after differentiation of insights into other complex structures of reality
6. the merger of form and content in the basic Tale
7. a philosophy of language. (28)

Embry concludes that Voegelin's Time of the Tale is "integrally bound up with myths, that is, works of art that symbolize the experiences of human beings in Cosmological civilizations". He then quotes Voegelin as saying: "all art, if it is any good, is some sort of a myth in the sense that it becomes what I call a *cosmion*, a reflection of the unity of the cosmos as a whole" (28). While this is a good analysis of Voegelin's use of the Time of the Tale, it begins to hint at some of the difficulties in this conception, or at least in the extent to which Voegelin applies its limiting power over humanity. In his insistence on some unknowable but unavoidable transcendental end, to which mankind is eschatologically drawn, he leaves no room at all for free will, for human intuition, ingenuity, scientific advance. Humans become mere matter in a cosmological engine. Or, as Anton Chigurh would have it, "the shape of your path was visible from the beginning" (*NCFOM* 259). Chigurh, of course, is a classic manifestation of the Time of the Tale, a metaphorical messenger from eternity, a "faintly exotic" (112) outsider from everywhen descending upon a society in rupture, validating the accounting of a "squandered world" (122), while the hubristic Llewelyn Moss, our everyman, blithely boasts that he "like[s] to get it right first time" (235) as he blunders towards his fate. As I will show in Chapter Four, such fatalism suffuses McCarthy's work. Judge Holden warns, for example, that "existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (*BM* 245) And in *Cities of the Plain*, one of McCarthy's legion of blind men tells John Grady:

Men speak of blind destiny, a thing without scheme or purpose. But what sort of destiny is that? Each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it another yet. In a vast and endless net. Men imagine that the choices before them are theirs to make. But we are free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life. (195)

Again, it must be noted that these are the words of characters and not, therefore, necessarily representative of McCarthy's own views, but the frequency with which such ideas are aired suggests, at the very least, an instinctual preoccupation with the matter. And thus I would argue that Voegelin's concept of the Time of the Tale, defining as it does an everywhen outside time as it is understood by poor, helpless humanity and explaining the tension that humans feel within the confines of the In-Between, bounded by the unknown and unknowable poles of the Beginning and the Beyond, is clearly represented in the fictional *cosmions* of Cormac McCarthy.

Cormac McCarthy's Time of the Tale

Eric Voegelin is by no means original in ascribing a mythological purpose to literature, but the intensity with which he pursues his passions is unusual. Similarly, it must be conceded that Cormac McCarthy's fiction displays a singular obsession with mythologising the ruptures in everyday society and with discourses on those alien universes beyond our understanding. As I have already explained, his work is riddled with references to the ancients, to lost societies and people. Such ancients may have been predecessors in our own world, or vestiges of another world. In *The Crossing*, for example, their genesis is left ambiguous:

Along the face of the stone bluffs were old pictographs of men and animals and suns and moons as well as other representations that seemed to have no referent in the world although they once may have. (135)

There are even suggestions that these "predecessors" may not have been human: there are consistent allusions to the almost divine nature of wolves in *The Crossing*, for example (4,17,25,45). With his mythmaking and references to ancients, to those who

inhabited this world before the present day, and to the animals who retain some latent memory of those prehistoric times, McCarthy constantly conjures a world in which the traditional God of modern Christian perception is an uncomfortable, almost alien presence. This is clearly a Voegelinian space, one which expresses, as Voegelin describes it, “the experience of a lasting cosmos permeated by the divine mystery of its existence, and [which] articulates the truth of a cosmos that is not altogether of this world” (CW28 175).

Accordingly, even planet Earth is not sufficient to hold McCarthy’s mythology. Anareta is invoked in *Blood Meridian*, when the survivors of an Indian attack sleep “with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night” (46). Anareta, as Leo Daugherty explained in his famous early analysis of *Blood Meridian*, is the mythical Renaissance “planet which destroys life” (163). Daugherty’s analysis, however, suggests that this passage can be read in two ways – either to compare Earth to Anareta, or to suggest that Earth *is* Anareta. In *Suttree*, meanwhile, the river is described as the “Tarn of Acheron” (190), that is, the widest part of the River Acheron in the Underworld, the “river of pain”. Thus, humanity remains in a single cosmos, and the human experience, even when invoking alien planets or underworld entrances or superior, non-human lifeforms, is still essentially intracosmic. Voegelin suggests:

There is a general experience of the cosmos; everything is *within* the cosmos, including the gods, and if you want to explain anything in the cosmos you can explain it only by telling a story: how it originated from something else in the same cosmos. That is what we might call intracosmic relating of things to their ground, to other things or actions within the cosmos; there is nothing outside the cosmos. Thus *myth* can be defined, I think fairly exactly and there are no

exceptions to it, as imputation to other intracosmic things of a ground. It is myth when you tell a story of an intracosmic ground. (*CW11* 233)

The intracosmic ground, then, is the territory that McCarthy traverses, and the mythologies he creates are those which explain the origins and ends of that cosmos. A timeless intracosmic presence could well describe, for example, the trout which “once” swam in the “streams in the mountains” at the conclusion of *The Road*. They “hum of mystery”, their backs presenting “maps of the world in its becoming” (241). What this demonstrates, again, is an everywhen, a line running through the cosmos and eternity. Even the turning of the seasons is made mythical, tales of eternity emerging from the tracks of time as seen, for example, in this passage from *Child of God*:

In the spring or warmer weather when the snow thaws in the woods the tracks of winter reappear on slender pedestals and the snow reveals in palimpsest old buried wanderings, struggles, scenes of death. Tales of winter brought to light again like time turned back upon itself. (138)

McCarthy leaves the reader in no doubt: the earth humans inhabit is not theirs alone, and their time is not unique. He – and humanity, if he is correct – are in a constant search for transcendent truth, for a key to the mystery, for what is beyond. And so such metaphorical musings are threaded throughout his work. His myths customarily blend time and place, everywhen and everywhere. The following passage from *Suttree*, for example, is a conflation of the modern, dirty city of Knoxville, its industrial roots and its pre-Adamite beginnings:

It was still early morning when he made his way down the steep path by the ruins of an old wall. Some ancient city overgrown here. In a sere field worn clothes the wind has tattered hung from a hatted cross. Down there the littoral

of siltstained rocks, old plates of paving and chunks of concrete sprouting growths of rusted iron rod. He'd even seen old slabs of masonry screed with musselshells here in the weed. Coming down the concrete steps with the mangled iron handrail and past old brick cisterns filled with rubble. Past the stone abutment of an earlier bridge on the river and the last ramshackle house and the brown curbstones and pavingbricks and blackened beams with their axed flats and their mortices, all this detritus slid from the city on the hill. (411)

His adaptations of the Time of the Tale are not only metaphorical, however. Explorations of the Time of the Tale take on stylistic form, too, informing the ways he structures his novels. This can perhaps best be seen in the italicised prologues and epilogues which appear in *The Orchard Keeper*, *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*. These lead outside the dimension of the immediate narrative, providing portentous book-ends which draw the mythologising onto a different level. The view pans out from the individual level of the immediate story into a panorama of existence itself. The narrative proceeds, but the “tale”, the myth that McCarthy is creating becomes greater than the narrative. It exists in its own space or, as Voegelin would describe it, its time is immanent to itself.

Suttree, for example, begins with a description of Knoxville, imagining it as a “*world within the world*”, in “*alien reaches, these meagre sinks and interstitial wastes that the righteous see from the carriage and car another life dreams. Illshapen or black or deranged, fugitive of all order, strangers in everyland*” [his emphasis] (4). And so one moves, then, from everywhen to everyland, a place inhabited by everyone, but also by the “weaver” and “carder of souls”, by “runder forms” (5), by death and fate and the flux of being.

The opening to *The Orchard Keeper* begins with a perplexing scene, one which initially makes little sense, in which workmen remove a tree that has grown around a wrought-iron fence, completely subsuming it. Who these workmen are is never explained, and the reader is left to infer that the tree is the one in the cemetery in which John Wesley's mother is buried. As Jay Ellis explains, the reader eventually realises that the action of the prologue occurs just before the final appearance in the novel of John Wesley (*Home* 43). Thus it is and it is not a part of the main narrative – it exists both outside and inside the tale. That it should occur in a cemetery, of course – a point of transition from the In-Between to the Beyond – is not coincidental. The novel ends with another panoramic swoop beyond the scope of the main narrative into a mythologising extroversion:

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. (246)

The epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, meanwhile, offers a masterclass in the establishment of an immanent time and purpose to the tale. The novel proper concludes with the harrowing death of the kid at the hands of judge Holden in the jakes. The epilogue then sweeps into a vision of a man crossing the landscape “striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there” (337). The “being in flux” which *Blood Meridian* represents goes on, the actions of men in the In-Between continue, while the search for transcendence, the spark of God, exists through time.

Another way by which McCarthy's preoccupation with the Time of the Tale affects the style of his writing is through the regular tense shifts he employs. Take, for example, this passage from *Blood Meridian*:

Now come days of begging, days of theft. Days of riding where there rode no soul save he. He's left behind the pinewood country and the evening sun declines before him beyond an endless swale and dark falls here like a thunderclap and a cold wind sets the weeds to gnashing....

He keeps from the king's road for fear of citizenry. The little prairie wolves cry all night and dawn finds him in a grassy draw where he'd gone to hide from the wind. The hobbled mule stands over him and watches the east for light. (15)

This is clearly an event which happened once, and yet McCarthy eternalises it by the use of present tense, making it a “once and forever” moment. McCarthy's characters spend their entire lives riding, walking, searching. And, once again, it is entirely typical that the scene ends with a sweep outwards across the horizon: into everywhen and everywhere. The most frequent use of this technique is in *Suttree*, in which the narrative frequently shifts from past into present tense. The following scene, again significantly, takes place in a cemetery, where Suttree's son is being buried:

They went on among the tilted stones and rough grass, the wind coming from the woods cold in the sunlight. A stone angel in her weathered marble robes, the downcast eyes. The old people's voices drift across the lonely space, murmurous above these places of the dead. The lichens on the crumbling stones like a strange green light. The voices fade. Beyond the gentle clash of weeds. He sees them stoop to read some quaint inscription and he pauses by an old vault that a tree has half dismantled with its growing. Inside there is nothing. No bones, no dust. How surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it.

He sat in the dappled light among the stones. (153)

The passage begins in the past tense. Then the description of the stone angel omits the verb to make it ambiguous, meaning it could be past or present. Next, the old people's voices drifting across a lonely space could be simple present – this is what customarily happens, rather than in this one instance, and therefore general, or it may only be this one instance. Thus, there is again some ambiguity. Then there are descriptions of the lichen and weeds, which again could be a generalised, simple present. “He sees them stoop,” however, is unambiguously personal to Suttree: this is his action, a unique moment, specific to him. And yet, despite the novel being told primarily in the past tense, here his thoughts are rendered in the present: the reader is with him, this moment, one so painful it will undoubtedly remain in his memory throughout his life, being transposed into a mythical continuous present from which he can never escape. Having reached this point, McCarthy then sweeps typically outward again into omniscient narration to make a point about life and death and the boundaries between those states. The past tense narrative recommences with “He sat in the dappled light”, but what one can see clearly in this passage is the Time of the Tale, establishing its own universal timelines. Through this, the existential angst of Suttree is laid bare as a personal and universal tragedy.

Time of the Tale in Suttree

I would argue that *Suttree* is McCarthy's masterpiece, and his use of the Time of the Tale to explore the existential crisis of Buddy Suttree is extraordinary.¹² The following passage gives a fine example of his skill:

¹² Critics who concur include Josyph and Morgan (“for both of us, the best of Cormac McCarthy's masterworks” (42)). Longley calls it “his masterpiece” (“Metaphysics” 80), while Canfield uses the same term for both *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian* (“Aquarius” 664). Bob Gentry, while pointing out

He looked about. Beyond the chancel gate three garish altars rose like gothic wedding cakes in carven marble. Crocketed and gargoyled, the steeples iced with rows of marble frogs ascending. Here a sallow plaster Christ. Agonized beneath his muricate crown. Spiked palms and riven belly, there beneath the stark ribs the cleanlipped spear wound. His caved haunches loosely girded, feet crossed and fastened by a single nail. To the left his mother. Mater alchimia in skyblue robes, she treads a snake with her chipped and naked feet. Before her on the altar gutter two small licks of flame in burgundy lampions. In the sculptor's art there always remains something unsaid, something waiting. This statuary will pass. This kingdom of fear and ashes. Like the child that sat in these selfsame bones so many black Friday in terror of his sins. Viceridden child, heart rotten with fear. Listening to the slide shoot back in the confessional, waiting his turn. Light pierced, light fell from the pieced and leaded glass in the windows in the western wall, light moteless and oblique, wine colors, rose magenta, lached cobalt, cinnabar and delicate citrine. (253)

Here, there are the classic ingredients of a McCarthy passage. The language is rich and exotic, containing a number of obscure words and yet remaining vividly descriptive. Once again, one sees a delicate use of the present tense, eliding the story into omniscience ("the sculptor's art") in order to make a general observation. The story is now diverted into some typical McCarthian religious symbolism before reverting back to the substantive plot. Thus, McCarthy's mythologising and symbolisation and the exploration of guilt and complicity which forms such an important part of *Suttree* are finely integrated with the narrative. Another significant passion of *Suttree*, alcohol and alcoholism, is explored in this passage:

"flaws" in its "excellence", considers it to have "no living peer" in terms of its poetry and dialect (61). From a particularly Southern perspective, Cawelti praises it as a "culmination and transformation of literary modernism" (166).

You could hear the small heeltaps of an idle whore receding in the streets. Claustal landscape of building faces even to the sky. The heelclicks sing with a stinging sound. Suttree looked upward. The baroque hotel front flaking a peagreen paint. A church clock tolling. Pigeons reel and flap in the bellpeal. In the gutted rooms sad quaking sots are waking to the problem of the Sunday morning drink. (385)

Once again, there is deft use of simple present to suggest once and forever, surrounding a single sentence in the past tense, “Suttree looked upward.” What is shown here is a moment in time, a snapshot, but one like any other snapshot that might have been taken at any different moment. The search for the Sunday morning drink goes on, as it goes on every Sunday, and the church clock tolls its permanent, all-seeing, passive presence. It is a beautifully descriptive passage, restrained and evocative.

And yet a lack of restraint is a problem which sometimes dogs McCarthy’s fiction. I have already explored how he shares Voegelin’s obsessive search for understanding of the transcendent elsewhere that is beyond man’s understanding. Voegelin writes:

if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness; between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l’ame ouverte* and *l’ame close*; between the virtues of openness toward the ground of being such as faith, love, and hope, and the vices of infolding closure such as hubris and revolt; between the moods of joy and despair; and between alienation in its double meaning of alienation from the world and alienation from God. (CW12 119-20)

An examination of such tensions and such alienation runs consistently through McCarthy's oeuvre. His work repeatedly explores ruptures in society and represents a sustained attempt to, firstly, analyse the scale and nature of the rupture and, secondly, to identify a possible route to salvation. It represents an anxiety about modern culture, modern political systems, modern symbols of control, and is characterised by a relentless quest for spiritual guidance in a world bereft of spirituality. It is constantly seeking some knowledge, some way towards redemption, a route out of the City of Man and into the City of God, even while reasoning that such a route is denied. McCarthy creates, in his fiction, a Time of the Tale in which he explores the tensions of the In-Between and the possibility of a Beyond. At times, however, he does so to such an extent it overwhelms the narrative. McCarthy's usage of the Time of the Tale to expound his message about the human condition exposes the best and the worst of his writing. At his peak, in particular in *Suttree*, his handling of narrative and structure and technique is dazzling. McCarthy at his worst, however, can descend into pomposity and his work becomes infested with a faux grandeur and a portentousness which becomes, at times, almost self-parodic.

Time of the Tale in The Crossing

The Crossing is seriously compromised by McCarthy's unrelenting search for understanding. It relates the passage of Billy Parham into adulthood and through the troubled lands of the American south and Mexico. The opening section, a novella in its own right, in which Billy captures a wild wolf and attempts to return it to its home in the Mexican mountains, is an astounding piece of fiction, combining sustained drama, rich characterisation and penetrating insights, and ranks among the very best of McCarthy's writing. As the novel progresses, however, McCarthy's preoccupations begin to dominate. Along the way, Billy runs into an endless parade of characters who all insist on sharing with him identikit views, told in identikit voices, bemoaning the

godlessness of the world and the intractability of death. Billy comes across a heretic who is acting as caretaker of a ruined church, “seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world” (141). The heretic tells him:

Things separate from their stories have no meaning.... The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what is to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell. (142-3)

This story, of course, is the Time of the Tale, the search for godhood. In an extended monologue, the heretic tells Billy of the man who used to live here:

Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all. It may be that the old man saw certain contradictions in his position. If men were the drones he imagined them to be then had he not rather been appointed to take up his brief by the very Being against whom it was directed? As has been the case with many a philosopher that which at first seemed an insurmountable objection to his theories came gradually to be seen as a necessary component to them and finally the centerpiece itself. He saw the world pass into nothing in the very multiplicity of its instancing. Only the witness stood firm. And the witness to that witness. For what is deeply true is true also in men's hearts and it can therefore never be mistold through all and any tellings. This then was his thought. If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life? Where else could it have its being? This was the view of things that began to speak to him. And he began to see in God a terrible tragedy. That the existence of the Deity lay imperiled for want of this simple thing. That for God there could be no witness. Nothing against which He terminated. Nothing by way of which his being could be announced to Him. Nothing to stand apart from and

to say I am this and that is other. Where that is I am not. He could create everything save that which would say him no. (154)

This could be read as a reformulation of the discussion in the *Timaeus* with which Voegelin begins his exposition of the Time of the Tale. God, like time, is outside eternity. Humans cannot witness God. God can exist in the Time of the Tale, but must remain outside the flux of Becoming. He can be sought but he cannot be found. But, for McCarthy, this apparent truth becomes a scab which he cannot prevent himself from picking. “All men are one and there is no other tale to tell,” the heretic concludes (157). At times, one feels McCarthy takes this proposition literally, re-casting the same thoughts over and over. Billy’s brother Boyd is described thus:

He looked up. His pale hair looked white. He looked fourteen going on some age that never was. He looked as if he'd been sitting there and God had made the trees and rocks around him. He looked like his own reincarnation and then his own again. Above all else he looked to be filled with a terrible sadness. As if he harbored news of some horrendous loss that no one else had heard of yet. Some vast tragedy not of fact or incident or event but of the way the world was. (177)

This adopts the by now standard McCarthy approach of drawing from the specific narrative out to a point of spiritual debate, using portentous language – “as if” is one of the most potent McCarthy formulations – and raising the language into near-Biblical register. The same formulation is repeated fifty pages later when Billy spies the prima donna bathing:

She moved her body, she swept both hands before her. She bent and caught her falling hair in her arms and held it and she passed one hand over the surface of the water as if to bless it and he watched and as he watched he saw

that the world which had always been before him everywhere had been veiled from his sight. (220)

A mundane act is given some religious symbolism (“as if to bless”) and the narration draws outwards into a philosophical observation about the nature of reality. On the next page is explained:

In the hard noon light the faded gilt of the lettering and the weathered red paint and sunbleached tapestries seemed some fallen grace from the pageantry of the prior night and the caravans in their trundling and swaying slowly south and in their diminishing in the heat and desolation seemed charged with some new and more austere enterprise. As if the light of God's day had sobered their hopes. As if the light and the country thereby made visible were alien to their true purpose. (221)

Once again, the language of theology (“fallen grace”) is invoked to describe something mundane, ascribing to it greater import than it deserves. The language then strains, for no reason that is explained, into portentousness (an “austere enterprise”) and this leads to another “as if” formulation drawing the narrative, once more, into theological discourse. The language defaults into Biblical register to make a final, gnostic point. Later, the primadonna talks to Billy and adopts the same language patterns as the heretic before her and numerous other minor characters along the way:

The road has its own reasons and no two travelers will have the same understanding of those reasons. If indeed they come to an understanding of them at all. Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you. Then you will see in your own life what is the cost of things. Perhaps it is true that nothing is hidden. Yet many do not wish to see what lies before them in plain sight. You will see. The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other

road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed. (230)

This is virtually indistinguishable from the recorded dialogue of a blind man Billy meets later.

As he did so the blind man spoke. He said that on the contrary nothing had changed and all was different. The world was new each day for God so made it daily. Yet it contained within it all the evils as before, no more, no less. (277-278)

And:

Finally the blind man told him about his conjecture that the blind had already partly quit the world anyway. He said that he had become but a voice to speak in a darkness incommensurable with the motives of life. He said that the world and all in it had become to him but a rumor. A suspicion. He shrugged. He said that he did not wish to be blind. That he had outlived his estate. (282)

Clearly, McCarthy is not suggesting the blind man speaks in these precise words, and yet this is the way he chooses to present them, in a highly stylised, portentous, even pretentious register. Later, Billy meets a man on a horse and remarkably he, too, is preoccupied with matters theological. The reader is told:

The man sat his horse and weighed this soberly. As if there might be some deeper substrate to this reflection with which he must reckon. He said that men believe death's elections to be a thing inscrutable yet every act invites the act which follows and to the extent that men put one foot before the other they are accomplices in their own deaths as in all such facts of destiny. (379)

The familiar “as if” construction appears again, suggesting some deeper reasoning beneath the surface of the mundane. Yet again, there is a discourse on destiny and fate and man’s helplessness against a world that will not accommodate him, and again it is told in the same high register. The man continues:

He said that moreover it could not be otherwise that men's ends are dictated at their birth and that they will seek their deaths in the face of every obstacle. He said that both views were one view and that while men may meet with death in strange and obscure places which they might well have avoided it was more correct to say that no matter how hidden or crooked the path to their destruction yet they would seek it out. He smiled. He spoke as one who seemed to understand that death was the condition of existence and life but an emanation thereof. (379)

Again, the discussion of flux in being, as represented by the Time of the Tale, results in the register rising throughout the quote until it reaches “but an emanation thereof”, at which point it slides into pomposity. Billy’s next encounter is with the indian Quijada.

Quijada didnt answer. After a long time he stirred. He leaned forward. He turned the white porcelain bowl up and held it in the palm of his hand and regarded it. The world has no name, he said. The names of the cerros and the Sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again. (387-388)

The central tenets of the Time of the Tale are rehearsed again. This is an alien world and humanity has lost its way within it. However humanity tries to bring order, the world will defy it. There is an unavoidable sense of *déjà vu* in all of this but, although the novel is approaching its conclusion, Billy still has time for yet another encounter with a philosophical stranger, this time a wandering gypsy who is trying to track down a biplane stolen by another group:

He spoke of the identity of the little canvas biplane as having no meaning except in its history and he said that since this tattered artifact was known to have a sister in the same condition the question of identity had indeed been raised. He said that men assume the truth of a thing to reside in that thing without regard to the opinions of those beholding it while that which is fraudulent is held to be so no matter how closely it might duplicate the required appearance. If the airplane which their client has paid to be freighted out of the wilderness and brought to the border were in fact not the machine in which the son has died then its close resemblance to that machine is hardly a thing in its favor but is rather one more twist in the warp of the world for the deceiving of men. Where then is the truth of this? The reverence attached to the artifacts of history is a thing men feel. One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated. Yet wherein does that history lie? (405)

Again, the reported speech adopts the identical register to that used by the primadonna and the heretic and the blind man and others. Again, the plot is used to explicate a philosophical point. Again, it represents a tenet of the Time of the Tale – that men seek to understand the tensions of their In-Between existence. And again the register rises throughout until it reaches the cod-Biblical “yet wherein does that history lie?” The gypsy isn’t finished there:

A false authority clung to what persisted, as if those artifacts of the past which had endured had done so by some act of their own will. Yet the witness could not survive the witnessing. In the world that came to be that which prevailed could never speak for that which perished but could only parade its own arrogance. It pretended symbol and summation of the vanished world but was neither. He said that in any case the past was little more than a dream and its force in the world greatly exaggerated. For the world was made new each day and it was only men's clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more. (410-11)

Long before the end of *The Crossing*, the reader gets the feeling that the same argument is being rehearsed by the same characters over and over. There is a relentless preachiness to this exposition which becomes all-encompassing. Too often, the language spills over, without any particular justification, into pretentiousness and excess. Where, in *Suttree*, such high-flown language is assimilated into the narrative with consummate skill, in *The Crossing* there is a clumsiness to it which seriously compromises the novel.

Conclusion: Myth as Ideology

I would suggest, then, that McCarthy's use of mythology in the Border Trilogy is complex, establishing a philosophical base on which the novels rest. The key to understanding his use of myth in the Trilogy, however, does not rest in the Trilogy itself, but in *Blood Meridian*. This should, in truth, be considered the first of a Western pentalogy, with *No Country For Old Men* sitting as the final volume and bringing the narrative full circle. Critics are almost unanimous in asserting that McCarthy is in some way addressing the myths of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny and the Frederick Turner Jackson image of the American west as a

new Eden ripe for exploitation.¹³ There is debate, however, about whether he is completely debunking those myths, or slyly inverting them or merely rewriting them. Nonetheless, there appears to be a consensus that he is usefully revisiting the myths of the west, with their casual racism and revisionist depiction of adventurous white settlers and savage Indians which Richard Slotkin so acutely dissects. As such, McCarthy has attracted a number of followers who seem to imagine he is establishing some alternative, liberal-minded critique of the myth of the west. This is not the case. McCarthy certainly demolishes the old myths of the west, but what he establishes in their place may be a new mythology which is even more malign.

The publication of *Blood Meridian* is the pivotal moment in Cormac McCarthy's career because it represents a decisive shift away from the City of Man and towards the City of God and the Cities of the Plain. After the cataclysmic violence of *Blood Meridian*, there is little prospect of happiness in the City of Man. The evil that pours out of the novel seems almost to preclude any notion of humanity. The mythological basis of the Border Trilogy may appear softer, its evils lesser, its heroes more recognisably human, but nonetheless that mythology is still rooted completely in the west of *Blood Meridian*. Critics have recognised the symbolism of the novels' dates: Jay Ellis, for example, notes: "The kid in *Blood Meridian* is born in 1833, John Grady Cole (and Cormac McCarthy) in 1933" ("Country" 95) while the scene in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* "takes place around 1883. That would be fifty years following the birth of 'the kid,' and fifty before the birth of John Grady Cole. This Epilogue, then, hangs over all McCarthy's work as a significant historical 'meridian'" (91). The action in *Blood Meridian* takes place in 1849-50, in *Pretty Horses* in 1950. The connections are obvious and intentional. The space inhabited by the anachronistic cowboys of the Trilogy is the same as that inhabited by the kid and judge Holden.

¹³ For American exceptionalism see John Cant in particular. Susan Kollin suggests McCarthy has written "what appeared to be the definitive statement on Manifest Destiny" (558).

I would argue that McCarthy's use of myth in the western pentalogy has little to do with the American west. McCarthy uses the old West because, as he says, "everyone in the world knows about cowboys and indians" (Kushner) and because, undoubtedly, the scalphunting era he depicts was a time and place lost to morality, but his critique is not of Manifest Destiny, but hubristic humanity. As Glanton and his gang ride into the scorching hell of the American desert in search of scalps, McCarthy's language makes clear the otherworldly nature of their environment. The men's shadows are stencilled "autonomous across the naked rock without reference to sun or man or god" (139), they are "like ghosts", "pyrolatrous" (111), they pass a "place of bones" including "tiny limbs and toothless paper skulls of infants" (90) and "houses caved and ruinous" (97). Rocks "will cook the flesh from your hand" (138), while the sun to the west lies "in a holocaust" and "along the trembling perimeter of the world dust [is] blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies" (105). Canyon walls void into an "adamantine deep" (147). This is a place "beyond men's judgements" where "all covenants were brittle" (106), a "void" (108), later a "hallucinatory void" (113), "hollow ground" (111), "barren" (119), engulfed by a "stark silence" (139-40). This is all so far from human comfort it is almost beyond comprehension. It is this space in which McCarthy composes his mythology of mankind, and it is not about the American west, nor is it about ancient gnostic battles between demiurges and archons. This is humanity laid bare, all pretensions of civilisation removed, all suggestions of evil exposed. But the point of the Trilogy is that, however low that period of human history was, within it is the seed of humanity's destructive powers. Those powers remain in the Border Trilogy, in *Pretty Horses* and the City of Man, in *The Crossing* and the City of God, and in the *Cities of the Plain*. Through Anton Chigurh, in *No Country*, they find once more the malign outlet last seen in judge Holden. The common denominator, then, is not the American west or Jonasian gnosticism: it is hubristic man, and his struggles in the Cities of God, Man and the Plain.

Thus, McCarthy's mythologising is designed to address his overriding concerns, the ones I raised in the series of questions in the Introduction: what is the nature of God, the meaning of death, the place of evil, what hope of transcendence? And, overriding all of these, exacerbating the problems attendant in each, one sees the decline of modernity. In his mythology, then, the modern world is in crisis. One sees the capacity for, and ascendancy of, evil, an enduring battle between free will and determinism, godlessness, a search for God, the "wrath of God", awoken by the only being capable of it, mankind (40).

McCarthy has recreated this moment of extreme rupture in the fabric of civilisation and used it to establish a Voegelinian modern gnostic hell. In doing so, he promulgates a particular, reactionary worldview. This is what mankind is, he is suggesting, this is what it is capable of, this is what it is composed of. It is a false argument, essentially the same distortion of reality I explored in Chapter One in the arguments of Pope John Paul II, T.S. Eliot and Walker Percy: take something at its nadir and present it as though it is representative of the norm. This is the blood meridian because "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" (4-5). But that doesn't stop McCarthy from emphasising that the same evil, the same godlessness, the same fatalism, infests every age and every man. This is not realistic, it is ideological. McCarthy's use of mythology in his work, and in the western pentalogy in particular, is thus highly ideological. To what end? In the remaining chapters, I wish to explore this in more detail.

CHAPTER THREE

Religion, Mysticism And The State Of Being

Introduction

I have shown how Cormac McCarthy's fictional worlds correspond to Eric Voegelin's Beginning, In-Between and Beyond. I have shown how McCarthy's characters often appear to seek access to the Beyond, to the City of God, some form of transcendence. Edwin Arnold was one of the first critics to identify the "essential religiosity at the core of his writing" ("Blood" 12) and other critics have developed the theme in subsequent analyses. And yet one knows that, for all their questing, McCarthy's characters seldom attain transcendence. As Dianne Luce observes, while McCarthy evokes Platonic or gnostic conceptions of earthly life as purgatory or being akin to the netherworld, he rarely "invoke[s] optimistic notions of an afterlife, a cycle of reincarnation, or a transmundane reunification with the divine" (*Reading* 159). Arnold is undoubtedly correct in his analysis, and religion, or spirituality, or the concept of the *numinosum*, is the most insistent theme in McCarthy's fiction. A key question, however, is why a writer for whom transcendent experience appears to form such an essential component of existence should so consistently dwell on the notion of exodus, but never on arrival. Critics talk of his most recent work, *The Road*, in millennialist terms, but this is wrong: what appears to be unfolding is a teleological journey with no *telos*, featuring a beyond that remains beyond and a humanity and a divinity between whom no connection seems possible. Despite this, religion remains a fundamental facet of McCarthy's philosophical outlook. Indeed, it may be argued that it has increasingly come to dominate his work. I showed in Chapter One the array of discussions between his characters on the existence of God and the troubled nature of

modernity. It is even tempting to interpret these discussions as proxies for the author's own metaphysical musings: certainly, the antithetical stances of Black and White in *The Sunset Limited* could easily be interpreted as some extended internal dialogue on the nature of faith. In Chapter Two I tracked McCarthy's use of mythology to progress his critique of modernity and the apprehension of reality that lies behind a transcendent sensibility which can best be elucidated through Eric Voegelin's conception of the Time of the Tale. McCarthy's few public utterances have mostly revolved, to some degree, around such questions.

And yet, like his characters endlessly and fruitlessly seeking passage to the City of God, it is difficult to assess precisely where McCarthy's prognostications ultimately lead him. What is of most interest, then, is the unresolved tension that envelops his theological debates. His views are certainly not straightforward and are therefore frequently misunderstood. Forrest Robinson, for example, writing of McCarthy's early fiction, suggests that because the "barbarism" in the novels "makes no sense", then "religion and religious values have virtually no part to play" (172). While religion may be less prominent in the southern novels, Robinson's contention is an oversimplification: there may not be discussion of Christian gospel or traditional reflections of morality in the southern novels, but the suggestion that there is no spiritual base to this writing engenders the sort of misconception that leads critics to accuse McCarthy of nihilism. Rather, what one sees in McCarthy's writing is a complex examination of the nature of divinity and its connection to the mundane world, particularly the *modern* mundane world. What is the place of human history in a divinely inspired cosmos, in which humanity, in Voegelinian terms, lives in the tension of the *metaxy*, straining for transcendence and connection with the divine? Such divinity is a complex force, and it lies at the root of McCarthy's fiction. For this reason, Sara Spurgeon is only partly correct when she avers that "McCarthy is interested in myths, not morals" (25). I examined McCarthy's use of myth in the previous chapter, but myth is not an end in itself; rather, it is a process for

apprehending the incomprehensible. Indeed, while myth may be essential for attempting to bridge the gap between mundane life and what lies beyond, in the end it is always insufficient.

There lies at the core of McCarthy's work an insistent tension between a desire to embrace the mystical experience of spirituality and the sense that modernity has denied any possibility of such an act. Mark Busby suggests that McCarthy's "powerful works... at the center are about ontology and epistemology – being and knowing" (141). While this is true, what may be of more interest is the clash in his fiction between mysticism and modernity, and between human conceptions of time and the place of the human in what is seen to be a divinely inspired cosmos.

The Crossing is probably McCarthy's most overtly religious work. In particular, the passage when Billy meets a hermitic priest in the half-ruined village of Huisiácheptic who then relates the sad story of a heretic searching that same place for evidence of God is the most religiously charged section of the novel. In an analysis of McCarthy's approach to religion, then, it is highly instructive to follow the complex drafting process of this passage using materials from the Cormac McCarthy Archive at Texas State University.

The Crossing

In this study of the heretic passage in *The Crossing* I will concentrate largely on four particular drafts of the novel in the Archives. Material relating to *The Crossing* is contained in boxes 55 to 65 and covers drafts from 1987 through to final proofs and production materials. Each box is subdivided into folders.

File 55/6 is the earliest draft of *The Crossing* in the Archives, but it does not represent a single iteration of the novel. Rather, in certain passages different versions of the text are interfiled. The heretic passage, in particular, has a number of different versions intermingled, making a straightforward analysis of the drafting process difficult. There are eighty-three pages relating to the heretic passage, representing a number of rewrites from 1988 and, in particular, 1990. The 1988 text offers the first complete version of the passage, which I shall call *Version 1*. The 1990 material presents a further complete text, and there are also additional pages presenting alternative drafts of particular sections. I have called the earlier material *Version 2a* and the main 1990 text *Version 2b*. There are a further thirteen pages, some of which are dated later in 1990 than the main draft or, because of their content, appear to have been written later. These are termed *Version 2c*. File 56/1 is a slight development of this material and is labelled *Version 2d*. File 57/2, a typescript draft from 1991, provides *Version 3* of the text. Finally, File 59/2, written in 1992 and very similar to the final text, provides *Version 4*.

The earliest material within 55/6, pages 146-166, was written between January and February 1988. Although much of this material remains in the printed text and, until the end of the scene, the narrative closely corresponds to the final version, it is nonetheless considerably shorter, suggesting a great deal of revision took place in the intervening years. It is therefore instructive to examine the various iterations of the text to analyse how the final version came into being and identify some of the preoccupations which have come to dominate McCarthy's fiction. Such analysis reveals that the revision process has had two effects on the final text: firstly, the focus of the scene becomes increasingly religious; and secondly, and somewhat contradictorily, the additional religious weight that McCarthy evidently wished to bring to the passage is balanced by the inclusion of a separate, though linked, thematic strand, relating to narrative and the nature of storytelling. Some critics, notably Dianne Luce and Edwin Arnold, see this storytelling thread as integral to the vatic

tone of the passage and the novel, but I wish to argue that, rather, it presents a secular interpretation of areas which McCarthy otherwise portrays as religious in essence.¹ On the surface, it may seem odd that McCarthy should seek in this way to simultaneously strengthen and weaken the central message of this section of narrative, but it is of a piece with his approach to mythology and symbolism which I discussed in Chapter Two.

Version 1, File 55/6

Until the conclusion of the passage, the basic outline of *Version 1* will be familiar to readers of the novel, although it is considerably shorter. Billy arrives in the half-derelict town of Huisiáchepic and is greeted by a man describing himself as a “heretic-priest” (55/6 151).² The man tells Billy the story of the town’s devastation in an earthquake in 1887 and says he has been there for six years. He came, he says, in search of evidence of acts against which God might have raised his hand, but found only “[a] doll, a dish, a bone. Nothing” (151). He tells the story of a man born in the town of Caborca whose parents were killed in the church by a cannonshot.³ The boy survives, grows to manhood in Huisiáchepic and becomes a father himself. He takes his son on a trip to Bavispe, but the child is killed in the earthquake. Stricken, he returns home: in the novel, he returns to his wife but in *Version 1* she, too, has been killed and “there breaks from his riven heart a prayer of thanksgiving that God has spared him that he bring to his wife from Bavispe the gift of her dead son” (153). This

¹ See, for example: Dianne Luce’s “The Road as Matrix” and Edwin Arnold’s “McCarthy and the Sacred”.

² McCarthy’s page numbering is often eccentric and there are frequent instances when there are multiple pages with the same pagination. Sometimes, different versions are underlined or double-underlined and where this happens this is shown. In other cases, the context of the narrative should aid definitive identification.

³ In much of McCarthy’s fiction, historical events are threaded seamlessly into his narrative, and this passage is no exception. Dianne Luce, in an as yet unpublished paper presented at the Cormac McCarthy Society Conference in Berea in March 2013, presented a detailed historical record of the events which form the backdrop to this fictional passage.

man also becomes a heretic and disappears. He is spotted in various places but never returns to Huisiáchepic. He works in Mexico for many years until one day, as a pensioner, he returns to Caborca. The remains of the Franciscan church totter improbably, “standing on three legs” while the “dome of the transept hangs in the sky like a miracle”. The man settles in the remains of the church and “hid[es] from God in God’s own house” (157). At this point, the heretic-priest breaks off from the story to tell Billy that “perhaps” he is a heretic himself (158) (despite having already described himself thus). Meanwhile, the old hermit takes to reading from his bible, thumping at its pages and addressing God. The locals do not know whether or not he is mad, and have never heard anyone address God in such a fashion. The priest comes to speak to him “about the nature of God and the nature of the will of God and the meaning of grace in men’s lives,” but the old man only shouts that the priest “knows nothing” (159). The priest departs and the old man returns to his testament. There are contradictions in the old man’s position, the heretic-priest tells Billy: “[i]f men were indeed the puppets he imagined them to be then is he not appointed to take up this brief by the very Being against whom it is directed?” (160). The old man comes to believe that “the reality of the world was dependant (sic) upon the mustering of witnesses” (160). The heretic-priest suggests to Billy that the old man is mad: “[w]hat to make of a man who having been spared a violent death by the direct intervention of the hand of God not once but three times who claims that this was done that God might have in His own house a witness against himself?” (160).

At this point, the draft diverges from the final text. The old man now comes to the priest, although the priest declares to Billy that “I was no priest. I was a widower without children living in the town of Nogales Sonora where I practised the profession of barrister and waited all unknowing for this man to come” (161). The old man tells the priest his story throughout the day. He has “the mind of a mnemonist” and has “enrolled in his ledgerbooks a sufficiency of insults and dismissals to stock

whole villages. Cities. For all that he'd never lost sight of the single great fact of his life. That he was chosen" (161).

Of their lengthy conversation, two things in particular remain with the priest. The first is "a picture puzzle of a Dutch village with gardens of tulips and houses with steep thatched roofs" (162). The second is the Biblioteca de Leyes in Mexico, where the old man once visited while working as a messenger and experienced some sort of Borgesian vision of the world as a giant, never-ending, constantly updating law library: "[t]he race of man itself could not overtake the headlong propagation of those tomes whose contents were already by definition unknowable and yet from whose strictures no man was exempt" (163). These two images define, the priest believes, the extremes of the world with which the old man struggles:

This was the void across which he had stretched himself. He did not wish to be witness to God nor to God's folly. He wished to mix his destiny with that of men and not to be apart from them. (163)

Now the draft begins to return to the final version. In that, truth is often "carried about by those who themselves remain all unaware of it" (*TC* 158). In *Version 1* it is a "subtle virus" carried by those "unsusceptible to it" (55/6 164). This passage is rendered twice in the draft: Firstly, it:

may wreak havoc all unknowing in some adjacent soul and wrench that soul from its moorings and send it upon roads it had never intended bearing before it the one true grail which all men seek even as they burn and kill and pillage to say that it does not exist for it is the will of God. (164)

And secondly:

they wreak havoc upon this adjacent soul and wrench it about in the road of its going and set it upon that track which it had never contemplated. That new man will hardly know the hour of his turning nor the source and he will never know why he should have received this thing which is the greatest good that can befall a man. For he will have received unasked for the very thing sought which he could never have known or suspected, the thing itself, the will of God. Against or beside which all else is madness, whatever its form or whatever its substance. What else to call it. I think our man understood this. He had lost his belief, you see. He no longer trusted in God to bring him forth into the fruit of the election in which he felt himself to have been set apart from men since he was first lifted out of the rubble of the church where his dead mother lay crushed among the stones. (164)⁴

This is an important passage, because it specifically links human destiny with the “will of God.” Moreover, the man is a “new man”, an echo of the Nietzschean overman and Mitya’s warning of the dangers of rationalism in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but this new man’s story is already told because it is the will of God. The priest concludes that the old man would have been better served had he remained in the ruins of Caborca. Instead:

[h]e lived my life for me as I live mine for him. He did not die upon his pallet in the ruined transept but in the home of a family in Caborca who had taken him in and to whom he was nothing and they nothing to him. The dome hangs trembling in the air as it has for many years. I am here”. (165)

And here the passage ends, with the priest having taken on the mantle of the old man, doubting, wondering, worrying. The passage rolls to a satisfactory conclusion – if not

⁴ Note, this is a different sheet also numbered 164 and the page number is triple-underlined, indicated here by a single thick underline.

resolved then at least completed. It is an examination of heresy and doubt. The search for God and godhood goes on. One comment earlier in the draft seems to express succinctly the sentiment of the whole passage:

I believe that the spirit which God has breathed into the world can in no place be absent from that world. And if this is true then one could go to a tree. To a certain rock in the mountains perhaps. Even cats have power to bless. In some ways my world is darker even than that old man's for I believe we are shadows in a shadow world and even the tapestry a shadow or the shadow of a shadow. (158)⁵

This passage is not included in the final version and it is perhaps a pity. In its Platonic imagery, it reveals preoccupations seen throughout McCarthy's entire oeuvre. There are touches of the neo-naturalism of *The Orchard Keeper*, the "optimal democracy" of *Blood Meridian*, Suttree's sojourn in the mountains, a hint of the despair at the loss of it all in *The Road*. However dark the heretic's world, for example, it is but a pale reflection of the man and boy's world in that latter work as they contemplate "[b]orrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (130).

And so the heretic passage in this first draft is an analysis of two men's search for grace in a world they suspect of being, at best, indifferent, at worst hostile. It reflects the sense of doubt that exists in so many of McCarthy's characters about the existence and nature of God. It covers around eighteen pages of text, or around 6500 words. The final passage covers twenty-two pages of the novel, or around 8600 words, something like a 35% increase. What did McCarthy add? And why?

⁵ This passage is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*: "Between the potency/ And the existence.../ Falls the Shadow"

Versions 2a, b And c, File 55/6

The material in *Version 2* was written between September and November 1990, mostly in a concentrated period in September. *Version 2b*, the main text, is a more complete draft than *Version 1*, with considerably more of the final text appearing at least in embryonic form. “There aint no church,” says Billy and the priest replies: “There is no building... There is always a church” (184). In *Version 1* there is little discussion about the priest’s purpose before his suggestion that he is looking in vain for evidence of God’s work. In *Version 2b*, however, the discussion in which the priest says he is “seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world” (TC 142) is largely as it appears in the final text.

A number of the passages making reference to God appear for the first time. “Men do not turn from God so easily you see” (TC 148) appears for the first time in *Version 2b* (55/6 199), as does the priest’s assertion that the old man never ceased to believe in God (TC 148), (55/6 199). The passage beginning “Who can dream of God?” (TC 149) is produced in draft form in *Version 2b*. It is structurally very similar to the final passage, although with slightly altered wording (55/6 200). The only wording from the final version which does not appear here is “Endlessly. Endlessly. So. Here was a God to study” (TC 149). In the description of the old man’s scandalous addresses to God, the phrase from the final text, “[n]ot seen God bearded in his very house” (150) appears as a handwritten addition: “he’d come to beard God in his house” (55/6 202). This handwritten note also provides the first dating of the idea of the man “striking some colindancia with his maker”. The following observation about the boundaries of the world is included, again as a handwritten addition:

And some said there could be no such reckoning because the boundaries of the world and the boundaries of God were one and there could be no place where

he was not, least of all in a church. Even if he himself had suffered it to ruin.
(202)

This is clearly suggestive of a Voegelinian *metaxy* in which humanity and God are ever-present. The final text now continues: “To see God everywhere is to see Him nowhere” (TC 153) and what follows conveys a sense that God remains buried within the hearts of men and is never truly lost. The opening line of this paragraph is included in *Version 2b* as a handwritten addition and the remainder of the paragraph in the draft closely prefigures the final text. When the priest and the old man talk, the priest “began to declaim to the old man concerning the goodness of God” (55/6 207). The old man comes to see:

[t]hat God had outwitted him. Had turned his very rebelliousness to His own service. How many others were there like him? The old man’s crystal belief in his election began to sully. To dim. Of whom in fact could one say he is not an elect? There was no other kind of man. And for those elect – which is to say every man – God could not be escaped nor eluded nor hid from. No one could devise a move so unexpected as to get clear of him. No more than a child could shed its shadow. God could not be set aside, neither could he be contained. He could not be denied. He contained within him even every objection to his own being. Else he was not God at all. (208)⁶

The sense of this passage is conveyed in the final text on page 156 although the wording is considerably altered. In *Version 2b* the passage continues: “no man may be saved from himself by himself but only by the grace of God” (208). This is changed in the final text to: “It is God’s grace alone that we are bound by this thread of life” (TC 156). In *Version 2c*, comprising later fragments from the end of 1990, after the death of the old man he is buried in Caborca “in the churchyard among those of his

⁶ There are two different pages numbered page 208 in 55/6. The page cited here is underlined once.

own blood. Such was the working out of God's arrangement with this man. Such was his colindancia and such is every man's" (205).

Thus, one can see that *Version 2* begins to overlay a significant amount of debate about the nature of God and grace on the basic narrative that existed in *Version 1*. The effect is to change the nature of the narrative from a relatively straightforward analysis of the old man, the priest and their respective searches for God and godhood, into a more detached, theological debate on the existence of God and the nature of transcendence. The narrative is changing. In subsequent versions it changes further.

Version 2d, File 56/1

Files 55/7 and 56/1 are the same draft split into two files. Material relating to the heretic passage is included in File 56/1. It is incomplete and offers little that is not in *Version 1* of File 55/6. Largely, it is likely that material in 56/1 was actually written earlier (but only by a matter of days) than the material in 55/6 or, where it is the same typescript page photocopied, it shows fewer amendments than 55/6. It is therefore of little import in examining the genesis of the heretic passage. One variation is worth drawing out, however.

Page 153 of *Version 2d* is different from *Version 1*, mostly in terms of wording, but it also contains this passage:

For this man as for any man there was never a going back. Who is it that goes?
We are entombed in the things we leave. It is not a mystery. It is no secret thing. This man from whom all is taken is like a dreamer waking into a world of sorrow and that which he loved and which was of such comfort to him now is his daily torment. A man with such memories is a thing of pity, beyond all

such and then things we may behold. Such a man is hardly more than mud which moves and speaks. (56/1 153)

In the draft, this is circled and marked “use”. It does indeed appear in the final text, but in a different form:

Such a man is like a dreamer who wakes from a dream of grief to a greater sorrow yet. All that he loves is now become a torment to him. The pin has been pulled from the axis of the universe. Whatever one takes one’s eye from threatens to flee away. Such a man is lost to us. He moves and speaks. But he is himself less than the merest shadow among all that he beholds. There is no picture of him possible. The smallest mark upon the page exaggerates his presence. (TC 146)

There is a tonal shift here. The draft passage opens with a specific reference to the situation of this particular man. In the final text, he is turned into a generic type, “such a man.” In the draft, the reader is told he is “like a dreamer waking into a world of sorrow” and his love and comforts have now become things of torment. The reader is entering his soul, experiencing his pain. One is encouraged to pity him. In the final text, however, McCarthy draws out to the universal, the pin being pulled from the axis of the universe. Where, in the draft, the man is merely diminished, in the final text he is obliterated, “no picture of him possible”.

I would argue that this is part of the process McCarthy undergoes in the drafting of this passage, in attempting to turn it from a story of personal tragedy, a “story of misfortune” (55/6 151, TC 144) into a more explicit exploration of God’s grace. This, as I will explore later in the chapter, becomes an essential element of McCarthy’s metaphysical quest.

Version 3, File 57/2

Version 3, in File 57/2, is tentatively dated in the official Archive inventory as [1991], but the heretic passage was actually written during October and November 1990. It has grown to twenty-five pages, or approximately 7500 words, compared with approximately 6500 words in *Version 1* and 8600 words in the final text. It can therefore be considered to constitute a midway point in the drafting process. There is considerably more material in this draft, and much of the new material is extremely close in content to the final text, so much so that it seems likely that at least one other intermediate draft may have been produced between this and the material in 55/6 and 56/1.

References to God increased in *Version 2* and become fuller yet in *Version 3*. For example, for the first time the priest asks: “Can God be cajoled? Can he even be pleased?” (57/2 195A). The first question remains in the final text (148), the second does not. In the same paragraph it is stated for the first time that: “[i]n his heart he had already begun to plot against God but he did not know it at this time. He did not know it until he began to dream of Him” (195A). As he leaves to return to Caborca, a handwritten note adds that “[h]is bible he carried beneath his arm” (196). While, in *Version 2*, “God could not be escaped nor eluded nor hid from” (55/6 208), in *Version 3* he is also “more terrible than any man could know (57/2 203). In the final text, this becomes “yet more terrible than men reckoned” (156).

The ending of *Version 2* was not the same as the ending of the final text. *Version 3* is considerably closer. In particular, this version includes for the first time the notion that to God “we are all heretics” and “[e]very word we speak is vanity” (206).

Version 4, File 59/2

Version 4, File 59/2, written in 1992, is very close to the final text, with each of the main elements of the passage now present in some form. Some of the final text's more portentous declamations are included for the first time in this version as handwritten additions. For example, when the man leaves his wife to go to Bavispe with his son, McCarthy adds: "Life is a memory, then it is nothing. All law is writ in a seed" (59/2 195). The second sentence does not sit entirely comfortably within its context, sounding forcedly gnomic. It is presumably echoing the idea of the *semen dei*, the "seed of God" which, according to the *Book of John*, resides within humanity and through which humans can achieve grace.⁷ Again, the general nature of humanity is being overlaid on the specific story of the heretic and priest. In his sorrow, the heretic is diminished until he becomes, in the final text, "the merest shadow" (146). In *Version 4*, however, McCarthy adds, somewhat repetitiously, in a handwritten note: "There is no picture of him possible. The smallest mark upon the page exaggerates his presence" (197). By and large, however, the additions in this version are largely cosmetic.

What is evident from an analysis of this important passage is that McCarthy has worked and reworked it assiduously in order to develop its religious meaning. It changes from a straightforward examination of heresy and doubt into a much more complex evaluation of the nature of God in the world and of the nature of humanity. God is presented as being everywhere and unavoidable. There is a suggestion that, within all disasters and abominations, there remains the prospect, however difficult, of God's grace. But at the same time humanity is portrayed as fallible, given as it is to heresy and vanity. Within these sentiments lies much that informs the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre. One begins to see the tortured struggle between some innate

⁷ "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God". *John*, 3-9.

desire for mystical revelation and the nature of a secular modernity which denies the legitimacy of such claims to spirituality. Lying between these poles is the teleological journey of mankind which is so troublesome in the work of Cormac McCarthy. In it, there is a tremendous sense of doubt about God himself, about humanity and about our relationship with God. The very nature of human experience and human history is called into question. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to explore these ideas.

The nature of God

Forrest Robinson suggests: “There is no God in McCarthy’s early fiction, only a dream of Him, and a very bad dream at that” (173). As I explored in the introduction to this chapter, such a contention is insufficient and does not explain the underlying theological basis of McCarthy’s writing. Ely, in *The Road*, could almost be directly arguing against Robinson’s position when he tells the man, “There is no God and we are his prophets” (143). McCarthy often deals with negatives and, as with Ely’s apparent non-sequitur, what he means may lie hidden beneath what he says. In an early draft of *The Stonemason*, Ben, standing in the cemetery, proclaims:

I remember a commentary on St Anselm that suggests that any proper conception of God must include all arguments against his existence. The heretic’s problem is that he has a limited concept of God. The God he does not believe in is a god of his own devising, but the God of the universe is large enough to contain all the heretics that ever were and all their doubts and all their fears as well. (66/8 149)

With this analysis, Ben could be rehearsing a critique of the position of the heretic in *The Crossing*. It is reminiscent, too, of Jacques Maritain’s differentiation between a true atheist and a pseudo-atheist who, “when he denies the existence of God, denies

the existence of an *ens rationis*, an imaginary entity which he calls God, but which is not God” (*Range* 83). The conceptions of God understood by McCarthy’s characters range widely, from such an *ens rationis* to the malevolent bystander envisaged by the heretic to a brooding, unknowable presence, the God of the *Book of Job* perhaps. The heretic in *The Crossing* “never ceased to believe in God”, he tells Billy. “No. It was rather that he came to believe terrible things of him” (148). Christopher Douglas goes as far as to attribute such heresy to the author himself:

McCarthy has come to believe terrible things of God, on the basis of the violent design that he detects in his creation. McCarthy accepts evolutionary violence and historical violence as givens and explores what kind of designer might have structured the world in that way. He sees two possible explanations for the designer’s silence. The first is a disinterestedness of one who sets up a system and lets it spin away, a disinclination to get involved in human affairs that is hardly a quality of the Christian God. The second option is the one more lovingly caressed in McCarthy’s fiction. It is that of seeing the silence of God in the face of human misery – brought on in part through our experience within the system of evolutionary violence – as being characterized by a certain malice. (15)

This would appear to represent a significant charge against the author. It might be corroborated by a discarded fragment from McCarthy’s working for *The Road* in the McCarthy Archives: “The deity long fled in horror at his handiwork. Leaving a world appropriate to your powers of contemplation. What will you do when you have ceased weeping? You will not cease” (87/3 Road Notes). One could argue, however, that the most significant factor about this fragment is that it *was* discarded. Moreover, the handiwork referred to in the fragment is, of course, the responsibility of humanity itself, not God. And humanity is a species uniquely capable of evil: as an anchorite tells the kid in *Blood Meridian*, “when God made man the devil was at his elbow”

(19). Thus, whatever implicit criticism of God that might be conveyed in McCarthy's fiction is mediated by a greater criticism of God's agent, mankind. In this, one returns once more to the nature of humanity and the triumph of secular modernity, in Melville's phrase the "crisis for Christendom". It is wrong, then, to deny at least the acknowledgement of the presence of some form of divine power in McCarthy's work. Problems pertain, nonetheless. Firstly, how does one apprehend him? Secondly, has he maintained his control over the world or has it been usurped by atheist, rationalist humanity? And thirdly, how are humanity, divorced as they are from their spiritual core, ever to be able to do what so many of McCarthy's characters appear to want and connect with the divine, to seek redemption and find a state of grace?

McCarthy would seem to share with writers like Flannery O'Connor the Thomist notion that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, the subsistent act of existing itself. Essentially, God exists and cannot not exist. As C.S. Lewis notes: "Each miracle writes for us in small letters what God has already written, or will write, in letters too large to be noticed across the whole canvas of Nature" (162). This notion of God writ large in nature is borne out throughout McCarthy's fiction. In *The Crossing*, for example, the blind man tells Billy "[t]he world was new each day for God so made it daily" (278), while as has already been shown, in *Version 1* of the drafts of *The Crossing* in the Archives, the priest's notion that "the spirit which God has breathed into the world can in no place be absent from that world" (55/6 158). In an unused fragment from *The Stonemason*, Ben says:

Some say that He made the stones flat so that they could be placed just so to make houses and temples. Some say He made men with just such bodies and just such souls to require these structures and these stones. For this gospel accommodates every inquiry. What we take arms against are those philosophies that claim the fortuitous in men's inventions. For we invent nothing but what God has already put to hand. (66/8 4-5)

The nature of this God, however, is less clear. For Mark Busby, writing of *The Crossing*, McCarthy's focus is on an exploration of "the existence and purpose of God in a violent and inhumane world" (153). Steven Frye, concurs, suggesting the novel explores the essential question of "the role of suffering in the material world and the fundamental nature of the divine" ("Naturalism" 46). He goes on to explore the novel's approach to theodicy, describing its "effort to reconcile God's benevolence with evil" (55). In relation to *Blood Meridian*, Christopher Douglas develops the same theme: "McCarthy's text proposes the truth – though not for the first time – that two millennia of traditional Christian theology has been organized to evade: that the silence of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and ethical towards his creation is inexplicable" (14). Far from being silent, however, Edwin Arnold suggests that McCarthy's is a "wild and often savage and mostly unknowable God, but a God whose presence constantly beckons" ("Blood" 14). Dennis Sansom, meanwhile, offers the contradictory proposition that "in *Blood Meridian* God does not beckon. God controls absolutely" (17). I shall explore Sansom's contention in more detail in Chapter Four but his main argument is that *Blood Meridian* is an attempt to convey the baleful results of a divinely deterministic world in which every event must be the causal effect of God's will. The extreme violence of *Blood Meridian*, Sansom argues, permits McCarthy's philosophical exploration of the untenability of such a proposition. The God who emerges from such a viewpoint, a God who apparently sanctions the depravity of *Blood Meridian*, is therefore troublesome in the extreme. But what picture of God truly emerges from McCarthy's work?

Christopher Metress, in his analysis of *Outer Dark* as representing a *via negativa*, suggests: "The best way to think about God is to think about what He is not, and if we do this, God becomes, in the words of one theologian, 'a nothingness, a mystery, a darkness, which [exists but] lies above our rational understanding'" (148). Metress wrote this in 2001, before the publication of *The Road*, but McCarthy's latest work

would appear to further elaborate Metress's contention. Indeed, there are undeniable similarities between *The Road* and *Outer Dark*, both thematically and, as I explored in Chapter One, stylistically. In *The Road*, McCarthy takes this nothingness at the heart of divinity to its logical conclusion. He removes everything. Thus, the only thing that can survive is God, *ipsum esse subsistens*. Metress explains: "a via negativa [is] a road down which we travel as readers as we learn to unlearn our assumptions about God and embrace unknowing as 'the most goodly knowing' of the metaphysical" (149). He goes on to suggest that McCarthy is "inviting us, in the tradition of apophatic theology, to unlearn what we believe we know, not because what we believe in doesn't exist, but because what we believe in can't really be known" (150).

In *The Road*, the man ponders further on the divine creation which, in the *metaxical* In-Between, is beyond comprehension: "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (230-1). In that silence, of course, all that would remain would be God, resolutely out of time, immortal, echoing the Emersonian premise that "[n]othing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive" (Emerson 828). Over and over in McCarthy's work one sees evidence of *ipsum esse subsistens* and, in *The Road*, it is taken to its absolute extreme and what is left is divine darkness. Writing of *Outer Dark*, Christopher Metress concludes:

what McCarthy's novel is trying to tell us [is] that the darkness never passes, that serenity – rest – will come to us, as it came to the blind man, only when we reconcile ourselves to darkness as a permanent condition, when we unlearn our desire for some vision of divine light that will heal us of our crippling uncertainties and give us full knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and what God is like and would have us do. (153-4)

This darkness becomes, at times, overwhelming in McCarthy's vision. An early draft of the passage from *The Road* about the dismantling of existence demonstrates a less sanguine sensibility, indeed almost appears to welcome the devastation: "The pleasing thing about witnessing the utter destruction of everything is that one can see finally how it was made. And how frailly" (87/3 83). Thus, there is the troublesome notion that God does exist, but his nature is not the warm, almost anthropomorphic vision of the all-embracing Emersonian God. Rather, he is a God who is wholly unknowable. For Christopher Douglas, writing of *Blood Meridian*, this leads to the conclusion that: "Its reverse-agnosticism, that perhaps God does exist, is not a cause for hope for McCarthy, but a cause for terror" (14-5). This may overstate the case somewhat. In his notes for *The Road*, McCarthy writes:

We trust in God.

What about the darkness? (The darkness will pass. It always has)

What sort of man would believe God the author of darkness. (87/3 The Road, Notes X)

Within the context of his notes, it is not entirely certain whether this discussion represents the views of McCarthy's characters or of the author himself. Essentially, it doesn't matter because, whichever it is, it suggests a tension between McCarthy's vision of darkness and his aspiration for light. It is as though, at once, he believes in and mistrusts a divine power. He seeks a map to the divine realm, a "map of the world in its becoming" (*TR* 241), more functional than the useless "decoration" drawn in the sand by the old man for Billy and Boyd in *The Crossing* (184). As G.K. Chesterton, another Catholic writer, observed in a poem, "The Convert":

The sages have a hundred maps to give
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,
They rattle reason out through many a sieve

That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:
And all these things are less than dust to me
Because my name is Lazarus and I live. (84)

One might imagine that McCarthy, for all his love of mystery, might crave the chance to pronounce himself Lazarus and thereby gain some understanding of the nature of humanity's progress through mortal existence, the possibility of transcendence to the City of God and the markers on the road thereto. This may be a consummation devoutly to be wished but, as Quijada observes in *The Crossing*: "The world has no name... The names of the cerros and the Sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way" (387). When certainty evaporates, when the way is unknown, what remains is the hope of transcendence.

Redemption and Grace

In *The Crossing* the priest tells Billy that to see God everywhere is the same as seeing him nowhere. In a recent study, Paul Moser notes: "Misguided expectations for God can leave one looking for evidence for God in all the wrong places. In failing to find the expected evidence, one easily lapses into despair, anger, or indifference toward matters of God" (263). Moser goes on to question the accessibility of God:

God would want to uphold the supreme *value* of God's character and power, including for humans, and therefore would challenge human tendencies to diminish this value. If *casual* human access, such as merely intellectual access, to God would diminish God's value for humans, God would avoid such access. We thus might think of divine evidence as "live it or lose it." Correspondingly, God would be elusive in some cases for good redemptive reasons [his italics]. (270)

McCarthy's God is certainly elusive. Intellectual access might summarise the heretic's relationship with his God, for example, and it is clear from the editing process that McCarthy assiduously rewrote that particular passage in order to expand on notions of redemption and grace. This, therefore, becomes a significant theme in the novel and, indeed, in McCarthy's oeuvre, instilling it with a profound sense of teleological anxiety. Particularly in the earlier part of his career, a number of critics have tried to extrapolate from McCarthy's fiction an analysis of religion which might be characterised as southern. Such analyses should be approached with care, however. As Dana Phillips has noted:

"Southern" readers have tended to see McCarthy as the heir of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor... [This is] a mistake... Those who read McCarthy as a "Southern" writer tend to want to find in each of his novels something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries similar to those O'Connor's fiction is supposed to affirm (mysteries of a Christian or Gnostic variety). McCarthy's fiction resembles O'Connor's in its violence, but he entirely lacks O'Connor's penchant for theology and the jury-rigged, symbolic plot resolutions that make theology seem plausible. In McCarthy's work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else. (434-5)

It is certainly the case that attempts to shoehorn McCarthy into a particular style of writing or philosophical viewpoint are fraught with danger and, consequently, any effort to appropriate him as the heir of southern gothic is unconvincing. The difficulty of grace and redemption is key to this: for O'Connor, attaining redemption and a state of grace undoubtedly required overwhelming pain and sacrifice, but she remained assured that they were attainable goals. For McCarthy, such assurance appears equivocal. John Lewis Longley suggests as much in his early analysis of McCarthy's

fiction: “Several elements or conditions are present in any McCarthy novel. Chief among them are denial of responsibility, usurpation of authority, and the rejection of Grace” (“Nuclear” 747). Again, this may be overstating the case somewhat. It is extremely difficult to pronounce that McCarthy *is* one thing or another or that his writing assuredly represents any particular viewpoint. While it is correct to point out that those who adopt McCarthy as a southern writer may misinterpret his work in their determination to discern a redemptive theme, any suggestion that his work represents an explicit *rejection* of redemption and grace is equally misleading. The prospect of redemption and grace *is* tenable in McCarthy’s world; but the tribulations endured by *Blood Meridian*’s kid, for example, are more complex – and darker – than the theologically simplistic (albeit brilliantly written) confrontation between the Misfit and the old woman in O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find”. Dianne Luce is clear that, although troublesome, transcendence is possible in McCarthy’s vision:

[In *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*] McCarthy foregrounds humankind’s tragic condition within cosmos rather than transcendence; certainly none of his major characters achieves it. Yet the potential for transcendence is, I think, strongly implied, not only in the late appearance of counterpointing characters who seem to possess a spiritual direction noticeably lacking in the main characters but also in the narrative emphasis on the spiritual void or alienation of the main characters themselves, which posits for the reader their great spiritual need. (*Reading* 66)

What one can infer from this, then, is that however dark Flannery O’Connor’s vision of the search for grace and redemption may be, McCarthy’s is darker still. One fears, for example, that a Hazel Motes as written by McCarthy would undergo his travails and still remain in an acute state of unredeemed purgatorial torment at novel’s end. But this is not to say that redemption is impossible. The fate of the kid in the conclusion of *Blood Meridian* can easily be interpreted as an O’Connor-like

assumption of a state of grace through violence. The loving calm of life with his beloved wife into which Sheriff Bell retreats at the conclusion of *No Country* is suggestive of a less violent passage. The possibility of transcendence is strongly hinted at in *The Road* and, earlier, in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*. Even the demise of Lester Ballard in *Child of God* could be read in a redemptive light while, as I shall explore in more detail in the final chapter, Buddy Suttree has frequently been interpreted as a Christ-like figure. Dianne Luce, for example, suggests his “Christlike care for others” represents “humanity’s truest ministry, a salvific communion, simple and available to all, that paradoxically coexists with man’s tendency to feral violence” (*Reading* 266). Christopher Metress, suggesting that *Outer Dark* represents a *via negativa*, concludes that the novel shows “that our redemption lies in our very freedom from absolute certainty, in our willingness to walk, like the blind man, ragged and serene, within a paradigmless world” (154). This is subtly different from the virtual will-to-martyrdom that affects the typical O’Connor character and is perhaps suggestive of a higher degree of scepticism in the author.

Beyond redemption

In light of this it is interesting to note Shelly Rambo’s suggestion that, contrary to the interpretations of many critics, the post-apocalyptic world McCarthy creates in *The Road* “cannot simply be interpreted within a [Christian] redemptive framework” because “he confronts us with the aftermath: what does it mean to witness to what remains?” Her argument is that the novel places the reader in “underexplored theological territory – beyond redemption” (101).

This is not strictly true. Rather, what can be seen in *The Road* may not be what is “beyond redemption” but redemption itself. In an unused fragment from *The Road* in the Archives, McCarthy hints at this: “It is not true that there is no redemption. We

just didnt know what it would look like. This is what it looks like” (87/3 NOTES X). In a Christian context, there is, indeed, no way of knowing what redemption looks like, nor is there, for mundane humanity rooted in the City of Man, any way of apprehending what lies beyond. Death remains the final mystery. Thus, Steven Shaviro is wrong to contend:

There is finally no mystery, not even in death; if we remain puzzled as to who we are, whence we have come, and whither we are bound, this is only because... [o]ur experience of the world’s limits consists precisely in this, that we can never encounter or encompass or transgress those limits. We remain bound in a dance of perpetual immanence. (12)

Shaviro’s latter point may strictly be correct, but to suggest there is no mystery seems, in the context of McCarthy’s oeuvre, almost perverse. On the contrary, the mystery is all. The dance may be immanent, but to suggest there is not a straining for transcendent truth stands contrary to the evidence. It is seen forcefully in the man and boy in *The Road*. It forms the basis for the entire drama of *The Sunset Limited*. It is profoundly troubling to Ben Talfair in *The Stonemason*, to Guy Schuler and Peter Gregory in “Whales and Men”, to the heretic and priest in *The Crossing*. The discussions about God which appear throughout McCarthy’s fiction speak eloquently of a desire for transcendent knowledge. Characteristically of McCarthy, it can be seen, too, in negative, in those lost souls Culla Holme and Lester Ballard who show no interest in their external environments, or in the community of scalphunters in *Blood Meridian* who reveal themselves to be devoid of any conception of community. They remain men of clay, and their very lack of inquisitiveness about the nature of the world around them points to just such a need in the rest of humanity. In McCarthy, there *must* be a prospect of transcendence. There *must* be something beyond, otherwise there would be no questing for God. The difficulty is not that transcendence, or redemption or grace, are impossible but, on the contrary, that they

are entirely possible. The final line of the heretic passage in *The Crossing* is assured: “For nothing is real save [God’s] grace” (158). Grace is defined by Maritain, evoking St Peter (*Peter II* 1:4) as making humanity “sharers in the Divine Nature, *consortes divinae naturae*” (*Knowledge* 254). Maritain goes on to differentiate between the “wretched idol-God” and the “infinitely transcendent God himself”, the “true God who is eternally self-sufficient and eternally blessed in the Trinity of Persons” (255). This differentiation may suggest some of the darkness inherent in the heretic passage: which God is the priest seeking when he scours Huisiáchepic for evidence of maldoing?

Teleology

Immediately after the heretic passage in *The Crossing*, the novel’s central character, Billy Parham, is on the move again, riding to America (159). McCarthy’s characters are always on journeys, and the sense of *telos*, of purpose, is palpable. Steven Frye notes, of *The Crossing*:

Although characters in the novel live out the one story, and their lives are presented in such a way as to emphasize the universal nature of the single journey, they never come to a complete and intellectually coherent understanding of the tale’s purpose or meaning. Yet that meaning remains a distant possibility built into the assumption that there is order in the one tale and implied purpose in its forward movement. (“Naturalism” 54)

The characters are on a journey then, and everyone is inevitably on that same journey. Mark Busby makes a similar point when he notes: “The Epilogue [of *Cities of the Plain*] then returns to the power of the storyteller, one of the dominant themes in *The Crossing*... it becomes clear that we are all actually on the same journey told again

and again in different but always similar ways in which deep questions about the process and the telling are often explored” (166). This extended epilogue, of course, is merely a reformulation of arguments already advanced in the course of the trilogy, particularly in the heretic passage: as the priest tells Billy, “[the narrator] appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one” (155). It is an unintended irony that at least no-one can deny McCarthy does his best to live up to his thesis in the repetitive conjoinings that constitute the second half of *The Crossing* and the conclusion of *Cities of the Plain*.

What can be seen in these continual wanderings by McCarthy’s characters is, perhaps, a Christian search for grace and redemption. Crucially, however, it mostly seems to be a *failed* search. While Dianne Luce is undoubtedly correct to point to the *prospect* of transcendence in McCarthy’s work – he is a pessimist but he is not a nihilist – nonetheless it appears to be a wholly contingent aim. In this, one could argue that McCarthy is not a millennialist thinker but an exodus thinker: for the millennialist, paradise – utopia – must be the end; for McCarthy, however, the journey is all, the transformation. To travel, in McCarthy’s world, may be better than to arrive, particularly when there is no real optimism that any actual destination exists.

And so, underpinning what might be seen as typically Catholic conceptions of grace and redemption, there are strong elements of doubt. This leads to the key questions for McCarthy in considering theological matters: what is the nature of the relationship between the divine and humanity? How does that interaction work? And what aspects of our human nature affect that relationship?

The Spiritual man

Garry Wallace, in his recollection of a conversation with McCarthy, notes: “[McCarthy] went on to say that he thinks the mystical experience is a direct apprehension of reality, unmediated by symbol, and he ended with the thought that our inability to see spiritual truth is the greater mystery” (138). If this is an accurate reflection of McCarthy’s views, then it allies him with writers like Flannery O’Connor, for whom: “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality” (*Mystery* 157).⁸ O’Connor remained convinced that, although perhaps “forced to take ever more violent means to get [her] vision across” (34), ultimately she could portray redemption and grace in her work. For McCarthy, on the other hand, our “inability to see spiritual truth” is a cause of considerable angst. I have already shown how McCarthy’s approach to organised religion is at best ambivalent, but what might be categorised as an individual mystical experience is integral to his work. The mid-life wanderings of the kid/man in *Blood Meridian* suggest he becomes some kind of mystic hermit. The engagements with assorted prophets throughout the Border Trilogy clearly have a mystical element, particularly the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*. The boy in *The Road* is increasingly presented in messianic fashion. McCarthy’s use of dreams as vehicles for imparting a message has been much noted in criticism, and the frequency with which these are essentially religious in nature is significant. In this, McCarthy would seem to be adopting the Thomist view of dreams as intimations of mystical revelation. In the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas writes:

Knowledge of the future by means of dreams, comes either from the revelation of spiritual substances, or from a corporeal cause.... Now both these causes are more applicable to a person while asleep than while awake, because, while awake, the soul is occupied with external sensibles, so that it is less receptive

⁸ It should be noted that, among McCarthy scholars, there is a degree of scepticism about the accuracy of Wallace’s recollections and an understandable unease about ascribing to McCarthy uncorroborated opinions. However, this observation would not appear incompatible with the nature of the metaphysical observations McCarthy makes in his work.

of the subtle impressions either of spiritual substances, or even of natural causes; although as regards the perfection of judgment, the reason is more alert in waking than in sleeping. (Quest. 172, Art. 1)

McCarthy's dreamers, then, are often making some mystical connection. Todd Edmondson makes a link between a "solitary seeker" on a "spiritual journey" and the work of Jacob Boehme (152). Boehme's spiritual journey, he suggests, "centers on the individual's all-consuming desire for an escape from meaninglessness" and wonders whether "it was through his readings in gnosticism that McCarthy discovered Boehme, or vice-versa". This is a worthwhile conjecture, and the linkage of the "seeker after truth" with both gnosticism and Boehme, with which and with whom McCarthy is regularly associated, is apposite. Edmondson concludes: "Boehme's presentation of the solitary seeker can be seen both in the way McCarthy's wanderers move through the world, and in the ways that he depicts communities as contexts not of holiness and health but rather of depravity and destruction magnified." He goes on:

Perhaps a neat and tidy classification of Cormac McCarthy's theology of the created order is not only impossible but also unnecessary. For the distinctions among these various cosmologies – or at least the way that McCarthy and his characters appropriate them – are ultimately not as significant as what they share. In each of McCarthy's novels, his characters, whatever religious or philosophical vision they embody, are unable to conceive of a world in which they might be at home. (153)

This chimes with the approach of Catholic writers with whom McCarthy, despite his lapsed status, clearly shares common ground. For example, in his biography of Flannery O'Connor, Brad Gooch suggests the influence of T.S. Eliot on *Wise Blood*:⁹

⁹ Eliot, of course, was Anglican rather than Roman Catholic. However, he formally espoused Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. Further, Barry Spurr argues that his theological views were Roman Catholic in essence.

O'Connor hinted that a starting point, if not blueprint, for Haze's quest might be found in T.S. Eliot's shattered epic of modern life, *The Waste Land*, a poem revered by her New Critic writer-instructors: "His search for a physical home mirrors his search for a spiritual one, and although he finds neither, it is the latter search which saves him from becoming a member of the Wasteland and makes him worth 75,000 words". (137)

Although O'Connor identified herself as a Thomist there is, in the harshness of her vision, more of a Jansenist perspective on God's grace. Jansenism was a seventeenth century theological movement which emphasised the wickedness of humanity, as seen through original sin, and the concomitant necessity of divine grace. Cornelius Jansen's controversial reading of St Augustine, *Augustinus*, published posthumously in 1640, argued that the Counter-Reformation, in its opposition to Luther and Calvin, had gone too far and had come to espouse Pelagianism, the idea that human nature is essentially beneficent and thus that salvation can be achieved without the interference of God. On the contrary, Jansen argued, human nature is radically corrupt and depraved, but God's grace cannot be resisted. People are helpless and cannot be saved unless the love of God is in them and God wills it. If, however, God does will it, then his mercy will infuse their souls whether or not they accede to it. This strongly echoes the comments of the heretic priest I examined earlier, in which he explains "God could not be escaped nor eluded nor hid from" (55/6 208). Thus, Jansenists proposed the idea of predestination and denied humanity free will in the acceptance of grace.¹⁰ It is almost impossible to read the endings of *The Violent Bear It Away* or *Wise Blood* and not conclude that the fates of Tarwater and Hazel Motes are a thorough-going lesson in Jansenism. O'Connor denied this, stating that "[M]an is so free that with his last breath he can say *No*" (*Mystery* 182) but it is difficult to see how any of her

¹⁰ Jansenism is, it should be noted, considered heretical. Current Catholic thinking on this matter propounds "God's free initiative demands man's free response" (Catechism of the Catholic Church). http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm [Accessed 21 May 2013]

puppet characters, manipulated as they are, are genuinely able to do so. The violence of their salvation is so extreme, so single-minded, so complete, that they appear to have no say whatever in the progress of their lives. This, then, would appear to be Jansenist. Andre Bleikasten concurs, suggesting “Tarwater and Motes both act out scenarios written beforehand by someone else” (62). This immediately recalls Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of William Faulkner’s *Sartoris*:

This “man” we discover – in *Light in August* – I think of the “man” of Faulkner in the same way that one thinks of the “man” of Dostoevsky or of Meredith – this divine animal who lives without God, lost from the moment of his birth, and intent on destroying himself; cruel, moral even in murder; then miraculously saved, neither by death nor in death, but in the final moments which precede death; heroic in torment, in the most abject humiliations of the flesh: I had accepted him without reservations. I had never forgotten his proud and threatening face, his blinded eyes. I found him again in *Sartoris*. I recognized the “somber arrogance” of Bayard. Yet I can no longer accept the “man” of Faulkner: he is an illusion. Just a matter of lighting. There is a certain formula: it consists in not telling, remaining hidden, dishonestly secretive, – telling a little. (“Sartoris” 95)

Sartre identifies the falseness of these created characters assuming a spiritual element at the behest of their authors. The spiritual quest undertaken by Hazel Motes, or Tarwater, or the heretic in *The Crossing* or experienced by Billy at the end of *Cities of the Plain* or even by Buddy Suttree as he approaches his final journey, becomes all-encompassing. As Dianne Luce notes: “For McCarthy it is the spiritual status of the characters, as opposed to their psychological experience, that is most at stake” (*Reading* ix). This may be seen, in Augustinian terms, as the development of a love of God. Eric Voegelin explains this in terms of exodus: “Exodus is defined by St Augustine as the tendency to abandon one’s entanglements with the world, to

abandon the love of self, and to turn towards the love of God” (CW12 78-9). Fred Lawrence ponders whether, by this, Voegelin is asking “who is to say that the capacity of human beings to be converted is not caused by supernatural grace?” (Lawrence n.pag). This begins, however, to lead to difficult territory for a number of reasons. I have already examined the violence that exists behind the salvific approach of O’Connor: the notion of supernatural conversion leads dangerously close to Jansenism. As well as these concerns, the spiritual quest comes increasingly to be addressed in terms of a mystical experience and this, too, becomes problematic. Discussing mysticism in Voegelin’s work, Glenn Hughes explains:

Not everyone concerned with the study of society and politics understands the fact that the friendship and concord that constitute true community is grounded in common individual participation in a mystery of transcendent reality. Those who *are* cognizant of it, are so, due to what Voegelin would call meditative experiences, in which both individual being and the life of genuine community are understood to be actually *constituted* by the spiritual mystery of the divine ground of being. Such meditative experiences may be called “mystical experiences,” broadly construed. The political scientist or sociologist who has not had such experiences, who does not seek them, and who does not recognize them in the symbolisms and formulations of the founding texts of political science, simply does not have an adequate explanatory grasp of the ontological basis of community, and thus does not apprehend the utmost foundation either of political reality or of scientific analyses of social and political order. (*Response* n. pag)

This is a remarkable statement which, for all the assuredness of its delivery, is completely lacking in evidence. It layers four specious observations one on top of the other: firstly that community is grounded in the individual’s experience of a *mysterious transcendent reality*; then that this reality can be comprehended by people

capable of a *mystical experience*; thirdly, there are some who are immune to such experiences; and finally this means that such people are incapable of understanding the ontological basis of community. All of this is unattested and self-serving, simultaneously seeking to define and prove an argument. The result of such thinking is kenosis, the “self-emptying” of one’s will and the acceptance of God’s divine will. This returns to the conditions in which it is acceptable to posit as evidence of divine redemption and grace the buggery of a young man, the torment inflicted on Tarwater in O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*. Thus, mystical experiences of this nature can become deeply problematic. Firstly, they can give the suggestion of an elect, those capable of receiving and comprehending experiences that the rest of humanity are not equipped to understand. And secondly, these mystical experiences themselves lead into ever more conjectural territory. They have the effect of suggesting that there is something mysterious in the world. In turn, this promotes a shift from an outward-focused concentration on community (and God) into an isolated, inward-facing experience, dwelling on a highly personal, almost solipsistic worldview. It prioritises the mystical over the mundane. For McCarthy, this appears to be an essential facet of life, as suggested by the Wallace quote. Even in his most successful work, *Suttree*, one can see something of this during Suttree’s mystical experiences in the mountains and after his typhoid illness (notably, the least interesting sections of the novel). It is seen regularly, too, in the parade of prophets who traverse his fiction expounding on their relationship with God. Bell’s dreams at the conclusion of *No Country* give a flavour of it, as do those of the man in *The Road*. McCarthy’s constant references to dreams suggest a mystical purview. Although in real life he is a lapsed Catholic, it links McCarthy thematically to a strand of Catholic writing including, in addition to O’Connor, Walker Percy and others. It also links him to the notions of religious experience examined by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

James’s work was premised on the idea of the mystical experience. By 1902, when it was published, it already seemed outdated. In it, James himself wrote: “There is a

notion in the air about us that religion is probably only an anachronism” (490). He may be overstating the case (for effect) but the sort of religious experience he goes on to labour – specifically a mystical religious experience – does indeed feel dated. By the time the book was published the established churches were moving away from such notions. Modern science was beginning to influence psychology and psychology was beginning to influence social science.¹¹ The growth of modernism in the early part of the twentieth century finally rendered the idea of a mystical experience all but obsolete. McCarthy, in his attempts to maintain some mystical element to existence, the “breath of God” or the juncture where “two worlds touch” (*COTP* 286) is at risk of standing Canute-like above James’s work and trying to deny a century of psychological insight.

James goes on to suggest:

The pivot round which the religious life... revolves, is the interest in the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism. . . . Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being in the world of religion, the one fundamental fact. Today, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. (491)

Such belief can become dangerous. It is the sort of narcissistic self-aggrandisement that causes people to lose perspective, to forget and forgo the role of community. It may be that Jesus Christ taught of the individual, but nonetheless Christian faith is premised on the relationships between human beings. There is something distasteful in the apparent privileging of those who undergo some mystical experience over others, as though they are somehow “more” religious or “more” special or “more”

¹¹ This is not to suggest, however, that psychology and the sciences completely abjure the mystical. Carl Jung’s work on the unconscious, for example, focuses heavily on mythic imagery. His *Red Book*, published in 2009, reveals how much his work was impelled by “inner images”.

connected to the glories of God. It is a bastardisation of the concept of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). But perhaps one could argue that such private and personal communion with God is reflected by some of the Bildads who populate the fiction of Cormac McCarthy?

History, time and the timeless

I have made a critical connection between the work of Flannery O'Connor and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A number of critics similarly connect Eliot's poem to McCarthy's work, but by far the most resonant of Eliot's oeuvre in respect of McCarthy is *Four Quartets*. It was published sequentially from 1936 and first appeared in its complete version in America in 1943. It is an extraordinary work, not only in literary terms but philosophically. In it, Eliot revisits the themes of *The Waste Land*, written twenty-two years earlier, and refocuses them in light of his conversion to Anglicanism and move away from high modernist style. Paradoxically, there is at once a deepening of conservative Christian thought and a broadening to encompass beliefs from other traditions, including mystical philosophical thinkers. David Tracey, for example, notes: "[the] Eliot of the *Quartets* leave[s] the Eliot of the controversial essays on Christianity far behind to join himself to the tradition of marginal Christian Platonist thinkers from Dionysius through Eckhart" (Quoted in Hughes *Pattern* n. pag). It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest that the poem cycle is, simultaneously, a strongly Christian work and representative of, in Tracey's description, a "multiplicity of the religious vision" but the spiritual conviction evinced in the poem represents, in Glenn Hughes's outstanding Voegelinian analysis of it, "the work of a poet of divine presence" (*Pattern*). Both Voegelin and Eliot, Hughes suggests, "view human existence as life in the in-between of time and timelessness, what Voegelin calls life in the tensions of the *metaxy*". As a consequence they "both reject the common notion of historical meaning as fundamentally a matter of temporal

development or progress, but rather both regard history as ... being constituted most significantly by the relation between human events unfolding in time and the timelessness of divine meaning, a notion that leads Eliot to call history ‘a pattern of timeless moments’”.

McCarthy, too, develops the Voegelinian sense of the timelessness of earthly existence throughout his work. Suttree’s sojourn in the woods is presaged by hearing “the ghosts of lumber trains, a liquid clicking and long shunt and clatter and the jargon of old rusted trucks on rails long gone” (283). At first, one imagines this is merely the time delay of the sound of the trains travelling towards Suttree from the distance, but might it also be connotative of ghost trains from another time? Certainly the idea of the rails being “long gone” would add weight to such a conjecture. Suttree’s spatial and temporal awareness, then, is becoming altered, a mystical experience is unfolding. Time passing timelessly is repeatedly suggested by the descriptions of nature, of clouds rolling by, the passage of the sun. Autumn leaves are a “perishable currency, forever renewed”. In this place, in a ballad, a girl was drowned and was found looking out of the water into “the rimpled world beyond” (283). Note, this did not happen in reality, once and forever, but in a ballad, over and over, whenever the song is sung, in timeless repetition, much like the *corrido* which celebrates the life and death of Boyd Parham in *The Crossing*. Nature is implacable, unbending. There is a “cold indifferent dark” with “blind stars beaded on their tracks... and pinioned planets all reeling through the black of space” (284). The mood echoes that of *The Waste Land*:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many. (*Poems* 54-5)

And of *Four Quartets*:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (190)

Further, this idea of life and death is picked up by Suttree. Reality begins to melt for him and “he hardly knew if he dreamt or not” (285). As he looks at a “world of incredible loveliness”:

Old distaff Celt’s blood in some back chamber of his brain moved him to discourse with the birches, with the oaks. A cool green fire kept breaking in the woods and he could hear the footsteps of the dead. Everything had fallen from him. He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care. (286)

At this point, however, the weakness of the Voegelinian conception of the in-between of the *metaxy* begins to emerge. No matter how finely written the prose is, once Suttree disappears into himself in his reverie an essential element of the humanity of the novel is dissipated. He hears the “footsteps of the dead” but these are impersonal things, unconnected to him, to humanity, to the moment. Later, when he is recovering from his ordeal back in Knoxville, he experiences “[r]ecurrences of dreams he’d had in the mountain” (295). These, too, revolve around the ghosts of the dead:

A dark hand had scooped the spirit from his breast and a cold wind circled in the hollow there. He sat up. Even the community of the dead had disbanded

into ashes, those shapes wheeling in the earth's crust through a nameless ether
no more men than were the ruins of any other thing once living. (295)

These emanations of the dead, our forgotten history, are, in Voegelinian or Eliotic terms, a part of the pattern of timeless moments. Voegelin suggests *Four Quartets* “deals with the life of man and his death, with time and eternity, with the world unredeemed and redemption, with ecstasy and contemplation, with action and stillness” (CW33 35). Eliot's dead are irreducibly dead, and so are Suttree's. Their past cannot be deciphered. So many have gone those who remain cannot put a figure on it. This is undeniably poetic, but it is not true: to reduce human history to little more than a lacuna within the divine presence is to ignore the power of human memory and to underestimate the lure of human community and to deny the truth of human love. In their insistence on subjugating humanity beneath a divine presence, Voegelin and Eliot begin to lose connection with the beauty of this collective humanity. And in passages such as Suttree's despairing journey into the mountains McCarthy, too, begins to privilege the supernatural over the human. As his career progresses these theological principles become ever more pronounced.

Time and The Road

By *The Road* the world is slowly reducing to nothing and it is not yet clear whether this is to be a message of hope or despair. In a reversal of the opening of *The Crossing*, in which Billy “carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english” (TC 3), now the names of things are slowly falling “into oblivion” (TR 75). In this new world, “[t]he sacred idiom [is] shorn of its referents and so of its reality.... In time to wink out forever” (75).

The shapes of the past and destiny which have become so familiar in McCarthy's work reappear early in *The Road*. Near the beginning of their journey, the man and boy stop at the man's childhood home. "The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see" (22). This is significant for two reasons: firstly, it replays the fatalistic, *metaxical* connectivity of past, present and future which suffuses McCarthy's work, and secondly it reveals, even this early in the narrative, the otherworldliness of the boy. A couple of pages later one reads: "The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all" (24). This is a remarkable thing for a young child to know, but it is an essential aspect of McCarthy's metaphysic in *The Road*. Later, it is suggested: "There is no past" (46), and this is immediately amplified by:

No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you. (46)

Again, this is suggestive that time has been erased. Providence is God's intervention in the world. Now, there is no God, and so the day, the present, the moment, must be providential to itself. They are living in an immanent time, with no history, no future, just a flux of moments and days and happenings with no meaning.

The notion that things of grace and beauty should have their common provenance in pain is, however, tendentious nonsense, on the verge of being repulsive. It returns to the territory of Flannery O'Connor and the buggery of Tarwater in the name of redemption. In this context of nothingness, the man thinks about his dead wife: "he thought that he should have tried to keep her in their lives in some way but he didn't know how" (46). This is a further refutation of any human connection between past,

present and future in this apocalyptic world. The woman has embraced failure. “And now I’m done”, she says (47). The man and woman do not talk about death any longer “because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about” (48). Calling death a lover, she says, “my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (49). When he leaves behind her photograph and other reminders of the past contained in his billfold, the man is deliberately obliterating the past by removing the human from it: it is, simultaneously, the murder of time and humanity. The man ponders: “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” (165).

This extinction of time and the connection with the past is therefore highly significant. Throughout McCarthy’s fiction, he has stressed the importance of narrative, the profane story as a mirror of the sacred message. Theologian and theoretical physicist, John Polkinghorne, explains, “the Christian gospel is an unfolding drama of redemption, not a timeless moment of illumination” (80) but just such an image of the timeless moment is nonetheless consistent with religious conservatives like Voegelin and Eliot, who stress the primacy of time in the mystery of life. McCarthy’s fiction is littered with old stones and other remnants of the past, their meaning lost, their connection fragile but tangible. For Eliot, for McCarthy, the past is not so much a foreign country, but a miasma which, unseen and untouched and untasted, envelops the present. It cannot be altered. It cannot be improved. But, in *The Road*, the end of the journey has been reached. In an early draft in the Archives, McCarthy writes:

What is gone that was ten thousand years in the making and will never be again is the collective dream of man of which alone the future is composed. Wherein alone resides his raw belief in the rightness of his being. The dream of the world which for him is the world itself and without which there is only clay and rock and the aimless wind that bears the cries of all things that bleed.
(97/4 unpaginated oversize page)

In destroying time, McCarthy shows what it is like to destroy the very fabric of our existence. Determinism has run its course. What is happening in *The Road*, then, is essentially an act of uncreation. Theologian Robert Fyall suggests: “Creation is not simply one of the acts of God ‘in the beginning’ but the continuing providence by which his living power is seen throughout the earth” (169). But, in *The Road*, God is no longer active and “[t]he day [is] providential unto itself.” Creation, an act of everywhen, has ceased, and uncreation has taken its place. This links powerfully to the despair evoked in the *Book of Job*. As Fyall explains:

the powers of darkness [in *Job* 3:5] have been presented in a sinister and personalized manner. What emerges is a cry for an ‘uncreating act’ which will return the universe to primordial chaos; an altogether more sinister picture than the deep peace of the grave.... the idea of ‘uncreation’ continues, for Sheol is not only a ‘place of no return; ruled by darkness and ‘Mot’s shadow’ but identical with the primeval chaos before creation: ‘land... of disorder’.... So there is no escape that way; Sheol is no resting place but a deep pit haunted by menacing presences. (113)

This “uncreating act” is precisely what McCarthy presents in *The Road*. It is therefore difficult to read the conclusion of the novel as anything other than a troubling critique of humanity. There is no doubt that *The Road* is a beautiful love story, and that the love of the man for the boy lives on, and that goodness is resident in that child. In their final conversation, the boy asks his papa about the other little boy he saw. “Goodness will find the little boy”, the man says. “It always has. It will again” (236). Note, he does not say “it always will”, but it will again. Goodness is not a commodity common to the world they currently inhabit but, like the fire within them, it lingers, it will not perish.

Nonetheless, the novel's coda, regarded by many to be optimistic, simultaneously reinforces this message of uncreation:

on the backs of the brook trout are the vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (241)

The final word is intentional. It returns to the mystery of God. Humanity has uncreated the world. It cannot be remade. Unless the message of the novel is heeded, McCarthy is suggesting, the mystery, older than humanity, will be extinguished. It is a powerful message but, because of a stylistic failure of the novel, it lacks the impact it might have had. Because of its didacticism, it is almost impossible for readers *not* to heed the message because they are situated in a way that obliges them to identify solely with the man and the boy: their opponents are one-dimensional caricatures of evil whose viewpoint is intolerable. Thus, in order to prosecute the critique of modernity that has so exercised McCarthy throughout his career, his latest novel is coercive in a deeply flawed way. In this, one sees the culmination of a trend that has developed since his turn westward in 1990.

CHAPTER FOUR

Free Will, Determinism And Fatalism

Introduction

In *Blood Meridian*, a group of pilgrims or “argonauts” are slaughtered by a band of white men who disguise their crimes as the work of Apaches. The passage concludes:

Notions of chance and fate are the preoccupations 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 chances, yet the judge, who had 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? (153)

There is a somewhat simplistic scientific consciousness buried beneath the judge’s rhetoric. His final proclamation is an infallible conjecture, a question whose answer is, by its nature, impossible to verify. In this way, a spurious verisimilitude is granted to a grandiose claim that does not, in truth, bear close scrutiny. It is an epistemological sleight-of-hand. This might be thought inconsequential – it is, after

all, merely a question posed by a character and not, therefore, a reliable indicator of the metaphysical leanings of the novel or the author. Nonetheless, it relates – as I shall show in this chapter – to a concept to which McCarthy returns time and time again, the idea of witness, the story, “notions of chance and fate”. By extension, it begins to explore his analysis of determinism and free will, and this would appear to be problematic, suggestive as it so frequently is of a fate which is ordained from the beginning. This is not a sustainable view, as John Polkinghorne explains:

The future is not already formed ahead of us, waiting to reveal itself to our exploration, as the fixed contours of a valley reveal themselves to the traveller who makes his way through them. The future is part of our creation: its shape is responsive to our moulding, as the clay is formed by the sculptor to create his irreducibly new thing, which is his work of art. If even the omnipotent god cannot act to change the past, it does not seem any more conceivable that the omniscient God can know with certainty the unformed future. He may well be able to make highly informed conjectures about its possible shape, he may have prepared his plans for any eventuality, but in his actual experience and knowledge he must be open to the consequences of the exercise of human free will and... the evolution of cosmic free process. (79)

As I shall explore in this chapter, Cormac McCarthy’s fiction is replete with suggestions of an unalterable future written and ordained from the beginnings of time. One is impelled to wonder, therefore, at the viability of this central conceit, resting as it does on a simplistic interpretation of free will and fate. There appears to be an inconsistency in McCarthy’s insistence on the knowability of the future and the desire for transcendence which is apparent in his characters’ continued searches for passage to the City of God. As I discussed in the previous chapter, John Polkinghorne explains, “the Christian gospel is an unfolding drama of redemption, not a timeless moment of illumination” (80). Too often, in his desire to enunciate the shape of men’s

lives, McCarthy's world slips into just that timeless moment of illumination; any notion of redemption thus becomes impossible. Perhaps that is what McCarthy is warning: entry is barred, redemption is not at hand. If so, it is a dark message indeed. More likely, he is warning what might prevail if humanity allows the evil that is manifest in his fictions to take root in reality. As ever with McCarthy, there are no easy answers. This is not unusual with novelists. In an analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's views on determinism, fatalism and free will, James Mullican notes:

Critics have taken virtually every position on the spectrum between the poles of complete freedom and complete fatalism. That this disagreement exists should not be surprising. Hawthorne was an artist, not a philosopher or theologian; an important element of his technique, perhaps essential to his vision of life, was his ambiguity. (91)

A similar ambiguity can be found in McCarthy's preoccupation with the same subject: while it is clear that he is raising questions about human free will and fate (divinely inspired or otherwise) his conclusion is often opaque. In this chapter I wish to examine some of the ways in which McCarthy explores questions of free will, determinism and divine determinism, showing how his view hardens over time into the pessimistic fatalism which imbues his most recent works. McCarthy employs a number of techniques to pursue his enquiries, most notably the notion of the story, some grand narrative which suggests an inexorable threading of unalterable fate through our existence. Using a further analysis of the drafting process of the heretic passage in *The Crossing* which I examined in Chapter Three, I will demonstrate how and why, when carefully establishing a theological basis to the passage, McCarthy simultaneously inserts a parallel, interlinked profane narrative relaying the nature of storytelling as it relates to humanity. I will then explain how, through this approach, McCarthy begins to address questions of free will and determinism.

Notions of free will

Flannery O'Connor's novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, tells the story of the "final revelation" (*Violent* 233) and redemption of a troubled young boy, Tarwater. Standing in opposition to Tarwater's search for meaning is his atheist uncle, Rayber. Margaret Earley Whitt suggests the novel's ending:

delivers two symbolic alternatives for the reader: choose the way of Tarwater, which is less choice than a violence racked upon its chosen, or the way of Rayber, the ultimate torture because it yields only nothing disguised as free will. (107)

There is something profoundly disturbing about this. Tarwater's moment of redemption arises after he is buggered by the devil: to suggest that one can find salvation and harmony through the violence of rape, and that the glory of heaven should be predicated on such violence, is surely contrary to any logical, even sane, analysis of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, the future for Rayber, the novel's Nietzschean straw man, is "nothing disguised as free will". For both Tarwater and Rayber, then, free will is problematic: in the case of Tarwater, it is mediated by supernatural force; for Rayber it is chimeric and meaningless. In Cormac McCarthy's fiction, his characters are forced to engage in those same dances with destiny. Indeed, the most common interpretation of the ending of *Blood Meridian* is that the kid/man is buggered and killed by the judge in the jakes: the similarity to Tarwater's fate is evident. Free will is conditional, the story, the impulse of fate, the suggestion of a divine agency, leave the characters with a search for meaning. There is a constant questing by McCarthy's characters for independence, but their ability to achieve this is compromised by fate and patterns of determinism. What does it actually mean, then, to be free in McCarthy's terms, to exist as a rational, thinking human being?

Vereen Bell, in his famous early essay on McCarthy's perceived nihilism, suggests that: "In McCarthy's world, existence seems both to precede and preclude essence" ("Nihilism" 31). In this, of course, he is referring to Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence", but Bell's formulation of existentialism is particular. He continues: "[In McCarthy,] [m]oral considerations seem not to affect outcomes; actions and events seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible fates" (32). The existentialist notion of existence preceding essence, however, is more rightly promulgated on notions of freedom which Bell seems to underplay. Konstantin Kolenda explains:

All Western philosophers up to Sartre wanted to *relate* human reality to some other type or mode of being: the World of Forms, God, Substance, Noumenon, Spirit, Will, Will to Power, *élan vital*, Being. Sartre rejected *all* candidates for such relata and put nothing in their place. The slogan "existence precedes essence" means to put an end to the hitherto irresistible tendency to define human nature in terms of something other than freedom, which, in Sartrian vocabulary, resulted in the contamination of the for-itself by some kind of in-itself. (261)

In discussing the concept of freedom, eventually one runs into social reactionary criticism that its pursuit is indicative of humanity's hubris: it is a symbol of the process of establishing the supremacy of humanity which has resulted, reactionaries say, in the dangerous uncoupling of rational humanity from their spiritual origins. Thus, such criticism of liberalism tends to demonise concepts of freedom as leading inevitably to perdition. Again, such writers employ the device of turning the object of their dislike into a bastardised version of itself: freedom, then, becomes not a means of self-expression but of establishing power – in Voegelinian terms the *libido dominandi*, the will to power. One sees this in works such as Dostoevsky's *Notes*

from *Underground* or the novels of Flannery O'Connor, which aim to critique western notions of free will and human autonomy. And it can be seen, too, in McCarthy: the convictions, for example, of Sheriff Bell, although not so eloquently conveyed, are consistent with Dostoevsky's pessimistic outlook in his demonisation of the Underground Man. In prosecuting their critiques of modernity, however, each of these authors exhibit particular flaws. The characters they portray are not possessed of anything remotely akin to free will, while the situations to which they are exposed are not free from external agency. This may be argued as a particular philosophical approach to the question of free will. However, at the same time, the characters are invested with flaws which make their failure a self-fulfilling prophesy. They do not behave as real individuals but as characters manipulated by the author. They are set up to fail.

Steven Frye, writing of *The Crossing*, declares the constant "witnessing" which occurs in the novel represents "an essentially Hegelian account of the world and the human beings who occupy it, suggesting that individual lives, all of which have a narrative trajectory, converge in a kind of mystical synthesis in the matrix, the one tale, from which individuals find meaning both existentially in a given moment and in history broadly conceived" ("World" 53). While this is a valid observation, in the matter of the individual character as used by writers like O'Connor and McCarthy, the argument begins to weaken: the individual, in such works, is necessarily subservient to the historical. While one may argue that, epistemologically, this is merely a contingent truth, in literary terms there must remain a suspicion of character manipulation of in such approaches.

For example, in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes is initially a nihilist, but he is a very Christian sort of nihilist. True nihilism is not premised on a lifetime's denial of God: that is taken for granted. Only a Christian could depict a nihilist in such terms. And so O'Connor explains: "He had the feeling that everything he saw

was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him” (*Wise* 74). This gets to the central weakness of the novel – it shows precisely where and how O’Connor is manipulating her character. Hazel is supposedly the nihilist who determinedly believes in *nothing*, yet O’Connor is planting the seed of *something* in him, so that it can later be exploited. She is trying to have it both ways – painting him as believing nothing, yet having him know, deep down, that there is a blankness that once was something and may be something again. So he is not a true nihilist, but a Christian caricature of one. He is a straw man. O’Connor employs the same technique with Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Again, this atheist is not allowed the luxury of genuine atheism. His one fine speech comes in an exchange with his uncle, old man Tarwater:

“You’re too blind to see what you did to me. A child can’t defend himself. Children are cursed with believing. You pushed me out of the real world and I stayed out of it until I didn’t know which was which. You infected me with your idiot hopes, your foolish violence”. (*Violent* 73)

That is clear and impressive, but it is immediately followed by:

“I’m not always myself, I’m not al...” but he stopped. He wouldn’t admit what the old man knew. “There’s nothing wrong with me,” he said. “I’ve straightened the tangle you made. Straightened it by pure will power. I’ve made myself straight.”

“You see,” the old man said, “he admitted himself the seed was still in him.”

That seed is God, religion, the sacred word. Even with Rayber – the man who has denied God – the seed remains and it is his human frailty that is preventing him from

allowing it to germinate. And this idea of the seed, or the light, or the spark inside the chosen, is found throughout McCarthy's fiction. In current McCarthy criticism, this spark is most often construed as a specifically gnostic impulse hidden within the soul of humanity, but it could perhaps more usefully be investigated in the light of a more generalised metaphysical exploration of transcendent truth. To what extent are humans truly free? And to what extent can God influence the actions and fates of humanity? As I explored in Chapter Three, McCarthy's dance with divinity informs his entire output and, like the arguments of Black and White in *The Sunset Limited*, his fiction often appears to take the form of a complex theistic dialectic with himself.

The mystery of God

For McCarthy, it often seems that God, nature and humanity are indistinguishable. This is stated explicitly in an unused fragment from the notes for *The Road*: "To say that what will come to pass is fate or fortune yet says nothing of the will of God. Or of the world. It is the same question. The answer equally unknowable" (87/3 NOTES X). This is the source of his characters' tension: they are striving for something, some contact with the divine, but its only manifestation is through natural phenomena over which humanity has no control and which seem not to hold humans in any regard. It is as though McCarthy is simultaneously straining for and denying the existence of a divine presence. There seems to be a profound conflict in the thinking that surrounds his work: a world in which there is no God is no world at all, yet there is no evidence that God is present. McCarthy seems to want God, at the same time, to deliver empirical proof of his existence and remain shrouded in mystery.

What he seems to be struggling with, then, is a sense of mystery. Somewhere, there is a pattern, a plan, a hand guiding the plan. As McCarthy's characters navigate the City of Man in search of the City of God, they are beset by this mystery at the heart of

being. But while, for McCarthy, investigation of that mystery is paramount, on the whole his characters do not share that inquisitiveness. Louis Pasteur once wrote:

I see everywhere in the world, the inevitable expression of the concept of infinity.... The idea of God is nothing more than one form of the idea of infinity. So long as the mystery of the infinite weighs on the human mind, so long will temples be raised to the cult of the infinite, whether it be called Bramah, Allah, Jehovah, or Jesus.... The Greeks understood the mysterious power of the hidden side of things. They bequeathed to us one of the most beautiful words in our language—the word ‘enthusiasm’ – *En Theos* – A God Within. The grandeur of human actions is measured by the inspiration from which they spring. Happy is he who hears a god within, and who obeys it. The ideals of art, of science, are lighted by reflection from the infinite. (quoted in Koestler 220)

One might argue that what is missing from most of McCarthy’s characters is the enthusiasm engendered by a “God within”. This is not necessarily a religious sensibility – indeed Pasteur did not intend it so – but a guiding principle through which to find an ethical purpose to life. Thus, it is not the divine reality of the Voegelinian Beginning and Beyond, nor is it evocative of Flannery O’Connor’s mysteries of faith and redemption, nor even Jung’s particularisation of the human *numinosum*. It is perhaps more Feuerbachian, with its identification of a guiding spirit within the individual, his conception that “God is man, man is God”, unfolding in the infinite. Roger Berkowitz describes Arthur Koestler’s understanding of Pasteur’s infinite as being “not a faith in the heavens, but one rooted in mud – or rather, the ocean – and focused on the infinite” (310). For all McCarthy’s vivid evocations of the natural landscape and the intractable nature of time, the wonder evoked by Pasteur and Koestler does not translate into the core of his characters: a sense of enthusiasm is absent. Erik Satie, famous for the playful directions in his scores, once gave the

instruction “Wonder about yourself”.¹ Other than Buddy Suttree and, perhaps, the kid in *The Road*, this is not something one would expect of a Cormac McCarthy character. While their author wrestles with faith and belief, interspersing his narratives with the array of prophets who give expression to his doubts, the characters with whom those prophets engage generally offer no opinions of their own.

Matters of independence

Instead, the pursuit of free will, for McCarthy’s characters, very often seems to be diminished into a utilitarian search for independence. Rather than seeking the free will to act in accord with their inner impulses, the characters seem more concerned simply to be left alone. In *The Orchard Keeper*, for example, Uncle Ather, a free spirit if ever there was one, is finally constrained by a society he can no longer evade. He believes he has free will and acts as though he does. His actions, however, reveal a flawed understanding of the concept of freedom. He believes he freely wants independence from other men, the ability to live an isolated life close to nature and, for this reason, when he is threatened he flees to the mountains. This is his idea of freedom, and the notion of flight, of riding on, of constant movement, is a regular trope in McCarthy, but it is not a genuine consideration of freedom. Ather’s actions are entirely a reflection of his own desire. Meanwhile, however, he cannot take himself outside of nature: genuine freedom can only be achieved as part of the wider world and the impulses which drive it. Ather’s decisions are based purely on his own circumstance, own thoughts and own beliefs. They are approached entirely in isolation from his social environment. He is *Walden* writ large, but in reality such total independence is impossible and, therefore, Ather’s actions do not result in the freedom he so craves. He can never be free because he does not understand his relation to the people and

¹ Erik Satie. *Trois Gnossiennes*, 1890. See: Conoboy, Tom. Wonder About Yourself. *Cezanne’s Carrot*. Vol. 1, No. 3, 2006. <http://www.cezannescarrot.org/vol1iss3/wonderaboutyourself.html> [Accessed 27 January 2013]

things around him, nor, no matter how he tries, can he live entirely aloof from them. Those critics who dwell on McCarthy's reinvention of American myths of the west or Manifest Destiny might more usefully examine his appropriation of the Thoreauvian myth of *Walden*, the notion that one can live completely independently. Thoreau's conclusion is that: "[i]f a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (219). Instinctively, there is something appealing about this, particularly to adolescent minds, and the notion of different strokes was crucial to the counterculture of the 1960s. Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, for example, was reclaimed by 1960s youth as a primer for understanding alienation from society and the urge to release some animalistic spirit, while Ken Kesey covered similar ground in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. One sees throughout McCarthy a series of characters who avowedly pursue their own course, Lester Ballard and Buddy Suttree, John Grady Cole, Boyd and Billy Parham, Llewelyn Moss, even the boy in *The Road*. No matter how attractive such independence sounds, however, it can be a dangerous premise. Taken to extremes, there is a danger of self-regarding, unmediated individualism.

At its extreme, it can become a doctrine of solipsism in which community is lost as individuals are free to act without recourse to any mediating factor. That would certainly account for the violence of *Blood Meridian* and it is undoubtedly true that the aspirational *summum bonum* can be malignly balanced by a Hobbesian *summum malum*. *Blood Meridian*, then, could be argued as a philosophical exercise to test what happens in an environment when only free will exists and no mediation, by way of conscience or moral code or empathy or pain or reverence can intervene. As a way of explaining the novel, there is some merit to this. It links, too, with the socially conservative outlook which is demonstrated in McCarthy's oeuvre: existential humanity is, after all, merely the latest incarnation of the modern gnostic, in whom spiritual connection has been lost and for whom hubris has replaced reverence

towards a greater being. This is, however, a profoundly reactionary view which focuses exclusively on those traces of modernity which seem repugnant to the critic and which are therefore blamed for any perceived ill in society. It deliberately ignores any element which is functional or useful or helpful. It ignores concepts of community. In particular, it ignores concepts of decency or altruism. Freedom to exist may, indeed, be premised on free will and choice but, given choices, people will not always act in a selfish manner. One might call this the Rambert principle, after the journalist Raymond Rambert in Camus's *The Plague*. Throughout much of that novel, in which the city of Oran is quarantined because of an outbreak of bubonic plague, Rambert's instinct is to escape. Even as he makes increasingly desperate attempts to do so, however, he becomes embroiled in efforts to help the failing populace and, when an opportunity to escape finally arises, he opts instead to remain. There is thus nothing antinomian about his behaviour and, while *Blood Meridian*'s judge Holden may be a potent representation of the depths to which society can descend, Rambert presents the heights to which it can aspire. There is no Rambert in *Blood Meridian*; indeed, with the partial exception of Buddy Suttree, until *The Road* it could be argued there is no Rambert anywhere in Cormac McCarthy's fiction. In *The Road*, the boy, with his continuing desire to help others, most notably the ailing Ely, is surely in the Rambert mode. When Ely claims he eats because people give him things, the man does not believe him. "You did," Ely rightly points out (143). The man replies: "No I didnt. The boy did" (144). It is the boy, then, who shows an altruistic spirit, which he confirms the next morning by insisting that they share some of their food with the departing Ely. The man tells Ely, "I wouldnt have given you anything" and Ely says that, in their position, he wouldn't have given them anything either (146). This is a significant scene in the novel because it is one of the first to presage the otherworldly saintliness of the boy.

One can see this descent into solipsism most insistently in McCarthy's western fiction. There are hints of it in the Tennessee novels, of course – the final call in

Suttree, after all, is to “[f]ly them” (471). Robert McEvoy, in *The Gardener’s Son*, while arguing with Mrs Gregg about the need to remove his gangrenous leg, says: “If God put the rot in it then let it rot off” (15). Such fatalism infuses McEvoy’s every action, to the extent that there is a morbid inevitability to his murder of James Gregg and, later, to his hanging for the offence. But with the western novels can be seen, more insistently, a critique of independence, the ability to do one’s own thing, to dance to the rhythm of one’s own private drummer. The Border Trilogy explores the individual negotiations with the outside world of its central characters, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. In the end, John Grady cannot overcome his fatalism. In *Cities of the Plain*, his final conversation with the blind maestro concludes:

A man is always right to pursue the thing he loves.

No matter even if it kills him [said John Grady]?

I think so. Yes. No matter even that. (199)

Like Robert McEvoy, one could have no confidence that John Grady Cole would ever be able to act any differently, regardless of the consequences. He obeys the cowboy code and dies. Billy Parham, on the other hand, lives to an old age, having found a way to negotiate the disappointments in life. A pivotal scene in *Cities of the Plain* reveals their differing fates:

That’s a pretty picture, aint it.

He looked at the horses across the creek where they stood footed to their darkening shapes in the ford with their heads raised looking toward the house and the cottonwoods and the mountains and the red sweep of the evening sky beyond.

You think I'll outgrow whatever it is I got [said John Grady].

No. I dont. I used to but I dont no more.

I'm too far gone, is that it?

It aint just that. It's you. Most people get smacked around enough after a while they start to pay attention. More and more you remind me of Boyd. Only way I could ever get him to do anything was to tell him not to. (146)

In the space of a few sentences there are references to both of the first two novels in the trilogy, with a picture of “pretty” horses and a remembrance of Billy’s dead brother, Boyd. Clearly, then, there is an elegiac quality to this passage, a looking back, a moment of reflection interrupting the present narrative. In the writing of McCarthy, one comes to recognise such passages as key signals that an important message is being presented. And thus, one must take Billy’s words as prophetic: John Grady cannot learn from experience. One remembers, from *The Crossing*, what such an intransigent outlook meant for Boyd Parham; the inference must be, therefore, that the same fate awaits John Grady Cole. This quiet passage is thus a portent of doom. And it arises because John Grady is incapable of learning, and therefore of changing. For him, the shape of his life truly is set from the moment of his birth. While he is perhaps the most profound example of this in McCarthy, he is not alone: Barclay Owens notes that one of McCarthy’s “favorite themes” is “man’s inability to predict far-reaching consequences of his actions” (“Motifs” 96). These consequences, of course, are not only self-destructive. As James Giles observes: “Even the most gentle of McCarthy’s people carry the seeds of destruction with them everywhere” (*Contemporary* 94).

The significant question, however, is why can humans not predict the consequences of their actions? Central to this is the extent to which free will exists. McCarthy's characters are generally in search of independence, but they are foiled in their attempts. By what?

Divine determinism

Most critics tend to preclude notions of divine determinism in *Blood Meridian* and in McCarthy's oeuvre in general, preferring to depict fate and the stuff of nature as defining factors. Denis Sansom, however, suggests the novel "can be read as an artistic critique of a philosophical-theological idea. The novel shows what we can narratively imagine to be the lived experience of an idea – a teleology of God's implacable will and human history, especially as it involves violence and war" (4). He calls this a "Theo-Determinist" philosophy of human destiny which posits that God is sovereign over all, so must be the causal agent of everything that occurs and thus every action is a reflection of God's will. Describing this claim as "repulsive in real life" (5), Sansom suggests that, as with Voltaire's *Candide* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, McCarthy is using fiction to demonstrate the absurdity of a philosophical idea. It is a persuasive argument and, taken in isolation, it is certainly possible to read *Blood Meridian* in this light. Viewing McCarthy's entire career, however, the argument becomes less tenable because, to differing degrees but increasingly over time, each novel, play and screenplay appears to be exploring broadly similar metaphysical territory: to sustain a satirical and parodic critique over a whole career in this manner seems unlikely. As Euan Gallivan explains, *Blood Meridian* does not stand alone and isolated in McCarthy's oeuvre (98). Rather, as I have shown, McCarthy's preoccupations cycle and recycle consistently throughout his career, and the concerns he explores in *Blood Meridian*, of evil, theodicy, free will, fate and determinism, can be seen to varying degrees in all of his work. Standing above this, I

would argue, is his overriding interest in examining, from a philosophical basis, the absurdity of modernity.

Sansom suggests that “[i]f war is God, then not only are we beyond good and evil, but God is also beyond good and evil” (11). But, however immoral the world of *Blood Meridian* is, this cannot be its final conclusion. What would be the role of the epilogue if that were the case? What would be the purpose of the kid/man’s hermitical wanderings through his middle years? Despite our early instruction that in the kid “broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3), and despite his participation in the despicable events of the novel, the kid *is* a moral being.² Moreover, McCarthy is at pains to point out that his moral decisions do not have positive outcomes: his humane decision not to kill Shelby will undoubtedly lead to Shelby enduring a painful death at the hands of Elias’s men (207-9). And three times the kid has the chance to kill the judge but declines, leading inevitably to his own death.³ This, then, is human will, and while McCarthy’s exposition is not wholly positive, there is nonetheless some inkling of universal morality here which would not be possible in a world beyond good and evil. Sansom’s thesis seems to rest purely on the evil that is manifest in *Blood Meridian* but, while there is (too) much of that, there is more to the novel than its violence.

Sansom also suggests that judge Holden “epitomizes a world’s purpose that has war as its divine aim” (6). This is true, but what is at question is the source of that divinity. If one accepts Sansom’s thesis, then the divinity must be God. If one accepts a

² This is hinted at as early as the opening passages of the novel. After the first violent act the kid perpetrates on his own – that is, without the provocation of Toadvine – his return to waking consciousness is symbolically in a ruined church: “He woke in the nave of a ruinous church, blinking up at the vaulted ceiling and the tall swagged walls with their faded frescos” (26). The most telling evidence of his morality comes later in the novel, during his mid-year wanderings in which he is described in hermitical terms. His conversation with the “eldress in the rocks” (305) reads almost like a confessional and he promises to “convey her to a safe place” (315). She has, of course, been dead for many years by this time.

³ His reasons for not doing so, however, are opaque, and whether a moral basis can be ascribed to his acts is not wholly arguable.

Voegelinian conception of desacralised humanity establishing an immanent heaven-on-earth, then divinity rests elsewhere. Sansom's critique posits the notion that the novel shows "how terrifying God is if God is the sovereign determiner of all events" (5). Further, the judge "is an imaginative picturing of a world defined by divine omnicausal determinism" (9). While this interpretation has merit, it is not wholly convincing. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, judge Holden, the architect of the novel's evil, is not representative of God, but of human beings. He represents the hubris of, in Voegelinian terms, Enlightenment humanity seeking to replace God with superman and spirit with reason. Thus, it is humanity, and not God, which has assumed omniscience and omnipotence. When the judge proclaims "War is God" (249) he is not proclaiming *himself* as God: rather, he is declaring as God those who promulgate war, and that is humanity. At one point, Sansom actually calls the judge the "grand inquisitor" (9), and this seems to be closer to the mark: the Grand Inquisitor, that symbol of humanity's hubris, is the man who, in Dostoevsky's parable, tries and executes Jesus for his heretical notions – heretical, that is, against the *establishment* of the Church, rather than the *teachings* of the Church or, put another way, against the views of *humanity* and not of *God*. Sansom then quotes John Sepich: "[t]he world McCarthy's Judge defines is a world of inflexible outcome. The exercise of will cannot overcome 'destined' ends" (9). I agree with Sepich, but not with Sansom's interpretation of Sepich. For Sansom, this represents "the bloodlust of a shaman who worships a God that uses cruelty as easily and purposively as compassion". However, the God represented in *Blood Meridian* is not a cruel God but an impotent one; and the judge is not worshipping him but usurping him. The relationship between God and man, moreover, is a fraught one. As an anchorite tells the kid early in the novel, "when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it" (19). Again, there are portents of the latent evil of humanity. As with the quote in *Suttree* about a new

McAnally, “good to last a thousand years” (463), it is hard to avoid the parallels between this thousand-year evil and the Nazi Thousand Year Reich.

If there is any theological determinism in *Blood Meridian*, then, it would appear to be weak rather than strong. While one might argue that the God of McCarthy’s fiction may have foreknowledge of all, it does not necessarily follow that God himself is responsible for dictating that future. Moreover, as I shall explore later, McCarthy would appear to veer more towards a theological incompatibilism, or fatalism, suggesting that free will is an impossibility. Therefore, there may not be a divine presence who has omniscient *power* over events, but that is not the same as suggesting the future in McCarthy’s world is not determined. On the contrary, it seems that the past, the present and the future are inextricably linked in a wholly deterministic way. A deterministic conception of the world would hold that all events have their *a priori* causes in the events and the laws of the universe. This can be seen in McCarthy’s use of the ancients and those who came before, making an explicit link between the past, the present and the future, the Voegelinian Before, In-Between and Beyond. And it can be seen, too, in the prognostications of the prophets in the Trilogy. That sense of determinism, moreover, grows more pronounced as McCarthy’s career progresses. It is instructive, then, to consider how determinism is reflected in his fiction.

Determinism

In a study of determinism in the work of George Eliot, George Levine suggests there are three basic stances taken by philosophers on the matter of determinism:

- 1) that the world is rigidly determined and that, in fact, there is no such thing as human responsibility;

2) that though almost everything is determined, the relation of cause and effect is broken in matters of human choice: thus man is free and therefore responsible;

3) that the world is rigidly determined, even in cases of human choice, but that man remains responsible for his actions. (269)

To this could perhaps be added a fourth, that the world is determined, but humanity, rather than God, has a say in its determination and therefore there is a qualified sense of free will. In other words, could one argue that the god of *Blood Meridian* is hubristic humanity and, if so, does it follow that what determinism there is in the novel is also man-made, or at least man-inspired?

The passage in *Blood Meridian* in which the bartender Owens is shot could serve to amplify this point. Owens is manipulated into a situation in which his only prospect is death (235ff). However, it is not any god who achieves this, but rather the malign men of Glanton's gang. Owens refuses to serve them because he thinks they are black and asks them to move to a less prominent table. Glanton tells him that only a fool would suppose any of these men would voluntarily relocate, but Owens is resolute. Brown gives Owens a gun and tells him to shoot Jackson. It is obvious to everyone what is going to happen and so it does: Owens is shot dead by Jackson, and no other outcome would have been possible. This is fate, but it is firmly in the human sphere. There is no hint of divine intervention here; rather it is humanly contrived by the gang, as much for sport as anything else.

When the authorities come to take away the suspects, the judge intervenes, declaring himself Glanton's representative in all legal matters (237). His defence rests on the inadvisability of calling Glanton a liar and becoming embroiled with him in "an affair of honor". Moreover, the judge continues, he can vouch for the fact that none of the gang were in the premises when the shooting took place. Thus, it is not any moral law

he invokes, but a matter of human honour. It is in the mortal realm. When the lieutenant returns later that evening, the judge discusses points of law with him once more, translating terms of jurisprudence, citing cases civil and martial. He quotes modern case law and philosophers of antiquity. Again, this is not divine law, but human. That evening, the men of the gang rampage once more, “pounding on doors demanding drink and women” (240).⁴ The offences remain human ones. The inescapable conclusion of this is that in McCarthy’s universe humanity is, at worst, evil, at best, the engineer of its own malaises.

Euan Gallivan notes a passage in *The Road* in which the father and son “ate sparsely and were hungry all the time” (27), and suggests that, in a Schopenhauerian analysis, this state of hunger is a “manifestation of that constant striving which is representative of the world’s innermost nature” (99). This may be overanalysing somewhat: the father would probably argue, persuasively, that their hunger is more a manifestation of the lack of food in a barren world. Sometimes, there is no need to identify philosophical resonances: the narrative suffices. What is important here is not the symbolism of their hunger, but how they came to be hungry in the first place. First causes are what matter and, in *The Road*, the first cause is humanity. For all that the actual trigger of the apocalypse is never explicitly stated, it is all but impossible to read *The Road* in the context of McCarthy’s complete output, published and unpublished, and not conclude that mankind must have been in some measure complicit in the unfolding of events. This is a self-inflicted torment: the apocalypse which has befallen mankind is man-made. In the immediate aftermath of the scene where the man shoots the roadagent who has grabbed the boy and later has to “wash [the] dead man’s brains out of [the boy’s] hair” (63), there are two hints of the boy’s sanctity. Firstly, the act of washing his hair is described as “like some ancient

⁴ This line is also evocative of T.S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”, describing the journey of the Wise Men to see the infant Christ: “Then the camel men cursing and grumbling/ and running away, and wanting their liquor and women” (*Poems* 99).

anointing” (63) and the hair is a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (64).⁵ This is followed by:

[The dead roadagent] was the first human being other than the boy that he’d spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word. (64)

The first sentence is clearly specific to the roadagent, but then there is a characteristic McCarthy elision into first person. These manoeuvres are always symbolically significant. Here, it takes the reader directly into the mind of either the man or the narrator or both. It personalises the drama. The term “my brother” is connotative of the generalised brotherhood of man but it is also heavy with irony, implicitly pejorative. Thus, the reptilian calculations may be in the eyes of *that* man, or of *all* men and, in the latter case, the world has therefore been traduced by mankind. There is, then, a clear inference of human fallibility and our implication in the ruination of Earth. In a deliberate contrast, a few pages later there is the first mention of the man and boy carrying the fire (70), that symbol of the boy’s goodness. The man and boy remain “the good guys” but the killing of the roadagent was necessary because otherwise he would have killed them. The Schopenhauerian “will-to-live” which encourages the incessant elimination of one animal by another in order to maintain existence can therefore, by the time of *The Road*, be taken as a truism. Thus, one may argue that what determinism exists in McCarthy is humanly sponsored and, for that reason, is not impelled by beneficence.

⁵ This divine streak in the boy increases as the novel progresses. As they walk, near the end, when the man is dying, he stops and looks at the boy, “to see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (230). Later, as the man lies close to death, there “was light all about” the boy and “when he moved the light moved with him” (233).

In prosecuting a socially reactionary critique of modernity, McCarthy is therefore presenting a counter-argument to the type of determinism enunciated by nineteenth-century liberals like George Eliot. For Eliot, the third of Levine's stances on determinism was valid: the world is rigidly determined, but humanity nonetheless remains responsible for its actions. A strong advocate of Feuerbach (she translated his work into English), she saw the religion of the future as a religion of humanity rather than of God and, as Bernard Paris explains, she viewed her fiction as "searching for a view of life that would give modern man a sense of purpose, dignity, and ethical direction" ("Religion" 420). Contingent in this is what Paris describes as "the double root" of mankind, being a "product of both the animal kingdom and the social organism". He continues:

Man's egoistic impulses, his concern for himself at the expense of others, are manifestations of his animal nature; but his moral life, his desire for the welfare of others, is largely the consequence of his relation to society. Civilization, not primitive nature, is the source of our highest life and greatest good. (422)

This is where Thoreau's experiment in *Walden* fails, and it is here, too, that McCarthy's views begin to diverge from Eliot. A great many of McCarthy's characters are not, like those of nineteenth-century determinist fiction, capable of making moral choices. Rather, McCarthy's universe is impelled, as John Rothfork explains, "by a Hegelian nightmare, by an inchoate, preconscious, and stammering biological force" ("Redemption" n.pag).

Nineteenth-century determinists such as Eliot, on the other hand, while they did not believe in absolute free will, nonetheless ascribed to humanity the ability to make choices based on moral convictions. As Paris explains, "Eliot did believe that the

individual has the ability to choose the better over the worse course if his motive and determination (themselves products of antecedent causes) are powerful enough” (439). This pursuit of improvement, of progress, which informs so much nineteenth-century fiction, is largely absent in McCarthy. Thus, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* the mill owner Henry Carson shows Christian compassion in forgiving John Barton for the murder of Carson’s son. In a mirror of these events in McCarthy’s *The Gardener’s Son*, Mrs Gregg cannot similarly forgive Robert McEvoy for the murder of her son, and he hangs for the crime. And even when some moral decision is reached, as with the kid in *Blood Meridian*, the outcome is not always positive.

For nineteenth-century determinists, then, the world was a moral universe in which mankind should aspire to goodness. Whether a desire to change derives, as with Gaskell, from a Christian sensibility or, with Eliot, from the triumph of the human will, there remains the prospect of improvement. For McCarthy, that prospect is considerably more problematic. His is certainly not a universe in which God is willing or able to intervene. This uncertainty is demonstrated in a note in the McCarthy Archive for *The Road*: “Is God bound by his own rule? If he can cast any of his creation from him can he not cast all? Has he?” (87/3 NOTES X). By the end of the novel one still cannot be sure. Christopher Douglas suggests that McCarthy’s famous emotional detachment is a reflection of God’s:

McCarthy’s voice does not emerge to condemn the violence in his created world, just as God’s does not in his created world. As the judge gleefully points out [in *Blood Meridian*], if God had meant to intervene – well, what is he waiting for? (20)

Nonetheless, events are impelled by *something*: the evil inherent in humanity can be seen to act as a malign force and individuals are drawn towards a fate that,

increasingly as McCarthy's career develops, appears to have been ordained from the beginning.

Fate and fatalism

In the case of *Blood Meridian*, any analysis must take account of the observations about fate which are threaded throughout the novel. In particular, in their final conversation, the judge tells the kid/man:

In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists. In fact, were he to know he might well absent himself and you can see that that cannot be any part of the plan if plan there be. (329)

And:

A man seeks his own destiny and no other, said the judge. Will or nill (sic). Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains with it all opposites as well. (330)

This is the point taken up repeatedly in *The Crossing*, that one's fate is ordained and the path set from the beginning. In that novel, one of Billy's confidants tells him "that while it was true that men shape their own lives it was also true that they could have no shape other for what then would that shape be?" (380), while the primadonna tells him: "The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed" (230). In *Cities of the Plain*, the blind maestro, whose sole function in the novel appears to be

to pronounce on free will and determinism in one extended conversation with John Grady, says:

Men speak of blind destiny, a thing without scheme or purpose. But what sort of destiny is that? Each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it yet another. In a vast and endless net. Men imagine that the choices before them are theirs to make. But we are free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life. (195)

This is suggestive of a causally deterministic viewpoint. Further, there exists at least a hint of theological determinism in the blind man's words. "We have only God's law, and the wisdom to follow it if we will", he tells Billy (195). McCarthy seemingly cannot escape the suspicion that, overriding everything, there is a divine agency at work. In this, his metaphysic is perhaps Spinozist: "Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived".⁶ Or it might lead to *Proverbs*: "A man's heart devises his way: but the Lord directs his steps" (*Proverbs* 16:9). Thus, there is an interlinked suggestion of divine agency and mortal activity, and it is this relationship which informs one of the most important elements of McCarthy's approach to matters of free will, determinism and fatalism, his use of the "narrative", the "story of stories".

This can be seen most clearly in the long heretic passage in *The Crossing* which I analysed in Chapter Three to establish how the revision process deepened its religious sensibility. I now wish to discuss how the revisions had a further effect on the novel, introducing a separate, though linked, thematic strand, relating to narrative and the nature of storytelling. Some critics see this storytelling thread as integral to the vatic

⁶ Spinoza *Proposition XV*.

tone of the Trilogy.⁷ While this is undoubtedly the case, what is of more interest is *why* McCarthy chooses to do this. After all, on the surface it seems counter-productive: while gradually deepening the theological foundations of the passage, as I traced through the various iterations of the drafting process in Chapter Three, McCarthy simultaneously introduces a parallel narrative strand, detailing the profane storytelling process of the *corrido*. It presents a secular interpretation of areas which McCarthy otherwise portrays as religious in essence, and therefore the two approaches might seem antithetical. One wonders why McCarthy would wish to simultaneously strengthen and weaken his argument in this way.

The answer, I would argue, is that this is one of the key manipulations McCarthy uses in his fiction. In prosecuting both secular and religious symbolisms, McCarthy is seeking to establish, once more, a core mythology of his own. In this, as I have explained, humans are hubristic animals afflicted by vanity, seeking to establish an immanent heaven-on-earth. I have explored the repercussions of this, in the slaughter of *Blood Meridian* and the apocalypse of *The Road*. What I now wish to consider is *how* this happens. And here, McCarthy's notions of free will, determinism, divine determinism and fatalism come to the fore.

The Crossing, Version 1, File 55/6⁸

As I showed in Chapter Three, the first draft of the heretic passage in *The Crossing* was primarily an analysis of heresy and doubt, focusing specifically on the two heretical individuals and their search for grace. As the drafting process evolves the passage pulls out, in typical McCarthy style, from these men's particular preoccupations to become a broader examination of the debate about the existence of

⁷ See, in particular, Luce's "Matrix" and Canfield's "Wasteland"

⁸ The draft versions discussed here are the same as those in Chapter Three.

God and the nature of transcendence. In the earliest draft, *Version 1*, there is little material that is secular in nature but one element stands out. I have discussed already the end of the passage in *Version 1*, in which the narrative diverges from the final text to include the heretic's memories of a Dutch village and the Biblioteca de Leyes in Mexico. The Borgesian law library which the old man envisages gives a strong suggestion of determinism and set fate: everything is unknown and yet it is also, paradoxically, ordered and recorded. Because this is a law library, however, whatever unexempted fate is ordained within it must, one supposes, be secular. Even so, in *Version 1* this passage does not begin to address the nature of storytelling that becomes such an important element of the final text. For that, one must consider later drafts.

Versions 2a, b and c, File 55/6

In *Version 2*, the Dutch puzzle and Mexican library are deleted and in their place comes a discussion on the nature of story. Here, McCarthy weaves a new motif into the narrative. As I showed in Chapter Two, the idea of the "story" begins to dominate *The Crossing* to an unhealthy degree, with one character after another rendering different iterations of the same basic concept, that of the *corrido* or tale, through which all stories are one, the world being but a tale: "And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them" (146).

In the text in *Version 2a*, there is no mention of the *corrido* and instead the priest tells Billy:

What does Caborca know of Huisiáchepic, Huisiáchepic of Caborca? They are different worlds, no? Yet there is but one world and everything imaginable is

necessary to it. And even were it not, how would we know what to take away? The seams are hid from us. We dont know what might fall down. A story is not like a stone pier or the foundation of a church or the law written into a seed. It exists only in the telling, otherwise you cannot find it. It has no abode. Therefore there is no end to the telling. And in Caborca or in Huisiáchepic or Cualquiera all stories are one. Rightly understood all stories are one. (55/6 190)

By *Version 2b* the concept of the *corrido* has been established, and initial discussion of it leads to the story of the *terremoto*, the earthquake in which the village of Bavispe is partially destroyed. By this stage in the drafting process, the passage is broadly similar to the final text.⁹ In *Version 1*, the heretic passage is a much more straightforward narrative of the old man's history, his relationship with the priest and their respective searches for God. Now, in *Version 2*, one also sees the simultaneous development of a separate thematic strand, the idea of the *corrido*, the nature of storytelling. In terms of writing craft, to establish additional thematic resonances in this way would ordinarily be considered a fault. This storytelling theme is expanded even further in *Versions 3* and *4* and the final text, however, and one must therefore suppose McCarthy has a reason for doing it.

Version 3, File 57/2 and Version 4, File 59/2

The passage in the novel which introduces the *corrido* for the first time (146) is almost complete in *Version 3*. The introduction to the paragraph, in which the priest

⁹At this point in *Version 2b*, however, although the numbering runs consecutively, there appears to be a passage of text missing. In *Version 1* the description of the man growing to manhood, marrying, having a son and deciding to journey to Bavispe with the boy is very close to the final text. It does not appear in any part of *Version 2* but is reinstated for the next draft, *56/1*. It is likely this was merely an oversight which McCarthy corrected later.

tells Billy he came in search of a certain man and to see if there were some alternate course, is included for the first time (57/2 188). One other sentence appears for the first time: “The story on the other hand cannot be lost and that is what I found here” (188). This leaves only the translation of *corrido* – “[t]he tale” (TC 146) missing from the drafting process to date. Thus it is clear that, by this stage, the notion of “the story”, an overarching narrative of human existence, is becoming central to McCarthy’s exposition of the heretic passage.

This version suggest for the first time that “[a]cts have their being in witness”. The passage continues with a handwritten addition: “The act itself vanishes instantly into history” and the typescript resumes: “One could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all” (57/2 200). Again, McCarthy is cementing into the text the idea of a single narrative of humanity, the human witness, the passing on of witness and testimony through people and ages and time. The point is continued a couple of pages later in an expansion of the passage in which the priest tells Billy the task of the narrator is not an easy one. In *Version 2* the comment concludes:

He appears to be asked to choose his tale from among many. But of course it is not like that at all. His task is quite the opposite. To make many of one. He must devise against his listener’s claim to have heard the tale before. (55/6 207)

In *Version 3* is added:

He must attempt something like a musical composition with those categories into which his listener will wish to fit his narrative. He alone will understand that narrative itself is the category of all categories. (57/2 202)

By the final text, of course, this is completed with: “for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it” (TC 159). And yet, for all the additional material, the passage is no less clear in the original, much shortened draft version. As the passage comes to its conclusion, this version sees further invocations of God and yet another iteration of the maxim that there is but one path through life:

What he saw finally was that the path of the world is one and is not many and that there can be no alter course in any least part of it and that it’s (sic) course is fixed by God and contains all consequence in the path of its going and that outside of that going there is neither path nor consequence. There never was.
(57/2 205)

At the conclusion, this version includes for the first time the notion that to God “we are all heretics” and “[e]very word we speak is vanity” (57/2 206). There is thus a deepening connection between the profane *corrido* and the sacred word of God.

In *Version 4*, File 59/2, the mention of the *corrido* is largely complete, with handwritten additions in this version that the story can “never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place” and a translation of “*corrido*” as “[t]he tale” (59/2 192). By now, the heretic passage is close to its final form and it is possible to begin to extrapolate some meaning from it.

The corrido, tale of tales

In the novel, the discussion of the *corrido* begins:

The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And

like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell.
(TC 146)

It continues at length and concludes repetitiously: “I say again all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one” (147). This theme continues throughout the heretic passage. The priest suggests to Billy that “[t]he task of the narrator is not an easy one” (158) and there is a third iteration of the suggestion that tales are all variations of a single tale. This repetition of the same point about narrative seems intrusive but, remarkably, there is a further repetition still, towards the end of the passage, when the priest tells Billy: “The storyteller’s task is not so simple” (161).

The notion of the storyteller’s task not being simple first appears in the drafts in *Version 2c*, written in November 1990, when the priest says the task is “not so easy” (55/6 204).¹⁰ It is possible the repetitive nature of the text may be an ironic comment on the narrator’s ability to narrate but, if so, it nonetheless feels somewhat clumsy: the point has surely been made. It is notable, however, that none of this material features in *Version 1* and so McCarthy has deliberately inserted it at a later stage. Moreover, it spills out into the rest of the novel, to say nothing of the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* which is, in effect, an extended reiteration of the same discussion. Thus, it seems that McCarthy has deliberately infused the trilogy with this element of the *corrido*, the tale of tales, through which all our lives are writ. It is evidently something McCarthy feels is extremely important.

The “story” in Blood Meridian

¹⁰ There are four pages in 55/6 numbered 204. Two of them are underlined twice. Both of these, dated Monday October 29 and Saturday November 3, contain this sentence.

Indeed, it has featured before in his work: as I have previously explored, McCarthy has a habit of returning again and again to the same thematic ideas and images – prehistoric remains, the spark of the divine, restless movement and so on. And this notion of the story of stories is another such. A major iteration of it can be found, for example, in an extended diversion in *Blood Meridian*, when the judge tells the story of the harnessmaker. At first, the purpose and meaning of this story is difficult to gauge, coming as it does in response to a request from Webster for information on the kind of indians who lived in the deserted “ruins of an older culture deep in the stone mountains” (139). It is here, of course, that the judge meticulously records the archaeological remains lying around the kivas and then destroys them. His reason for doing so, he tells Webster, is “to expunge them from the memory of man” (140). “[N]o man can put all the world in a book,” Webster says. “No more than everthing drawed in a book is so” (141). The judge replies: “What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it’s writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all”. This, again, is a formulation of the notion that all fate is pre-ordained, already written in the story of stories. “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,” concludes the judge.

It is now that, in response to Webster’s query, the judge tells the story of the harnessmaker. This is a lengthy parable in which the harnessmaker kills a traveller who has shown him kindness. He buries the body, returns home and tells his family that they were attacked by robbers and only he escaped alive. He maintains this deception all his life but, on his deathbed, he confesses to his son, who bears witness and forgives him. The old man dies. At the conclusion of the judge’s story, the men of Glanton’s gang set up a chorus of disapproval, telling him the story was different in reality. The man was not a harnessmaker but a shoemaker, and he was cleared of the charges; he never lived in the wilderness but rather in town; the origin of the bones remained a mystery; no, the bones were the remains of one of the men’s brother; and

so on (145). The judge waves them silent, but the point has already been made. Here is a story, and it is all stories; different versions exist, different iterations. In other words, “[r]ightly heard, all tales are one” (TC 147). The judge says there is a rider to the tale and tells of the dead man’s pregnant wife and the child she bore, a boy who never knew his father. The prognosis for this child is not good: “Now this son whose father’s existence in this world is historical and speculative even before the son has entered it is in a bad way,” the judge continues (145). The image the boy has of his father, because it has never been tempered by reality, is one of false perfection: “The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods.” Instead, for this boy, “[t]he world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way.” And now the judge makes his next important pronouncement: “What is true of one man ... is true of many” (146). Again, there is a reminder that all stories are one. But the judge now explicitly links this to the people who used to live in the deserted mud and stone dwellings, returning the reader to Webster’s initial enquiry. The people were called the Anasazi, the old ones. “They quit these parts, routed by drought or disease or by wandering bands of mauraunders, quit these parts ages since and of them there is no memory. They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered”.¹¹ Thus, as with the harnessmaker, or shoemaker, or brother or whoever he is in the judge’s parable, their story is one and many, it is singular and symbolic, historical and mythical. “The old ones are gone like phantoms and the savages wander these canyons to the sound of an ancient laughter,” the judge continues, and the reader is drawn into one of the parallel histories which suffuse McCarthy’s novels, the reminders and remainders of the ancients which co-exist with the modern day. All stories are one, all people are one, all history is one, everywhere, everywhen.

¹¹ This, of course, is reminiscent of the end of *The Orchard Keeper*: “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” (246).

This quiet passage presents elegantly and eloquently in four pages the same message that is repeated over and over in *The Crossing*. It is a fine example of highly crafted writing. It is concise, elaborate, multi-layered, beautifully controlled, standing in stark contrast to the increasingly laboured repetitions in *The Crossing* which were highlighted in Chapter Two.

The judge now elides into another essential point:

All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us. (146)

The judge, suzerain of modernity, is here extolling the domination of technology and the modern world. In *The Stonemason*, McCarthy uses Ben Talfair to present the counter view when he posits stonemasonry as evidence of God's work. Ben says: "true masonry is not held together by cement but by gravity. That is to say, by the warp of the world. By the stuff of creation itself. The keystone that locks the arch is pressed in place by the thumb of God" (9-10). Ben's Papaw, however, insists that such work must employ "freestone masonry" (65), not cut stone or ashlar. "You go against scripture you on you own," he tells Ben. "That man up there aint goin to help you. Aint no need to even ask". Ben quotes from the Bible to explain Papaw's views: "And if thou make me an altar of stone thou shalt not build it of hewn stone, for if

thou lift up they tool upon it thou hast polluted it” (63).¹² Thus, builders in stone are seeking to “alter the structure of the universe”. Ben continues:

When I showed Papaw photographs of Mayan stonework he only shook his head. Stretchers and headers and quoins are the very soul of stonemasonry and of these they had none. Perhaps their mortar was mixed with human blood as in the old ballads. Papaw know these tales too. He says the only blood you’ll ever need is the blood of your redeemer. (65-6)

This returns to notions of redemption and the law of God. For all that God seems, at times, to be absent or inattentive in McCarthy’s fiction, one is always reminded of his presence. The judge concludes his story of the Anasazi: “This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons” (147). In the context of *Blood Meridian*, of course, this is a chilling prophecy. What happens in that novel will happen again, McCarthy is saying. And it does, for what is *No Country for Old Men* but a twentieth-century replay of the loss of humanity?

And so one begins to see the conflict of free will and determinism taking a central role in McCarthy’s philosophy. In particular, one sees a consistent appraisal of the role of God in man’s affairs. It is for this reason that McCarthy melds the profane *corrido* of humanity and the sacred story of God. Humanity must exist under God’s tutelage. What therefore becomes of interest is the extent to which human actions are reflections of independent will or directed by external forces. For Sara Spurgeon, “[w]hether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will... is one of the central questions” of *Blood Meridian* (24). Dana Phillips is clear it cannot:

¹² *Exodus* 20:25

Blood Meridian treats darkness, violence, sudden death, and all other calamities as natural occurrences – like the weather, which can also be vicious in McCarthy’s border landscapes. Accordingly, the novel soon makes it clear that creation cannot be shaped to man’s will, at least not for very long. Man’s will does not seem a very relevant or potent force in this novel, nor does there seem to be some other will shaping his fate. (439)

It may be correct to suppose that an *individual* man’s will is not a potent force in McCarthy (although, as I have argued, the *collective* will of hubristic humanity does appear to present a potent and dangerous force). However, one cannot then make a leap of logic to suggest that there is not some other will shaping his fate. On the contrary, this notion of fate comes, increasingly, to dominate McCarthy’s fiction. The idea that the characters of *Blood Meridian* are embarked on a journey whose destination is already ordained is reinforced through the frequent use of narratorial omniscience and, in particular, through prolepsis. It can be seen as early as the novel’s opening, in which the kid, “has a sister in this world that he will not see again” (3). Toadvine sees on Bathcat’s arm a tattooed number which “he would see in a Chihuahua bathhouse and again when he would cut down the man’s torso where it hung skewered by its heels from a treelimb in the wastes of Pimeria Alta in the fall of that year” (87-8). In a later journey “David Brown rode at the rear and he was leaving his brother here for what would prove forever” (242).¹³ These proleptic interludes give a clear indication of fatalism and fate. This is most significantly exemplified, however, in McCarthy’s most recent novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*.

Fatalism in No Country for Old Men

¹³ Four pages after this example of prolepsis – possibly the most extreme form of narratorial omniscience – there is an example of incomplete narratorial control. In the aftermath of the judge’s coin trick by the fireside the reader is told: “In the morning some did walk over the ground where the coin had gone but if any man found it he kept it to himself” (246). Such inconsistency in narrative approach, coming so close together, seems to suggest a technical fault.

No Country For Old Men is essentially a study in fatalism. It presents a highly reactionary view of modern society (it is set in the 1980s) in which notions of community and decency have been eclipsed by the latent evil which exists in humanity and erupts in moments of crisis. On the surface, it is a straightforward thriller (indeed, it has been criticised as such) but, when examined more closely, it is a carefully plotted examination of determinism in which each principal character is, in a different way, involved in a *danse macabre* with fate.¹⁴ The novel thus presents a Gordian knot of interdependent fates. It is the logical extension of a career which has insistently rehearsed and replayed such notions. It appears to take a hard deterministic line: determinism is true and is incompatible with free will, which is illusory. Nomologically, all events in the novel unfold because of what has happened in the past and because of the laws of nature. Once set in train, a sequence of events cannot be halted, or altered, or avoided. Thus, in the coin toss scene, Chigurh's coin has 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" (56). For Chigurh, the outcome is already ordained. There is no further reckoning. The coin is an instrument of fate. He explains to the garage owner:

Anything can be an instrument.... 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. Well, you say. It's just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of

¹⁴ James Wood, for example, suggests "the book gestures not toward any recognizable reality but merely toward the narrative codes already established by pulp thrillers and action films" (Wood).

some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. Yes. That's true. Is it? (57)

Chigurh is hewn from the same stuff as judge Holden and the leader of the triune in *Outer Dark*. He is evil manifest. He is the Nietzschean superman, assuming his place as immanent man/god dispensing summary justice. Throughout the novel he tells his victims what is about to happen to them and explains why. The garage owner has been putting up a stake all his life but he "just didnt know it" (56). In the humiliation of Wells, Chigurh repeatedly reveals himself to be in control of the fated man's destiny. "He had seen it all before," the reader is told (174). As Wells waits to be shot, everything in his life "can be seen at once" (175). Chigurh ignores Wells's offer to take him to the satchel of money: "You know that's not going to happen", he says (176). At the moment of the execution, he predicts: "You think you wont close your eyes. But you will". He continues: "I know what else you think" and explains, "[y]ou think I'm like you. That it's just greed. But I'm not like you. I live a simple life" (177). A simple life it may be, but Chigurh is still a representative of human evil. The terrified Wells says to him, "[y]ou think you're outside of everything.... You're not outside of death" (177). But in a way Chigurh is, and not only because, as he counters, death "doesnt mean to me what it does to you". Chigurh is outside of death because he is outside of life; for him the fatalism of existence does not apply. He tells Wells of an occasion when he murdered a Mexican:

An hour later I was pulled over by a sheriff's deputy outside of Sonora Texas and I let him take me into town in handcuffs. I'm not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do. Do you understand? (174-5)

Chigurh believes in the notion of free will for himself, but not for his victims. He sees himself as an “other”, in the way of judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*. He is not human, but an archetype, a symbol of hubristic humanity. Thus, while he may “believe” that he could extricate himself by an act of will, the reality portrayed by the events of *No Country* is that the rest of humanity exists in a hard deterministic universe.

Carla Jean is the most realistically drawn female character McCarthy has created to date and her undescribed, off-page death is perhaps the most poignant episode in his entire oeuvre. She is an innocent, an honest and decent young woman of nineteen, probably ill-educated but certainly not unintelligent. In her encounter with Chigurh, she demonstrates a clear-eyed understanding of her predicament and a stoic resignation that is impressive. As they face their respective deaths, both she (257) and Wells (175) begin by calling Chigurh crazy, but while Wells quickly loses control and is reduced to cursing him helplessly, Carla Jean retains her composure.¹⁵ She quickly understands that she is going to die. She tells Chigurh: “I knowed you was crazy when I seen you settin there.... I knowed exactly what was in store for me. Even if I couldnt of said it” (257). After the coin toss, she tells him, “[y]ou wouldnt of let me off noway” (259). But this is not merely the fatalism of someone confronting inevitable death: Carla Jean’s fatalism is ingrained, part of her nature. In a touching scene with Sheriff Bell, she tells him: “I’ll tell you somethin, Sheriff. Nineteen is old enough to know that if you have got somethin that means the world to you it’s all that more likely it’ll get took away. Sixteen was, for that matter. I think about that” (133-4).

This strikes a chord with Sheriff Bell. “I aint a stranger to them thoughts, Carla Jean”, he says. “Them thoughts is very familiar to me” (134). For Bell, Chigurh’s reign of terror provokes an existential crisis and the novel presents the steady disintegration of

¹⁵ Here, incidentally, the Coen brothers’ movie adaptation improves on the novel, by making Carla Jean refuse to call the coin toss (258). This simple act of defiance affords her a dignity which is in keeping with her character and makes her death in the film even more poignant than that in the novel.

a broken man. The focus is on failure, and it is evident that Bell is ill-prepared to counter Chigurh's evil: "*I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train*", he says (159). As with Carla Jean, however, Bell's fatalism is more deep-rooted and has been longer in gestation than this current crisis. Unusually for a McCarthy character, Bell is invested with a back story, and once more it focuses on fate. During the war he led a troop of men hit by mortarshell and attacked by Germans. Bell is given a medal for bravery in trying to hold off the German advance but he is convinced he does not deserve it. The reason for this, he explains to Ellis, is that when it got dark he "cut and run" (276). He had a choice, he says. "I could of stayed" (277). Ellis points out that, if he had, he still couldn't have helped his men, but this does not assuage his guilt. "[S]ome part of me has never quit wishin I could go back," he says. "And I cant." The truth is eating at him. "I didnt know you could steal your own life" (278). Bell is a religious man but he is struggling with his faith: "*The world I've seen has not made me a spiritual person*", he says at one point (303). He does not feel worthy of God, and he does not see in the modern world much that is honourable or decent. Nor will it improve. "*I think we are all of us ill prepared for what is to come and I dont care what shape it takes*", he says (295). This, again, leads towards fatalism: what will come will come and, because of the ills of modernity that Bell recounts throughout the novel, he is deeply pessimistic about that outcome. What Bell wants, as much as anything, is an accommodation with God, some mutual understanding. His discussions with Ellis about God reveal their shared reservations about God's ability to intervene: God knows what is happening, but can do nothing to stop it (269). Even God, then, is impotent in the face of the implacable evil of Chigurh/hubristic man. And Bell, a flawed man whose greatest flaw is his disproportionate self-doubt, cannot avoid the conclusion that "*the world is goin to hell in a handbasket*" (195). His fatalism is complete.

Llewelyn Moss, on the other hand, is a man of the modern world, entirely comfortable within it. Even when he has propelled himself into the nightmare of pursuit by Chigurh, he remains confident of his ability. He knows what he is doing is dangerous, even lunatic. “You live to be a hundred,” he tells himself, “and there wont be another day like this one. As soon as he said it he was sorry” (20). “You have to take this seriously,” he continues, “You cant treat it like luck” (23). He is aware of the “dead certainty that someone was going to come looking for the money. Maybe several someones” (19). He tells Carla Jean he is “fixin to go do somethin dumbern hell” (24), giving a clear indication of his fatalistic position: by taking the money he has set in train events which cannot be halted. Back at the sight of the ambush, he tells himself, “You dumb-ass.... Here you are. Too dumb to live” (27). He spots the truck in the moonlight and says: “There is no description of a fool... that you fail to satisfy. Now you’re goin to die” (27). “It’s all right, he said. You need to be put out of your misery. Be the best thing for everbody” (28). He reveals his fatalism: “There’s lots of things you aint goin to see again” (29). Underlying this apparent self-criticism, however, is a steely conviction. Moss is another of McCarthy’s highly competent individuals, good with his hands, possessed of cunning and intelligence. From the start, the reader understands how cautious he is. When he first spots the aftermath of the Mexican drug-runners’ shoot-out in the desert, it is explained: “He lowered the glasses. Then he raised them again. Then he lowered them and just sat there. Nothing moved. He sat there for a long time” (11). To reinforce his caution, on the next page, “[h]e stood there. Listening” (12). He takes care to remove any fingerprints from the scene of the crime. He ponders: “He stood there thinking about that... There had to be a last man standing” (15). “Do not... get your dumb ass shot out here. Do not do that”, he chastises himself (16). When he sees the dead man under the tree, “[h]e studied the country about. Then he watched it some more. It was the better part of an hour before he rose and started down” (17). The evidence is overwhelming: this a careful man. He knows, too, what the repercussions of his decision will be: early in

his flight, “he knew that he was probably going to have to kill somebody. He just didnt know who it was” (87).

This, however, presents a significant weakness in the novel. In the same way Flannery O’Connor manipulates her characters, Llewelyn Moss is a confusing mixture of caution and recklessness, designed to expound McCarthy’s message about fatalism. A man as cautious and able as Moss would not behave the way he does in the hotel, when he finds the transponder in the money. “He knew what was coming. He just didnt know when”, the reader is told (108). Having come to this realisation the only logical option for Moss would be to get out. He stays. For a man shown to to be scrupulously careful this seems improbably careless. “What have you done? What have you failed to do?” he asks himself, but it is patently obvious that what he has failed to do is get out of a dangerous situation by escaping from the hotel. And, on cue, Chigurh appears to ensure that Moss’s fate unfolds as ordained.

Later, a chastened Moss appears to have come to share the fatalistic view of Sheriff Bell:

The point is there aint no point.

...

Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it.

...

You think when you wake up in the mornin yesterday dont count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it’s made out of. Nothin else. You might think you could run away and change your name and I dont know what all. Start over. And then one mornin you wake up and look at the ceilin and guess who’s layin there? (227)

The message McCarthy is promulgating is that, whatever determinism may exist, ultimately the fault lies with humanity. Chigurh explains to Carla Jean why he must kill her:

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.
(259)

This cycles back to *The Crossing* and the idea of the story of stories, the inevitability of fate. Responsibility rests, however, with humanity. Each of the characters in *No Country for Old Men* has played out their game with fate and the outcome, baleful as it is, remains our responsibility. Nonetheless, even in this relentlessly pessimistic novel the message is not wholly negative. Sheriff Bell, for example, retains hope for humanity. The future may be ordained, it may be the inexorable extension of the past and the present, but there is still something worth having faith in:

Where you went out the back door of that house there was a stone water trough in the weeds by the side of the house... I dont know how long it had been there. A hundred years. Two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of solid rock and it was about six foot long and maybe a foot and a half wide and about that deep. Just chiseled out of the rock. And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of... But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough

to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in? It wasnt that nothin would change. (307)

Bell views the trough and wonders at the hope that must have been invested in the manufacture of something “to last ten thousand years”, something which will pass through generations. It acts as a fragile counterpoint to the overwhelmingly negative impetus of the remainder of the novel. Throughout it, there have been demonstrations of self-centredness in various forms, people choosing to act in particular ways, with catastrophic results. Greed has overtaken decency; common sense has been cast aside for expediency; evil has been allowed to flourish; the community, society, is suffering as a consequence. And it is this notion of inherent evil that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nature Of Evil And The Cities Of The Plain

Introduction

In 1936, Aldous Huxley delivered a speech at the Royal Albert Hall in London. He spoke “as a man of letters” about words “as the instruments of thought”. Specifically, he spoke about peace and war, and worried that, where these were concerned, “people use the wrong words.” He began a denunciation of a speech by the then Archbishop of Canterbury:

In a recent speech, the Archbishop of Canterbury made the following remark – ‘The use of force, of the sword, by the State, is the ministry of God for the protection of the people.’ Consider this sentence carefully. The two key words in it are ‘force’ and ‘sword’. Of these, the first is an empty abstraction, having as it stands, no definite meaning of any kind. The second is a picturesque anachronism. The sword – it is a fine word. It suggests chivalry; it calls up visions of knights in shining armour. All very nice and cultured and reassuring. (quoted in Humphrey 21)

He continued to attack the Archbishop’s argument and moved on to discuss weasel words – what would now be called, after Orwell, Newspeak – which conceal the violent nature of what is being done in the name of humanity. He spoke of the words used for enemies, words designed to dehumanise them. “Not one of these words describes the concrete reality of the men and women to whom it is applied. It is all

fine, liberal declamation.” He explained: “Most people would hesitate to torture or kill a human being like themselves.... All political and nationalistic propaganda aims at only one thing; to persuade one set of people that another set of people are not really human and that it is therefore legitimate to rob, swindle, bully and even murder them” (22).

It is a stirring argument, but is this really the case? Is it true that “most” people “would hesitate” to murder other human beings? Does the history of humanity bear that out? Liberals and humanists like to imagine so, like to believe that, on balance, humanity is a force for good. But is it so? Huxley concludes: “To achieve this end, propagandists always make use of the same device; they teach people to think of their fellow men and women in terms of unsuitable words” (22-3). *Blood Meridian*, one of the most violent novels ever written, depicting a world where moral conscience is almost extinct, may be viewed as a philosophical thought experiment designed to test this hypothesis. So is Huxley right to celebrate humanity, or is McCarthy right to castigate it? In other words, is McCarthy’s novel a series of “unsuitable words” designed, not to alter our perceptions of one another – to argue such, after all, would necessarily ascribe some fascistic outlook to the author – but to prove that perceptions are more easily manipulated than one might wish to imagine?

Evil is everywhere in Cormac McCarthy’s fiction. William Spencer notes, writing of *Outer Dark*, that evil is a “pervasive theme” (83) and suggests that McCarthy presents “a gradual surprise attack on the smug view that evil is an outside, inhuman force”. He develops the point when describing the role of the triune in *Outer Dark*:

The italics [in which the triune passages are written] make them seem unreal or surreal, and nightmarish.... Early on, the effect of this pattern of interwoven chapters and the changes in typography is to imply the separateness of evil, to

posit evil as a nightmarish force outside of humanity – but as the italics are dropped, so is the illusion of the separateness of evil. (85-6)

Although this is a valid argument, it is perhaps taking things too far: while, in *Outer Dark*, evil is undoubtedly manifest – most notably in the triune – the goodness that surrounds Rinthy’s simplicity gives the lie to it being the *essence* of humanity. Dianne Luce explains this cogently when she suggests:

[Rinthy] is a presence in [Culla’s] dream, as he is in hers. She is simultaneously the author of her own dream/life and a figment of his, and yet the two worlds touch, suggesting a notion revisited impressively in McCarthy’s next three novels, that our inner life is always manifested in the world around us: our experience of the world is always a projection of our inner grace or darkness, and the world of “reality” is largely subjective. (*Reading* 63)

Rinthy is essentially a good woman and, throughout the novel, she encounters people who wish her well. Culla, on the other hand, is pursued by strife and danger. Spencer is correct, however, to suggest that evil is pervasive and elemental in *Outer Dark*, and this is mirrored in McCarthy’s later works, particularly *Blood Meridian*. John Rothfork suggests: “McCarthy’s early novels, up to and including *Blood Meridian*, brood on the metaphysics of evil and the possibility that tragedy and evil are remnants of a primitive life process, rubble left ‘like some imponderable archeological phenomenon’” (“Pragmatist” n.pag). This inherent tendency to evil makes humans uniquely violent. Rothfork asks: “Does McCarthy offer something like Euripides’ view in which violence is another name for man?” (“Language” n.pag). Bent Sørensen, sees the novel as “an instance of katabasis, i.e., a mythographical descent into Hell” (17). For Steven Shavero, *Blood Meridian* is a “catastrophic act of witness, embracing the real by tracing it in gore” (18).

Blood Meridian is an extended study of evil and its apparent inherency in human nature. McCarthy has explored this territory before, of course – with *Outer Dark*’s triune, and also with Lester Ballard in *Child of God* and Ratner in *The Orchard Keeper* – but it is in *Blood Meridian* and his unpublished screenplay “Whales and Men” that his fullest explorations of the subject are made. I have demonstrated in previous chapters how religion frames McCarthy’s work and how the uneasy relationship between mankind and God affects our passage through the City of Man and towards the City of God. I have explored how McCarthy’s vision is marked by a social conservatism which appears to view modernity and post-Enlightenment humanity as morally flawed. There is a capacity for unmediated evil. The sentiments expressed by Huxley, therefore, would seem to have limited resonance in McCarthy’s fictional universe – indeed, one imagines that had Huxley made his speech in a tent in Nacogdoches in 1849 rather than the Albert Hall in 1936, he might have endured a similar fate to the hapless Reverend Green. In this chapter, I wish to explore how McCarthy pursues this reactionary agenda through a concentrated study of the nature of evil and how, in his work, this comes not only to typify but almost to symbolise modern man. As a result, McCarthy seems like the last modernist, still railing against the death of God and pursuing an agenda that others left behind a generation before.

Notions of evil in “Whales and Men”

“Whales and Men” is a screenplay housed in the Cormac McCarthy Archives at Texas State University.¹ It is a minor literary work and has never been published. It is overly didactic and has a tendency to make its points through laboured and sermonising dialogue. While it is flawed, it is nonetheless of considerable value when trying to

¹ File 97/5 is the final draft with no corrections. File 97/6 is a photocopy of this draft with holograph corrections in pencil.

analyse McCarthy's philosophy because its didacticism aids interpretation of those parts of his oeuvre which explore similar territory more successfully but in more opaque fashion. It offers something of a window onto McCarthy's thinking. The narrative revolves around Guy Schuler, a marine biologist with an abiding passion for whales, a rich adventurer named John Western and his girlfriend Kelly McAmon, and Peter Gregory, a "titled Irish aristocrat" (12). They sail to the Indian Ocean in search of whales but, 1400 miles west of Colombo, they witness the illegal killing by pirates of a school of blue whales. A single whale survives, newly born, so fresh its umbilical cord is still visible. The group can hear its cries through the hull of the ship but they are powerless to intervene: its mother's milk would be as thick as cottage cheese and the calf would require over a hundred gallons of it per day (111). With no alternative, Guy euthanases it with panabarbital. At the conclusion of the screenplay, the previously apolitical Peter makes his maiden speech in the House of Lords "on behalf of a nation that cannot speak for itself" (133), while Western, earlier something of a playboy figure, is seen working as a surgeon "in a third world country" (128), operating on a young girl while muffled artillery sounds in the distance (128-9). In contrast to the deeper pessimism of later works, these character conversions are (not altogether convincingly) suggestive of a fragile sense of hope for the future. Towards the end of the screenplay, John reflects:

Our history – which we are at such pains to preserve and which we imagine contains our freedom – is exactly what enslaves us. For it really exists only in the individual memory and is lost with that memory forever. We perceive it to be a summation, a communal enterprise, and it is not. History particularizes. What we hold in common is not the past but the future. Everything unexpressed is still whole. What is experienced is broken into parts it was never even made of. We have no faith in being because we have fractured it into history. And this is the way we live. In archives of our own devising. Among sketches and bones... There is no book where the world is written

down. The world is that book. The way the whale lives is the way the world is and the difference between us and the whale is the difference between us and the world. Or us and God. For he is not divided. He has no life elsewhere. (96)

This is one of the most interesting quotes from the screenplay, because it draws together so many insistent themes in McCarthy's critique of the evil inherent in humanity. There is the idea of the particular history, all stories being one. There is a Voegelinian beyond, in the shape of the common future. There is a loss of faith, occasioned by secular insistence on the preferment of humanity and their story. There is the notion of the story already being written, the world being the book. And there is a loss of connection with human nature, the world and God. The sketches and bones which comprise the archives of our devising recall judge Holden, that ambassador of high hubris, sketching and destroying, naming and obliterating. By the end of the screenplay, John has become a sadder, wiser figure. His words, in a letter to Kelly, are a lament that all the things McCarthy's characters have consistently warned against have come to pass:

I know that one life can change all life. The smallest warp in the fabric can tilt all of creation to run anew. Choice is everywhere and destiny is only a word we give to history. To that which is accomplished and done with.... The empty sea will reflect back to us the emptiness of our souls. Having banished God we are now compelled to do his chores and we live in a continuing surprise at the indifferent results. We return again and again to the shabby resources of our own vanity. Like imbeciles at a poisoned well shuffling to and fro with cup and dipper through an ever mounting pile of corpses. The universe is cold and black and silent and our loneliness becomes us. (129)

The last line, in particular, sounds like the thoughts of a suicidal person embracing death. It is an entreaty that opens the way to *The Road*. This should not be taken as

unrelieved pessimism, however. Just as, in *The Road*, there is the faintest prospect of salvation, in “Whales and Men” a similar yearning for hope obtains. John concludes:

I know that we are lost but I no longer believe that we are doomed. That which we are lost to still exists and if there is a way out then there is a way back... I take back what I said about destiny. All this was known from the very beginning. (130)

Although offering the hope of a sustainable future, the ending is somewhat forced and unconvincing, leaning heavily on the familiar McCarthy trope of the future being writ from the earliest days. The shifts in character of the main protagonists do not feel entirely natural and they leave unresolved many of the tensions that are revealed in the course of the narrative. Throughout the screenplay there are a number of maladroit dialogues through which the characters expatiate on the nature of evil. During a sojourn in Peter’s Irish country house, Peter tells Guy of contracting measles at the age of seventeen. He feared blindness and developed a sense of mistrust:

I’d lost my father and my brother and I thought I was going to be blind and I thought about my own misery and the misery of the world and I wondered if I were being punished for something. From there I was led to ponder the nature of evil. Which almost immediately had me in over my head by quite a good deal. Like many before me I could not reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of God. Saint Augustine said that he sought for the origins of evil and got nowhere. (53)

This is not strictly true, of course. Augustine did indeed ponder the nature of evil, and in Book 7 of his *Confessions* he asks: “Where then does evil come from, if God made all things and, because he is good, made them good too?... Where then does evil come

from?” (138). However, as John Polkinghorne explains, for Augustine there was an answer and it lay in:

a redefinition of the nature of evil. It is not an illusion, but it is not true reality either, for evil is *privatio boni*, the absence of the good, an idea that Augustine got from Plotinus. Thus evil is non-being, just as darkness is not a positive entity but the absence of light... ‘For evil is not a positive substance: the loss of good has been given the name of evil’. (61)

Such questions have vexed religious thinkers for millennia. Lactantius (c.240 – c.320 ACE) quotes from Epicurus (341 BCE – 270 BCE), writing a full three centuries before the birth of Christ: “God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither able nor willing; or He is both willing and able” (Quoted in Hick 5). This moves the discussion into the realms of theodicy. It is this problem which obsesses the priest in *The Crossing*, in his search for the evidence of the hand of God in the natural disasters which befell his home town. Both the priest and the heretic whose history he recounts to Billy recognise that evil is not simply an absence of good in the Augustinian sense, but neither can articulate what it must therefore be: as a positive it can only lead to the theodicy question posed by Epicurus, and this fearful notion is the cause of great consternation for the heretic and the priest, leading to the latter’s belief that the hand of God must be “a wrathful one” (141). This question is raised again and again through McCarthy’s work. In “Whales and Men”, Peter continues his monologue, this Irish nobleman’s voice increasingly becoming indistinguishable from the Mexican priest in *The Crossing*:

But of course I was ignorant of [St Augustine’s] undertaking so I forged ahead. It struck me that I had no working definition of evil. I knew that it was not just an opinion. One man’s evil is another man’s good. Also I didn’t know where it came from. I put the first question aside for the moment and

concentrated on the second. Where does it come from? I could find no evidence for its free existence in the world. I couldn't see that flood and famine were evil. They were just misfortunes. I knew enough biology that I couldn't attribute evil to animals. I knew that a shark attack was not a manifestation of evil but simply of hunger. (53-4)

Here, Peter is drawing a distinction between moral and natural evil. John Polkinghorne explains the difference:

There are two forms of evil that are present in the world – moral and natural. Moral evil arises from the willed choices of humankind. It encompasses man's inhumanity to man... to the global cruelties of exploitation and starvation. Dreadful as the resulting sufferings are, their immediate source is clear. They result from the exercise of human will.... The classic answer to the allowed existence of moral evil is the free-will defence – the claim that it is better for God to have created a world of freely choosing beings, with the possibility of their voluntary response to him and to each other, as well as the possibility of sinful selfishness, than to have created a world of blindly obedient automata. (65)

On natural evil, Polkinghorne continues: "There remains the problem of natural evil. Tempest and earthquake take their toll of human life.... [God] the one who allowed the wastefulness of evolution, with its blind alleys and its competition for limited resources. What are we to make of all that?" (66). Once again, this recalls the torment of the priest in *The Crossing*. Just as the priest finds no trace of divine malevolence in the detritus of the natural devastation of Huisiáchepic, in "Whales and Men" Peter discounts natural evil as the most significant malign force. In fact, such forces are not the work of God at all, nor is nature in itself hostile. Indeed, Peter sees in whales – the natural metaphor at the core of this screenplay – something akin to a reflection of

divinity. He posits that whales have great intellects which humans cannot comprehend. He quotes environmentalist John C. Lilly as suggesting that “they contemplate the universe” (23) and explains that the reason they do not fight back against whalers is “because to a whale a whale’s body seems a rather strange place to be in the first place.” Peter continues: “So I dream up these scenarios. Suppose God came back from wherever it is he’s been and asked us smilingly if we’d figured it out yet. Suppose he wanted to know if it had finally occurred to us to ask the whale” (23-4). This suggestion of a divine inspiration behind animals is a belief McCarthy has used throughout his career. In *All The Pretty Horses*, for example, McCarthy seemingly goes as far as to ascribe to horses some divine purpose, in a conversation between John Grady Cole and Luis, the old cook:

Finally John Grady asked him if it were not true that should all horses vanish from the face of the earth the soul of the horse would not also perish for there would be nothing of which to replenish it but the old man only said that it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing. (111)

In *The Crossing*, meanwhile, wolves appear to hold a spark of divinity. They twist and turn and leap “in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire” (4). They are ancients, beings of “great order” (45) in whom the presence of alien cattle in the landscape appears to elicit anger, violating as it does their “old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols” (25). These creatures have some connection to a world beyond the understanding of those “lesser gods” (17), man, and they know “what men do not: that there is no order in this world save that which death has put there” (45). Since animals hold some spark of divinity, therefore, McCarthy’s characters tend to search closer to home in their quest for true evil. Accordingly, in “Whales and Men”, Peter posits:

The point is that it appeared to me that the source of evil must be in ourselves. Not only was mankind the source of evil but he was the agent as well. You couldn't find evil anywhere except where he was. Except where he had been. We were quite right to have postulated Satan. We should be very happy to have him. We need to read Genesis more carefully. There was no evil in the garden until we got there. It was never the serpent at all. It was us. Evil was a manmade creation. Like hydro-electric dams and argyle socks. Or so it appeared. (54)

In an analysis of *Blood Meridian*, Hanna Boguta-Marchel explores this same territory. She suggests that, since God is wholly Good, “[e]vil therefore begins with the history of man”, noting also the role of the mysterious snake in the drama: “The role of the human,” she writes, “is ambiguously both active and passive: the evil to which he submits deliberately is initiated by a patently external source” (7). In “Whales and Men”, Peter is less equivocal: humanity is culpable. Evil, he concludes, is “something primal” (54) and yet it appears to be “our own invention. A paradox” (54). This idea of a primal impulse seems akin to Jung’s “shadow”, that undesirable or evil element of human nature. The notion of a “shadow” appears frequently in McCarthy, such as in Black’s observation to White in *The Sunset Limited* that: “The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it” (118). Jung, of course, believed this antinomian darkness was also mirrored in God, a concept he articulated most notably in his *Answer to Job*.² While I have shown that McCarthy also appears to ponder such a divine attribute at times throughout his writing, it must be noted that it is far from his principal focus. Rather, he tends to ponder the relationship between evil and humanity. Peter continues:

² As an aside, it is interesting that Jung likened that work to Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, undoubtedly an influence, too, on McCarthy’s “Whales and Men”. He described the experience of completing it as having “landed the great whale” (Jung *Letters* 17-18).

That we could have come up with something as enduring as evil seemed a bit grand for us. So. Perhaps we were simply that which rendered the expression of evil possible. We were what evil had been waiting for. All right. What was there about us that made us so suitable. What was there about us that did not occur anywhere else in nature. (55)

Again, one sees this argument throughout McCarthy's fiction. I have previously discussed the anchorite's warning to the kid in *Blood Meridian* that "when God made man the devil was at his elbow" (19). Sheriff Bell's constant fretting about the state of the modern world in *No Country* ("*Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide*" (196)) leads towards a similar conclusion. Surveying a scene of desecration in *The Road*, the man reasons "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" (28). It is the man's wife who explains the malefic outcome of this: "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape [the boy]. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it" (48). For White in *The Sunset Limited* the history of the world is "a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly" (112). In *The Orchard Keeper*, when Ratner is in his car Sylder experiences a "profound and unshakable knowledge of the presence of evil" (33). In the prison in *All The Pretty Horses*, Perez tells John Grady that a Mexican "knows where good and evil have their home" (194). And so, without the need for further elucidation, intuites the reader. All of these examples, of course, might be suggestive that evil is *inherent* in humanity, but that is not necessarily the same as suggesting, as Peter does, that humanity actually *created* evil. Peter continues his theme:

What was evil? You see I knew that it existed. It wasnt just a sort of platonic elaboration. It was real. That for me was a given. Not only was it real in its effects, it was more real in its effects that (sic) anything else one could name. And I knew it was not just a stew concocted of equal parts of greed, hatred,

and ignorance. Rather those were only expressions of the basic commodity. Well. I was stuck. I couldn't come up with anything. I tried some other approaches. I tried to think of something that it was like. Not easy. The closest I could come was fear. Evil was like fear. It was more like fear than anything else I could think of. Why? What was the connection. Well, I thought about that and I got to thinking about the saints – about whom I'd heard a great deal in my young life without ever giving them much thought one way or the other. But now it occurred to me to consider them and the thing I noticed was that while they were very different sorts of people there was one thing they all had in common. And that was fearlessness. Oh, one could say they also had in common an ability to care for others etcetera etcetera. But these were things they did. I was after something more basic. Something they were. And what they were was brave. They were brave in a way that other men were not. It wasn't as if they struggled against fear and managed to win. It was as if they had actually rid themselves of it altogether. Well this was interesting. Was evil simply cowardice? If you put enough cowardice into a container could you reach a critical mass that would exfoliate into evil? Was evil the grand gestalt that could not be divided back into its origins. Was it the genie in the bottle after all? (55)

This conceit of something not being divisible back into its origins is a favourite formulation of McCarthy's, appearing a number of times in his work. Most notably, it emerges during the drug-induced, post-operative dream experienced by the kid in *Blood Meridian* in which judge Holden confronts him: "Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go" (309). The almost identical formulations here would suggest McCarthy – who frequently employs such intertextual references – is making a direct comparison between the evil described in "Whales and Men" and *Blood Meridian*'s representative of hubristic humanity, judge

Holden. There is, then, an implicit connection between evil and mankind, particularly post-Enlightenment mankind.

This is developed by Peter in his monologue. He suggests that fear and courage are opposites that occupy the same space, meaning that neutral ground was impossible and courage essential. “Anywhere that courage did not live evil would enter and commence at once its awesome escalation into the colossus that it yearns to be”, he says (56). One recalls here, of course, the evil of Anton Chigurh which flourishes in *No Country for Old Men* because, as Sheriff Bell confides in one of his italicised monologues: “*Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him*” (4). Peter talks of the “banality of evil” and how its very lack of variety makes it obsessive.³ He continues, invoking a very Voegelinian, modern gnostic critique of humanity as immanent gods:

The thing that made us unique, the thing that made us even godlike – as we fondly supposed – was the very thing that made us aliens in the world. The record of the bones seemed clear enough. We had our origins in this earth. Yet something made us long for another nativity altogether. Something had made us almost despise the earth. What was it? What was it that had made us refugees from joy and orphans of delight. What was it that characterized our species, that was found nowhere else in nature? (56)

For Peter, the answer is language:

the thing that has most benefitted man is language. Not fire or an opposable thumb. So what are the penalties? Naming gives us power over things. What is

³ In the final screenplay draft, File 97/5, Hannah Arendt’s phrase is not attributed, but in the previous draft, marked *Late Draft* (file 97/4), it is alternately introduced by Peter as “Miss Arendt’s expression I believe - ” and “in Miss Arendt’s expression” (6P).

the cost? Has anyone ever thought to ask? What gradually became apparent to me was that language was a thing corrupted by its own success. (57)

There is something Heideggerian in this apparent privileging of language: particularly in his later work, Heidegger's existentialist thought focused on the importance of language and meaning. John Macquarrie explains: "As time has gone on, language has become in Heidegger's philosophy the existential phenomenon *par excellence* and the very key to Being" (113). It links, also, to the language theology of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, who drew on Heidegger's idea of the "linguisticity of being" to establish their *New Hermeneutic*. This contended, as Henry Virkler explains, that: "Language... is not reality, but only a personal interpretation of reality. One's use of language, then, is a hermeneutic – an interpretation" (63). Hermeneutics, in other words, is the theory of understanding the function of words. In "Whales and Men", Peter considers that function to be malign: "Language was like the evil aliens in the horror movie that take on the forms of things and gradually replace them altogether. Only no one knows. They look like the thing but they are not the thing. Language usurps things" (57).

To an extent, this is Oswald Spengler's pseudomorphosis in reverse: Spengler argued that all civilisations decline but, in trying to forge an identity, a new civilisation's emerging culture is forced into a mould left by the decayed culture of the old. Thus, the old civilisation remains a malign influence. Here, McCarthy – who after all has a tendency to privilege the old over the new – is inverting this notion by suggesting that the new and dangerous concept of language created by humanity obliterates and usurps that which lay beneath. And what lay beneath, one surmises, may have been the *numinosum*, the spirit, the connection with divinity that, in Voegelinian analysis, is missing from modern life. Again, then, there is the suggestion that humanity has the ability to despoil. Peter continues:

You see what I was really after was why the world was going to be destroyed. I thought there had to be a reason. More and more language seemed to me to be an aberration by which we had come to lose the world. Everything that is named is set at one remove from itself. Nomenclature is the very soul of secondhandness. (57)

As I have shown in earlier chapters, naming things, drawing maps, asserting ownership, is a constant theme in McCarthy's fiction. Over and over, it boils down to the certainty that everything is ordained. For all humanity's hubristic attempts to exert influence over its world and its existence, human lives, in Quijada's words in *The Crossing*, "could have no shape other for what then would that shape be?" (380). "The world has no name," Quijada continues. "The names of the cerros and the Sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names" (387-8). In attempting to order the world, then, humanity has succeeded only in losing itself. And the culprit? Language.

It is not language, *per se*, but rather what language represents, that McCarthy is critiquing here. Language is one of the first weapons created by humanity. It has existed since prelapsarian times, since humans purportedly invented sin and lost innocence. Peter directly refers to this: "A named thing becomes that named thing", he continues. "It is under surveillance." The result of this is that "[w]e were put into a garden and we turned it into a detention centre" (58). From this, Peter comes to the conclusion that language is the root of all evil.

I saw that the psychological truth of Genesis was impeccable. We always knew that our desire to be God would kill us off. It was told from the very beginning. And finally, the one thing that characterized all evil everywhere

was the refusal to acknowledge it. The eagerness to call it something else. Which condition is now very nearly universal. (58)

In an earlier draft, file 97/1, McCarthy remarks in a handwritten note: “CAMUS’ PLAGUE: (the world’s condition, not just wartime)” (3). This, however, suggests an inaccurate reading of *The Plague*. Camus’s point was not that the plague in Oran was representative of the world’s condition but that it was, rather, an ailment, the source of which lies latent within humanity and which will necessarily erupt from time to time, in moments of rupture in society. This is the warning in Camus’s masterpiece and McCarthy would appear to misrepresent it here. Peter’s realisation of the evil within humanity as part of the world’s condition is not unique in McCarthy, however. In *The Sunset Limited*, for example, White warns: “It’s the first thing in that book there. The Garden of Eden. Knowledge as destructive to the spirit. Destructive to goodness” (111). Nonetheless, it is a strikingly explicit condemnation of the role of humanity – seeking as it does to establish an immanent heaven-on-earth – in destroying creation. Peter is implacable:

We will not be missed. When we have slaughtered and poisoned everything in sight and finally incinerated the earth itself then that black and lifeless lump of slag will simply revolve in the void forever. There is a place for it too. A nameless cinder of no consequence even to God. That man can halt this disaster now seems so remote a possibility as to hardly bear consideration. (59)

He even warns Guy at this point, in case the reader should somehow have missed the true target of his denunciation, post-Enlightenment man: “Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason” (59). Don Héctor, of course, makes exactly

the same imprecation to John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses* (146).⁴ Reason, knowledge, learning, those attributes articulated through language, are things to be abjured. White, in *The Sunset Limited*, picks up the same theme: “I suppose from the God point of view all knowledge is vanity. Or maybe it gives people the unhealthy illusion that they can outwit the devil” (111). For the wolf in *The Crossing* – a symbol, remember, of something divine – its knowledge is unequal to the task of dealing with the source of evil: “[The wolf] looked up at [Billy], the eye delicately aslant, the knowledge of the world it held sufficient to the day if not the day’s evil” (55). It is in *Blood Meridian*, however, that this analysis of the inherency of evil in mankind is explored to its most chilling effect.

The nature of evil in Blood Meridian

David Holmberg appropriates the Foucauldian term “heterotopia” to describe *Blood Meridian*.⁵ It is an apt expression because there does seem to be a contemporaneity to the mythic and realistic settings of the novel.⁶ What Holmberg fails to address, however, is *why* McCarthy chooses to do this. Holmberg depicts McCarthy’s landscape as “a prehistoric biblical wasteland” (152), invoking McCarthy’s description of a “time before nomenclature was and each was all” (*BM* 172). But why would McCarthy seek to transport the American west of the mid nineteenth-century to a primeval zone? What ur-world is created by this peculiar fusion? And to what end?

⁴ Although it has generally been supposed that Don Héctor’s (and Peter’s) comment is a paraphrase of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, no formal identification has so far been made. However, in an as yet unpublished presentation by eminent McCarthy scholar Allen Josephs, at the Cormac McCarthy Society Conference in Berea, Kentucky, in March 2013, he suggests that the source of the quotation is actually a BBC adaptation of *Don Quixote* from 1973.

⁵ Foucault calls a heterotopia a “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live”, contrasting it with utopian spaces which are “unreal spaces” that “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.” A heterotopia, by contrast, “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault). This is, in some ways, an extension of the Aboriginal concept of “everywhen”.

⁶ As I explained in Chapter 1, McCarthy also employs this technique to dazzling effect in *Suttree* to describe the mythic and real layers of 1950s Knoxville.

For Holmberg, the heterotopia seems to serve as a “complex realm that is both prehistory and the coming apocalypse, as the future is foretold in the past, as the ‘child the father of the man’” (152). Holmberg’s conclusion is that it is difficult to determine whether *Blood Meridian* offers any positive assertion, rather than simply a deconstruction of the heterotopian zone. This seems unnecessarily reductive. The argument is presented but not followed to its conclusion: the question why McCarthy would choose to create this mythical hell remains.

In *Blood Meridian*, there is a depiction of humanity at its worst. Glanton’s gang are the personification of evil and the country they traverse presents a magnifying mirror of their atrocities. It is important to reflect, however, that although the novel is set in 1849 it is specifically *modern* humanity which is being exposed to such exacting analysis. In particular, it is judge Holden who, with his proto-Nietzschean prognostications, represents the baleful tendencies of modernity to greatest effect. As the judge records his naturalistic findings in his ledger Toadvine watches him. The judge speaks, and he is presented as a social conservative’s image of hubristic man, a Hogarthian caricature:

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

He looked about at 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. (198)

A suzerain, he explains, “is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements” (198). This, of course, is precisely the Voegelinian view of desacralised humanity seeking to establish a heaven-on-earth over which they have complete dominion. The judge is offering himself up as an immanent god. “This is my claim,” he continues. “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” (199). And so it is, in the conservative litany, that rationalist humanity bring about their own downfall.

Next, the judge clearly affirms the Voegelinian point that, not only is modern humanity seeking to establish an earthly empire, but it has lost touch with the *numinosum*, with its spiritual core. In response to Toadvine’s comment that no man can acquaint himself with “everything” on this earth, the judge intones:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down.... But that 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. (199)

For all the gnostic and mystical interpretations of judge Holden, here McCarthy expresses a very Catholic sentiment, even invoking the term “mystery”, which for Catholics has a specific meaning to do with the inexhaustible unfathomability of God. He does so in a critical sense, of course, because the judge uses the term pejoratively, underlining his atheistic, hubristic tendencies. Throughout the novel, he represents malign humanity at its worst. His gun is sardonically named “*Et in arcadia ego*”, suggesting man-the-inventor’s role in creating death. As Jay Ellis notes, “Holden spouts Nietzsche before Nietzsche’s time, insisting on the creative regeneration of

human identity through bloodshed” (“Country” 88). For Vereen Bell, the judge remains ambiguous:

If the judge is a failed priest, he may as well be Satan, but if he is Satan, he may as well be God also, for in this context the two are not conceived as inversions of one another.⁷ The arguments on behalf of one turn out to be the same as for the other, and in that paradox lies the appalling moral of the judge’s story. (*Achievement* 122)

The context of the judge’s discussion with Toadvine and the gang is also important. Immediately before it there is yet another example of the gang’s meaningless violence, when they deliberately steer a conducta of 122 mules carrying flasks of quicksilver, plus their muleteers, over the cliff to their deaths. The scene is described thus:

The riders pushed between them and the rock and methodically rode them from the escarpment, the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver as the flasks broke open and the mercury loomed wobbling in the air in great sheets and lobes and small trembling satellites and all its forms grouping below and racing in the stone arroyos like the imbreachment of some ultimate alchemic work decocted from out the secret dark of the earth’s heart, the fleeing stag of the ancients fugitive on the mountainside and bright and quick in the dry path of the storm channels and shaping out the sockets in the rock and hurrying from ledge to ledge down the slope shimmering and deft as eels. (195)

⁷ Strictly speaking, of course, the two are never inversions of one another, because to equate Satan with God would imply a dualism which is at odds with Christian orthodoxy.

The language is undeniably beautiful but the religious symbolism is simply inappropriate. This is an act of random and pointless violence, so why is McCarthy inviting comparisons with martyrdom, with arcane alchemical enterprise, with the mythology of the ancients? A number of critics invoke René Girard's concept of sacred violence in discussion of McCarthy, and there is, indeed, considerable merit in such discourses.⁸ Nonetheless, the argument is uncomfortable in the context of this passage. What occurs is low-level, mindless violence, and to invest in it some sacred resonance is problematic. It brings into question, again, the way in which McCarthy mingles sacred and profane thought, human destiny and divine oversight. Once more, the human story comes to be parsed in terms of religious sensibility. In the same way as the *corrido* in *The Crossing* is overlaid with theological musings, there is an unhealthy conflation of religious and secular sensibilities and activity in this scene. It is a metaphysical sleight-of-hand.

Of course, it could reasonably be argued that, however mindless, this is still a thoroughly despicable act and it is therefore appropriate to invest such moral authority in the description of it. In the context of this passage that could represent a persuasive argument. However, McCarthy uses this same technique in *All the Pretty Horses* and, on that occasion, no such argument is valid:

They pulled the wet saddles off the horses and hobbled them and walked off in separate directions through the chaparral to stand spraddlelegged clutching their knees and vomiting. The browsing horses jerked their heads up. It was no sound they'd ever heard before. In the gray twilight those retchings seemed to echo like the calls of some rude provisional species loosed upon that waste. Something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being. A thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace itself like a gorgon in an autumn pool. (71)

⁸ For example, see Ciuba *Divinity* on *Child of God*, or Giles *Spaces* on *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*.

In sharp contrast to the grandeur of the language, what is actually being described here is no more than the drunken vomiting of two immature teenage boys. The sombre religiosity of the language simply cannot be suited to the triviality of the scene. Two boys make themselves sick with alcohol, and the reader is asked to believe this somehow represents something “malformed” in the “heart of being” which smirks its rejection of grace: this is ludicrously overblown. One could dismiss it as an unfortunate descent into bathos, but an important lesson is being revealed in McCarthy’s use of narrative. What is happening is that divine determinism is being interposed throughout the narratives. While, as I explored in Chapter Three, there is considerable merit in Dennis Sansom’s suggestion that *Blood Meridian* is actually an attack on the concept of divine determinism, there is no doubt that, at times, McCarthy’s worldview does stray close to such territory. The careful conflation of sacred and profane activity allows McCarthy to manipulate the drama in a particular direction. Thus, humanity is depicted in three overlapping ways: as impotent actors in a divinely inspired drama; as hubristic delusionals attempting to impose themselves as suzerains of the world; and as the begetters of evil in creation.

Judge Holden and the way of evil

Judge Holden is the most written about character in McCarthy’s fiction. He is larger than life in every sense – a glabrous, seven foot albino whose immorality is almost autistic in its totality. Many critics have tried to understand him. John Lewis Longley notes:

What serious critics will have to do is look for other affinities – Melville, Conrad, and Dostoevski. The Judge invites comparison with Staggovin (sic) and Svidrigaloff, or perhaps even Nechaev himself. Instructive parallels can be drawn with *Heart of Darkness* – what happens in a savage wilderness when all

restraints are removed, and there is no one to say *Thou shalt not*. (“Nuclear” 750)

This is true to an extent, but it does not tell the full story. It is undoubtedly the case that Judge Holden stands alongside Ahab, Kurtz and Stavrogin as massively flawed individuals, possessed of some malevolent, perhaps psychotic sensibility. Stavrogin, however, is merely a psychopath, albeit a marvellously enigmatic one, while Ahab, though originally driven by religious fervour, is finally defeated by insanity. Kurtz, meanwhile, offers the most interesting comparison. Kurtz, for all his darkness, is not an emblem of post-Enlightenment hubris in the way that Judge Holden is. Rather, he is simply a flawed man, one who falls prey to madness and ends the novel recoiling from the horror of “the adventures of his soul on this earth” (Conrad 69). There is undoubtedly a duality of light and dark in Kurtz, but his darkness is no Jungian “shadow”, no supernatural or metaphysical weakness in the human soul. Kurtz’s flaws are material flaws. In this, he articulates the beliefs of his author, as explained in an acute critique by Walter Anderson:

Conrad completely accepts Darwinian premises and without going beyond their implications proceeds to create a sort of ‘spiritual’ drama that puts a halo back into the world of matter. For him the earth is a ‘temple where there is going on a mystery play,’ and he writes for its sake – something which had not, he felt, been noticed by his critics. In this mystery play, man is the sole proprietor of spiritual substance, a quality which, for Conrad, has no transcendental dimension. Conrad’s sense of the marvellous is too great ever to be fascinated by the mere ‘supernatural’. (405)

Perhaps a more pertinent comparison with Judge Holden might be the Underground Man in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. Ihab Hassan claimed in 1961, “American fiction... does not stem only, as Hemingway claimed, from a book by

Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* but also from another, it may be argued with equal pertinence, by Dostoyevsky called *Notes from Underground*” (24). Hassan overstates the case but it is certainly true that a *type* of fiction can trace its genesis to *Notes from Underground*. And that type of fiction is the socially conservative, religiously flavoured variety favoured by Cormac McCarthy. Hassan suggests that, even though it was published in 1864, *Notes* could be considered a modernist text. Certainly, in the narrator’s anger and self-loathing it prefigures existentialist angst, or at least that caricature of existentialism which is promulgated by conservatives as being at the root of modern society’s malaise but which is, in truth, closer to nihilism. Hassan continues:

That [the Underground Man] can establish his identity only by forcing himself to collide ignominiously with an arrogant officer who does not even recognize his existence is of no importance. The important thing is that it is he who forces the recognition. This is freedom. (23)

This is essentially a reformulation of Hegel’s master and slave dialectic. Hassan then turns to Conrad, and in particular Kurtz. This is significant because it points to where the failure of Dostoevsky’s narrative lies. In the Underground Man, Dostoevsky paints a picture of nihilistic despair in which “freedom” can only be expressed through self-destructive narcissism. It is the natural product of solipsism. In Kurtz, however, Conrad takes his readers directly into the storm of mortality and forces them to confront what Hassan describes as the “unintelligent brutality of existence” (24). In this, Kurtz could be said to share some of the characteristics of the Underground Man, but the difference between them is one of action, of choice. The Underground Man’s choices are essentially always negative. For this reason, it is difficult to see *Notes from Underground* or the Underground Man, with his belief that suffering “is the sole cause of consciousness” (*Underground* 35) as in any way representative of modernist progressiveness. Rather, the character of the Underground Man is carefully

circumscribed by his author to represent a numbing nothingness in modern thought. In similar vein, it is difficult to read many of the characters of McCarthy's fictions, enclosed as they are in the brutalist environments of the south and the west, as being progressive. For all his expansive rhetoric and bravura displays, Judge Holden is more Underground Man than Kurtz.

In a discussion on theodicy, Chris Dacus picks up the question of freedom, explaining the German Idealist notion that human freedom is the source of evil, and noting in particular the "general acceptance" that Schopenhauer has been an influence on McCarthy (9).⁹ He goes on to suggest that "Western modernity can aptly be described as a cultural phenomenon whose greatest reason for being is the pursuit of freedom; and this view of freedom is perhaps best described as *antinomian*" (10). This is a breathtaking and mischievous leap of logic, which he justifies by paraphrasing Kant: "a modern Westerner cannot accept any law that he has not given to himself, for doing so would abrogate personal freedom". This is a questionable cause fallacy, deliberately evaluating western thought in negative terms, thereby turning Enlightenment thinking into antinomianism. In turn, this allows Dacus to explicitly compare Western thought with the "antinomian western landscape" in which Glanton's gang operate, "setting a symbolic connotation among whose meanings is the western United States as nomological and temporal end point of Western civilization as such" (10). In another leap of logic he now describes the judge as the personification of the "historical moment of the end of the Enlightenment". John Cant makes a similar observation when he asserts: "The judge personifies the extreme of anthropocentrism, of Enlightenment hubris" (170).

⁹ "Generally accepted" may be a touch hyperbolic, although Dwight Eddins and Euan Gallivan have made interesting contributions on the subject of Schopenhauer in McCarthy.

There is a tendency among political philosophers to telescope the history of progress into a sustained period of confrontation with the traditional order, which is equated with the Enlightenment. A *via moderna* is held up as something which is threatening to the world order, reacting against the spiritual instincts of humanity and disrupting the prospect of revelation and grace. It is articulated clearly in Weber's critique of Western civilisation. It is recognisable in the outlook of Eric Voegelin, and in other reactionary political philosophers such as Leo Strauss. But it is evident, too, in critics who could not in any way be regarded as socially reactionary or right wing. Broadly Marxist-leaning philosophers such as Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School demonstrate a similarly telescoping approach to the perceived failings of Enlightenment thought. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer articulate a critical view of the Enlightenment. They begin:

the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy.

(3)

However, they conclude that enlightenment, over time, became a myth in its own right. They suggest:

Mythology itself set off the unending process of enlightenment in which ever (sic) and again, with the inevitability of necessity, every specific theoretic view succumbs to the destructive criticism that it is only a belief – until even

the very notions of spirit, of truth and, indeed, enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic. (11)

The result is that “enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology” (11-2). In this way, “Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical” (16). The result is calamity. It provoked Adorno and Horkheimer to question “why mankind, instead of entering into a truly new human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (xi). This would appear to provide a basis for the philosophical thought experiment of *Blood Meridian*. Adorno and Horkheimer were writing, of course, in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and such profound scepticism about human nature is understandable. Eric Voegelin shared their view:

The German Revolution, finally, in an environment without strong institutional traditions, brought for the first time into full play economic materialism, racist biology, corrupt psychology, scientism, and technological ruthlessness – in brief, modernity without restraint. (CW5 241)

The assault on modernity reflected in *Blood Meridian* by the personification of judge Holden is an attack on this “modernity without restraint”. It is an attack on a scientistic world which proposes that everything is knowable and that, once known, it can be transformed for the good of humanity. This is the true anthropocentric principle, but it is wrong to conflate scientism with the views of the Enlightenment. The former is a bastardised, simplified, defective reduction of the latter. Nor should the horrific outcome of the Holocaust be allowed to stand as the natural and only concomitant of western enlightenment progress.

As Manfred Henningsen points out, in his introduction to Voegelin's *Modernity Without Restraint*, Adorno and Horkheimer "did not distinguish among the various provinces of the west" (CW5 4) in their critique of modernity. "Unlike the two Frankfurt thinkers," he adds, "Voegelin left space for human agency". Adorno and Horkheimer, then, display a deep-rooted pessimism about the nature of humanity. A Frankfurt School colleague of theirs, Herbert Marcuse, is notably less pessimistic. While arguing that western liberal democracies had become "totally administered societies" driven by values of consumerism, he nonetheless believed in the prospect of social transformation through a revolt of the underclass, the "substratum of the outcasts and the outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and unemployable" (256). And that, surely, is a summation of the deadbeat colleagues of Buddy Suttree in *Suttree's McAnally Flats*?

In *Blood Meridian*, however, there is little room for human agency beneath the overwhelming malignancy of judge Holden. The reader is presented with a reactionary view which focuses exclusively on those traces of modernity which seem repugnant and which are therefore used as the blame for any ill in society. It deliberately ignores any element which is functional or useful or helpful. It ignores concepts of community. In particular, it ignores concepts of virtue or society. This is precisely the vision of hell that is conjured up by the Glanton gang. It is the *Book of Job* rewritten to remove any trace of decency in either mankind or God. John Vanderheide makes a specific connection between the *Book of Job* and McCarthy's *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, suggesting that the former text is a "powerful critique of humanity's mis-measurement of itself and of its place in the cosmos" (107-8). Vanderheide offers an illuminating study of these texts and concludes powerfully

that they reveal the writer's occupation as indicative of "strict dedication to immanence, to natural and historical life" (119). He goes on:

an occupation of this nature demands the writer's remove from and resistance to the present. In this the writer acts out a daemonic parody of the transcendent. The cool remove of transcendence in McCarthy's allegorical narratives—the silence that follows the pleas of the protagonists of *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*—does not signify the cruelty of an indifferent God. There can be nothing indifferent about a Creativity whose essence is difference. Rather, McCarthy's narratives register the insight into divine power expressed by the poet of *The Book of Job*: that one cannot be certain that when summoned from the depths or the heights of being, it will not manifest as a pale and monstrous destructiveness. Immanence is that thin fold between the heights and depths. It is the daemonic place of humanity and its others, their consecrated respite from transcendence. (119)

This is an interesting argument, at once valid and invalid. Is it actually possible for a writer to remove himself from the immanent to parody the transcendent? This is the role of myth, to be sure, explicating the inexplicable, and such texts could be said to escape the immanent, but can a person, a writer do so, even in the mind? In any case, I would argue strongly that McCarthy's fictions do not remove the idea of transcendence; rather, they make such an act – indeed apparently, for McCarthy's characters, such an ideal – to be almost but not quite unattainable. This is redemption, he suggests, this is an indication of what lies beyond. There is no respite from transcendence. Nonetheless, Vanderheide's comparison with the *Book of Job* is telling. Job is one of the most problematic, and least understood, of the Books of the Old Testament. For example, in a Masters thesis, Zachary Swartz makes an explicit connection between the *Book of Job* and *The Road*, specifically relating the monster of the man's dream to Leviathan and comparing the interrogative natures of the man

and Job in response to the events unleashed on them by God. While Swartz's analysis is good, he employs two highly suspect quotes from Stephen Mitchell to reinforce it. Firstly Mitchell suggests that God's response "reduces itself to this: *How dare you question the creator of the world? Shut up now, and submit*"; and secondly he declares that Job is presented with a "God's-eye view of creation before man, beyond good and evil" (Mitchell quoted in Swartz 42) [his italics]. Neither of these quotes offers a valid exegesis. Rather, far from offering a "God's-eye view", they appear to be forcing a human interpretation on the text, even to the extent of invoking Nietzsche. In order to attain an understanding of a beneficent God, no Christian reading of the text of the *Book of Job* could permit such an anthropomorphic view. Vanderheide's analysis of *Job* in relation to McCarthy, however, is acute and challenging, presenting a divinity who is resolutely impelled on his own, unfathomable course. To attempt to rewrite the *Book of Job* from an even less sympathetic viewpoint than the original text would, on the face of it, appear to be an impossible task. And yet, with *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy may have achieved it. Christopher Douglas suggests:

Blood Meridian's peculiar (and only) postmodern quality is to reintroduce divine design into the late-twentieth-century, modern conception of the universe – a move that transforms modernity's agnostic fear that God may not exist into its dreaded opposite: perhaps that God exists after all. (6)

This is a worthwhile analysis, and it bears out the modern condition, as described by McCarthy. Nonetheless, I have argued that, at times, McCarthy takes his critique of modernity too far. This leads to a weakness in some of his fiction, with a tendency to didacticism. In order to promulgate his views, McCarthy at times straitjackets his narrative and, in particular, he not only privileges a particular worldview but effectively ensures that no alternative is permitted. In *The Road*, for example, the position of the reader is overwhelmingly on the side of the man and boy. This is to be

expected, of course, but essentially McCarthy offers no alternative viewpoint, allows no ambiguity. The roadagents are universally evil, the world that the man and boy now inhabit is callous and dangerous. There is nowhere, emotionally, for the story to go. *The Road* is a love story: on the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, McCarthy himself suggested it was “a love story to my son” and this sense of total love comes across very strongly in the narrative. But, even so, it fails to fully satisfy because there is no light and shade, no ambiguity. There is a similar difficulty in *No Country for Old Men*, in which the love expressed by Bell for his wife is unwavering and beautiful. McCarthy is often criticised for the lack of women in his novels but in Loretta, and also in Carla Jean, McCarthy creates two fine women whose ideal of love is potentially transformative. However, once again this depiction of love is compromised because of the stridency of the narrative approach. Chigurh, like Judge Holden before him, bestrides this novel to an uncomfortable degree. His character is simply overwhelming. His brutality is total and uncompromising. The tender loves of Loretta and Carla Jean cannot withstand such single-minded evil. Their love is overshadowed, almost occluded, by Chigurh.

And this, too, points to a stylistic failure in *Blood Meridian*. Much has been written about its violence but, in the end, the novel fails because its violence becomes numbing. The reader becomes desensitised. Slaughter after unmediated slaughter becomes tedious rather than shocking. The evil is unremitting because there is no mitigating correlative. Inger-Anne Sjøfting, in arguing that the typical western novel evolves through a series of binary oppositions – civilisation-barbarity, good-bad, masculine-feminine and so on – and the revisionist western will simply invert them, suggests:

McCarthy dissolves the oppositional apparatus by giving exclusive attention to one side of the binary only. There can be no tension between the masculine and the feminine when there is no femininity; there can be no tension between

wilderness and civilization when there is no civilization.... Consequently, McCarthy magnifies the presence of the traditionally dominant side of the binary and thus forces the myth of the American west to its most appalling extreme. (17)

Søfting's analysis is acute. While forcing the reader to confront these myths from their most extreme point is surely McCarthy's intention, nonetheless it begins to suggest a weakness of the narrative: where there is no opposition there is no possibility of a complex interplay of ideas. Instead, all that is offered is unmitigated evil. Robert Morgan identifies, in *Child of God*, how McCarthy overcomes this problem:

[The anonymous alternative narrators'] voices are one of the most alive, most effective parts of the novel. They give humor, daylight, sanity to an otherwise almost unbearable story.... Without these voices the novel would have less effect because we would be numbed by the unrelieved horror of Ballard's activities. (17)

Without them, he continues, "the reader would lose touch with humanity and become inured to the repetition of Ballard's crimes. We would become lost in the labyrinth of perverse action" (18). This is precisely what occurs in *Blood Meridian*. To return to Aldous Huxley's critique of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Huxley's vision is undoubtedly idealistic. In his fiction, Cormac McCarthy makes strident efforts to demonstrate the impossibility of such idealism in the face of humanity's tendency to violence. It is a powerful argument and perhaps a useful corrective to blind utopianism. But ultimately it is a flawed argument because it refuses to acknowledge different voices. There is no Rambert in *Blood Meridian*. There is no Oskar Matzerath, banging his tin drum and exposing the lunacy of those around him. There

is no Huck Finn, mischievous and headstrong. There is no Marlow, offering a different perspective from horror-struck Kurtz. There is no Buddy Suttree.

Wandering the borderland for weeks after their triumph (and debauchery) in Chihuahua, the Glanton gang become less human and more spectral. They appear “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” (172). Soon after, unprovoked, they slaughter a peaceful group of Tiguas (173). They have now, definitively, become inhuman. In preparation for this event they prepare ammunition “as if the fate of the aborigines had been cast into shape by some other agency altogether. As if such destinies were prefigured in the very rock for those with eyes to read” (173). For a second time on their journey, Toadvine shows a glimmer of decency, pointing out the Indians “aint botherin nobody”.¹⁰ Again, he does not act on his sentiments, and the slaughter is realised. To usher it, McCarthy invokes a moment of uncharacteristic anthropomorphism, the men approaching the encampment in “the long light of the day’s failing” (173-4), this suggestion of failure somehow making nature complicit in the breakdown of humanity that is about to unfold. After the slaughter, the narratorial voice explains:

The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

¹⁰ The first time Toadvine almost takes a moral stand occurs a few pages earlier:

Toadvine saw him with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading his horse the child was dead and the judge had scalped it. Toadvine put the muzzle of his pistol against the great dome of the judge’s head.

Goddamn you, Holden.

You either shoot or take that away. Do it now.

Toadvine put the pistol in his belt (164).

Except, of course, this is not true, because there *is* a scribe, and he is Cormac McCarthy, and we, the readers, are reading his script. This leads to a central criticism of McCarthy's approach in his later novels, in which he almost imputes to himself a godlike power of prophesy. Harken to me, he might be saying, listen to my imprecations or devil take you, and your race of heretics and supermen and naysayers. Thus, the biblical register for which he reaches so regularly becomes integral, part of the author's vatic control over his narrative. The author begins to hover uncomfortably over the story, lecturing, haranguing, iterating and reiterating a jeremiad, pontificating about the evils of humanity and what will befall them unless they listen to the word.

"You couldn't find evil anywhere except where mankind was", it is suggested in "Whales and Men" (54). That may be true, but there is also goodness. Where goodness exists in McCarthy's world – and it does exist – it is almost universally eclipsed by evil. Those notions of love and beauty and hope which do subsist in the later novels are fragile to the point of breaking. This is unfortunate, because when McCarthy achieves a finer balance his writing assumes the level of genius. In the next chapter, I will discuss that balance, and the plurality of vision that makes *Suttree* his masterpiece.

CHAPTER SIX

Suttree And The Pursuit Of Love In The City Of Man

Introduction

On 27 May 1977, Cormac McCarthy's editor, Albert Erskine, began a covering memo to go with pages of the manuscript of *Suttree* which he was returning to the author with "mostly minor" queries.¹ The memo covers four pages and was written in three bursts of activity spread over four days. He begins with a quote from Coleridge:

... it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity.

Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, XVII. (1)

Describing this as one of Coleridge's "shrewdest observations", he suggests "it applies precisely to such characters as J.B., Hoghead, Primrose, Blind Richard, etc, etc, who after all this time are still indistinguishable one from the other and are equally boring" (1). He continues: "If you think this book is the best you can make it as it now stands, I'll turn it in, with great misgivings, for copy-editing and production. But I want once again to plead for something better and more compact". He offers examples. Firstly he contrasts the scene in which, after a drunken spree, Suttree is picked up in the negro quarter and jailed. This, according to Erskine, "has values in

¹ This memo is housed in the McCarthy Archive at Texas State University, in file 19/1.

setting scene, theme, character, etc”. He contrasts this with the later nightclub riot where Suttree “is hit with a floor-buffer and taken to the hospital, has some cute repartee with nurses and departs; this one is tedious and contributes nothing that I can see except additional pages of more or less the same thing, and is inferior to the hospital business near the end, which though too long does contribute (I think) to the whole.” He expresses the opinion that the riot and hospital scene could be removed “not only with no loss to anyone but with considerable gain to everybody” (1).

Erskine continues, citing a number of episodes, some of which McCarthy actually did remove, but most of which remain in the final text.² Moreover, author and editor have evidently had the same discussion before. Erskine writes:

I know by now that for reasons of your own (and they may be better than I can see) that you are determined to keep the whore-keeping Suttree bit and the mussel-gathering bit (more than a bit, being still over ten per cent of the book), but I’d like to repeat that I believe they not only don’t pull their weight but might even sink the boat – a boat that deserves to float. (2)

The memo represents his “final plea”, and he makes it because “what is basically so good is marred by tedious nonessentials that make the whole thing vulnerable, and unnecessarily so” (2). He hopes that “some day, somehow I’ll come to understand the main character of this book, and thus the book itself, because I’ll have to describe it to people who are going to try to promote and sell it, who are going to review it, and who ultimately are going to read it (many I wish, but without too much hope)” (2). He compares the character of Suttree to Hamlet: “[b]oth are fascinated by maggots, excrement, decay” (3), but where Hamlet is heroic, Suttree acts “like a true juvenile

² This in itself is unusual. Evidence from the Archives reveals that McCarthy is single-minded in the extreme and is heavily disinclined to take editorial advice. For example, in the draft of the first half of *The Crossing* (File 60/1) with suggested corrections by his later editor, Gary Fisketjohn, out of around forty suggestions for alteration, only three are taken up by McCarthy.

delinquent” when he drives the police car into the river and “thereafter takes off on a bus for parts unknown for reasons unspecified” (3). Erskine says he believes that “a writer’s attitude toward his characters is a very important element of a book” (4) but professes himself unaware of what Suttree means to McCarthy. He returns to his main theme that the good is marred by extraneous detail, such as “the repetitive descriptions of blight and decay in the city that Suttree broods over, over and over, after the point has been driven in, over and over”. He concedes that “you may be right and I may be wrong” but, not being privy to McCarthy’s motivations, he “can say only what I’ve said”.³

Albert Erskine was a highly regarded editor. Before McCarthy, of course, he was most famous as William Faulkner’s editor, as well as editing James Michener, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty. He was a key figure in the editing and publication of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and worked with Malcolm Lowry on *Under The Volcano*. One must take his literary credentials seriously. Nonetheless, I would argue that on the subject of *Suttree* McCarthy is indeed right and Erskine wrong. *Suttree* is a gloriously rambling, rambunctious, ill-disciplined gallop through the darker fringes of 1950s America. John Lewis Longley describes it as “all texture and very little structure” (“Suttree” 81). It is dark and comic, philosophical and entertaining, poetic and scatological. Above all, it is an exercise in pluralism such as McCarthy has not essayed before or since. It is an examination of community. Its oblique slant on love is pessimistic but acute. The novel is unique in his oeuvre. It is a masterpiece. In this chapter I wish to explore in detail the novel that should stand as Cormac McCarthy’s greatest achievement.

³ Although Erskine has concerns about *Suttree*, this should not be taken as ambivalence about McCarthy’s ability. His belief in McCarthy was immense. Daniel King, citing evidence from Erskine’s correspondence, quotes him as saying “since [McCarthy] has no agent I have offered to act on his behalf because I think so highly of his work” (King 198).

A World Within the World

Suttree announces itself with two magnificent flourishes. Firstly, in the prolegomenon there is an italicised evocation of the town of Knoxville in its mirrored image as a Tennessean Hades, a “*city beset by a thing unknown*” (4) in which, in Shakespearean terms, “[t]he rest indeed is silence” and “[r]uder forms survive” (5). Secondly, the town is revisited at the start of the novel proper, featuring a man in a skiff on the water, his hand trailing over the gunwale (5). In contrast to the darkness of the italicised opening, then, this second opening would seem to suggest a more idyllic scene. But no, because what follows is a superb panoramic sweep, a single pass over the River Tennessee on a hot summer day as the as yet unnamed fisherman lands a carp, rebaits his line and settles back in the sun until noon, when he rows slowly back upriver and finally passes some rescue workers pulling a corpse from the river. The fisherman, now revealed to be Buddy Suttree, discusses this grim event with another man, Joe, and he learns the incident involves a suicide who has jumped from the Henley Bridge. Suttree moves on and ties up his skiff at a dark cavern beneath the vaulted concrete of the bridge and takes a catfish to an old man, the Ragpicker. Their subsequent discussion on the suicide leads to a conversation about death. Suttree continues upriver to his houseboat and as he stretches out on his cot, he ponders the river, “Cloaca Maxima. Death by drowning, the ticking of a dead man’s watch” (13). This detour to ancient Rome and the *Waste Land* of post-First World War London immediately takes him into a reverie about the death of his grandfather, the first of many such meditations on death and mortality that will come to haunt Suttree in the course of the novel. The narrative now shifts, for the first time, into first person as the narrator and Suttree merge into a single authorial voice, and some of Suttree’s preoccupations begin to emerge. “The dead would take the living with them if they could”, (13) his younger self thinks as he looks at the dead body of his grandfather. He recalls the last letter his father wrote and the reader surmises that some disagreement must have arisen between them. “There is nothing occurring in the

streets”, his father writes. “Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the hopeless and the impotent” (14). Suttree ponders the ways of the “Mother Church” and there is the first reference to a “stillborn” child. This is Suttree’s dead brother, “[m]irror image. Gauche carbon” who “neither spoke nor saw nor does he now”. This dead sibling haunts Suttree. “He is in the limbo of the Christless righteous”, he thinks, while “I [am] in a terrestrial hell”.

This bravura opening is evocative of two similar panoramic openings in iconic American novels, Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁴ In the former, Lewis conjures a picture of middle America in the 1910s, an image which captured the American imagination to such an extent the novel became an enormous bestseller. Its italicised epigraph begins: “*This is America -- a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves*” (6). In the following pages Lewis lovingly recreates the Main Street of “*Gopher Prairie, Minnesota*”, while advising that it is but “*the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina Hills*”. He concludes: “*Main Street is the climax of civilization.*” In Chapter 4, after Carol Kennicott first arrives in the town with her new husband, she walks its length and breadth and there is a photographic description of each shop and building, “its huddle of Fords and lumber-wagons”, the “grasping prairie on every side” (37). Although all of this is frightening to Carol, it is lovingly recreated and presents a picture of order out of chaos, wilderness tamed, Main Street as fulcrum of civilisation. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Sinclair Lewis commented that: “in America most of us – not readers alone but even writers – are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as

⁴ One might also include here James Agee’s *A Death in the Family* (1957), a novel chronicling events in the northern, more wealthy part of Knoxville. Rick Wallach calls it Knoxville’s literary *Old Testament* to Suttree’s *New Testament* (“Ulysses” 78) and discusses the novels in relation to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Louis Palmer provides another useful contextual analysis of the two novels.

our virtues” (*Nobel* n. pag). He introduces this concept with reminiscences about an American pastor from whose essays on fishing Lewis “learned, as a boy, that there is something very important and spiritual about catching fish, if you have no need of doing so”. With the languid fisherman Suttree, and the vivid depiction of a down-at-heel Knoxville riverside, where the streets are “*black and streaming*”, the “*pavings rent with ruin*”, part of “*a mongrel architecture*” (3) composed of “*alien reaches... maugre sinks and interstitial wastes*” (4), Cormac McCarthy emphatically demonstrates that he is one writer who is wholly unafraid to present an inglorious – although still, brilliantly, a celebratory – depiction of American civilisation.

Similarly, *The Grapes of Wrath* begins with a beautiful panoramic sweep, this time of the dustbowl in the 1940s midwest in which nature has laid bare the landscape, where the “last rains” have “not cut the scarred earth” (3) and the winds grow ever stronger, so that “the finest dust did not settle back to earth now, but disappeared into the darkening sky” (4). Dawn comes, but with it “no day” (5) because of the permanent dust cloud. The depiction of the devastation is searing, and yet somehow it does not quite manage to convey the unstoppable force of nature that caused it. Partly, this is due to an occasional lapse into anthropomorphism in the descriptions of nature: clouds appear and disappear “and in a while they did not try any more” (3) while, during the night, the wind “dug cunningly among the rootlets of the corn” and stalks “settled wearily” (4). Partly it is because Steinbeck’s beautiful language is simply too lyrical. Dust is “fluffed up” (4), the wind “cried and whimpered” (5), the world is covered only by a “film of dust” (5). The devastation of nature’s force is hinted at, but not fully evoked. This is not the case in *Suttree*: while powerfully poetic, the descriptions of nature in the novel’s opening are stark and uncompromising. At the creek mouth, “*the mud [is] deltaed and baring out of its rich alluvial harbored bones and dread waste, a wrack of cratewood and condoms and fruitrinds*” (4). The flats are a “*fecal mire*”, the river a “*sluggard ooze*”. There is something almost demonical in this evocation. Steinbeck, for all his genius, has always been vulnerable to criticism of

over-sentimentality. Leo Braudby, for example, writes of “Steinbeck’s ‘myth of high-minded failure’ in *Tortilla Flats*, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*” (92). Suttree is neither Doc nor Mack, the Apollonian and Dionysian opposites who dominate *Cannery Row*, but a man battling his own private demons. And, one feels, for all the mighty fisticuffs that conclude *Cannery Row*, Mack’s boys would not last long against Ab Jones, Red Callahan and the rest of Suttree’s acquaintances. Whatever sentimentality Steinbeck may have occasionally been prey to (and this has been overplayed in my estimation), one can be confident from the opening pages of *Suttree* that no such fault will be in evidence in what follows.

The other great American novel to which *Suttree* is commonly compared is *Huckleberry Finn*. Jerome Charyn’s contemporary review of the novel in the *New York Times Book Review* declared that it “reads like a doomed *Huckleberry Finn*” (14) and the Tennessee River is a moiling post-industrialisation parody of Huck’s glorious Mississippi. A number of critics have subsequently explored the wider affinities of the two novels. Robert Jarrett was one of the first to do so, describing Suttree as “a modern Huck Finn” (viii), while Leslie Harper Worthington has written extensively on the subject and concludes that, with Suttree, “McCarthy has not only extended *Huckleberry Finn*, but transformed it” (127). Bryan Vescio concurs, seeing a complex inter-relationship between Huck and Tom Sawyer and Suttree and Harrogate, in which “*Suttree* appears not merely to echo Twain’s novel, but to reread it” (108). More specifically, Vescio revisits Leslie Fiedler’s depiction of a strand of American fiction he defined as “tragic Humanism” and argues that “McCarthy’s reading of Twain’s novel in *Suttree* both reclaims the earlier work for tragic Humanism and shows that McCarthy’s own work is an extension of that tradition” (108). He goes on: “Suttree and Harrogate become not so much versions of Huck and Tom as embodiments of the two warring impulses in Huck’s personality, his discontentment with both nature and civilization. Suttree is an insider desperately trying to get out, and Harrogate is an outsider desperately trying to get in” (110).

Vescio's reading is acute and convincing, and points to some of the attributes of the novel which make it great. In particular, it points to a deep-rooted and often caustically funny humanism that is ultimately uplifting. Lewis Simpson, writing of William Faulkner's response to the character of Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, observed:

[Faulkner] was astounded at Holden Caulfield's situation. Holden fails of acceptance (sic) into society, Faulkner commented, not because he fails to be 'tough enough or brave enough or deserving enough,' but because he has no society and thus no human race to be accepted into. Contrasting Huck Finn to Holden, Faulkner pointed out that Huck is kicked around a good deal but that he knows he is growing up in a human race. (166)

I would argue that the genius of *Suttree* is that Buddy, too, is growing up in a human race. It is far from an idealised human race, nor even a particularly attractive one, but human it is, and Suttree's flaws are our flaws and his hopes are ours and his fears – of death, the church, malign authority – are ours. Where much of McCarthy's western fiction becomes bogged down in a ponderous religiosity, in *Suttree* the author manages to combine an instinctive curiosity about the nature of the divine beyond with a rude desire for human interaction. John Lewis Longley identifies three principal threads among many in the novel: "Suttree and family; Suttree and love; Suttree and death" ("Suttree" 82). This is correct, but of these the most important is love. *Suttree* is essentially a love story. It chronicles, simultaneously, Buddy Suttree's tortured emotions in terms of religious love, family love, romantic love and community love. As is frequently the case with McCarthy, of course, that love is all too often only revealed in its negative, its lack, yet love remains the driving force behind the novel.

Romantic love

Perhaps the most surprising form of love to appear in a McCarthy novel is romantic love, and some may argue its absence in *Suttree*, too, but it is a significant element of Suttree's existential crisis in the course of the novel. Suttree is Cormac McCarthy's most fully articulated character. Judge Holden may be more dramatically realised, but he is a largely symbolic figure rather than a human archetype, while John Grady Cole and Billy Parham may be deserving of our sympathy but their unbending resolve makes them strangely passive: whatever unfolds in their lives must unfold because they can act no other way. Lester Ballard is a "child of God" (COG 4), but characterisation was not uppermost in McCarthy's intentions in this novel and Lester is more of a gargoyle than a character. The same could perhaps be said for Rinthy and Culla in *Outer Dark*, whose roles are largely symbolic. The man and the boy in *The Road* are finely realised characters whose love for one another is overwhelming but, in the end, the narrative of that novel is too one-dimensional for their true characters to flourish: there is nobody for them to react against. It is to Suttree, then, that one turns to see the full range of human emotions, the gamut of foolishness and courage, belligerence and quiescence, right and wrong, good and bad, laughter and pain. He has a number of sexual encounters in the novel, most notably with the prostitute Joyce with whom he cohabits for some months, and it is known that he is married, but it is with the child Wanda that he comes closest to realising romantic love. The importance of this should not be underestimated because, as I discussed in Chapter One, love is a rare commodity in McCarthy's fiction. Romantic love is seldom experienced and even more seldom articulated.

Wanda's age is never explicitly stated but she is very young, and this is potentially problematic in any analysis of the novel. The first time Suttree meets her, he spies her pissing innocently into the river (307). On the next occasion, when he is invited aboard her father's houseboat, she is described as being a part of a flight of young

girls dashing and “whinnying like goats” and “simpering”, their “girls’ laughter” rising in a flurry (310). In these early exchanges, then, this is clearly a young girl, little more than a child. The first suggestion of anything other comes while Suttree is negotiating a better deal for himself with the father, Reese, and a “soft young breast crosse[s] his nape” as Wanda stretches over him to set the table. This is an entirely innocent act but the description, focusing as it does on her breast rather than simply her arm or her shoulder, suggests a mild erotic charge. As they sit around the cramped table to eat the two younger siblings are suddenly shy but:

This had emboldened the oldest one [Wanda] who set her shoulders and flung her hair back and passed Suttree a platter of biscuits. She was extraordinarily well put together with great dark eyes and hair. (313)

This description, overtly sexualised, appears out of nowhere and is immediately dropped as the focus turns to the meal. It hints that Suttree is admiring her body but there is no suggestion yet of any carnal intent. The two are brought together for their first significant interaction when Wanda’s brother, Willard, reacts badly to poison ivy and his limbs and eyes swell up. Wanda is stationed to take his place working the mussel boat with Suttree. As they eat breakfast before leaving, Wanda “seemed to be at grace” (349): the religious allusion provides a suggestion of her innocence. Next, she is seen sitting demurely in the boat with her knees together and hands in her lap, but then she is depicted with:

Her pointing, her young breasts swinging in the light cloth of her dress, turning in the boat, caught up in a childlike enthusiasm, a long flash of white thighs appearing and hiding again. (350)

This presents an image of a child, ingenuously revealing her developing body. She appears to be an innocent. They continue to row upstream and Suttree teases her by

pretending to chase a watersnake. As she jumps in alarm, Suttree can “see down the front of her dress all the way to her belly, the skin so smooth, the nipples so round and swollen” (350). The reader is given the same vantage point as Suttree and it feels voyeuristic to be viewing this young girl in such a way, but the language is becoming more suggestive, giving an indication of Suttree’s growing attraction. After they have eaten lunch on a grassy knoll above the riverbank and rested for a while:

She took the oars as they went back down and Suttree handled the rail bars.
She would help him haul the filled rails in, smelling of soap and sweat, her
body soft and naked under the dress touching him. (351)

The use of the conditional tense in the second sentence is instructive. It could be read as speculative, implying a subjunctive inconclusiveness about whether this actually happened or Suttree imagined it *might* have. Gradually, the reader is being drawn into an eroticised reverie. Back at the camp, she sits with her knees up and her arms locked around them defensively, but again her body is revealed: “Her full thighs shone in the firelight, the little wedge of pink rayon that pursed her cleft”. It is at this point that Suttree kisses her for the first time. Her breath is a “child’s breath”, yet she opens her mouth to him and slumps against him, her legs falling open for him. Nor does she pull away. Suttree concedes the danger of what they are doing: “I don’t care,” Wanda replies. There is no doubt she is consenting, and that she is as lustful as Suttree, and yet there is a reminder that “[h]ers was a tale of bridled lust” (352). There remains, then, a childlike restraint.

Over the next four pages, descriptions of Wanda shift between childishness and knowingness: she holds her arms aloft “like a child” for Suttree to remove her nightshirt (353). She whimpers like a puppy (354) and Suttree rests his ear next to the “womb of this child” (358). But she returns to him twice in the night for more after their first intercourse (353). She has “hot eyes” and, in a playful reiteration of the

earlier scene, she deliberately presses her breast against Suttree's ear as she removes his empty plate (354). When he tells her they have to stop, she again replies "I don't care" (355). She watches him "with eyes full of questions" (357) and, as they make love in the trees near the camp in the rain, she is "all over him" (358).

Their lovemaking is tempestuous and their attachment is fervid: time and again Wanda is described coming to Suttree. On one occasion, they are called "[t]hese lovers" (358), although they never actually profess their love for one another. Nonetheless, it seems that for Suttree this is more than a mere sexual liaison, and that his feelings for Wanda are intense. His reaction to her death, drifting off in the boat, "a man with no plans for going back the way he'd come nor telling any soul at all what he had seen" (363) and resting for days in his cot in silence, betokens a man enduring grief. Few characters in McCarthy's fiction fall in love, and fewer of them admit to it. Suttree, conflicted and generally reticent about his own emotions, is not about to act against type. One earlier moment of peace in the camp at the height of their affair, however, is suggestive of the love that Suttree feels for Wanda:

A sole star to the north pale and constant, the old wanderer's beacon burning like a molten spike that tethered fast the Small Bear to the turning firmament. He closed his eyes and opened them and looked again. He was struck by the fidelity of this earth he inhabited and he bore it sudden love. (354)

Although McCarthy does not make great use of personification in his work, it is perhaps typical of the emotionally taciturn Suttree that he might profess his love for Wanda in so impersonal a manner. Moreover, this moonlight contemplation comes very soon after the scene in which Reese and Suttree get outrageously drunk in a whorehouse and endure a terrible journey home, after which Suttree reckons "[m]y life is ghastly" (348). This would seem to represent quite a turnaround. I would

suggest, then, that Suttree's feelings for Wanda are genuinely loving and that, indeed, she is the only character in the entire novel to whom he yields.

That is not to say that Suttree regards their relationship as unproblematic: it is clear that he wrestles with his conscience and at one stage calls a halt to the affair. There must always be an ambivalence about the mechanics of a relationship between an older person and someone barely out of childhood, and Suttree does appear to reflect on this. There is, in American letters, a tendency to deproblematise such relationships and large age gaps between male and female lovers are not uncommon. It can be seen in Hemingway – Robert Jordan and Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Colonel Richard Cantwell and Adriana in *Across The River and Into the Trees*, for example. It can be seen with McMurphy and Candy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It is a staple, too, of Hollywood movies. McCarthy follows this deproblematising tradition and the relationship between Suttree and Wanda is not abusive. Nonetheless, nor does he depict it in a wholly positive light.

Suttree is a rounded individual, the most human character McCarthy has created. Some argue that, in the course of the novel, he is in thrall to events, simply reacting to what happens around him. If that is the case, then one could argue that his relationship with Wanda is another such happenstance. Louis Palmer suggests such a reading when he notes: "[Suttree's] action is mainly negative, akin to Stephen Daedalus's 'non servium' ('I will not serve')" (151). Vereen Bell, on the other hand, suggests a more positive outlook: "[Suttree] prefers to live authentically, even in suffering and deprivation, rather than to live in falsehood in comfort" (*Achievement* 72). I think the truth lies somewhere between these two statements. I am not convinced, early on, that Suttree makes positive decisions such as to live authentically. His decisions are largely negative – what he will not do, who he will not like, where he will not live. While Suttree does grow into his existential frame in the course of the novel, it is difficult to see how a man who gets arrested and sent to the workhouse effectively for

being in the wrong place at the wrong time can be argued to be choosing an authentic life. He falls into his life, and his life falls apart than gradually falls back into place again. That is not quite the life cycle of an authentic existentialist hero, but then, Suttree hates to be pigeonholed: “Dont tell me who I’m like,” he says to his uncle John in an early confrontation (18). But, as the novel progresses, and Suttree’s crisis deepens, a different insight into his actions emerges. Interpreting those actions as being “mainly negative” begins to feel superficial. A refusal to act need not be a negative: indeed, it could be forcibly argued that, as with *Bartleby the Scrivener*, who would “prefer not to” and who therefore lives and dies an authentic life, such refusals are entirely positive. In this way, Suttree’s refusal to serve, or to seek accommodation with either his family, or the state, or the church or propriety or simply to do what is expected of him, is symptomatic of a bravery which cannot be parsed as negative. How much easier would it have been, for example, for him to simply accept the offered bottle of whiskey in Howard Clevinger’s and avoid the accusation that he wouldn’t “take a little drink with us poor old niggers” (166)? Unafraid to risk an accusation of racism, Suttree remains resolute. His negative action is a positive strength. His relationships are not purely reactive and his contact with other individuals is conducted purely on his own terms. This will become more evident in a discussion of familial love in the novel.

Familial love

Much has been written about the strained relationship between Suttree and his father and, in particular, how this appears to mirror the relationship between McCarthy and his own father. It is not my intention to rehearse these arguments as there is little further to be said but Suttree’s familial relationships are an important – if enigmatic – aspect of the novel. As William Prather points out, “[a]uthentic communication among members of the Suttree family hardly occurs” (“Color” 40). When they do

meet, the result is either strained or incendiary. When Suttree's mother visits him in the workhouse he breaks down and cries. When he arrives at the family house on the day of his son's funeral, his mother- and father-in-law assault him and he is run out of town by the local sheriff. This is a dysfunctional family, and yet there is very little information about what happened. It is not clear under what circumstances Suttree left his wife and son but, such is the violence of the family's response to his return, one must infer that his departure had been particularly distressing.

The general consensus among critics is that Suttree's habitation among the derelicts of McAnally is a revolt against his family. Rick Wallach suggests "he spends much of his young adult life in rebellion against his class, his father and himself, in refusal to be told who he is" ("Ulysses" 84). Randall Wilhelm presents the corollary of this: "Suttree, by relinquishing his status as a member of the wealthy, moves from a privileged position of seeing to one of being watched" (100). Louis Palmer develops the point further: "His aimlessness, frequent drunkenness, refusal to take offered jobs, and lack of initiative can be seen as conscious ideological retraining, a de-education or deprogramming of his previous life". He concludes: "It is difficult for middle-class readers ... to conceive of such a project" (153).

So why, then, does Suttree undertake this project? It is clear that family relationships are heavily strained and Suttree feels detached from his family and upbringing. In an early discussion with his uncle John (another family occasion which ends acrimoniously), he tells him: "When a man marries beneath him his children are beneath him.... I was expected to turn out badly. My grandfather used to say Blood will tell" (19). This is interpreted by many critics as the beginning of Suttree's disaffection with his kin and his life. There is much to be said for this argument but it cannot be the whole story: resentment about his grandfather's dismissal of the distaff side is insufficient to explain the depth of Suttree's revolt against his family. Bob

Gentry hints at this in a tongue-in-cheek article in which he speaks directly to the character of Suttree himself:

Bud, a side of you is haut bourgeois no matter how commode-hugging-McAnally Flat drunk you get. What would a little love have done for ole Dad? Would you or he have been so capable? Was there no cup of compromise for you to drink from? No sip of humility? (61)

Such is the disaffection that Suttree feels, one wonders whether other factors may be at play. As well as familial difficulties, Suttree's various reminiscences suggest that his childhood was not a universally happy one. Many memories are negative, such as the sense of fear instilled in him by the religious education he was forced to undertake. As Louis Palmer notes, this Catholic school education, with the "deathreek" of the preachers and the "visions of hell" (*S* 254) is "a kind of apprenticeship for death" (Palmer 154). This is an important point because much is made – for obvious reasons – of the amount and nature of references to death in *Suttree* but, equally, the nature of this concomitant stultification of the spirit and the flesh must also be borne in mind. Much of the malaise that infects Suttree in the course of the novel can be laid, not so much against his family, but at the door of those educators, particularly the hell-proclaiming preacher-educators, who instilled in him all of that fear and guilt and diffidence in the first place. Thus, the role of religion becomes paramount.

Amour dei in Suttree

Organised religion fares badly in all of McCarthy's work, and *Suttree* is no exception. Entering the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a drunk Suttree remembers his childhood visits to the place. They are harrowing memories: "Like the child that sat in

these selfsame bones so many black Fridays in terror of his sins. Viceridden child, heart rotten with fear” (252). Such terrors persist. The Knoxville that Suttree inhabits is a troubled and troubling place. Randall Wilhelm calls it an “underworld or wasteland” (97), while John Lewis Longley suggests “Suttree is in Hell, and by his own volition” (“Suttree” 80). For Dianne Luce, it is purgatory, “a world within a world, a subset of Knoxville; but it is also an outward projection of Suttree’s inner landscape: the Knoxville he experiences reflects his inner, spiritual turmoil” (230). Her conclusion is that:

McCarthy’s deployment of purgatory as a syncretic Platonic/gnostic/Dantean metaphor for the earthly struggle for vision emphasizes that Suttree does not literally ascend into paradise, Dante’s next realm, but transcends the despair, blindness, and captivity to materialism that marks the soul’s earthly travail – achieving enlightenment or gnosis or its existentialist equivalent. (229)

This notion of transcendence is echoed by William Prather, who notes that at the end of the novel: “By the roadside stands a Suttree who has completed his existential transformation” (“Color” 39). For Luce, this scene is “clearly a transcendence of his past life” (203). The Christian notion of transcendence, of course, requires the death of the individual before an ascent into the heavenly realm. An argument could be made that Suttree literally does die in the novel and that the decomposing and unrecognisable body found in the bed in his houseboat actually is his mortal remains. Luce’s existential reading, however, is persuasive. Throughout the novel, Suttree has struggled with faith and an accommodation with the spiritual. Vereen Bell suggests that Suttree is “like Stephen Dedalus, an imperfectly lapsed Catholic, left impaled upon the wrong end of a coherent theological dogma in which the world can only be a place of death and suffering” (*Achievement* 69). This is not strictly true: in particular it underplays the strong vein of humour and elements of camaraderie which suffuse the novel. Dianne Luce presents a more nuanced view when she concludes that

Suttree explicitly rejects the Roman Catholic Church, suggesting his reasons for doing so are “gnostic” (269). Rick Wallach goes further, suggesting that:

For Suttree, the possibility of a single exterior reference point has long been disestablished, and by finally rejecting the possibility of a Christian God, Suttree conclusively explodes it. (“Ulysses” 83)

Is it correct to assume that Suttree “rejects” the possibility of a Christian God? There is no question he undergoes an existential examination of his conscience and beliefs, but I would argue the outcome of his deliberations is less clear-cut than Wallach suggests. Suttree does seem to undergo some form of conversion in the course of the novel, most notably in his typhoid-induced delirium. Afterwards, when the priest asks him if he would like to confess and suggests God must have been watching over him, Suttree replies: “You would not believe what watches.” He continues: “He is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving” (461). The latter response is opaque. The first sentence could be read as atheist, denying a Godly presence, but in the second it would seem that the “He” to which Suttree refers must be God. It may be that, like the ragpicker, Suttree “aint no infidel” and although he “always figured they was a God”, he “just never did like him” (147). Although there is evidence throughout the novel that Suttree has difficulties reconciling his worldview with God (particularly the Christian and, even more pertinently, the Roman Catholic conceptions of him), this is not the same as suggesting that he is explicitly rejecting God.

“Barefoot Jesus”

Rather, like most of McCarthy’s characters, he seeks an accommodation with religion which can satisfy his quest for understanding. Edwin Arnold suggests that questioning the relationship between man and God is a “main theme” in *Suttree* (“Blood” 14).

Robert Coles also identifies this strain in McCarthy's writing when he suggests that McCarthy is a "novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning" (90). Although Coles wrote this in 1974, five years before *Suttree* was published, his prescient comments could usefully define the character of Buddy Suttree himself. John Rothfork identifies Suttree as an "essentially religious character" ("Redemption" n.pag), likening his experiences to Christ in Luke's Gospel and calling him a "barefoot Jesus". "If Suttree is a Christ figure," he concludes, "it is Christ crucified".

In this context it is worth remembering that Suttree is a fisherman. The religious significance of this should not be lost; but nor should the fact that he does not, on the face of it, appear to be a very good fisherman. Lying in his cot on his barge, he listens to the sounds of fish surging outside and ponders. "He said that he might have been a fisher of men in another time but these fish now seemed task enough for him" (14). As one of God's disciples Suttree may not, then, conform to the traditional profile of pious reverence and evangelical zeal, but in the community which he inhabits would such attributes be of value? Instead, he is an intelligent, educated man living among the rejects and derelicts of 1950s Knoxville, occasionally offering support, even more occasionally offering advice, but as likely as not being drawn into the drunken brawling and thieving and fucking that constitutes the everyday life of McAnally Flats. One might, then, consider that Suttree – both the individual and the eponymous novel – could offer little prospect of religious insight, some understanding of the elusive *numinosum* that constitutes the backdrop to so much of McCarthy's output. Such an evaluation would certainly chime with Erskine's critique but nonetheless Suttree *is* a fisherman and his thoughts are frequently theological and his fears are eschatological. In *Suttree*, McCarthy rehearses some of the issues which come to overwhelm his later fiction. Here, however, amid the comic detritus of lives lived outrageously, he maintains a balance between the City of God and the City of Man

which he cannot sustain in much of his subsequent output. And Suttree the “barefoot Jesus” is a key component of this.

There is, for example, some spiritual connection between Ab Jones and Suttree. Ab is one of the most clearly defined characters in the novel and his relationship with Suttree is a close one. He is a giant of a man, with a “scarred black face” (202) and, on his back, “galaxies of scars and old rendings” (230). Suttree has a high regard for this man, returning frequently to visit him and interceding with Mother She on his behalf. Their longest scene together occurs when Ab is recuperating after another beating at the hands of the police. Immediately prior to this, however, is a wildly humorous encounter between Suttree and the goatman. When the goatman, a part-time preacher with a sign saying “Jesus Wept” on his wagon (197), hears that Suttree is a fisherman he asks him what he catches. Suttree reels off the answer and the goatman replies: “Man dont always catch what he fishes for” (199). The goatman proceeds to discuss scripture and it is evident that he is a man of God (albeit a relatively sane one, in contrast to the outlandish religious lunatics who appear elsewhere in the novel). It is hard to ignore, then, the theological symbolism behind his comment about fish catches. In the next scene, as Suttree sits down by Ab’s bedside, he is referred to as “the fisherman” (202), immediately recalling the evangelical allusion three pages before: Suttree as fisherman, catching what? It is Ab, however, who delivers the homily. “Look out for you own,” he tells the younger man (203). “I dont have any own,” Suttree replies. “Yes you do,” says Ab. He continues:

Let me tell you about some people, he said. Some people aint worth a shit rich or poor and that’s all you can say about em. But I never knowed a man that had it all but what he didnt forget where he come from.... I got no use for a man piss backwards on his friends. (203)

He develops the theme:

You see a man, he scratchin to make it. Think once he got it made everthing be all right. But you dont never have it made. Dont care who you are. Look up one mornin and you a old man. You aint got nothin to say to your brother. Dont know no more'n when you started. (203)

This, then, is the gospel of McAnally Flats. Do not forget your own. Do not renege on your past. Do not rest on your laurels. Do not presume to be content forever. It is a gospel of community, of love, of memory, of belonging, most of all of realism. Suttree the disciple listens, and one knows he acts upon Ab's words. It is shown, conclusively, that Suttree is a fisherman of McAnally in the tragic scene leading to Ab's death which I shall examine in more detail later.

This description of Suttree as "the fisherman" is one of only four such in the novel. The other three are of interest, too. One is when Blind Richard hails Suttree from the bridge while "the fisherman" lies in his cot on his barge. Here, too, there is a religious reference: Richard "raised his arm into the lamplight like a supplicant to the chalice of God's bright mercies" (372-3). The other two occasions refer to the old crazy reverend who allegedly castrated himself and who shouts hellfire and damnation at everyone passing beneath his window. In the first reference, "the invector" moves to a different window in order to be able to "still watch for the fisherman to pass" and shout his "invective and sullen oaths" at him (66). The second reference, however, refers to a specific occasion, when a reformed and transcendent Suttree is leaving Knoxville for the final time. This time there is no verbal brimstone: "The eunuch was asleep in his chair and he stirred and mumbled fitfully as if the departing steps of the fisherman depleted his dreams but he did not wake" (469). In other words, there is nothing, or no-one for him to fulminate against, only a fisherman, a man of spirit, going on his way.

Fifty pages prior to this, when Suttree is returning to McAnally after his affair with Joyce, he passes the mad eunuch's window again and on this occasion he is again given the full treatment. "God spare his blackened soul," the madman yells at Suttree. He continues:

Back for the fishing are ye? God himself dont look too close at what lies on that river bottom. Fit enough for the likes of you. Ay. He knows it's Sunday for he's drunker than normal. It'll take more than helping old blind men cross the street to save you from the hell you'll soon inhabit. (412)

And yet, within fifty pages, at novel's end, one can see that there is nothing about this fisherman to trouble the old man. What happens? After the interlude with Joyce, Suttree returns to his boat and buys "three five hundred yard spools of nylon trotline" (413) and returns to his career as fisherman, with all the symbolism that entails. Three days later, after he has eaten supper, "an uneasy peace came over him, a strange kind of contentment". For tortured Suttree, the import of this seeming happiness should not be underestimated. He converses with his double, his reflection wrought in a glass bell by the lamp flame. Unlike the previous doubles who have so beset him, however, this time "[h]e leaned and blew the away the flame, his double" (414). He has recanted the vanity of his previous existence, understood that he cannot stand against the tide of existence. "One thing", he says. "I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all" (414). John Lewis Longley suggests this passage "may be the definitive statement of the Existential consciousness" ("Suttree" 82). If that means coming to an accommodation with your life and that of those around you, then this is true. As Suttree says: "It is not alone in the dark of death that all souls are one soul" (414). The fisherman is back among his flock, his community and, in the remaining pages of the novel, he hovers over a community that

is unravelling. It is a “season of death and epidemic violence” (416). Through it, Suttree ministers to the losers of McAnally – Leonard stricken with gonorrhea of the colon, the dead ragpicker, Harrogate pursued by the authorities, Aunt Alice in the asylum, the final, fatal confrontation between Ab Jones and Tarzan Quinn. His role is becoming clear.

Inner and outer lives

If Suttree is a “barefoot Jesus” spreading the gospel of McAnally, what precisely is the spiritual investigation wrought by the novel? Given McCarthy’s mistrust of organised religion, of course, one should not expect a straightforward Christian interpretation of gospel. In considering this question, it is worth observing both the internalising and externalising natures of the narrative in relation to the character of Suttree. As the novel’s central character, Suttree is dominant and, through the regular narrative technique of eliding the thoughts of the narrator and the protagonist, the reader is privileged to see the world from Suttree’s perspective. Thus, the reader is able to experience both his interior thoughts and exterior actions. Both are essential to the unfolding of the novel’s drama.

Much of Suttree’s internal contemplation is focused on death, which thereby becomes a principal theme in the novel. For John Lewis Longley, “[d]eath is the controlling image: death as enemy, death as danger, death as omnipresent event” (“Suttree” 84). Forrest Robinson writes:

At the same time that he acknowledges his fear of death, Suttree longs for release into oblivion. “How surely are the dead beyond death,” he reflects. “Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is

not a curse. Far from it". Though the novel ends with brief, tentative gestures of affirmation, they do little to relieve the accumulated weight of disenchantment. Suttree may glimpse some final, huddled human solidarity, but there is no evidence that the light penetrates his settled nihilism. There are no resurrections in his Knoxville. (167-8)

This goes too far: again, it does not allow for the leavening nature of the many humorous passages which punctuate the novel. Moreover, it is unfair on Suttree. When he made those comments he was consumed by grief on the day of his son's funeral. Further, he had recently been involved in a violent confrontation with his in-laws and his pariah status had been unequivocally confirmed. And he undoubtedly feels considerable guilt. Before he arrives at the family home, he wonders what the boy's mother will say and "[r]emorse lodged in his gorge like a great salt cinder" (150). As he watches the funeral, he is "choked with a sorrow he had never known" (153). In such circumstances, this degree of morbidity is surely to be expected and excused. Vereen Bell, another who has suggested an element of nihilism in McCarthy's work, considers nonetheless that the novel is "about transcending death – not in fact, of course, but in the mind and spirit" (*Achievement* 69). This is true, but only up to a point. It is about transcending death in as much as Suttree finally manages to overcome his morbid obsessions. In the end, it is only by leaving his community, the deadbeats of McAnally, that he is free to take a place in society. There is, of course, an irony in this because, as I shall demonstrate, it is the notion of community that makes *Suttree* such a work of genius. And this is another reason why Robinson is wrong in his suggestion of a sustained "weight of disenchantment". Suttree's spiritual meditations are long and painful, but in the end they are affirmative, not disenchanting.

John Rothfork approaches Suttree's spirituality by invoking Meister Eckhart, whom he describes, somewhat categorically, as "the greatest of the medieval mystics"

("Redemption" n.pag). Jacob Boehme, much beloved of McCarthy scholars, may be one to question that assertion. Eckhart, Rothfork argues, "offers insight into both the mysteries of *Suttree* and perhaps into McCarthy's oeuvre". Eckhart's central claim was that "God and I are one in process", which Rothfork finds echoed in much of *Suttree*. Most notably, he quotes Suttree's remark that "I know all souls are one and all souls lonely" (*S* 459). He might also have highlighted Suttree's earlier assertion that "[a] man is all men" (422). Rothfork explains that the process Eckhart refers to is "perception and language that makes 'the core of God ... also my core'" ("Redemption" n.pag). Strictly speaking, this process is not perception, which is more correctly an awareness of *external* forces, but apperception, a term coined by Leibnitz to describe the introspection and reflection the mind undergoes when it considers its own inner state. However, Rothfork's analysis and, in particular, the way he goes on to meld internal and external awareness, has merit:

All souls are one, not because they objectively share in some quasi-physical Boehme 'unground,' but because we speak and listen and care in Heidegger's sense of the word. From childhood to senility, we speak our need to each other and perhaps to an incarnate God. The significance is not in what we say, but as Eckhart suggested, that we speak and pray and curse. This is incarnation, the mystery of the subjective transubstantiating into the objective. ("Redemption" n.pag)

In this, and in the notion of all souls being one, McCarthy is again touching on aspects of community. Dianne Luce, in identifying a Christly nature in Suttree that is mirrored by other characters in the novel, begins to examine this. She writes:

It is not Suttree alone in this novel who enacts Christlike care for others; here, as in the Border Trilogy, *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*, McCarthy risks the charge of sentimentality to convey his vision that in such acts lies

humanity's truest ministry, a salvific communion, simple and available to all, that paradoxically coexists with man's tendency to feral violence. (266)

This acute reading of McCarthy points to both his great strength and great weakness as a writer. Luce is certainly correct in her analysis, but too often McCarthy overloads his narrative with theologising to a degree that it becomes not sentimental but dogmatic. At his best, however, he transcends this and, in *Suttree*, can be seen a man's pained and painful quest for spiritual knowledge based within the community of humanity. If Suttree is a disciple, he is a *human* disciple and the gospel that is preached is one of human love. It is difficult to conceive how a novel which contains so much humour, so much laughter, so much communal celebration – for good or ill – could be construed as promoting anything else.

Love of community

This essential element of humour is drawn almost entirely from the people who inhabit McAnally Flats. Nowhere in McCarthy's fiction is there the degree of pluralism that can be seen in *Suttree*. The cast of characters is immense. The range of these characters is extraordinary. The deftness with which they are depicted – and Erskine is surely wrong in his estimation that many of them are “indistinguishable” – is remarkable. They are comic, vibrant, violent, unpredictable. These characters come to life. They feel real. Perhaps this is not surprising: Mike Gibson gives a comprehensive account of some of the real-life contemporaries of “Charlie McCarthy” in Knoxville in the 1940s and 1950s who came later, beneath varying layers of disguise, to occupy the pages of *Suttree*. “His accuracy in depicting mid-twentieth-century Knoxville is almost uncanny”, Gibson writes (31), noting that, even today, old friends can guide the curious around various locations in the novel. Jack Neely, a Knoxville journalist and McCarthy expert, while acknowledging that *Suttree*

“doesn’t make Knoxville sound nice”, reports that locals “still argue about how real each [character] is, and who they were really, as if this so-called novel were a painstakingly accurate anthropological study” (1). Wesley Morgan, another renowned Knoxvillean, notes in a conversation with artist, Peter Josyph:

...one of the things that struck me early on was something I had read in a review of *Suttree*: McCarthy’s *colorfully imaginative characters*. I said: “They weren’t imagined – most of them were people who were running around, identifiable”. (Josyph 46)

Given its strong basis in reality, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a vitality to the novel which does not exist anywhere else in McCarthy. Not everyone appears to agree, however. D.S. Butterworth argues:

Suttree, despite its recentering of the marginal, maintains a dehumanized view of its human subjects by equating them with physical objects. They are trapped in time, space, social and economic circumstances, as living fossils, as empty containers in the surrounding sediment of the world. (137)

I could relate this description to others of McCarthy’s novels – the anachronistic cowboys of the Border Trilogy, for example, or the lunatic cast of *Blood Meridian* somehow being asked to stand in for modern humanity in a critique of post-Enlightenment civilisation, but I find it impossible to read the range and depth and tumult of human life depicted in *Suttree* and apprehend it as a “dehumanized view” of humanity. If these characters are trapped in time, space, and social and economic circumstances, aren’t we all? Butterworth contends that McCarthy is unwilling to rehumanise socially marginal characters as the consequence of his “geological view of humankind” (131). This is an excellent argument, but it is aimed at the wrong novel. He goes on to say “McCarthy contextualizes the human subject first and

foremost in the world of things, treating even living individuals as archaeological finds, as odd birds whose petrific bones are immune to the chisel, whose stories are nothing more than tracks in mud even as they speak” (132). That is a powerful charge, and I can see resonances of it in the inconsequential Rinthy and Culla wandering through *Outer Dark*, in Ben Talfair droning from his podium about masonry in *The Stonemason*, in that mystic out-of-time Uncle Ather in *The Orchard Keeper*, in the fossilised history lesson of *Blood Meridian*, in John Grady Cole’s attempt to live in a past that never existed, in the interchangeable prophets of the Trilogy, in the ponderous theologising of that same series, in the repeated exaltation of the ancients throughout McCarthy’s writing, in the inanimate baddies of *The Road*, in judge Holden reincarnated as Anton Chigurh to wreak his havoc one more time in *No Country for Old Men*.

But *Suttree*? Black transvestite Trippin Through the Dew, who “they cant do without”, with her “whinny of girlish laughter” (467)? Harrogate with his dreams and notions and implacable incompetence, his outrageous boat, his dead bats, stuffed phone boxes? Solid, stolid Michael? Blind Richard looking for his cigarette and then drinking it? Joyce and her stuffed ape? A man lost and hurting, hiding in a cemetery as his son is buried? Leonard the catamite and his inopportunist resurfacing father (“Fathers will do that” (417))? Not to mention watermelons. Or dead shoats. Or rupturing sewers. If these are “archaeological finds”, then the archaeology of humanity is a multifarious science indeed.

The McAnally Flats of *Suttree* seems to me the one space in McCarthy’s universe that is free of such strictures. John Rothfork notes: “Unlike McCarthy’s earlier characters, Suttree seems to have a choice about the social contexts in which he might invest his life” (“Redemption” n.pag). Of course, one could argue, as Louis Palmer does, that “the denizens of McAnally Flats are society’s rejects, not rebels. They are not united by choice, by institutions, by family, or by a shared philosophy. Only Suttree is there

by choice” (152). But the fact is, Suttree *does* choose to stay in McAnally and, in so doing, brings some element of choice to it. He is a disciple of McAnallism. Why does he do that? The answer would appear to lie in the extraordinary pluralism that surrounds the characters who inhabit this purgatorial wasteland. What can be seen is an analysis of class, of race, of sex, of sexuality, of insiders and outsiders, society and anarchy. And all of it is portrayed with a bawdy humour that transcends the theologising and existential desperation which attends Suttree’s decline in a way that does not happen anywhere else in McCarthy’s oeuvre. One suspects this may not have been what Sinclair Lewis had in mind when he talked of a “glorification of our faults as well as our virtues” (*Nobel* n.pag), but faults and virtues there are in abundance in *Suttree*.

Love and life in the community of McAnally Flats

Like D.S. Butterworth, Duane Carr finds flaws in McCarthy’s presentation of character, suggesting of his southern novels in general that they present “some of the most blatant stereotypes of Southern ‘rednecks’ in contemporary American fiction” (9). Of *Suttree* specifically, he complains about Suttree’s stereotypical depiction of “educated man’s existential condition” (18) and Harrogate’s “innocent naivete and contentment of a simple country boy” (19). In this latter description, it is impossible to find a single adjective or noun which accurately depicts the “not lovable” (54) but ingenious, disaffected and criminally-minded city-rat, Gene Harrogate. Carr misses the point. It may be that in the southern novels there is a degree of stereotyping, but this is deliberate, and it evolves. In *Suttree*, McCarthy operates within the historical period of the time but, by so doing, manages to transcend it. The “white trash” of McAnally Flats are a disreputable bunch and one might not wish to spend much time with them, but how much more realistic is their evocation than that of Mack and the

boys in *Cannery Row*? How much better can the reader attempt to perceive the world as Suttree's companions comprehend it?

Many critics see in the depiction of McAnally Flats and its inhabitants a critique of the modern world. Given the nature of McCarthy's preoccupations, as explored in previous chapters, it is inconceivable that this would not be the case. Douglas Canfield likens Suttree's escape at the novel's conclusion to a flight from "the collapse of Western civilization" ("Dawning" 666). For Dianne Luce, Suttree is seeking to free himself from drowning in "the materialism of mortal flesh and the materialism of American culture" (*Reading* 197). Randall Wilhelm expands on this:

McCarthy, by staging the events of the novel between the years 1950-1955, dramatizes [a] germinating split in postwar American civic life between the 'haves and have-nots'; those sanctioned and recognized by municipal authority retain their privileged status in the socio-economic system, while those are (sic) unable or unwilling to perform for the status quo are relegated to the margins of society, rendered 'invisible' to the public eye. (100)

This leads, he suggests, to an "interplay" between "civic-sanctioned urban areas and disenfranchised minority slums", "underscoring the theme of rising municipal power in the postwar decades and the appropriation and marking off of geographic areas based on race and economic status" (102). I am unconvinced that such "marking off" is a distinctively postwar activity, but this is certainly an accurate summation of the situation in Knoxville in *Suttree*, with the disenfranchised inhabitants of McAnally and the great and the good, represented by Suttree's father, who live in the north of the city. Louis Palmer sees this in terms of a "class war out of the Communist Manifesto, pitting a hapless proletarian underclass against a crass and rapacious owning class" (149). This could justifiably be argued but, in truth, there is little of the "owning class" in *Suttree*. What can be seen, however, is authority. And it is against

this that the hapless proletarians of *Suttree* mostly battle – Ab Jones against the police, Leonard against the welfare people, Harrogate and the health authorities, Callahan and the prison guards. These organisations are, as Palmer points out, the “sometimes brutal enforcers of the elite’s power” (149) but enforcers are not the owning class *per se*. Palmer is absolutely right, however, when he points out: “it is not the didactic message of the novel that the poor are necessarily better in a moral sense. Like the dead, they just do less harm” (156).

Gender and sexuality

McCarthy is often accused, with some justification, of being a very male-focused writer. There are few women in his novels, and even fewer strong women. The dueña and Alejandra, in *All the Pretty Horses*, are obvious exceptions, as are Loretta and Carla Jean in *No Country for Old Men*, while it is reported that the protagonist of McCarthy’s forthcoming work, *The Passenger*, is female.⁵ Rinthy, in *Outer Dark*, has a quiet nobility but she is hardly a dynamic presence. Sarah Borginnis, in *Blood Meridian*, is a forceful woman who takes matters into her own hands when she assumes responsibility for the idiot, but she appears only briefly. Other than this, women are largely under-represented and under-characterised in McCarthy’s work. One might argue that, in *Suttree*, the trend continues. The major female characters are a witch, Mother She, a prostitute, Joyce, and a child-woman, Wanda. John Rothfork suggests:

With women Sut exhibits none of the compassion that flows among the outcast disciples: Ab Jones, City Rat Harrogate, Michael (the Indian-angel who floats on a driftwood raft in the river), and the nameless ragman. This

⁵ This novel has been listed as “forthcoming” for some time and, as yet, there is no definitive publishing date.

may be a boy's club of latent homosexuality, but they minister to each other simply by talking, by listening, by caring. ("Redemption" n.pag)

While it is unarguable that the McAnally congregation is a "boy's club" (although the "latent homosexuality" is somewhat speculative), I am unconvinced by Rothfork's argument. As I have already argued, I believe Suttree's relationship with Wanda to be a loving one. He remains patient and polite with the fussing Aunt Martha. His relationship with Joyce, though doomed, is initially satisfactory. (Admittedly, he kicks his mother-in-law in the head, but only under the severest provocation.) It is arguable whether there is any material difference in the way Suttree interacts with men and women, blacks and whites, straights and gays. Here, his relationship with Trippin Through the Dew is worthy of consideration. Trippin is "a black and ageless androgyne in fool's silks" (110), a transvestite or transsexual who is part of Suttree's wider cohort of friends. Trippin thinks Suttree is "a pretty thing" (112) and one can infer from the context of their conversations that they have some history. Despite her glamorous nomenclature, however, Suttree always refers to Trippin as John, and it seems unlikely that any homosexual undercurrent is at work here. As Jessica Simmons notes, McCarthy twice refers to Trippin Through the Dew with the female pronoun and over a dozen times with the male (56). Simmons also draws attention to Suttree's question to Trippin about the age of Sweet Evenin Breeze, another transgendered individual: "You or her. Him. It" (412). Suggesting authorial "discomfort" with those who resist gender stereotyping, Simmons also highlights the narratorial voice's description of the gay men in the Huddle Bar as "a group of dubious gender". Nonetheless, Simmons suggests that McCarthy's portrayal of Trippin is not pejorative, and she is correct in this conclusion. On the contrary, Trippin is a positive force in the novel, someone with a strong and obvious and seemingly affectionate relationship with Suttree. Indeed, Simmons makes a persuasive argument that Trippin is another of the doubles who surround Suttree (57) and concludes that she is "a character who helps further define, illuminate, and enrich

both the book and its protagonist” (58). This is consistent with the novel’s broad pluralism, through which outcasts and outsiders of all sorts are given a voice rarely granted to them in American letters. The stale voice of reason – as represented by Suttree’s father – tries to dismiss life on the streets as “a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent” (14) but McCarthy’s novel appears specifically designed to give the lie to this. And it is this pluralism, perhaps, that Albert Erskine found so perplexing in 1977.

Race

In her examination of “white trash” in *Suttree*, Karissa McCoy expresses surprise “that academic critics have not more fully explored this material offal [*Suttree*] for the class and race relations that it evokes” (136). Similarly, Jay Watson notes how puzzling it is, given the period in which *Suttree* is set – right at the start of the Civil Rights movement – that it “fails to mention these historical events, or the larger movement of which they were a part” (129). Nonetheless, he argues, there are “indirect and ambivalent ways in which... [it] ... registers the coming of the Civil Rights Movement [and] the massive, systemic social changes it introduced” (130). Watson considers some difficulties in the novel, such as Suttree’s rape by the black Mother She and the similarity between Leonard’s disposal of his father’s body in the Tennessee and the sinking of Emmett Till’s mutilated body in the Tallahatchie River in 1955, but he carefully places this analysis in its historical context. For southern writers, the emerging Civil Rights movement presented difficulties, which Watson labels the “Quentin problem” after Faulkner’s Quentin Compson. He explains the problem as “the necessity of elite white southerners to come to grips with modernity in all its economic, racial and sexual fluidity” (133). Suggesting the Quentin problem presents postwar southern writers with “a literary dead-end” (134), he concludes that Suttree’s westward flight at the novel’s end “complicates things” and considers, as a

result, that it is a “deeply conflicted novel”. Suttree’s departure could be interpreted, Watson suggests, as “a headlong flight from the promise of dynamic historical change” (134). This is a sophisticated and persuasive argument in as far as it goes, but it underplays the way that race is considered in the novel.

A number of racist remarks are made in *Suttree*, of course. Given the range of characters who inhabit it, nothing other would be credible. Probably Harrogate is the greatest offender. Harrogate, remember, is an ill-educated youth, newly arrived from the country and, although possessed of a wily cunning, not blessed with reflective ability. It would be surprising if he did not parrot the sort of language and opinions of those around him. Freshly in Knoxville and looking for a place to stay by the river he espies a black family and retreats: “He reckoned he’d not be put to living next door to niggers leastways” (98). Later he relates this to Suttree: the position offers no privacy and “[b]esides they’s niggers lives next door” (115). Suttree does not remonstrate with his protégé, because his is not a pedagogical or paternal relationship. His disdain is evident, however: “Oh well, said Suttree. Niggers” (115). Later still, when Harrogate is catching pigeons in rat traps with the intention of trading what he doesn’t require, he tells Suttree he’ll sell them to niggers. “Shit, they’ll buy anything” (117). Again, Suttree declines to respond. As Harrogate settles into Knoxville life he grows more confident, his alimentary aspirations rising from pigeons to pigs. “If them niggers catches you eatin one of their hogs,” warns Suttree, “they will have your ass” (138). It is obvious, however, that Suttree’s advice will go unheeded, and what follows is one of the great comic set-pieces in the novel in which the hapless Harrogate goes head-to-head with a piglet and nearly loses. That the pig’s head was stuck in a bucket for most of the encounter should perhaps have counted in Harrogate’s favour, but before he manages to land the fatal blow he endures painful injuries of his own. He then tries to skin the beast, at which point the owner, Mr Rufus, arrives and finds his property “like something recovered from a shallow grave” (140). Rufus is described as “a black of a contemplative nature” and “slightly drunk”,

and he enjoys baiting Harrogate. Will the boy pay compensation for the loss of the shoat, he asks (141) and he threatens to set the law on him if he doesn't work to pay off his dues. Harrogate tries to negotiate a fee but "Rufus didnt even answer this" (143). Harrogate takes to the work and enjoys the regular food and "[l]ong after he'd worked out the price of the shoat he was still around to fetch and carry or lie these last warm days in a den" (144). There is no question here who is the dominant character, and Harrogate knows it. Still, his inherent racism endures. Attracted by "a pair of nubile young black girls" who live nearby, he asks Suttree: "You ever get so drunk you kissed a nigger?" Suttree's response is laconic: "I've been a whole lot drunker than that" (144). Even with these girls, Harrogate is comprehensively beaten: he tries to lure them to his bower with comic-books, but the girls "came sidling and giggling after supper and carried off his whole supply". Most notably, on Thanksgiving Day, amid bitter cold, when Suttree goes to rejoin Harrogate at the Rufuses, he finds him "sitting by the stove with a parcel of blacks all of whom were drunk or working at it" (176). Apart from the fact Harrogate, too, is reeling drunk, it could be a normal domestic scene: Harrogate and his adoptive black family. Thus, it is impossible to take Harrogate's racism seriously but, by not drawing attention to it or moralising or using Suttree to force an alternative view, McCarthy allows the city rat's foolishness to tell its own story.⁶

The issue of racism is addressed more seriously in the novel, but again without any obviously didactic overtones. The intimidating figure of Ab Jones is central to this. Throughout the novel, Ab's proclivity for violence is stressed. Drinkers in his bar harassing Suttree and Ab's wife Doll are warned: "If you cause that big son of a bitch to come out here as bad as he feels he is going to kill you where you sit" (231). However, the focus of Ab's violence is authority, and in particular the police, and in

⁶ Similarly, McCarthy ensures Rufus is not depicted as some patronisingly saintly black character trailing his innate nobility behind him like a Morgan Freeman character in a Hollywood movie. In a later scene he is shown sitting on the kerb drinking moonshine like any other McAnally rebrobate and then struggling to get a drunk dog out of his slop bucket.

particular the corrupt police chief, Tarzan Quinn. It is as though war has been declared between the two parties, although who was the original aggressor and who the defender it is by now impossible to tell. As Randall Wilhelm explains:

For Jones, as well as for many others in the underclass, “civil disobedience” in the form of perpetual defiance authors meaning into the world. By fighting and physically engaging the forces of civic power and oppression, one creates a *raison d’être* in an absurd world, but it is a battle that can never be won, only prolonged for a time. (98-9)

Although Wilhelm is right to suggest that defiance in this way is an existential act, this perhaps underplays the fact that, for people like Ab, there is little alternative but to react in this way. Ab is frequently targeted and abused by the authorities. Vereen Bell suggests: “Ab’s conflict with the police seems vaguely theological, as if he had displaced his resentment toward an unapparent God onto His tangible and all too willing emissaries on earth” (*Achievement* 82). As I have previously explained, I consider there to be a spiritual dimension to the relationship between Suttree and Ab, but to argue that there is a theological element to Ab’s conflict is vague to the point of untenable. Rather, his conflict is political. As he tells Suttree, “[t]hey dont like no nigger walkin around like a man” (203). Apart from his fists, the only defence Ab has against authority is the witchery of Mother She, and even this fails him: when he and Suttree visit the old woman to have a spell cast against Tarzan Quinn, once Mother She casts her runes she proclaims that it is Suttree who is in need of help and refuses to address Ab’s concerns (279ff). Thus, he is alone in his fight with authority. It is inevitable he will lose, and so he does, in a harrowing late-night encounter in which he and Suttree are chased by the police and Ab is badly beaten and taken to the police station, whereupon he meets his fate at the hands of his nemesis, Quinn. Again, race is not explicitly mentioned in this episode, but it remains at its root. It is the capture of Ab which causes Suttree to steal the police car and drive it into the river, an act which

Erskine described as “juvenile”. Erskine is wrong. Daniel Traber correctly identifies it as a “politically subversive act” (38). It is an act of civil disobedience brought about by his fury at the treatment of Ab Jones.

Traber further suggests it arouses Suttree from his passivity, through which he “remains comfortably restrained from taking any action by his nihilistic attitude”. Although there is a passivity to some of Suttree’s behaviour, particularly in the early stages, this is seriously overplayed by many critics. He spends four days searching the tunnels for Harrogate, remember, he consistently looks out for many of his companions, he even assists Leonard with his madcap scheme to get rid of his dead father. Moreover, I would take issue with his attitude being “nihilistic”. Any charge of nihilism in *Suttree* is redeemed by the novel’s simultaneous focus on external events such as Ab’s death and Suttree’s internal musings. Nonetheless, Traber is correct to suppose that this episode galvanises Suttree in a profound way, leading directly to his ultimate departure from Knoxville. It is interesting to compare Suttree’s trashing of the police car with a very similar incident in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. In that, Hazel Motes’s beloved car is taken by a police officer and driven off the road and down a hill. The import of this act is that Hazel has invested in his car some spiritual power, almost as though it could replace God himself. Its loss forces him towards acceptance of God and, thus, redemption. By having Suttree steal and trash a police car in almost identical fashion, McCarthy inverts O’Connor’s original story and turns an act with theological symbolism into a politically charged one. The bravery inherent in Suttree’s act should not be overlooked. Karissa McCoy notes that “Suttree is an existential hero who is able to transcend materiality [but] I also contend his ability to do so arises from his background of racial and class privilege, however much he attempts to disown that inheritance” (137). While this is unarguably true – in 1950s America life was more straightforward for a white person than a black, and for a middle-class white person than a poor white – I would nonetheless argue that Suttree deserves credit for the resolute way he remains true to his principles. Noel

Polk, for example, suggests that Suttree “is alternately engaged with and in retreat from the denizens of McAnally Flats, but he is always curiously detached from them emotionally, though he seems to have some fondness for a couple of them, especially the ragpicker” (67). He goes on:

In *Suttree* ... I have no real sense that the characters, especially Cornelius [ie Suttree], are as completely aware of or as interested in the external world as the narrator is. Cornelius, Harrogate, the others, are merely part of a detailed landscape that McCarthy is painting for us, and I get no sense that McCarthy uses the landscape to reflect his characters’ consciousnesses. (72-3)

I do not accept this. The balance between internal philosophising and external action is acutely realised in *Suttree*, and indeed the two are better balanced than in any other of McCarthy’s works. In his western novels, in particular, the philosophising becomes so overwhelming it distracts and detracts from the narrative thread. Suttree, on the other hand, would be unimaginable without the external world he inhabits and, although he may appear passive, his interaction with that world is total. Rick Wallach picks up this point when he stresses that *Suttree* is a narrative of community:

The extent to which the human spirit is grounded in spatial origins couldn’t be more powerfully enunciated than by the story *Suttree* tells; ... Knoxville itself seems within its pages to die and approach rebirth as an allegory of Suttree’s tribulations and eventual awakening. (“Ulysses” 78)

Remember, too, that throughout the novel Suttree interacts with a range of doubles: his dead twin, the ragpicker, Michael, Harrogate and others all act as another aspect of Suttree himself: “Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to hand” (28). As Dianne Luce notes: “In *Suttree*, as in *The Divine Comedy*, everyone with whom the protagonist interacts is in one way or another a double and a cautionary model for him

and for the reader, a challenge to his compassion as well as ours” (*Reading* 234). The impact of this is to ensure that Suttree is engaging simultaneously with the internal and the external: the doubles allow him to confront his core beliefs and concerns and insecurities, but they also force him to play out those concerns in the externalised world. Unlike the indistinguishable array of prophets in the Trilogy, the mystical Suttree is a product of the City of Man.

Success and failure in the City of Man

Through it all, one is left with the question of whether Suttree, the man, is a failure or a success. I would argue strongly for the latter, though not all critics may agree. Karissa McCoy, for example, suggests “he never fully succeeds in forging a different identity” (143). This is not correct. By the end of the novel he has indeed forged a new identity – perhaps literally so, since the unrecognisable corpse in his bed is likely to be mistaken for him, leaving him free to assume whatever mantle he chooses in his new life.⁷ Indeed, this is the whole point of the novel. McCoy evokes Baudrillard to advance her argument, suggesting the “privileged classes have the prerogative to ‘di[g] about in the stockpile of signs” (143). I am wary of invoking modern critics in discussing McCarthy, since his work itself seems to eschew any such semblance of modernity. To suggest, as McCoy appears to here, that Suttree is exercising the privileges of his position in society to dig about in the detritus of poor white living is to make an unnecessary and unqualified judgement. He does not just “dig about” with these people: he interacts, he is one of them, he looks out for them. However, Suttree does fail, to some extent. The disintegration of his life is at times unbearably painful. Does this mean, though, that he is a failed individual? More pertinently, does it mean, as some attest, that he is suicidal? Or in existential despair?

⁷ In fact, McCoy refers to this same episode in her paper (143-44).

Suttree may, indeed, present an accurate imagine of existential man, but this should not be characterised as despairing. The absurdity of the human experience, as enunciated by writers such as Albert Camus, does not equate to nihilism, or pointlessness in existence, or a validation of suicide: quite the reverse. What Camus taught, through his existential heroes, is that precisely because the world is absurd, it is incumbent on humans to react against it, to fight it, to exert our own control over it. Particularly in the early stages of the novel it would be difficult to argue that *Suttree* does this: he roams from one drunken nightmare to another, avowedly resisting responsibility for anything, living, it seems, in as close to an intellectual vacuum as he can manage.

Yet at the end he is an existential hero. He does find meaning. He does invoke the power to respond to his surroundings. Nothing becomes Buddy *Suttree* as well as his departure from Knoxville. It is a triumphant moment. One could argue that the novel's final words, "Fly them", suggest that his flight will not release him from the existential void, and that the demons which have assailed him throughout will remain at his heels. But I would argue the opposite. The point is that he does fly them, he is flying them, he will continue to fly them. At this point, *Suttree* is closer not to Hamlet, with whom Albert Erskine compared him, but Richard III, in that pivotal scene near the end of Shakespeare's play when, for the first and almost only time, some semblance of the humanity behind the evil is manifest. On the eve of Bosworth Field, Richard, like *Suttree*, is beset by ghosts. He awakes with a start:

Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!

Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft, I did but dream.

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!

The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.

Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.

Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
 Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason why:
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.
 I am a villain. Yet I lie. I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter. (Act 5, Scene 3)

This scene has a number of resonances with *Suttree* besides the dreams of the dead. Richard's separation of himself into subject and object – "I and I" – is a mirror of the doubles Suttree employs throughout the novel, the "antisuttree" (28), "some othersuttree" (287), "I am, I am. An artifact of prior races" (129). As with the conclusion of *Suttree*, there is the imprecation to "fly". But fly what? Here, Richard debates the issue, and wonders if it is himself he must flee, his nature, his past misdeeds. He loves himself but hates himself – surely this, too, could stand as a testament to the ambivalence of Suttree's self-reflection? In this scene, for the first time, Richard almost manages to evoke sympathy, before his evil nature reasserts itself. Latterly, of course, there has been a reassessment of the historical character of Richard III and a suggestion that, perhaps, he has been the victim of black propaganda through the centuries. The tortured Suttree, wishing to recant his vanity, may be guilty of writing his own black propaganda against himself. In Shakespeare's drama, little good comes of Richard's contemplation of his nature. Inevitably, he reverts to type. The open ending of *Suttree*, with his departure from Knoxville, offers the hope that, for Suttree, the resolution may be more favourable. And so it should be because, for all his vanity, there is considerably more to Suttree than he himself appears to realise.

In the asylum visiting his Aunt Alice, for example, both Suttree and the narrator – who are often, of course, one and the same person – are too hard on him. “He felt himself being drawn into modes for which he had neither aptitude nor will,” we are told. “[H]e’d nothing to give. He’d come to take” (434). But this is not quite true, here or elsewhere in the novel. There is an honour about Suttree that is not immediately apparent – this is a man, after all, who ran out on his young family and seems to have been a serial quitter – but nonetheless there is a (sometimes wrong-headed) innate desire within him to help those around him.

Notably, the next scene after this episode traces the end of Harrogate’s nascent career as telephone box thief. Hunted by the law, the miserable Harrogate huddles in his roost beneath the viaduct and it is Suttree who offers succour. There follows a touching scene in which the humanity of Harrogate is laid bare. Fearing the unknown void of his future back in the workhouse, (“They wouldnt be a soul there that I knowed” (437)), Harrogate retreats to the comfort of memory. Ironically – but perhaps unsurprisingly for this troubled young man – his happiest memories are from his previous sojourn in the workhouse: “Me and old crazy Bodine used to have some good times racin scorpions in the kitchen”, he tells Suttree (437). At this point, Harrogate’s reminiscence is removed from his first person narrative into third person omniscience but, remarkably, the result of this is not to depersonalise the telling but precisely the opposite, to make it more human and more rooted in Harrogate’s actual experience. His inarticulacy would have made it impossible for him to express his feelings effectively or to describe the scene with any clarity, but the omniscience allows this privilege and the reader is drawn inexorably into the mind of this young man. He becomes human. How?

He becomes human because he is invested with a history. This, of course, is rare in McCarthy. Back story, when it is given at all, is usually skeletal. Details are glossed. Perhaps only Sheriff Bell is furnished with what one might recognise as a typical

fictional back story, detailing his formative experiences in Vietnam. Harrogate, that inveterate huckster who can only live for the moment – what Stacey Peebles describes as his “complete immersion in the present” (177) – is rarely allowed the luxury of reminiscence and, when he is, it is usually unedifying – the burning down of old lady Arwood’s house, troubles with his stepfather and so on. In this scene, however, he revisits one of his treasured moments. For McCarthy, whose stock-in-trade is to pull out from the personal into the universal in order to pursue his grand thematic vision, this inversion of his *modus operandi* seems oddly, almost shockingly, intimate. So often in his work there is an admonishment that there is no history, no future, that the story is already writ and has been from the inception of time and humans are all but players in a grand game. Here, McCarthy gives the lie to his own vision and it is all the more powerful for that. What can be seen is Harrogate as opposite of Lester Ballard. Vereen Bell has noted that, “given a [similar] damaging knock on the head” Harrogate could easily have become another Lester (*Achievement* 85). He could have, indeed, but he isn’t. And this is shown to powerful effect here. Lester does have some back story, and it is relayed regularly throughout the novel by the unnamed, italicised narrators, but none of that back story is filtered through Lester’s own consciousness. The idea of Lester, like Harrogate, fondly reminiscing over some past, trivial event, is impossible to imagine.

And so, after Harrogate is finally captured in a characteristically bungled robbery and is driven off to jail, there is a definitive image revealing him as the human inversion of Lester. In one of the concluding scenes of *Child of God*, when Lester has been captured and is being driven into custody, he sees a young boy in a bus and the boy turns to stare at him. Lester is the lost child of God. The boy in the bus is humanity, community, hope. In *Suttree*, it is Harrogate who is on a train, looking out. He is not Lester Ballard. He is not hopeless. He is going to jail and he is one of life’s inexorable failures but he is undeniably, heartbreakingly human, and this view has been elevated in our perceptions by investing him with a history, with memory, with the human

emotions of happiness and longing and desire. The final moments of Harrogate's journey are telling: as he is transported to jail he sees his own reflection staring back at him from the blackened carriage windows. He is now in the position of both Lester and the child – the included and excluded, seeing and being seen. He closes his eyes, unable to bear the moment and its consequences. Which is closing his eyes on which, one wonders?

Thus, although the outcome is not favourable for Harrogate and he is bound for prison, his earlier dialogue with Suttree presents a positive force in the novel. Communication and community become paramount. William Prather notes, "Suttree, in all his acts of kindness and sharing, symbolizes the possibility of an authentic existence in an authentic human community" ("Color" 39). Bryan Vescio writes that many critics agree "that at the end of the novel, Suttree seems to have a newfound rapport with the human community" (114). He quotes in support of this thesis John Grammer's assertion that "what [Suttree] finds in this most optimistic of novels is neither deliverance nor death, but a new awareness of the nature of life, of the solidarity which arises from precariousness" (Quoted in Vescio 114-5). And it is shown, regularly and explicitly, how precarious life in McAnally is. By the novel's end, many of Suttree's friends have died. Harrogate is in prison. His love life is in tatters. He is fleeing. And it is this naked humanity – failed but great-hearted – that is sometimes underestimated and misunderstood. It is one of the glories of *Suttree*, and it does not occur to anything like the same degree elsewhere in McCarthy's fiction.

What also does not occur in the rest of McCarthy's work as consistently as it does in *Suttree* is humour. It does appear, of course, most notably in dialogue, for which McCarthy has an exceptional ear but, increasingly as his career has progressed, his work has grown more sombre. It is impossible to imagine a sombre *Suttree*, a *Suttree* divested of Gene Harrogate and Leonard and the drunken melées and the fantastically miserable Ragpicker and the congregated mad men of God. One could even argue that

Suttree's greatness rests in its humour: where the Border Trilogy, for example, becomes programmatic in its Tourette's-like reiterations of the story-of-stories, Buddy Suttree is allowed to explore similarly deep metaphysical territory with room to breathe and relax and relate. There is a serious purpose to the humour in the novel but, vitally, it reveals a generosity of spirit that so often seems to be lacking elsewhere in McCarthy. The pluralist community of McAnally comprises people who are more often at odds with one another and more inclined to break a bottle over each other's heads than to shake hands. Yet, remarkably, they manage to suggest a way of living that presents a degree of social harmony. How can that be? Suttree himself is key to this, in the way he moves between the various groups and individuals who make up the novel, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, intelligent and stupid. What can be seen through this is the variety of the human condition, the modes of difference which constitute the human community in its broadest sense. For all that the main protagonists of *Suttree* are reprobates and deadbeats, there is nonetheless an affirmation about their mode of expression. And, largely, that is developed through the humour which binds the novel and its characters together. In contrast to the maundering search for passage to the City of God elsewhere in McCarthy, here we are roisterously in the City of Man, sharing the secular communion of McAnally Flats.

Peter Josyph, in conversation with Wesley Morgan, notes of McCarthy's critics:

[they] are often more comfortable the farther they are from the facts of McCarthy's fiction. They love trying on philosophical systems. That's fine, but you've no idea how contented I am to read *Suttree* as a book about a guy, a guy who a guy like me has a lot in common with in what he's trying to do with the time that he's alive. (34)

The novel, in other words, is about humanity. It is about the City of Man. It is about hope. That is why it is a work of genius where *Blood Meridian* is fatally flawed. So intent is McCarthy on exploring evil in *Blood Meridian* he loses sight of the human. The entire dimension of human sensibility is overlooked. By contrast, *Suttree* seethes with humanity, with the wretched and forlorn, good and bad, hope and loss. Josyph and Morgan hold their conversation on a walk around contemporary Knoxville. Josyph describes how they track down a concrete bunker in the bulkhead of Hill Avenue Viaduct, the location where, in the novel, Harrogate sets up his “slick” home. They discover makeshift beds and blankets in the space and realise that people have been living there recently. Josyph enters the space and becomes overcome with emotion:

Josyph: Boy. It’s upsetting. I realize...Huh...It’s upsetting...Because Harrogate is fiction, but somebody was living in here for Christ’s sake, so...it’s...it’s 2010 and...

Morgan: *Still* somebody –

Josyph—somebody is *in* here.

(*Josyph breaks down, tries to collect himself*)

Morgan: (*Supportive*) Yes...

Josyph: You see, that’s...that’s what...that’s what all of these critics, these bullshitters, they just don’t understand with their *gnosticism* and their...

Morgan: Yup, yes...

Josyph: ...it's just not about...Somebody has to *come in here* at the end of the day! I was homeless...once...and I know what it's like...It's not *gnosticism*, I'm telling you...They're just out of their minds...They have to get out of their houses and see this—this is what it's about, the whole book...

Morgan: Yup...

Josyph: ...and he found it, and he understood it, and he *nailed* it... (all ellipses Josyph's). (46-7)

This powerful passage explains everything about the greatness of *Suttree*. Josyph is correct to accuse much criticism of McCarthy of focusing on the philosophical aspects of his writing to the detriment of the human. The same accusation, however, could be levelled at McCarthy himself. The author who creates the dazzling and beguiling dialogue of *Suttree* is reduced, in the Border Trilogy, to repetitive regurgitations of cod-philosophical musings. The plurality of characters seen in McAnally Flats is gradually flattened into a few faux cowboys in the Trilogy, some Vietnam vets in *No Country for Old Men* and, in *The Road*, some shadowy non-human combatants arrayed against the man and boy. Existence in the City of Man, which is such a vibrant and dizzying space in *Suttree*, becomes subservient to the search for passage out of it, into the City of God. A pluralist acceptance of humanity in all its grotesque glory gives way to a socially conservative critique of humanity which is apparently premised on pre-modern notions of the death of God and the corruption of humanity.

Cormac McCarthy is a modern literary genius. His breadth of vision and his ambition are astonishing. He has attempted, single-handedly and against all prevailing trends in American letters, to revive pre-modernist and Modernist traditions and reassert at the heart of debate the role of the spiritual, the *numinosum*, in everyday life. It has been a

lifetime's labour and, even if he publishes nothing further, he will leave behind a body of work that will be regarded by future generations as outstanding.

Nonetheless, from the commanding heights of *Suttree*, it is difficult not to contemplate the remainder of his literary career without a sense of disappointment. What might have been, had he been able to free himself from the shackles of those overwhelming preoccupations? If only he, too, could fly them.

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