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**Cormac McCarthy's Cold Pastoral:
The Overturning of a National Allegory.**

**PhD Dissertation in American Literature or
History.**

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Summary of Dissertation: Cormac McCarthy's Cold Pastoral: The Overturning of a National Allegory.

This dissertation will argue that the novels of Cormac McCarthy represent a sustained attack on American literature's abiding fixation with pastoral. It further argues that such a fixation is very much a national allegory, one that, paradoxically, cannot help but produce a sense of doubt lurking beneath the numerous assertions of individual and national confidence.

Cormac McCarthy very much engages with the antinomies of this national allegory. His use of pastoral allegory comes in the form of a broken allegory: a strategy that is very much in keeping with Walter Benjamin's vision of allegorical fragmentation resulting from permanent historical crisis. This crisis, as McCarthy shows, reaches tipping-point in the modern era: the pastoral's dream of 'pure-utility' is shown to be completely incompatible with the predominance of exchange value and commoditized social relations.

The study is in four parts. The first section divides the first four novels in order to explore how they shatter the South's notion of uniqueness through a depiction of a desecrated pastoral. The second section considers the novel *Blood Meridian* on its own in order to demonstrate how the novel's absurdist renunciation of pastoral and the western mythos helps set up the late novels themes of generic and cultural termination. The third looks at the *Border Trilogy*, and discusses how recourse to the more open wildernesses of the south-west curiously introduces a countervailing theme of disenchantment and pastoral attenuation. The fourth and final section groups together *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, in order to argue that these late novels elicit a final rejection of pastoral as it collides headlong with the imaginary of late-capitalism.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The American Pastoral as National Allegory

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.¹

The above comment from Cormac McCarthy is a good example of how disavowal can take the form of allegorical perspective: the allegory of social harmony rejected for an allegory of immanent violence. That McCarthy in his works renounces the notion of social harmony by writing about perpetual human crisis suggests that he is at the very least skeptical of the redemptive appeal of pastoral, a literary device that weaves in and out of his stories of loss and disenchantment with the modern world.

When I refer in the title to pastoral as a form of national allegory, I am speaking specifically of a mode of living that is universally mourned even though it never existed. In this introduction, and in the study overall, we will be looking at the American variant as it is used and ultimately rejected in the novels of Cormac McCarthy, noting along the way its similarities and differences with the European tradition, how it is used by the author both as a social critique against technological change, and, conversely, as a strategy to attack the ideological illusions of the device itself.²

¹ Woodward, Richard B. "McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times Magazine*, 19th April 1992. 28-31.

² According to Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*: What was formally an "essentially literary device" is, in the modern era, turned for more "ideological or (using the word in its extended sense) political uses." (73). Marx also notices this in Jefferson's writings where the pastoral ideal is used to promote "social policy." (74).

This latter idea, however, needs to be understood dialectically. Although a wry metafictional distancing from the pastoral ideal is evident throughout Cormac McCarthy's work; what is also manifest is a countering ecopastoral vision which places the human and nature on the same plane. McCarthy gives us the coldest of pastorals, the kind, that is at once ferociously non-androcentric and fundamentally biocentric in its abjuration of the American inheritance.³ Because of this rigorous rejection of the American ideal where land and character are so intertwined that the allegory of pastoral becomes a way of seeing the world, the use of John Keats' "cold pastoral," taken from his poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, as part-title for this thesis is particularly germane. In his 1947 study *The Well-Wrought Urn*, the American critic Cleanth Brooks argues that *Ode to a Grecian Urn* is a prime example of what Keats meant by negative capability: "I mean negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁴ Brooks sees the poem as a distillation of this idea: the poem is "full of paradoxes such as "cold pastoral" and "unheard melodies".⁵ These troubling epithets suggest an irrevocable schism between the ideal world depicted on the urn and the real historical world that always remains outside such representation. The work of art is timeless, but history itself is mutable, death-ridden and violent, hence the injunction of "cold" before "pastoral". McCarthy's writing is also full of such cold paradoxes: the attempted eternity of pastoral life that is perennially thwarted by the cold reality of violent history.

What is the meaning of this inheritance and its abjuration? In its American context, the pastoral inheritance often acts as the ideological lure for a profound disengagement with active history. As a result, such a detour into the imaginary has produced a powerful mythology of often unmediated heroic enterprise - the tropes of which should be familiar

³ This is largely Georg Guillemín's thesis in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*.

⁴ Keats, John. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. 277.

⁵ Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. 165.

to anyone with a grasp on American literature and film: the veneration of the (natural) countryside over the (artificial) city, wagon trains receding to the western horizon, the frontiersman with his cabin in the woods, the noble-savage Indian, the even nobler American Adam, the frontier as the site of self-re-invention, the cowboy on his horse as shepherd of the plains, the reification of good work as a noble calling, and, more latterly, the locomotive and motorcar as symbols of freedom and happiness. All of these units stripped of their historical social relations have helped bring into play an active forgetting in American life that masks the real historical issues of American-European settlement predicated on the forced eviction of Native Americans, in the west, and slave-labor, in the south. Moreover, the proletarianization of the poor as a result of America's own industrial revolution - which began primarily in the north, between 1830 and 1880, and then replicated in the southern cities after Reconstruction - has revealed pastoral as a bourgeois dream of orderly exclusion rather than an ideal for all. These worms in the Arcadian apple are the very stuff of McCarthy's distorted and refracted vision.

The emergence of the American pastoral needs to be understood in two connected but thematically divergent ways: first, how pastoral myths from the Old World migrated with the Puritan settlers into the New World, and, second, how they underwent mutation in order to accommodate the particular social and spatial needs of the new country. The latter idea of spatial difference is especially important for understanding that there are two kinds of American pastoral: the agricultural pastoral of the South and the wilderness pastoral of the West. To help explain the distinction, we can follow critic Herbert Lindenberger's suggestion that the first is the "soft pastoral of cultivated landscapes and social communion" while the second is the "hard pastoral of wind-swept slopes and total solitude."⁶ On a more ideological level, one is about the, largely feudal in provenance, maintenance of an existing social order, whereas the other is predicated upon the seemingly more progressive idyll of limitless territorial expansion.

⁶ The Herbert Lindenberger quote can be found in: Scheese, Don: *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*. 5. It is also important to note that Lindenberger sees the provenance of the 'soft-pastoral' in the formation of early New England communities.

In terms of the latter, moreover, it may help explain why pastoral is often a sub-genre in the American romance-epic: in the literature of the West, the old European idyll of settled communities is frequently displaced by the epic search for something equivalent. This idea is taken up by Leo Marx, who identifies pastoral as “the desire, in the face of the growing complexity and power of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek the basis for a simpler, more harmonious life ‘closer’ as we say to ‘nature’.”⁷ According to nature writer Don Scheese, this “desire” for a better place is the ground for all pastorals; however, what marks the American pastoral off from its European antecedents is that the “escape to” element has been displaced by a “quest for.”⁸ It is this vital displacement that, as we shall see, helps insert pastoral as a sub-genre in the romance-epic. Moreover, the fact that such ‘searching’ has often come undone, for instance, through disease, famine, class conflict, and wars of ethnic genocide, provides the note of disquiet in all American representations. Thomas Jefferson himself alludes to this self-poisoning when he refers in his journals to the dark-forebodings underlying his pastoral dream: “an exultant pastoral dream may well emanate from a mind susceptible to the darkest forebodings.”⁹

Such dark thoughts must have lain latent in the minds of the early European migrants, especially when one considers the often-apocalyptic Christian theologies that fired their imaginations. For at the very outset of the American story, we have the paradox of a millenarian vision married to a Calvinist skepticism which qualified the wilderness as a place that had to be won for God. Though this is clearly different from the land-grabbing imperialism that was a feature of American 19th century *real-politik*, there is shared sense that destiny, manifest or otherwise, could only be achieved by force. In order for the land to be made fit for a Christian God, work had to be done on it. The Lutheran concomitant of

⁷ Marx, Leo. “The Pilot and Passenger.” *Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States*, xii-xiii.

⁸ Scheese, Don. *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*. 5.

⁹ Jefferson’s journal remark is taken from Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. 144.

work and divine calling, passed down from generation to generation as a kind of sacred mother-milk, is thus another way of understanding that the American pastoral is church-militantly wrathful in its desire to create a land fit for God's children. This fanatical devotion to the work-ethic (pastoral attained through self-sacrifice and exertion) will be explored in detail in the chapters on *The Crossing* and *The Road*.

American pastoral, therefore, is seriously compromised by the idea of force and labor. In terms of the former, this suggests that the attainment of a good community entails the forced ejection of what is deemed evil – or, to paraphrase Richard Slotkin, the millenarian dream of the Promised Land can only be regenerated through violence.¹⁰ In other words, the terrible and terrifying *Other* - whether taking the form of the Native Indian, the outlaw-assassin, the Blackman or the wilderness as *terra damnata* - is not only the counterpoint to the potent myth of the American Hero, selflessly placing himself between a good community and that which threatens it, but also serves as the historical dimension that frustrates the pastoral ideal. This also means that work rarely goes beyond necessity: the notion of an ever-present evil suggests that labor, the physical imperative of building shelters and fortresses in the wilderness, is rarely synonymous with the pastoral ideal of easeful labor. Perhaps it is this dreadful nexus that helps explain McCarthy's belief that there can be no life without bloodshed.

McCarthy critic Barclay Owens partially qualifies Richard Slotkin's argument of the battle against violent oppressors when he makes a distinction between two heroic types of the frontier, the progress hero and primitive-pastoral hero. In both cases, the idea of self-redemption is a key factor behind the journey into wilderness:

The young Adamic hero is fated to leave the domestic comforts of society. In the progress myth, the hero saves Anglo society from the evil foreign oppressor and is recognized for his valor, whereas in the primitive-pastoral myth, the hero remains a lonely warrior as an outcast. Both kinds of heroes find glory and redemption in the fight against the oppressive authority of society. The primary difference between

¹⁰ See Slotkin, R. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the Western Frontier*.

the two types is that the progress hero seeks redemption by fighting the Anglo-American interests while the primitive-pastoral hero seeks redemption by fighting against oppressive authority and rejecting domesticity.¹¹

This is a useful distinction; if not a little schematic. But with McCarthy such distinctions are muddled up: by presenting both the progressive and primitive Adamic paradigms in his work, the writer is able to contaminate each with enough contradictions to break their generic valency. For example, the primitive-pastoralists and progress-heroes in his novels are always shown to be shot through with anxieties and doubt about the life chosen. Thus the search for a mythical land incarnate with God's word, the desired terminus of quest literature, provides an early source for American literature's obsession with argosies of spiritual redemption that go tragically wrong.

Another way of putting it is that the dark forebodings in the American pastoral describe a collision between an ideal vision and the forces of history that frustrate it: for instance, the settlers' early experiences of failed harvests leading to famine - in some cases, to cannibalism.¹² Moreover, if we take into consideration other historical indices such as increased settlement in the eastern states, with its attendant repressions of law and order, the Indian Wars of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, independence from Britain in the late eighteenth century, the rise and fall of slave economies in the south, the scouring of Indian territory that aided the movement west, and the victory in the Mexican wars of the 1840s that led to the annexation of New Mexico and Texas, we would have to conclude that all have contributed, in very real terms, to the historical truth of the unsettling Virgilian injunction - *Et in Arcadia Ego*. What we have here, then, is the biblically inflected pastoral ideal of Canaan contaminated by the political exigency of settlement and

¹¹ Owen, Barclay. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. 68.

¹² Howard Zinn, in *A People's History of the United States*, provides vivid contemporary accounts of cannibalism in the Jamestown Colony in the winter of 1609-1610) 24.

law.¹³ Or to put it another way: from the outset, we have the troubling paradox of a dispossessed people taking possession of what didn't belong to them in the first place.

For the reasons stated, forgetting or misremembering real history through recourse to national as well as self-mythologization is something that McCarthy consistently confronts in his work. This is why the journeys - demonstrated most powerfully in *Child of God*, *Outer Dark*, *The Crossing* and *Blood Meridian* - that McCarthy's characters undertake are full of dream-like divagations, obstacles and thwarted endeavors. Furthermore, these dream-like confusions have a material basis largely because the search for a location untrammelled by political and environmental contamination proves to be impossible. It is the very impossibility of pastoral that provides the tragic core of McCarthy's vision.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to give a full account of traditional pastoral or indeed the form that it takes in American literature, it is important to provide - prior to a full discussion of McCarthy's novels - an explanation of what the genre represents, why it can be seen as a national allegory, and how McCarthy uses it in his work. This introductory chapter will do this by looking first at the use of the genre and its connection to the romance-epic. It will then go on to explain how McCarthy's notion of "optical democracy" in *Blood Meridian* is, in ecocritical terms, vital for understanding why his treatment is a cold pastoral. Moving on from this, we will discuss how the trope of historical forgetfulness is thus challenged by both the aforesaid stylistic contaminations and the irruption of historical violence onto the pastoral scene. Lastly, this introduction will conclude with an explanation of the importance of allegory in American fiction, its use in McCarthy, and why the Benjaminian notion of fragmentation is a good method for shedding light on the writer's attempt at overturning the restorative schemas of pastoral allegory. As a corollary to this, I will contend that, when we get to the late novels of McCarthy, the different existentialist approaches made by McCarthy critics Georg Guillemain and David Holloway should be eschewed in favor of the anti-subject theories of Louis Althusser and

¹³ For an overview of the periods between settlement and westward expansion see: Reynolds, David: *America, Empire of Liberty*, parts one and two, respectively.

Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, outlined respectively in their essays “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” and “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses.” My use of these latter theorists, one from the field of psychoanalysis, the other from the field of structural Marxism, are informed by Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek’s attempt at synthesizing the two different fields as a method for highlighting the various mental pathologies caused by late-capitalism.

McCarthy’s Implicit Critique of the Romance-Epic.

The first thing to make clear is that my meaning of American pastoral acknowledges the fact that it often functions as a sub-genre in American romance literature – a form that McCarthy critic Steven Frye sees, following the quest literatures of James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville, as the framing device for several of McCarthy’s novels. Frye also sees McCarthy’s use of this tradition as a “reconfiguration of the frontier romance,” one that is suitable for a late-modern consciousness no longer able to invest in the *bildungsroman* positivism of a lot of nineteenth century American romance.¹⁴ This modern consciousness, which will be discussed in detail when we look at allegory, permeates McCarthy’s pastoral with a sense of melancholy that undermines the work of healing and restitution that the traditional form offers. The melancholy, however, always has a material basis and is exemplified from the outset in the writer’s Southern works, especially his debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*. Such criticism as Dianne Luce, Steven Frye and other critics have pointed out, gives the impression that McCarthy was influenced by the Agrarian Movement’s critique of industrialism, primarily its plea for a return to the values and cultures of the old rural communities.¹⁵ As we shall see, this reading needs to be qualified, mainly because McCarthy is no less dismissive of the old ways than he is of the new. Melancholy, therefore,

¹⁴ Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. 1-2.

¹⁵ A group of writers – among them Allan Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren – who, through their concerns with the increased industrialization of the south, argued for a conservative back-to-the-land politics which used the pre-Reconstruction social arrangement as its benchmark.

needs to be seen as a historically-based reaction to the forced modernization of American civilization, and the breaking up of perceived harmonious social and property relations.

The use of the romance frontier motif as register for national feeling and character is distinctly American and, as previously mentioned, is why pastoral deviates from its European counterpart. For example, part of its national specificity is the way it deals with the emergence of America as a transcontinental idea; how its various literary renderings celebrate the power of this vision. The profusion of American landscape painting and nature literature between the 1830s and 1860s (Winslow Homer, Frederic Edwin Church and George Inness, for the former; Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for the latter,) powerfully demonstrate a passion for land as a metaphor for national character. However, and as noted earlier, because of slavery and the way the movement west was predicated on the clearances of various Indian tribes, a general sense of unease permeates the propulsive celebration of movement depicted in these media.

In literature, too, we see in this period the beginning of a national obsession with the independent, self-reliant, pioneering male. We can also see McCarthy, especially in the *Border Trilogy*, drawing from the American romance tradition a mythologized version of the American male; a hero-protagonist who, whether of the progressive or primitive type, is, on the surface, able to transcend the tawdry mendacity of local and national politics as well as the stultifying social relations of certain areas of American life. The tragic element in this, however, is that the protagonist hero takes with him the ideals and illusions of the culture he has left behind. Steven Frye, in the following comment on James Fenimore Cooper's highly successful *Leatherstocking* tales, alludes to a troubling dichotomy where myth and realism encounter each other:

Characters were created to embody human traits but were larger than life, emblematic of a culture's values, aspirations, ambitions, and self-perceptions. In early American epic romances, the mythic hero finds himself a player in a sweeping drama that pits the forces of historical progress – the settlement of the frontier by European civilization – against the forces of reaction, which involves the attempts made by Native Americans and white frontiersmen to preserve older and simpler

ways of living. Thus the inevitability, the mixed benefits, and even the tragedy of these emerge as central concerns.¹⁶

Not only does this clearly delineate the main themes in the early romance-epic; it also points to some of the primary allegorical concerns in McCarthy. But as Frye goes on to argue, McCarthy's use of frontier is a revisionist adaption that, especially in *Blood Meridian*, foregrounds the political and historical forces that brought about settlement of the frontier through genocidal violence. Throughout this thesis, I shall demonstrate how McCarthy imbues his epic-romance, as well as his pastoral vision, with what Frye sees as a troubling dichotomy:

The forces of civilization are by no means portrayed in a celebratory light, as industrial technology, American business interests, such as Texas Oil, even the building of the interstate highway system often leaving the hero displaced and bereft of purpose. Incidents of greed and malevolence abound, as scalp-hunting, drug-running, even nuclear apocalypse, all find their way into McCarthy's epic vision.¹⁷

The reasoning, then, behind McCarthy's decision to revise the Western form, first with *Blood Meridian* and then with the *Border Trilogy*, should now be clearer.¹⁸ For these are modern novels in a very real sense; history is displaced but is actively working in its themes and sub-themes. Though not linear in terms of chronology, it is possible to see the early Southern novels as recording the changes taking place in the Appalachian region between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the nineteen fifties; possible, too, to regard the Western novels, *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*, as tracing the one

¹⁶ Ibid. 8-9.

¹⁷ Ibid. 9.

¹⁸ I shall also make plain that McCarthy's foregrounding of history begins before the western turn initiated by *Blood Meridian*. The last two Appalachian novels, *Child of God* and *Suttree* respectively, are much more historically grounded than the heavily Gothicized worlds of the preceding works, *Outer Dark* and *The Orchard Keeper*.

hundred-odd years of expansion and settlement of the south-west Border States. Moreover, though standing a little outside the aforementioned geographical grids, it is possible to view *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* as the existential and ecological corollary of McCarthy's life-long critique of rampant commoditization in the era of late-capitalism.

The Poisonous Pastoral Element in the Romance-Epic

Much like the romance-epic, the pastoral is at once qualitatively different and similar to the European tradition it draws from. In ante-bellum Southern literature, for instance, the plantation pastoral often provides justification for the institution of slavery as well as the *status quo* that helped maintain the white social order.¹⁹ Small wonder, then, why several critics have noted that the use of a post-bellum Southern gothic and grotesque is prominent in the Appalachian novels. With their images of ruined homesteads, neglected orchards and descriptions of distorted sexual relations, such fictions are early warnings of McCarthy's romance/pastoral re-vision.²⁰

Part of this rejection/adaption dichotomy can be explained by what critic Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, defines as the "belated" arrival of American literature and the concomitant rush to affirm a specifically American experience, in the middle of the nineteenth century: a belatedness that affected both a rejection and embracing of the older European style.²¹ This conflicting desire to affirm as well as deny the European style is especially strong in its southern variant:

¹⁹ Lewis P Simpson, in *The Dispossessed Garden*, provides numerous examples of this: inter alia, Jefferson's own ambiguous attitude to slavery in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (40), in the agricultural essays of John Taylor (40), and in the "prototypical novel of the literary plantation", John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn: Or Life in the Old Dominion* (1831). (43).

²⁰ There are several, but Dianne Luce and Mark Royden Winchell have written extensively on the subject. See bibliography.

²¹ For a comprehensive review of this see Palmer, Louis H: 'Southern Gothic and Appalachian Gothic: A Comparative Look at Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy.' *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 3 (1991). 166-76.

William Byrd in his 1728 *History of the Dividing Line*, and most importantly, Thomas Jefferson in his late-eighteenth century writings, offer early versions of the South as natural paradise or agrarian haven from the corrupt “canaille” of European cities. Jefferson’s *Queries in Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) invent the American as yeoman, his version of the Virgilian herdsman.²²

What is worth noting in reference to the above is how Byrd and Jefferson use the European model as a trope of restoration - albeit, for Jefferson, in a more egalitarian and less feudal way - and, second, how the Virgilian relationship between city and country along with a corresponding “idealized vision” of a simpler time and place is sustained in its American treatment. In the south, however, the vision of a simpler time and place coupled with the pastoral’s fatalistic presentiment of “change” and “displacement” is compromised by the slave’s presence in its “version of Eden.”²³

This fatal compromise is also implicit in McCarthy’s Western novels in the way that the distinction between civilization and wilderness is elided as human settlement precipitated the division of the old frontier into fenced-off boundaries, thus permitting the profusion of farms and ranches on wilderness land. However, what is also interesting is the way the American form is able to range thematically across its diverse topography: whether pastoral is expressed in its New England, Southern or Western representations, there is a shared dream of “*locus amoenus*”, the “pleasant place” which serves as the counter-locale in all pastoral.”²⁴ Noting this turning away from the pastoral idyll in modern Southern literature, critic Lewis B. Simpson coined the term “Southern Apostasy” to describe the kind of writing that presents a much more sober view of man and nature: for imbued in such writing is the view that the landscape of wilderness is neither a place of escape nor a search for home; rather it is the coldest of places, chosen in the main because

²² See *The Companion to Southern Literature*. Flora, Joseph M and Lucinda H. MacKethin, eds. 621.

²³ Ibid. 620.

²⁴ Ibid. 620.

it mirrors the desolation of the central protagonist. For these reasons it is worth employing Lewis B. Simpson term “apostasy” as strategy for describing the renunciation of pastoral in modern fiction.

What, then, drives the apostasy that Simpson sees in the modern use of pastoral? Concealed beneath the southern memory of pure pastoral, for example, is the slave component: forced labor/slave economics as the material factor behind the idyll. This can explain why McCarthy’s style is shockingly intent on revealing the violence that has contaminated the pastoral scene. For Simpson, the apostasy is secular literature’s response to the religious idea of America as God’s own country. Simpson identifies two forms of pastoral in the American representation: a New England “garden of the covenant” and a Southern “Garden of the Chattel.”²⁵ The former is the Puritan dream of Golden Age restoration in the New World; while the latter, soaked as it is in medieval codes of chivalry and racist theories on the natural chain of being, dreams itself as a ‘patriarchal garden’ wherein its owner rules over his chattel slaves with seigniorial beneficence. However, implicit in McCarthy’s Western novels is a third problematic: a garden of wilderness, where the pastoral’s ideal of pure utility is vitiated by the social and property relations of capitalism: namely, serial, state-sponsored land-grabbing aggravated by the exploitation and violence against indigenous populations and African-American slaves.

American Pastoral’s lack of any real serious engagement with African-American and Native-American histories stands at the heart of McCarthy’s critique of the device. Indeed, this is made explicit in *Blood Meridian* where reference is made to a “negro” work gang – “the shadowed agony in the garden” (5); it is also shown in the depiction of the solitary “Indian” in *The Crossing* who is ironically depicted as trespassing on what was once wilderness (5-7). With the above in mind, it is interesting to note how Simpson sees the beginning of the American nation and, by implication, the pastoral fixation, as founded on the anxiety of dispossession; forced or voluntary exile from a corrupt and moribund old

²⁵ Simpson, Lewis P. *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*. 2.

Europe. It becomes, therefore, a method of displacement where the failed garden of Puritan England is transposed onto the “virgin” soil of New England.

Another paradox noted by Simpson, and this becomes especially germane for the Southern pastoral, is that at the heart of this rebellion is a procrustean desire for equivalence with the old order: “The settlements they made in a ‘new world’ were in one way or another responses to the dispossession of the integral and authoritative community of an “old world” by modern history.”²⁶ As we shall see, this equivalence fixation for order might lie behind the blind-acceptance, by Americans John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins, of the semi-feudal hacienda in *All the Pretty Horses*. Contrarily, it may also explain the anti-federal recidivism of McCarthy’s Appalachians - demonstrated most notably in *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child of God* - who imagine themselves always as beyond the law.

There is a correspondence here between old and new, which suggests that pastoral, whatever form it takes in American letters, wavers in similar fashion: it is a redoubt that fails; a fenced-in Arcadian vision that is unable to fend off the predations of historical change. Both versions are, according to Simpson, products of the “culture of alienation” of which the aforementioned Protestant antinomy helped foster.²⁷ Of course, this makes the apostasy associated with the garden of the covenant and that of the chattel different only in degrees: Simpson argues that the former stood in clear opposition to modernity, whereas the latter, especially in its ante-bellum form, was fatally embroiled with a reactionary defense of social order and tradition predicated on the system of slavery. Nevertheless, out of both pastorals, Simpson sees the beginning of a gnostically-charged response to modernity: in other words, a growing renunciation of technology that would have in its ranks conservatives (Allen Tate and some of the Agrarian School) and progressives (Thoreau and Emerson) alike. In its New England form, especially, we see a shared antipathy toward industrialism as well as a desperate undertone of failure at halting its advance.

²⁶ Ibid. 2.

²⁷ Ibid. 2.

It is clear, along with myriad other apostates, that McCarthy is still haunted by the failure of halting such an advance. We can see this in the first three Appalachian novels where psychosis, material greed and environmental despoliation spoil the rural picture; it is also shown in the *Border Trilogy* and *No Country for Old Men*, where the slavish adherence to the hegemon of exchange value destroys the cowboy-pastoral. It is there also in McCarthy's most recent novel *The Road*, where overconsumption along with the exhaustion of ecological resources, produces the metaphor of social apocalypse. Most prominently, however, it is shown in McCarthy's acknowledged masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*, where pastoral renunciation takes the form of a grisly attritional racial war.

By introducing such themes into the soft and hard wildernesses of the American landscape, McCarthy highlights the role of history, especially the social-economic, in upsetting the pastoral ideal. In traditional pastoral, the geographical template is an area of ancient Greece known as Arcadia; in the American pastoral, as it is depicted in literature and painting, this is reconfigured, at various historical junctures, into the homesteads of New England and Virginia, the plantations of the south and the verdant plains of the west. The social-economic contaminants upsetting such transference are in the first case slavery where "Jefferson himself as a slaveholder could not reconcile his pastoral idyll with the realities of slavery."²⁸ It also pollutes the fatal optimism- fatal, mostly, for the Native-American Indian - of Frederick Jackson Turner who in his canonical text *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* underscores the pastoral mysticism of John Winthrop's 'City on the Hill' with the pragmatics of *real politik* in order to establish a rationale for the conquering of western territories. For Turner, it was the "constant confrontation with nature in the West that had made America fundamentally different from Europe." Furthermore, the taming of the frontier, through the honest sweat of the brow, the dream of turning it into a pastoral commodious for human settlement, was a mission that only the white-man could see through. This is a sacred mission which would not only expand the

²⁸ Ibid. 621

territories of the United States, but bring about a necessary rebirth for the nation's endless pursuit of perfection.²⁹

McCarthy's take on the pastoral is thus precisely the opposite of the old pastoral's division of an uncontaminated natural landscape cut off from a corrupted civilization: the 'dangerous outside' is already in the garden and it is called History; not so much Leo Marx's "machine" or Lewis B. Simpson's "serpent" but one that is always already a constituent of modern pastoral; indeed it would be better to say that there is no pastoral without the dialectic of contamination. It is perhaps this concern with the validity of pastoral that fuels McCarthy's take on it; an obsession whose exigency can be compared with Raymond Williams' idea that William Wordsworth's bucolic poetry, the description of evicted peasants doomed to wander the countryside as indigents and beggars, brought into being an active "green language" that acted as a protest against the countryside clearances enacted by industrialism. This idea of eviction, whether forced, as in *Child of God*, or almost self-willed, as in *All the Pretty Horses*, is echoed in McCarthy. The theme of wandering induced by socio-economic factors that, according to Williams, produces in pastoral literature's "conventional culture of retrospect" is barely concealed, especially in the Western novels, by recourse to the romance-epic.³⁰

This "conventional structure of retrospect" suffused a great deal of American literature at the time of industrialism. For instance, Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden*, notes how the locomotive quickly became an invasive symbol in Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau's bucolic writings. Marx demonstrates this in his analysis of a section in Hawthorne's journals, where the latter describes that moment of irruption in which the idea of death is introduced into an American pastoral scene. Hawthorne's idyll is disturbed by the sound of a train breaking the tranquility of his thoughts: "But, hark!, there is the

²⁹ For a further discussion on the points made about Frederick Jackson Turner see David Reynolds: *America, Empire of Liberty*. 147.

³⁰ Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. 569

whistle of the locomotive – the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony.”³¹

Hawthorne’s thoughts prior to this are the reflections of a man in Virgilian repose: looking about at the pleasing scene of nicely cultivated landscape, replete with fully farmed images of “thriving Indian corn”, he is somewhat smugly aware that the labor of others has given him time for abstract contemplation. The moment of the train, in this sense, then is also that moment when industrialism arrives to destroy the serenity of such an idealized vision, the moment when a new social order despoils the pastoral idyll: “And no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumberous peace.”³²

The train represents a kind of death for an old, sentimentalized, almost feudal, view of man and nature. The train is also a symbol of modern industrial labor, thus signaling a new kind of labor-economy different from the guilds and workshops of the past. Hawthorne’s own reaction illustrates the schism between the pastoral and industrialism.³³

To punctuate this idea, Marx looks at how Hawthorne responds to the disturbance: “like a malevolent genius” he drops a few grains of sand into the entrance of an ant-hill and obliterates it. The result is consternation among the inhabitants, their frantic movements displaying their ‘confusion of mind.”³⁴ Marx suggests here that the act of violence on nature by Hawthorne is mirrored by the author’s turbulent confusion of mind. Some kind of violence to sensibility has taken place here: the machine is in the garden and thus induces

³¹ Hawthorne quoted in Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. 13.

³² Ibid. 13.

³³ It is also worth noting that such skepticism informs Hawthorne’s barely concealed parody, fictionalized in his novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), of the Brook Farm utopian community experiment.

³⁴ Ibid. 14

the human observer to imitate its own percussive tearing and rendering of the natural world.

In *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first novel in *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy, too, seems to use the locomotive trope as a symbol of pastoral invasion:

(...) it came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance ... and he stood still holding his hat in his hands in the passing ground-shudder watching it till it was gone."³⁵

It is interesting to note on this point that, in McCarthy's fiction, a lot of technological objects are shown to be mixing strangely with the natural world. Such disquiet is represented in *The Orchard Keeper* where we see the Natty Bumppo-like Athur Ownby impotently fighting against the TVA, so violently resentful at the presence of a 'government tank' in his orchard that he shoots holes in it (219). Yet such a reaction to contamination does not mean the end of enchantment; for a lot of McCarthy's heroes are slow to realize their illusions. Forgetfulness, a theme that has historical as well as psychological meaning in McCarthy, is the opiate that draws his protagonist into this world and away from historical engagement. This is an age-old trope: the garden as a last resting place for a person assailed by the trials and tribulations of life and work. The following lines from Virgil's *Eclogues*, where Arcadia is depicted as a place of refuge for the besieged-by-life individual, resonates residually in the character of Arthur Ownby:

Ah fortunate old man, here among hallowed springs And familiar streams you'll enjoy the longed-for shade, the cool shade/Here, as of old, where your neighbor's land marches with yours/ The sally hedge, with bees of Hybla sipping its blossom/Shall often hum you gently to sleep.³⁶

Ownby in the *Orchard Keeper* is very much a modern incarnation of Virgil's old man, but with the clear distinction that he is less a figure in a tableau than a historically

³⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 3-4.

³⁶ The passage from Virgil is taken from Raymond Williams', *The Country and the City*. 16.

compromised mortal who finds it impossible to repel the incursions of modernity from ruining his garden - or himself. Such a conflict, the dilemma of nature as redoubt for the besieged self, escaping from the world of law and history, is epitomized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's attempts to imbue the American experience with a sense of divine calling, one where man and nature can be reconciled. Emerson in his essays wished to arrest the American sense of materialistic progress by claiming that, unlike the broken pastorals of Europe, man truly could find his destiny in the realm of nature- to wit, an American nature where an individual can "become a transparent eyeball" and can "see all: the currents of the Universal Being shining through him," and where in the wilderness he could "find something more dear and connate than in streets and villages."³⁷

It is away from the dubious contingencies of organic/inorganic, American man/nature, the androcentric idealism of Emerson et al., where we find McCarthy's radical reworking of pastoral. In its place, the writer proposes an idea of nature that is non-hierarchical and blind to the poetic entreaties of Emerson and such-like. It is this rejection of Emerson's optical metaphor - a rejection that as we shall see is not without its contradictions - which we shall turn to next.

Optical Democracy and its *Blinding Contradictions*

In McCarthy we can see a constant tussle between the pastoral-inflected nostalgia for the individual soul - the transformation of the historically-bounded mortal into a soul at peace with itself - and the forces of history challenging such an idea.³⁸ For standing in the pastoral's way is the historically felt dehumanization of endless war along with an adaptation, in the modern era, to a thoroughgoing commoditization of everything. In *Blood Meridian* we get the cold proposition of "optical democracy" as an alternative to all human follies:

³⁷ See Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay: "Nature" in *Nature and Selected Writings*. 35-82.

³⁸ The modernist take on the individual soul/consciousness will be explored in my chapter on *Suttree*.

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinship.³⁹

If one had to choose a key passage that summed up McCarthy's philosophy as it is conveyed through his writing it would be this notion of "optical democracy." Here landscape and people are allegorized to present an undifferentiated space, "a strange equality." Interestingly, this "strange equality" tallies with an emerging discourse in literary ecocriticism known as "deep ecology": "Deep ecology might be compared to the literary and philosophical work of deconstruction in its call for a radical critique and transformation of conventional ways of conceiving of 'human' values, of humanism, even of science itself."⁴⁰ In this way, McCarthy's idea of "optical democracy," seems to foreshadow an epistemological shift from the old conservationist viewpoint that saw nature purely in "instrumentalist terms"; the protection of which would be guaranteed only if future "human exploitation" also became part of the bargain. As we shall see, this tepid response to humankind's endless exploitation of the natural world will eventually have its final bitter reckoning in McCarthy's most ecopastoral of novels, *The Road*.

The perceiver-narrator is coldly omniscient: an incorporeal observer-bystander who sees no difference between beings animate or inanimate. As Georg Guillemín argues in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, this is a renunciation of man over nature; a renunciation that rejects in turn pastoral as Jeffersonian middle-landscape (the idea of *locus amoenus*) between wilderness and civilization and as a site for the cultivation of

³⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 247.

⁴⁰ Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 146.

individual sensibility. In their place is a radical ecopastoralism that refuses to consider anything as a refuge.⁴¹

The radical nature of this allegorical viewpoint needs to be explored. Traditional allegory often uses an optical metaphor to explain the presence of a second-text. Whether it is Plato's allegory of the shadow-world of caves, or the various parables of blindness and self-blindness permeating much of classical and post-classical literature, allegory alludes to a truer metaphysical world beyond phenomena revealed through hermeneutical disclosure. There is, however, a sense that perception of this world is often murky – visibility between the lunar and sublunar worlds always low. Here with “optical democracy,” the image of the human shorn of the burden and illusions of consciousness, analogous only to the surrounding rock formations, suggests that the idea of the quest as a journey of self-revelation is a fool's errand. The effect of this reduction of the human to the natural world on his characters takes the form of self-blindness: the ossified consciousnesses of his characters preclude insight.

How is this shown? In the novels *Child of God* and *Outer Dark*, we witness moments where the hapless wandering protagonists are stranded at the border of a physical and metaphysical world: the inability to cross over engenders an existential crisis. One of many examples of this is *Child of God's* Lester Ballard, exile from all known communities, initially finding refuge in the woods: “Ballard among gothic treeboles, almost jaunty in the outsized clothing he wore, fording drifts of kneedeep snow, going along the south face of a limestone bluff ... (.)”⁴² Ballard believes that he has at last found a home for himself in nature: Neolithic woods which complement his own descent into pastoral primitivism. But we soon find only a few pages on that pastoral verdure, in all its fecundity, is casting him into oblivion. He is no longer in nature, but of nature:

⁴¹ See Lewis B. Simpson's comments on Jefferson's notion of sensibility and pastoral in *The Dispossessed Garden*. 24-33.

⁴² McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 128.

He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading. Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry.⁴³

For Ballard, it is sight without in-sight: Emerson's 'transparent eyeball' has not been bequeathed to the likes of him.

The apprehension of the invisible is supposed to induce a sense of spiritual knowledge - as in the allegorical figure of "Christian" in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* - in the subject. According to Jane K. Brown sudden spiritual knowledge becomes "a mode of representation which renders the supernatural visible."⁴⁴ This, though obviously referring to classical or crypto-classical worlds of gods, demigods and mythical creatures, has filtered down into modern representations where certain characters personify mysterious qualities that allow them to see things more than others. We can see this trope repeated a lot in McCarthy, especially in terms of the numerous sibylline characters encountered in the *Border Trilogy*. Curiously, however, the Appalachian novels are replete with false prophets; physical blindness is not regarded as a conduit for second sight but as an instrument of deception and self-deception. As will be argued, McCarthy's novels are full of characters either physically blind or mentally unaware: the acts of insight or foresight are often foreign to them. The effects of history render its figures as directionless and unreflecting non-agents, self-startled at their various, often purposeless peradventures.⁴⁵

There are, however, several moments in the *oeuvre* where this critique of the self-blinded individual soul is contradicted. For example, as a seeming contradiction to "optical democracy," we have the mystical notion of "carrying the fire" in *The Road*: You have to

⁴³ Ibid. 170.

⁴⁴ See: Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck: "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. 5

⁴⁵ The fact that most of McCarthy's characters lack what Aristotle termed as "anagnorisis" ("self-revelation," or "self-knowledge") adds a strange twist to these modern tragedies.

carry the fire. I don't know how to. Yes, you do. Is the fire real? The fire? Yes it is. Where is it? I don't know where it is. Yes you do. It's inside you. It always was there. I can see it.⁴⁶

Generic Contamination as Antidote to Historical Forgetfulness

Which of the above should we believe here: the austere ecopastoralism of *Blood Meridian*, or the more hopeful humanism of *The Road*? Are both these tropes narrative feints that have no outside referents, mere props for the particular trajectories of the respective tales? It is my contention that the idea of blindness, the austere substitution of “optical democracy” for purposive consciousness is reinforced in a writing that deliberately mixes up literary styles in order to reduce the monopoly of one genre over another. To these ends it is worth exploring the function of pastoral contamination in McCarthy in order to argue that just as certain diseases leave scars on the body, history traumatizes the pastoral moments in the text.⁴⁷ As an example of this line of thought, Frederic Jameson makes an interesting point on how certain literary forms survive their own termination:

To limit ourselves to generic problems, what this model implies is that in its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form.⁴⁸

Jameson argues that an old form persists in order to shape a prevailing ideological concern in the present: Likewise, the modern pastoral carries within it a ‘socio-symbolic

⁴⁶ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 279.

⁴⁷ Later on in this chapter, I’ll make more of this idea as I explore Walter Benjamin’s idea of “allegory as a permanent state of emergency.”

⁴⁸ Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious*. 126-127

message' that demands attention to the form and genre: sometimes it is there as a "contradiction" and sometimes it acts as a 'mediatory' or "harmonizing mechanism".⁴⁹

This is very true of Cormac McCarthy: his use of the pastoral seems to oscillate between the generic message of order (harmony and stability) and the unstable, irruptive message of "contradiction." The pastoral is thus sedimented in his works, but in such a way that the genre folds in on itself to become a vehicle for contraction rather than amplitude. Therefore, when we read McCarthy, we notice a narrative - suggestive in his decision to leave the claustrophobic settings of his early Appalachian novels for the wide open spaces of the south-western Border States – of diminishing returns. In other words the geographical transition is marked by an unassailable paradox: the walled-in ethos of the Southern pastoral births an attenuated version of the Western frontier. This suggests that the freedoms promised by both are negligible: each region is irremediably contaminated by unequal social and property relations that cannot resuscitate pastoral in its traditional form.

That McCarthy never lets us forget the numerous machines in the garden – e.g., the beginning of the nuclear arms build-up that is implied in *The Crossing*, the nightmarish millennial conurbation of Los Angeles as backdrop to his exiled cowboy's last days in *Cities of the Plain*, and the environmental violence wrought by automobiles as they careen through the Tennessee countryside in *The Orchard Keeper* - are testament enough that the timeless pastoral is irremediably contaminated by the speeded-up historical forces of change. Thus when pastoral is dropped into this admixture, its generic exclusiveness undergoes contamination; allowing the reader to question not only its presence in McCarthy but in the history of American literature also. Therefore, the failure of traditional pastoral in McCarthy, with its trope of historical forgetfulness, allows the counter-allegory to penetrate its enclosure and, by doing so, revives the form for critical enquiry.

It is the displacement of an idealized history for real history that is behind McCarthy's anti-pastoral injunction. One function of the national allegory is forgetting or

⁴⁹ Ibid. 126-127.

misremembering the more uncomfortable truths regarding American history. But what happens if you are unable to forget; indeed are burdened with the knowledge of remembering? This is appositely remarked upon by the Man, speaking to his son in *The Road*:

Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that. You forget some things, dont you? Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget."⁵⁰

There are so many instances in the *oeuvre* of Cormac McCarthy where protagonists and antagonists alike try to escape from the tyranny of remembering or, unfortunately, can only remember what they want to forget. This, as I shall argue, can be seen in Arthur Ownby's sylvan retreat in *The Orchard Keeper*; satirically in Culla Holme's aimless wanderings in *Outer Dark*; macabrely in Lester Ballard's use of caves in *Child of God*; tragically, through Cornelius Suttree's self-exile in *Suttree*, and pathetically through the sad anachronisms that are the *Border Trilogy's* lost-cowboys, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham.

Forgetting in pastoral appears to be equated with death, or, in Lewis B. Simpson's phrase, the "denial of being". In McCarthy, false remembering seems to trigger an unwanted effect: the impossibility of an uncompromised pastoral immersion. The thwarted desire for historical oblivion is trigger for the unappeasable melancholy of his characters. Thus the part-remedy is to remember falsely; to either nostalgically recall a past that never was or bitterly remonstrate its passing as reason for social decline (as in Sherriiff Bell in *No Country for Old Men*); or, like John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, insert himself in the false continuum of pastoral.

How, then, is this trope of forgetfulness conveyed in the novels? If we ascribe the notion of ironical distance to McCarthy, are we in danger of conferring intentionality on the part of the author? Is would be better to suggest that nature-writing as well as fictional writing in general is unavoidably contaminated by the social relations that produce it? If we

⁵⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 5.

look at it in this way, then it is possible to understand that the ambivalence that is at the heart of the writing is also symptomatic of a general mistrust with all representational productions, the allegorical novel in particular.

Pastoral as an Allegory of Fragmentation

McCarthy's use of pastoral allegory cannot be separated from his metafictional approach: although his novels are saturated with the emolliating tones of pastoral, there is a reflexive theme of dissolution and fragmentation that points toward a late-modernist assault on the style itself. In this sense wholeness is displaced by fragmentation, determinacy by indeterminacy, generic clarity by distortion. The literary source of this approach, according to Deborah Madsen, can be traced to protestant skepticism with using allegory as the method of interpretation for scripture. The meaning of scripture is that it is God's word: it is the Truth and is "self-validating;" therefore, "it draws on this circularity in the idea that the truth of scripture and the truth of one's reading of Scripture should be mutually validating."⁵¹ However, because allegory infers interpretation of something that has, so to speak, come out of the mouth of God, there's an ingrained skepticism about the very human invention of allegory as a representational device. Such suspicion would eventually have ramifications for literature as a form of truth-telling. American literature, perhaps because of the country's religious tradition, is replete with suspicion of the device itself. Thus many novels since Hawthorne and Melville use allegory to reveal problems with the form itself. In short, a suspicion of allegory is inherent within the modern American novel. Allegory, in its modern incarnation, is therefore often used as a metafictional device for casting doubt upon its function as a revealer of hidden meaning. The fact that American literature is fundamentally interested in character and personality further aggravates its validity: humans, according to Protestant theology, are fallen beings: how, then, is it possible to believe one character's account of experience over another?

⁵¹ Madsen, Deborah. "American allegory (sic) to 1900." *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. Rita Copeland and Peter L. Struck, eds. 237.

Madsen's understanding of a qualitative American allegory is a good starting point because it allows us to view McCarthy's radical re-vision as working within a tradition of allegorical suspicion. Interestingly, such suspicion is not so much directed toward scripturally-informed allegory than to a secularized belief in the soulfulness of the individual – or, in even more secular terms, the validity of individual psychology. When we get to our discussion on McCarthy's late novels, we will see that part of McCarthy's attack on American exceptionalism is its valorization of individual character to the degree that it is often synonymous with national character. In American life, the religion of self is just as powerful, and is often synonymous with, the old Christian theology. Because of this, it is important to examine the curious attraction, for conservatives and progressives alike, of essentialist ideas about national character and individual identity. McCarthy's vision therefore corresponds with Deborah Madsen's interpretation as well as the aforementioned Lewis B. Simpson's observation of the "apostatic" turn that modern American literature took as it distanced itself from both the idea of America as divinely-selected nation and the sovereignty of individual identity.

One way of halting the advance of progress against tradition was through the promotion of literature as an autonomous zone uncontaminated by the ravages of the modern world. The movement known as new criticism - spearheaded by such southern critics as John Crowe Ransom, Allan Tate and Robert Penn Warren - with its emphasis on close reading and essentialist ideas about language and genius, tried to retake the garden in the name of literature.

F. O. Matthiessen - writing around the same time as new criticism's heyday, though clearly in opposition to the movement's ideological conservatism - in his classic study *The American Renaissance* (1942), expresses a similar logocentric position by overstating the special case for American literature. A somewhat skeptical Deborah Madsen explains how

Matthiessen describes the period 1850 to 1855 as "one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression," united by a commonality of themes and particularly by the

desire of his designated writers (Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman and Poe) to discover rhetorical means by which the word and the thing might become one."⁵²

It is clear when we read McCarthy that the irrevocable separation of word and thing is central to his critique of modernity. This idea is at its most apocalyptic in *The Road*:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The name of birds. Finally the names of things one believed to be true ... The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality."⁵³

In this anti-Edenic passage, word and thing, the union of logos and world, has been rent asunder. The pastoral covenant which places God's word onto the tongues of humans is broken.

In terms of McCarthy's allegorical use of pastoral, it is better to go beyond the idealism, the dream of a marriage between word and thing, inherent in new criticism's reification of literature and Matthiessen's idea of "American Renaissance," and take recourse to Walter Benjamin's notion of allegorical fragmentation as it is codified in his study *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. For Benjamin, the baroque tragedies of 17th century Germany represented a new kind of allegory: the traditional eschatological tropes of catastrophe and melancholy were now used as a way of allegorizing the trauma of a country riven by religious wars and violent dynastic conflict. The use of the classical trope of the ruined church or castle, for example, now emblemized the pervasive feeling of uncertainty and impermanence in post-Reformation Germany. In this constant state of emergency, to use Benjamin's term for the seemingly permanent sense of political crisis in the Germany of the 17th century, a materially felt melancholy begins to permeate the

⁵² Madsen Deborah. "American allegory (sic) to 1900." *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. Rita Copeland and Peter L. Struck, eds. 237.

⁵³ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 89.

erstwhile metaphysical use of allegorical figuration. For instance, a castle ruin in this new *Trauerspiel* now becomes gravid with historicity:

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.⁵⁴

“Irresistible decay” is very much a motif in McCarthy’s writing. McCarthy, from the early to the late novels, describes his protagonists walking or riding through landscape scarred by untended fields, ruined churches, and abandoned commercial enterprises. His use of allegory is not just descriptive, however: it enables the reader to detect contemporary resonances that correspond with a post-Second World War American world of broken communities and moribund commercial endeavors. Moreover, his heroes, unlike the allegorical heroes of old - often mere playthings of the Gods - are undone by inexplicable historical forces: their melancholy, therefore, is rooted in historical causation; their existential ruin (“the realm of thoughts”) complemented by the devastated remains of a ruined culture. For example, ruined churches, erstwhile centers of order and continuity, are, in McCarthy, the settings for soulful self-examination by the protagonists. An interlocutor, in the form of a defrocked priest or a blind heretic, is deployed as a conduit for a discussion on the various historical oppressions that have brought about a melancholic social *Umwelt* to pass. We can find such usage in the following depiction of a ruined church in *The Crossing*, the setting for Billy Parham’s encounter with a heretic mormon:

You come here to hide out?

I came here because of the devastation.

Sir?

⁵⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 177-178

The devastation. From the terremoto.⁵⁵

Ruins, for Benjamin and McCarthy alike, are places to contemplate the aleatory nature of history; the kind of history that imperceptibly yet unalterably changes things in front of people's eyes. The ruined sites are places to ponder the catastrophes of the wider world: war, famine, poverty or, in the case of the above, natural disasters such as earthquakes. Accompanying this is an inconsolable melancholy that weeps over the impermanence of all human civilizations. Benjamin believed that the allegorization of such places could bring about a germinating historical consciousness of the type that could see these places as symbols for the immanence of violence in the world:

The broken pediment, the crumbling columns are supposed to bear witness to the miracle that the sacred edifice has withstood even the most elemental forces of destruction, lightning and earthquake.⁵⁶

Ruined churches (*The Crossing*, *All the Pretty Horses*), ruined plantation houses (*Suttree*, *The Road*) in McCarthy are ghosted with historical meaning. They are fragment forms of human culture, material exemplums of the hubris that brings about cultural decline. Moreover, they remind the "witness" that history's angel is standing over the broken fields and buildings of the American pastoral.⁵⁷ McCarthy makes this idea plain in *The Road* when the man is shown walking across farmland, picking up arrow heads along with Spanish coins (204): relics of old genocidal wars and the time of the conquistador. Melancholy, therefore, is the prevailing mood enveloping the protagonist witness: historical remains and relics are pieces of the broken allegory of pastoral reconstituted in texts that obsess about its powerful hold on the American imagination. This is why, at the end of *The Crossing*, we find Billy Parham at his most abject. He is history's witness: an

⁵⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 141-142.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 178.

⁵⁷ I am referring here to Benjamin's notion of the "Angelus Novus" (the angel of history), an angel who, in George Steiner's words, "can look into the deeps". See George Steiner's "Introduction" to *The Origin of German Drama*. 20.

allegorized bystander lamenting on all the violence and destruction in the world: "He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept." ⁵⁸

Benjamin saw the German tragic drama as a bridge between the timeless myths of classical tragedy and the more secular idea of the modern prince/sage beset by the political exigencies of his time. In terms of religious allegory, the eschatological motifs of catastrophe, with its idea of restoration is not suitable for the modern world. The modern prince/sage (for it is possible to regard John Grady Cole and Billy Parham of the *Border Trilogy* as embodying such qualities) is always beset by a constant feeling of things coming to a violent end; or, to invoke the sentiments of the last paragraph in *The Road*, a feeling that whatever was lost "could not be put back. Not be made right again" (287). This sense of melancholy without redemption produces a permanent "state of emergency, resulting in the evacuation of eschatology."⁵⁹ Allegory, or traditional allegory, because it is stripped of its eschatological dimension, remains, in its modern incarnation, only in fragmented form. Crucially, then, and because the German tragic drama deals mainly with secular problems of princely rule and tyranny, the shift is towards allegory as political code. In this way, according to Benjamin, allegory undergoes restoration through the intercession of political meaning in the shape of "the mourning for a perpetual and irresolvable state of emergency."⁶⁰

The meaning-laden world of traditional allegory is displaced by an emptying out of religious soteriological meaning: allegory can no longer miraculously restore meaning and order to a broken world. However, the focus on a world that is now irremediably broken and fragmented allows for a new allegory of fragmentation to allegorize a world broken asunder by social and political forces. This is very much the political dimension of late

⁵⁸ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 425.

⁵⁹ Caygill, Howard. "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Allegory." *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, eds. 247.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 247.

McCarthy, a world that is constantly depicted as broken and sorrowing, veering from one catastrophe to the next, existing in a perpetual state of emergency as late capitalism breaks down all known systems of community and civic society. In his depiction of social breakdown, ruined enterprises and institutions, in his creation of anachronous and marginalized character types such as the cowboy, McCarthy, too, allegorizes an American world torn apart by aggressive socio-economic systems.

When Benjamin looked at the German mourning drama, he, according to critics Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, was fascinated by how

these allegorical dramas, with their unfathomably strange imagery, provide no interpretive passage between the material sign and a theological idea. The possibilities of meaningful representations are called into question: the signs are dead-weight (like corpses of the dead) dissolving the link that enables a hermeneutical movement between figures and their meaning, between human life and absolute truth.⁶¹

Extrapolating on this analysis, Benjamin made a correlation between the mourning drama and the modern fictional device of presenting allegories as anti-allegories whose “meanings” are also called into question through the introjection of multiple meanings. These modern allegories, with their endless polyvalencies, are really allegories of discontinuities, of agent-less impotence, of fractured experience, or, in the words of Paul De Man, “as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self.”⁶² Non-meaning is thus re-contextualized as a historical record of human and social pathology in the modern era. This is also relevant for understanding the historical dimension in McCarthy’s pastoral: the movement of allegorical types, such as the cowboys in the *Border Trilogy*, across often hostile but familiar geographical spaces allows for a critical re-contextualization where

⁶¹ Copeland, Rita and Peter T. Struck. “Introduction.” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. 10.

⁶² Paul De Man is quoted in Theresa M. Kelley’s “Romanticism’s errant allegory (sic).” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. 211.

such anachronistic figures become transfigured representatives of fragmented selves in a fragmented society.

Allegory, then, in pastoral is the shaping mechanism that helps sharpen the antinomy between the ideal state and its dissolution by modernity. As mentioned earlier, Georg Guillemin sees this as providing the melancholy undertone for all the work; but, following Walter Benjamin, it is better to see this in more historically concrete terms. Dissolution reflects the endless “states of emergency” of the social order: “In place of the catastrophic resolution of tragedy, Benjamin locates the formal principle of *Trauerspiel* in the mourning for a perpetual and irresolvable state of emergency.”⁶³ It is this sense of eternally recurring catastrophe in the modern era that gives McCarthy’s writing a political dimension that moves beyond melancholy and tragedy.

For what is at stake in McCarthy’s writing is a mirroring social concern: fragmentation has resulted from a breakdown of the codes and myths on which American society feed on. History, specifically the impact that socio-economic changes has on his characters, is root and cause for pastoral melancholy, and is not, as Georg Guillemin seems to believe, a mere function of mimetic allegoresis. It is this perspective that informs the main thesis argument of this study.

Thesis Argument: Beyond Georg Guillemin’s and David Holloway’s Existentialist Reading of McCarthy.

As this study is mainly looking at how pastoral functions as a sub-genre in McCarthy’s poly-generic reconstruction of the allegorical American romance-epic, a literary review is implicit in this introduction’s discussion on romance-epic, pastoral contamination, allegory and anti-allegory. Moreover I continue this approach in the body as a whole. For example, there is frequent use of critics of whom I am in broad agreement with: notably, Rick Wallach, Jay Ellis, Dianne Luce and John Cant as well as references to other key studies, *inter alia*, Steven Frye, Barclay Owens and Mark Royden Winchell. In

⁶³ Caygill, Howard. “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Allegory.” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. 247.

terms of the thesis argument, however, what follows is a delineation of the two McCarthy critics that I position myself against. These are Georg Guillemin, who was the first writer to study the use of pastoral in McCarthy, and David Holloway, who up to the time of writing, is the first critic to analyze McCarthy from a Marxist-Existentialist viewpoint. Therefore what follows below is a brief outline of Guillemin and Holloway's position on McCarthy, my agreements and disagreements with them, and the direction I intend to take in order to move beyond their criticisms.

McCarthy's suffering characters emblemize the impossibility of pastoral. Or, to put it another way, there is always the inference that the energy exerted by the occlusion of real history exacerbates the agony of Arcadian exile. Georg Guillemin in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* takes an existential Gnostic position to this anguish and thus identifies McCarthy's pastoral vision as ecopastoralism shot through with melancholy:

McCarthy's pastoralism is ecopastoral not just because it respects the ecological equality of all creatures and favors undomesticated nature over agricultural land, but, because it equates the external wilderness of nature with the social wilderness of the city and the internal wilderness of the human mind.⁶⁴

While agreeing that McCarthy's vision is tragically ecopastoral, I feel that the existential weight given to this is too vague. In my view, the melancholy that is so pervasive in the writing is a response to the scarcity – whether this is familial, sexual, cultural or economic – that his protagonists experience. Even in McCarthy's most rapturous evocations of pastoral, there is an underlying sadness that suggests a very materially-felt disconsolation. A better way, then, of understanding the allegorical method in McCarthy is provided by David Holloway's dialectical notion of pastiche. Whereas Guillemin seems to be enamored of the use of allegoresis, Holloway, in *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, argues that the anachronistic use of allegorical pastoral in McCarthy is part of an overriding compulsion to self-reflexively examine the usage so that we can go beyond the "depthless" and "empty" aesthetic of pastiche.

⁶⁴ Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. 13.

Holloway sees this approach as “pastiching pastiche:” a device which distances the writer from allegoresis in general:

As a signifying mode that therefore retreats from the naming of any “real” referent in the world, the ironic mode of pastiche is the kind of aesthetic most fitted to a time in which representation conceived as a system of transparent and stable signs has become a thing of the past, and in which the very notion of a recoverable telos or unifying grand narrative at work in human history has been declared (by some) to be similarly obsolete.⁶⁵

This is compelling criticism and is a fitting rejoinder to Guillemin’s conviction that McCarthy’s characters are mere representations of allegorical design: “In book after book, these unreflective nomads represent a melancholia that they do not contain within themselves.”⁶⁶ Although, on a superficial level, Guillemin is correct about this, he fails to see that McCarthy’s allegorical style is a bitter commentary on the irrecoverable nature of the once stable sign of subjectivity. Holloway therefore sees allegory in McCarthy as a form of meta-pastiche that is used to suggest the moribundity of the transparent and the death of the real. The transformation of allegory into anti-allegory, therefore, is a form of resistance against the technocracy of late-capitalist America and the loss of the possibility of the self.

Holloway’s idea of pastiching pastiche is a compelling advance on Guillemin’s hermeneutic of melancholy; however, there is still something unsatisfactory about its conclusions. In my opinion it is better to propose a stronger materialist reading that argues for a political understanding of the numerous social repressions that have ultimately foreclosed the Jeffersonian pastoral as symbol of freedom.

To these ends, the main purpose of this study is to argue that McCarthy’s cold pastoral means the death of humanistic notions of the primacy of man over nature and,

⁶⁵ Frederic Jameson is quoted in: David Holloway’s *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 71.

⁶⁶ Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. 9-10.

further, that such a reading stands in opposition to the Sartrean inference given by David Holloway in *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, where he argues that the sloughing off of a socially-constructed identity will produce a more authentic self. In short, Holloway's use of Sartrean concepts such as practico-inert and being-for-itself cannot account for McCarthy's renunciation - from *Blood Meridian* to *The Road* - of all hierarchies, including the hierarchy of self over nature. To put it another way, there is no refuge for the eviscerated subject in these novels. It would be better instead to go beyond the issues of subjectivity and consider the real tragedy that McCarthy describes: America's embracing of the ideology of exchange-value to the point that the dream of uncontaminated use-value, "pure-utility" as I call it in this study, reflected in its literature has become redundant. Holloway, to his credit, does this but then becomes mired in the various sublations of Sartrean dialectics: i.e., the supersession of the allegory of fragmentation will somehow one day restore the subject to the throne. In this vein, the theories that I argue for and against - namely Jameson and McCarthy critic David Holloway (especially his utilization of Jameson's political unconscious), and my ultimate distancing from the latter's Sartre-inflected analysis of McCarthy - will be informed by the anti-historical-subject theories of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan in order to go beyond the Existentialist impasse.

Part One:

McCarthy's Southern Pastoral Apostasy:

The Appalachian Novels.

Introduction

According to McCarthy critic Jay Ellis, there are two ever-revolving, endlessly conflicting ideas in McCarthy: first, the desire to flee from the environment that spawned you and, second, the countervailing draw of staying-put and finding a home in the local and familiar. This dichotomy, as Ellis suggests, is shown mostly by the trope of constricted space, and is best evinced by the 'gap-in-the-fence' metaphor in *The Orchard Keeper* (more of which later) as well as the theme of wandering repeatedly within confined spaces in *Outer Dark*, *Child of God* and *Suttree*.¹ Moreover, the atmosphere of contraction that pervades these early novels suggests that McCarthy is already at this early stage in his writings asking questions about the frontier as metaphor for endless expansion and existential escape. Here at the very beginning is a major theme: a highly paradoxical pastoral where leaving and staying-put are solutions without consolation.

This sense of constriction compounded by a deeply ambiguous freedom permeates all McCarthy's writings. More troublingly, and in terms of the Southern pastoral in particular, the Jeffersonian vision of a middle-landscape lying between the city and the wilderness is shattered by the very fact that the consoling and ordering signifier of the well-ordered estate is absent in these novels. It is worth considering, therefore, the reasons for such an elision; moreover, since these landed estates often appear in ruins in the novels, we should infer that some unspeakable catastrophe has taken place which needs to be historically comprehended. That is why there is a need to look for some kind of context for these novels – after all, the time period covered is, approximately, the late nineteenth century and the first fifty-odd years of the twentieth. The period covered in these novels – roughly the time of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction – with its fictional and journalistic assertions of Southern revivalism and corresponding threnodies of degeneration, become part of McCarthy's evisceration of the pastoral ideal.

¹ This follows Jay Ellis's main thesis argument in: *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*.

For these reasons it is worth asserting that these early works, in spite of their elusive historical and geographical nature, are at heart evocations of a New South whose traumatic birth pangs and residual nostalgia for the myths of ante-bellum - functioning in similar ways to how the pastorals of 18th century England emerged at the time of the Industrial Revolution - have produced a falsely pleasing memory of the old order in order to conceal a much more troubling history. Now there are many manifestations of this false remembering, but for the purpose of this section we shall stick closely to a belief, held among mostly Conservative thinkers, of a *sui-generis* south, which in its social relations, geography, climate and cultural patterns was perceived as markedly different, and by implication better, from the hated Yankee north. In terms of cultural production, this regionalist obsession has produced some fine literature. However, it is here where we find a key area of concern in McCarthy's early novels: a use of the Southern mythos and its reified idioms to overturn its various illusions.

For example, when we get to meet some of the characters in the following discussion on these novels, it is clear that in speech and behavior they come close to exemplifying W. J. Cash's famous assertion - echoed elsewhere in Allen Tate's "Uncle Sam's other province" - that the "South is another land." Cash, though recognizing that there are "many Souths" insisted also that such plurality could be couched under the heading of "one South", an imaginary locus with "definite mental and social patterns" that nurture a "complex of established relationships and habits of thought."² There is no question that McCarthy uses to powerful ends the speech patterns and habits of thought of his East Tennessee region; but, as we shall see, such typology is so reified that it becomes pastiche.

On top of the claims of linguistic uniqueness, we have arguments for the peculiar socio-economics of the south. We find this best promulgated in John Crowe Ransom's rejection of the "Gospel of Industrialism", a position that, along with other Southern Agrarians associated with the political broadside *I Take My Stand* (1930), argues for a

² Cash, W. J. "The Continuity of Southern History." Escott, Paul, et al., eds. *Major Problems in the American South, Volume Two: The New South*. 2-5.

return to a pre-industrial rural economy. It is clear that whatever the perspective taken, there is a shared belief which looks at the South, not as a “lost cause” but as a recoverable pastoral: “the South Shall Rise Again”, if you will. As we shall see, such a position is renounced by McCarthy: when we look at the novels we can see similar anti-industrial and anti-federal tropes which superficially forge an alignment between McCarthy and these writers; however, it soon becomes apparent that McCarthy’s biocentric ecopastoralism rejects the middle-landscape ideology implicit within this type of thinking.

Whether we regard the chauvinistic obsessions of Cash et al. as tosh or not - and historian C. Vann Woodward clearly does, pinpointing the sundry discontinuities of slavery, secession, etc, as historical repudiation for the “New South same as the Old South” thesis - it is clear that, for very different reasons, the idea of a bruised and battered “nation apart” is a subject that is taken seriously, even today.³ One of its more compelling myths – if we momentarily, and forgetfully, slough-off the reactionary element of ante-bellum nostalgia, the “lost cause” element that one even finds in writers like Flannery O’Connor - is the idea of the south as a site in which the advent of industrialism was either opposed outright or tailored to meet the perceived endemic cultural patterns of the region. Of the latter, we have again W.G. Cash as our guide: in his famous panegyric on Southern manners, he argues that even industrialism underwent a Southern-style transformation once it crossed the Mason-Dixon-Line. In a marvelous act of political sophistry, the historian conveniently consigns slave-owning society to the graveyard, but miraculously resurrects its bourgeois remains in the form of a new industrial leadership. Gone, according to Cash, are the airs and graces, the manorial style of the slave-owning faux-aristocracy; in their place are the more egalitarian but still manorial sensibilities of the southern gentry: Captains of the plantations seamlessly evolving into Captains of Industry.⁴ For agrarian redeemers such as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom there was something attractive about buying into this

³ Woodward, C. Vann. “The Discontinuity of the Southern History.” Escott, Paul D, et al, eds. *Major Problems in the History of the American South*. 408.

⁴ Ibid. 3.

myth-making: though opposing the industrialism brought about by Reconstruction, there was a shared belief that the South was a land apart, separate from the greed and ugly commercialism of the North, adorned still by old-world manners – for it was just this that needed to be redeemed and restored. Each position, fulsomely agrarian in the case of Crowe-Ransom and Tate, or cautiously pro-industrial, in the case of Cash, howl for the vertical pastoral typical of the ante-bellum social order. Such “two nations” theories have at their heart a combined sense of loss and a fierce desire for restitution; a combination that comes close to the pastoral’s materially empty but figuratively powerful allegory of plenitude; an allegory, moreover, that paradoxically seeks the restitution of the old divisions associated with ante-bellum life.⁵ When we get to look at the city novel that is *Suttree*, we shall see that the respective pro-industrial and agrarian idealisms of Cash and Crowe Ransom are both rejected.

We can see this argument for uniqueness further exemplified in the often crackpot cultural justification of slavery as a feature of the peculiarly hot climate of the South. For example, historian Ulrich B. Phillips believed that as the South was on the same latitude as Greece it engendered a similar group of enlightened “noble” men who were able to while away their time reading poetry and philosophy while a “few chattels slaved away in the fields”.⁶ A corollary of this was the propagation of a derisively faux-Dorian culture which put a sophisticated patina over the system of slavery. This was reflected in the Doric architecture of the plantation houses, in the polite *noblesse oblige* of the gentleman farmers and in the refinement of their women. Writers such as John Crowe Ransom, though careful not to openly support such a system, also believed that the peculiar institution of squirearchy was in itself proof that there was a group of people “who had come to terms with nature.”(13) The absence of landed estates, peopled by persons of high-culture - their

⁵ W.J. Cash argues that the “South is another land” and then reinforces his view by citing approvingly Allan Tate’s “Uncle Sam’s other province.” Ibid. 2-4

⁶ Ulrich B. Phillips cited in Smiley, L. David. “Quest for a Central Theme.” Escott, Paul D, et al., eds. *Major Problems in the History of the American South*. 11-13.

presence only acknowledged in ruins (*Suttree*) or as a domicile for cannibals (*The Road*) - is evidence enough that such a past is being renounced by McCarthy.

The idea of the south as a climatically homogenous yet socially diverse place, whose shared manners, customs and religion, mostly made up of the Presbyterian/Baptist kind, does not bear scrutiny when one considers that, first, the south is in the main a temperate rather than tropical climate. Secondly, vast areas of the region never had that much contact with the institution of slavery anyway. For example, unlike the lowland areas either side of the Mississippi Delta, the Appalachian territory was never suitable for cotton farming: its principle industries have always been mining and logging. This perhaps explains why there are very few African-American characters in the McCarthy *oeuvre*: the area's ethnic make-up is still largely drawn from Scottish and Northern Irish stock, its oppressions more to do with the struggles of poor white farmers and their endeavors at finding sustenance and subsistence in an often unyielding terrain. What is interesting in McCarthy's choice of the mountainous regions, then, is how they don't quite fit into Cash's, Crowe-Ransom's or Phillips' template of a bruised and battered South that is yet an exemplum of continuity for the genteel "Southern way."

Revealingly, Cash cannot help but produce the fly in his pastoral ointment by presaging the *dramatis personae* of McCarthy's early novels: the poor and dispossessed:

Beneath these was a vague race lumped together indiscriminately as the poor whites – very often, in fact, as the "white-trash." These people belonged in the main to a physically inferior type having sprung for the most part from the convict servants, redemptioners, and debtors of Old Virginia and Georgia, with a sprinkling of the most unsuccessful sort of European peasants and farm laborers and the dregs of the European town slums. And so, of course, the gulf between them and the master classes was impassable, and their ideas and feelings did not enter into the make-up of the prevailing Southern civilization.⁷

⁷ Ibid. 2-4.

For the purposes of this study, what becomes interesting about this ultra-reactionary view is how it neatly describes not only the concerns of the early McCarthy but also the region that these novels are set-in: the unprepossessing, very unpastoral communities of East Tennessee: an area bereft of the cavalier, master classes so beloved of Cash and others. McCarthy's writings are generally devoted to the 'lumpen' elements so decried by southern apologists: indeed when a scion of the gentlemen-class is depicted in the form of Cornelius Suttree, it becomes quickly apparent that he identifies with the poor and downtrodden of his Knoxville community. It is this identification with the poor and its implicit rejection of the higher social order that undoes the totalizing schema of pastoral. This introduces the Benjaminian notion of an allegory of fragmentation. The poor are the remainder breaking up the notion of the exemplary and harmonious. In these novels, one finds no genteel classes unless they're scoffed at, no squirarchy unless they are parodied and brutalized, and no plantation houses unless they are in ruins. The novels are mostly concerned with those other negative features which are often described, too, as truly "Southern": a land of floods, blight, famine and general deprivation, filled with a people who show less *noblesse oblige* and more a propensity for random and horrifying violence. In short a land that reveals very much the broken pastoral of the South.

It is with these important antinomies in mind, that we turn to the first four novels which, in spite of the complex overlay of a gothic narrative in the first three, and the high modernist style of the last, *Suttree*, point inexorably to the historical factors, the very material causes, behind the ruination of the Southern pastoral ideal. The following discussion of the Appalachian novels is in two parts: the first part looks at the theme of contraction, wandering in a confined space, as it works in *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child of God*, while the second looks at the theme of escape in *Child of God* and *Suttree* and how it is predicated always on the counter-themes of exile and expulsion.

Chapter Two

1) *The Orchard Keeper: A Paralyzed Pastoral*

Cormac McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), is at once the most pastoral and profoundly pessimistic of his novels. If we keep this antinomy in mind, it is possible to argue that the novel's entropic atmosphere, its allegorical "state of emergency", informs all subsequent renderings: namely, a pastoral of ever-diminishing returns, which over the course of McCarthy's body of work is shown through his various characters' futile efforts at resisting the forces of historical change.

The entropic element in *The Orchard Keeper* is mostly evident in how the pastoral theme becomes one of neglect rather than order; this, as we shall see, is a feature of his Southern novels in general. Another hallmark of his Southern novels and, arguably, the *oeuvre* as a whole, is the general atmosphere of constricted - and psychologically constricting - space: the palpable sense that modernity, in all its guises, is sadly crowding out the areas of seclusion that allowed the pastoral myth to flourish. Whereas pastoral in the Western novels is often subordinated to the master genre of the romance-epic, an adherence which allows for a more spatially fluid narrative, its presence in this first novel is very much informed by the idea of stasis, the orchard in question, a suffocating pastoral of circumscribed space enclosing a community ever susceptible to modernity. Vereen Bell is one of many critics who see the novel charged with an anti-modern, anti-androcentric message that foregrounds "the irrelevance of the human in the impersonal scheme of things."⁸ This idea is supported, but given a more political coloring, by David Paul Ragan, who argues that "McCarthy depicts a world in which traditional embodiments of value - religion, community relationships and agrarian connections with the earth - have deteriorated as a result of urban culture, commercial interests and governmental

⁸ Bell, Vereen. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. 10.

intrusions.”⁹ Ragan is right to detect the social criticism in this novel, but is wrong, in my view, to believe that the source of all this can be attributed to urban culture. As we shall see, the novel is quietly excoriating in its treatment of agrarian archetypes, refusing to elevate the country over the city in any shape or form. It is better therefore - to invoke Steven Frye’s definition of McCarthy’s style in general - to see the novel as a “revisionist frontier romance”, revisionist, mainly, in the sense that the tendency of the genre to emblemize a culture’s values is only present in a negative sense. The interesting corollary of this is that we are presented with pastoral as paralysis; the frontier-romance’s heroic archetypes beleaguered by a sense of inertia and incomprehension at the changes taking place in front of them.

The novel describes the intersecting stories of the young John Wesley Rattner, bootlegger Marian Sylder, and the old keeper of the orchard, Arthur (Athur) Ownby. The narrative voice used for these characters is, aside from first person dialogue accounts, primarily in the third person. This crucially means that the shifting points of view as well as the thought processes of the characters are articulated through an omniscient, depersonalizing narrator. Such a voice suits the traditional pastoral’s primacy of place over character as well as the novel’s deployment of landscape as a character in itself.

This is evident in one of the early descriptions of the old orchard keeper Arthur Ownby, who is depicted as a classic pastoral type, the shepherd/husbandman at dusk, calling home the bestiary under his care:

He raised his horn. His call went among the slopes echoing and reechoing, stilling the nightbirds, rattling the frogs in the creek to silence, and on out over the valley where it faded thin and clear as a bell for one hovering breath before the night went

⁹ Ragan, David Paul. “Value and Structure in *The Orchard Keeper*.” Arnold, Edward T, and Dianne C. Luce, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. 17.

clamorous with hounds howling in roundelays, pained wailings as of phantom dogs lamenting their own demise.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the disquieting gothic tone of the last sentence, McCarthy here is doffing his hat to the pastoral's tradition of diurnal pastoral description, signifying life, and its antithesis, the encroaching night, signifying death. As an old man, Ownby is associated with the end of life and thus even when the rendering of pastoral is at its most ecstatic, a melancholy undertone lingers. In this light it is possible to argue that the pervasiveness of death in McCarthy's first novel informs all the works thereafter. Furthermore, McCarthy's preference for the third person voice suggests that Ownby is first in a long line of sympathetically drawn protagonists whose presence in any given text will be more figurative than drawn from real life. In short, there are already signs in the early McCarthy that the pastoral's inability to bring to life the stock characters it relies on is part of the pastiche element fundamental to the revisionist style: the lack of life in them a wry comment on the social impossibility of pastoral itself. Moreover, this refusal to allow his characters to speak on behalf of their inner selves adumbrates McCarthy's incipient ecopastoralism - the kind that will be fleshed-out later in *Blood Meridian's* notion of "optical democracy" - where human beings undergo a negative transfiguration leveling them with the landscape.

Beneath the novel's complex structure is the customary pastoral refrain of an old way of life under siege from social and technological change. In spite of such mimesis, the story initiates two mutually compatible authorial concerns: first, how changes in the social reality induce melancholy and, second, how such transformations are often perceived as accidental. One of the narrative strategies for conveying this disorientation is the aforesaid complex organization of the story itself. As we shall see, the novel's beginning is really the end: what lies between has already happened. However, before we consider the problem of organization in depth, we shall begin by analyzing a key theme in the novel: the transient,

¹⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Orchard Keeper*. 46.

apparently happenstantial, nature of the modern and its often devastating impact on traditional community life.

Historicizing the “Transient” and “Happenstantial”

In *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period*, Dianne Luce locates a couple of possible historical sources for the pervading sense of impermanence, the “transient” and “happenstantial,” to use the words in *The Orchard Keeper*; specifically, how such temporal modes affected Red Branch, the generic Appalachian community depicted in the novel. First, Luce identifies two main culprits for the fundamental altering of Appalachia’s traditional socio-economic practices as well as for the eventual ruination of its fragile eco-system; first, the late nineteenth incursions made by industrial capitalism, primarily the logging business; and, second, the flooding of the Tennessee valley and the damming of its rivers by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the nineteen thirties, the latter an example of federal interference that did more damage to the mountain communities than good. These social-economic transformations are often defended as necessary interventions, which, on the whole, brought much needed work and commerce into what had hitherto been a deprived area. For example, the area’s abundant supply of woodland timber helped build the railroads across the United States and also temporarily brought much needed commerce and employment to the East Tennessee mountain communities. This, along with the electrification of the Tennessee Valley by the building of dams, arguably, brought places like Red Branch into the modern era. However, such successes were in the short term; the long term ramifications seeming to be much more negative. In terms of the TVA project, Luce argues that “the TVA’s engineering decisions destroyed the farmlands of hundreds of families and permanently altered the traditional culture of the region.”¹¹ Luce also avers that the benefits of these enterprises, though more evident in the lowland and urban areas, did not seriously improve the conditions of the poor in the mountain communities: the poor were downtrodden when the changes came and remained

¹¹ Luce, Dianne. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period*. 20

so when they stopped. This economic and cultural failure is ridiculed in the novel in the form of “the cold gleaming” and “sinister” tank in Athur Ownby’s orchard, a tank probably installed to help serve “one of the TVA’s engineering projects, erected and maintained by the federal government at the end of the orchard road.”¹²

The novel is about a community suffering the after-shock of such social-economic and failures. This is why the economic and environmental damage that both enterprises perpetrated on the area is registered in the novel in remnant form: the story, so to speak, begins in the catastrophic aftermath: the logging industry has already left the area, while what remains of federal involvement is mostly of the coercive, authoritarian kind. What is left is a community teetering on the edge of an economic precipice: left to its own wits, Red Branch returns to its old backwater ways only to find such a world, due to the aforesaid depredations of capital and federalism, is no longer sustainable. So what is at stake in the novel is the fact that by the mid-to-late nineteen thirties, the area is in its own ‘state of emergency,’ resulting from capitalist and federal intrusion. The gratuitous despoliation of the area’s natural resources has left the community in historical limbo: it continues its traditional social practices in a ramshackle way, for the motor car is now the preferred mode of transport; moreover, both tradition and modernity are shown to be bereft of energy and stimulus. For after the timber industry exhausted its operations, and after the TVA failed to stimulate the economy, widespread unemployment was the order of the day, causing some community members (in the novel, this is best evinced in the character Marion Sylder) to turn their minds to such semi-legal and illegal practices as animal bounty hunting and bootlegging (Dianne Luce: 8). It is this capitalist and federally motivated devastation , extraction without replenishment, that provides the political subtext of the novel: paradoxically, therefore, the “transient’ and “happenstantial,” is a mode of living generated by permanent economic and cultural failure.

¹² Ibid, 20

As a further instance of negative change, Luce explains how the mountain community's traditionally built log-houses, for generations sturdy enough to withstand fierce seasonal changes in the weather, were replaced, in the early years of the 20th century, by economically convenient, but more fragile box houses. The precarious and weather-prone becomes a metaphor, therefore, not only for the turbulence of socioeconomic change but the fragility of existence in the modern world. The modern, though synonymous with law and order, with the federalization of country that once was wilderness, is paradoxically shown to be made of weaker stuff than what it was there to replace. This is shown, Luce notes, in the opening pages of the novel: "In contrast to the Rattners' log-dwelling," a dwelling where, in a wry snook against federal law, "no tax is paid on it, for it did not exist in the county courthouse records." These more modern houses are "endowed with an air transient and happenstantial as if set by the recession of floodwaters. Even the speed with which they were constructed could not outdistance the decay for which they held such affinity."¹³

There is no clear reference, in *The Orchard Keeper*, to the incursions made by industrial capitalism; nevertheless, the description of fragile, prefabricated dwellings clearly implies that the traditional certitudes of the community are under threat. In these opening pages, therefore, it is possible to perceive a moment of metonymy where the transient condition of the houses displaces the stabilizing strategies of the Southern pastoral, a strategic gambit which, moreover, uses structural distortion to mirror an increasingly unstable social superstructure. This might sound far-fetched; but in this novel, and the novels that follow, there is not one extant upright example of the classic symbol of Southern order: the plantation house. It's as though the very absence of this figure is signifier enough for the crumbling status of the Southern pastoral.

In the passage that Luce quotes from, McCarthy also alludes to the future shock experienced by areas undergoing rapid change in the space of years:

¹³ Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. 8. Luce is quoting a passage from *The Orchard Keeper*. 11.

It was a very much a different place in 1913 when Marion Sylder was born there, or in 1929 when he left school to work briefly as a carpenter's apprentice for Increase Tipton, patriarch of a clan whose affluence extended to a dozen jerrybuilt shacks strewn about the valley in unlikely places squatting over their gullied purlieus like great brooding animals rigid with constipation, and yet endowed with an air transient and happenstantial as if set there by the recession of floodwaters.¹⁴

The first thing to say about this is that the reference to the way the community looked in 1913 is unsentimental: the community is shown to be already in a ruinous state, blame for which, therefore, cannot be put at the door of industrial capitalism alone. However, by 1929, something more than dry-rot is setting in. Increase Tipton is a bad boss and terrible landlord, neglectful of his workers and seeming not to care about their living and working conditions:

They were rented to families of gaunt hollow-eyed and dark skinned people, not Mellungeons, and not exactly anything else, who produced with such frightening prolificness that their entire lives appeared devoted to the production of the ragged line of scions which shoeless and tattered sat for hours at a time on the porch edges, themselves not unlike the victims of some terrible disaster, and stared across the blighted land with expressions of neither hope nor despair.¹⁵

This is apocalyptic writing of the social kind: a foreshadowing of the concern found later on in *Blood Meridian* and also *The Road*. In other words, the horror is very much the work of the unequal social and property relations of the South, exacerbated further by both the predations of the corporate world in the form of railroad cartels and the endemic greed, epitomized, as mentioned, in the figure of the acquisitively named Increase Tipton - a wry reference perhaps to the euphonious names of the Pilgrim Fathers and early Puritan settlers. The pre-capitalist dream of the artisan, learning his trade from a beneficent master is debunked here.

¹⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Orchard Keeper*. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid. 11.

For in this community we find a populace so forlorn and abject that they barely fit into a recognizably ethnic tabulation: “not Mellungeons and not exactly anything else.” (11) But in spite of the unsentimental looking back, it is clear that whatever was latently poisonous in 1913 had become manifestly worse in 1929. In the space of 18 years, the poverty is still there but modern symbols such as the locomotive, the motor car and other machinery are now ratcheting up the sense of dislocation. Such textual deployment of machines gives the impression that the relations of capitalism have speeded up time - the unnaturalness of quick temporal change has caught a community unawares, unable to resist the changes taking place in front of its eyes. Moreover, and most importantly for the master theme of broken pastoral in the *oeuvre*, the reaction to such changes are shown to be mostly one of shocked incomprehension and inertia.

The “recession of floodwaters,” then, is an apposite metaphor for both the precariousness of life led in the Southern backwaters as well as the general aleatory view that history can only be understood through its effects. However, a more political reading of the above would see such radical economic and environmental transformation as the very stuff of capitalism: the imperative of flux; unsentimental permanent transformation (“everlasting uncertainty” as Marx put it in *The Communist Manifesto*) as part and parcel of the capitalist *modus operandi*.

Thus the biblical metaphor of “floodwaters” becomes demystified when we understand that the function of capital is to - albeit by hiding in plain sight - sweep away so much of the old ways and old traditions and put in their place “everlasting uncertainty.” Floodwaters, then, in turn, may serve as a metaphor for the up and down economic fortunes of this period, with the Redbranch community acting as a fragile dam, a symbol of fragile resilience of lives led, literally and figuratively, on the brink of a precipice. Thus the pathetic fallacy of the natural world as being somehow removed from the social-economic is challenged: in McCarthy everything is precarious and subject to the vicissitudes of the social system; none more so than the rural communities who increasingly become more dependent on the marketplace.

Images of precariousness abound in these opening pages. For instance, in a confusing moment of chronology, the narrative hearkens back to an earlier moment where, briefly, Rattner returns to his home town, and is shown drinking in “The Greenfly Inn.” There is no better illustration of precariousness than the following image of a bar, full of drunken customers, teetering on the edge of a cliff:

At that time there was a place in the gap of a mountain called the Green Fly Inn. It was box-shaped with a high front and a tin roof sloping rearward and was built on a scaffolding of poles over a sheer drop, the front door giving directly onto the road. One corner was nailed to a pine tree that rose towering out of a hollow – a hollow which on windy nights acted as a flue.¹⁶

The very name of the inn conjures up, in a comical way, an image of a pestilential anti-pastoral: a ravenous Id-like aphid greedily eating up the plants and crops of its habitat. Moreover, the description of the inn’s location is a powerful early example of McCarthy’s use of synesthesia: a bringing together of the sensations of vertigo, nausea and drunkenness, as the inn, moored like a ship to trees and rocks, teeters precariously at the edge of a precipice. Hallucinations brought on by drunkenness accrue, and are followed swiftly by a sense of nausea as the inn rocks and sways like a ship in a storm.

At times the whole building would career madly to one side as though headlong into collapse. The drinkers would pause, liquid tilting in their glasses, the structure would shudder violently, a broom would fall, a bottle, and the inn would slowly right itself and assume once more its normal reeling equipoise.¹⁷

Another way, then, of interpreting the combination of “transient and happenstantial” with the “recession of floodwaters” is to see it as that temporal and interstitial moment where McCarthy records the lives of a people whose traditional lifestyles are on the verge of extinction, people who, very much like the inn, are desperately

¹⁶ Ibid. 12

¹⁷ Ibid. 12-13

hanging on to whatever remnants of experience are keeping them afloat. The novel's complex structure, with its difficult chronology and shifting characterization, mirrors a dream-like sense of bewilderment at the changes taking place in the social reality. It's as though the broken pastoral is reflected in a general disorientation of everything.

McCarthy reinforces the notion of precariousness by setting the novel on the side of the mountain in rural Tennessee between the two world wars: a time of contrasting economic fortunes for the USA. The relative boom of the nineteen twenties was followed vertiginously by the Great Depression in the nineteen thirties: an economic downturn that, arguably, was experienced at its harshest in the rural communities of the mid-western and southern states. But for "many southerners, the Great Depression commenced at the beginning of the nineteen twenties, and not at the end of this decade."¹⁸ Most rural workers were tenant farmers, beholden to the vagaries of rent and landlords who were in turn at the mercy of the vagaries in the wider economy. For these reasons, many farmers and rural workers found jobs in the city factories, only to experience low wages, long hours and appalling conditions.

It is no accident then to find that the opening pages depict Kenneth Rattner as a socio-economic type of this period: he is shown to be hungry and penniless – both possible social causes for his criminality. The first paragraph suggests that he is returning home from the West, a geographically indeterminate point that is often mythologized as a place of endless possibility: "For some time now the road had been deserted, white and scorching yet, though the sun was already reddening in the western sky."¹⁹ The fact that Rattner is returning to his place of origin clearly debunks such an idea. We go on to learn that he is hitchhiking but, because of his generally wretched demeanor, no one will stop for him: "You wouldn't pick up Jesus Christ, would you" (8), he rages at the passing traffic – a wry rejection of the soteriological element in the pastoral. We soon discover that there is

¹⁸ Flora, Joseph M and Lucinda H. MacKethan, eds. *The Companion to Southern Literature*. 317.

¹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac: *The Orchard Keeper*. 7.

something mentally wrong with Rattner (later on in the novel Rattner's wife claims that it came to her in a vision that he had a platinum plate in his forehead, the result of a war-wound (66)), which probably explains why people won't stop for him. Nevertheless, the overall feeling is that McCarthy, through the wretched Rattner character, is debunking a number of hoary myths: the South as the home of generosity, and as the locus of Christian thought and goodness. For instead of the image of a prelapsarian garden, we are given the postlapsarian theodicy of a region beset by evil and violence.

It is Marian Sylder who best expresses this idea when, in the passage dealing with his fight to the death with Rattner, he senses in his opponent "a profound and unshakeable knowledge of the presence of evil." (33) Rattner loses the fatal fight and so never quite makes it back to his hometown. His corpse is unceremoniously thrown by Sylder into a chemical pit adjacent to the orchard, an act that happenstantially connects the preternaturally evil Rattner with the decaying garden under the care of Arthur Ownby. To add to the novel's theme of chance and coincidence, Rattner's son, John Wesley, uses the orchard as his playground, unaware that his father's corpse is interred there – a bone orchard if ever there was one. To compound matters, Sylder effectively becomes a surrogate father to John Wesley, both unaware of the fatal ties that bind them together. So, from the onset, Death is not only literally in Arcadia, it will undergird all subsequent relationships. However, in keeping with the apostatic tradition, the garden is already in a state of ruin: Rattner's body is only added to the ossuary.²⁰

Such are the complicated antimonies in McCarthy that we need to make a distinction here between positive contamination– the ecopastoral idea of mutability which argues for nature to go its own way – and negative contamination – the damage done by industrial capitalism as it destroys and consumes without replenishment. Because of this palpable disgust at industrial contamination, it is important to see the development of a critique in

²⁰ It is worth noting here - and in relation to the chemical pit that Rattner's corpse ends up in - that the *Orchard Keeper* with its images of pollution and chemical farming was written a few years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962), a fierce denunciation of modern agriculture's reliance on chemical pesticides.

McCarthy about the way organic materials are harnessed by industrial capitalism as instruments of violence and oppression. We can see this in the images of cars, junkyards, chemical pits, government tanks, and so on, that permeate all the Southern novels. Likewise, in the Western novels there are numerous examples of gun-fetishism, metal animal traps and the encroachment of military camps onto the wilderness. In *The Orchard Keeper* it is clearly expressed in the combination of violent verbs and nouns denoting man-made metallic objects used in the killing of Kenneth Rattner by Sylder:

So although he never saw it, had no warning, he had already made a half turn and started to rise when the jack crashed into his shoulder and slammed him into the side of the car. Something crashed alongside his head in the quarterpanel – he remembered that too, but couldn't know until later that it was the base of the jack. He didn't duck the second time either, but only slid down the door of the coupe when the man swung, sideways – he was watching him now – tearing a ragged hole in the metal.²¹

The desecration of the Jeffersonian covenant, the desired interaction of human and landscape, is palpably shown in this onomatopoeic collision between people and metal. We also see this repeated in the frequent references to cars speeding recklessly through the countryside. Further, the frequent references to metal and machinery, the correlation of the sexual act with machinery, suggest that the increasing reliance on technology will also engender mechanical attitudes to human relationships. We can see such degradation in the following description of a limestone cave, where walled fossils and obscene graffiti are sharing the same space:

They followed one by one, the stiff winter nettles at the cave door rattling viperously against the legs of their jeans. Inside they struck matches and Warn took a candlestub from a crevice and lit it, the calcined rock taking shape, tonsiled roof and flowing concavity, like something gone partly to liquid and frozen back again misshapen and awry, their shadows curling threatfully up the walls among the dried

²¹ Ibid. 37.

and mounded bat droppings. They studied the inscriptions etched in the soft and curdcoloured stone, hearts and names, archaic dates, crudely erotic hieroglyphs – the bulbed phallus and strange centipedal vulva of small boy’s imaginations.²²

Again because of the slippery antinomian nature of McCarthy’s writing, one should qualify the tendency to view the images as evidence of a one-sided pastoral contamination by recognizing that such treatments are always ambiguous. If we look again at the above we will see that the image of the cave is just as unprepossessing as the graffiti scrawled on its walls: “their shadows curling threatfully up the walls among the dried and mounded bat droppings.” It is also worth noting that metal is just as organic as any flower; something that McCarthy’s seems to affirm in his writing and, interestingly, falls in line with Thoreau’s statement in his journals that “nothing is inorganic.” McCarthy’s ecopastoralism means that the natural and unnatural are often depicted in austere unaesthetic terms.

Part of McCarthy’s strategy, then, is to debunk, as in the above example, pastoral tropes and archetypes through discordant juxtaposition. In the world that McCarthy depicts in *The Orchard Keeper* there is no room for an idealization of the natural world; the lyricism which always accompanies the writing, though generally in the elegiac mode, is frequently undercut by a tough acceptance of natural violence. Indeed lyricism and naturalism are often mixed together: “Across the yard, brilliant against the façade of pines beyond, a cardinal shot in a drop of blood.” (133) Furthermore, to truly depict deterioration it is better to look at nature with a cold eye and record the very calamitous fact that the notion of an uncontaminated pastoral space ends once human communities move in.

In a textual sense McCarthy’s method is to record pastoral disruption through refracted narrative distortion, to craft a text that forgoes unity for disunity, order for disorder. Such devices are employed by McCarthy as a way of depicting a society fatally embroiled in its state of emergency, the calamitous moment of socio-economic supersession. It is to this that we shall turn to now.

²² Ibid. 139.

The Distorted Mirror

This story of a barely functioning community is mostly evinced in the general indolence of the citizens and in the constant references to faulty architecture, broken relationships, broken cars, and poor woodsman skills. In terms of the protagonists, this is exemplified in a number of ways, but is shown most powerfully in pastoral archetype Arthur Ownby. Arthur - as he is sometimes picturesquely referred to - is a less than diligent shepherd of a neglected orchard, dwelling deep in the woods in a ramshackle house surrounded by the detritus of junk and waste: "The hillside in front of the house was littered with all manner of cast-off things: barrel hoops, a broken axehead, fragments of chicken-wire, a chipped crock ..." (56). This dereliction of good husbandry, one that *Walden* author Henry David Thoreau would have been appalled by, is also embodied in the young John Wesley who wanders this broken arcadia as a parody of a neophyte huntsman; his ineptness so clearly inscribed it cannot help raise questions about his status as a rightful inheritor of the humanist pastoral.²³ This paradox is shown a number of times: most powerfully in the clamorous chaos of a coon-hunt where pursuers and pursued create a bedlam of noise through the primeval forest (119-127), and, more poignantly, in the following description of John's Wesley's first trapping of a mink:

When he got to the top and turned around he could see his catch floating in the grass and even before he pulled up to him he could see the white places on it like hanging leeches. Then he had it in his hand, feeling the fur gritty with mud, the cusped bone hand-end jutting from the foreleg wrecked between the jaws of the trap, the white rib smeared with clay and the fine yellow teeth bared in a fierce grin. And turning it slowly in his hand, studying dumbly the clean ugly slits, white and livid. Wounds, but like naked eyelids or dead mouths gaping.²⁴

These strongly counter-pastoral images are so described because the kill is not clean and so clumsily and unnaturally brought to pass. Though this is redolent of Tennyson's

²³ Yet, arguably, very suitable for McCarthy's burgeoning ecopastoralism

²⁴ Ibid. 179.

“nature, red in tooth and claw,” there is extra emphasis on a kind of technocratic brutality: the trap that the mink is caught in is man, possibly, factory-made; moreover, metal is a recursive, negatively deployed object in the novel: it is in the tree, the cars, the government tank that desecrates Ownby’s orchard, and in the pesticide pit in which Kenneth Rattner, John Wesley’s murdered father, is interred.

The sense of a pervasively distorted pastoral is emphasized by the use of the pathetic fallacy to describe John Wesley’s sense of shame at being responsible for the death of the mink caught in the metal trap:

Before he reached the woods the first drops of rain had already spattered his shoulder. When he got to the road it was already black and slick with water and he hunched his shoulders forward against the mounting downpour, shivering a little. Sheets of spray gusted over the smoking road and over the swamped land – the houses standing bleak and gray – a final desolation seemed to come, as if on the tail of the earth’s last winter a well of water were rising slowly up through the very universe itself.²⁵

Here the organic material of nature becomes, literally and figuratively, inorganic, the weather functioning in ways redolent of Freud’s notion of *the Uncanny*; rather than it being an instrument of regeneration, it thwarts the desired union of humanity and nature. The above also suggests that the rural world offers little consolation for John Wesley from the social reality that constantly intrudes on his moments of solace.

The use of technology is shown to distort John Wesley’s attempts at unmediated communion with nature; because of this, his interactions with the natural world are often rendered as unpropitious as his home-life, where he is harrowed daily by his bad-tempered, zealously religious mother. This absence of domestic peace, a recurring motif in the *oeuvre*, is shown when his mother charges the gentle-natured John Wesley to hunt down the killer of his father: “You goin to hunt him out. When you’re old enough. Going to

²⁵ Ibid. 179.

find the man that took away your daddy.”²⁶ John Wesley’s mother is forcing John Wesley to “Remember”, to accept the weight of heredity and carry out the genetic destiny of a son atoning for his father’s death through bloody revenge. That he is only able to avoid this through recourse to pastoral reverie suggests the scarcity of choices in this community:

He never forgot. From somewhere in the darkness came the sound of a banjo, tentative chords – a message – what news? Old loves, reconsummated, sickness, a child’s crying. Silence now in the houses. Repose. Even to those for whom no end of night could bring rest enough. And silence, the music fled in the seeping amber warmth of innumerable dreams laid to death upon the hearth, ghostly and still The morning is yet to the nether end of the earth, and he is weary. Bowing the grass in like sadness the dew followed him home and sealed his door.²⁷

These lines, lovely as they are, frame the limits of pastoral forgetfulness: “He never forgot.” John Wesley listens to the night-sounds of Appalachia, where timeless nature is mixed up with the more temporal phenomenon of folk music. The “tentative chords” of a banjo are perhaps the first strains of mountain song, its “message”, the familiar tropes of “old loves”, “sickness”, a “child crying”. The quietus of the moment, though, is not without portent: if John Wesley doesn’t escape from this enclosed world, he too could become a character in a song: the “future” story, perhaps, of a man avenging his father’s death. To escape, John Wesley must unseal the door that encloses him in this demi-pastoral; however, flight means release into the historical world, a place that is fraught with all kinds of danger. This is the function of the gap in the fence motif at novel’s end – a tiny aperture in the cemetery where freedom only means entry into the mutable world.

That the novel seems to set the impossibility of escape in the thematic foreground is part of its stratagem. For as we have already noted, the story that follows the prologue has already happened; thus the story of John Wesley childhood travails is also a thing of the past: it is this past, however, that provides the novel with its unappeasable melancholy.

²⁶ Ibid. 66.

²⁷ Ibid. 67.

There is a sense, then, that the story that comes between the prologue and its denouement at novel's close is a kind of *memento mori* for vanished communities and vanishing ways of life.

This however should not be seen in narrowly poetic or metaphysical terms. We have to remember that the bulk of the story is set in the Depression where, because of very few chances of legal work, Marian Sylder's job as a moonshiner would have been seen as survival employment in such areas as the Red Branch community depicted in the novel. Furthermore, in a wry inversion of the American pastoral's exemplary community, the Red Branch community of these years exists as an alternative to the high-level federal interference of the Roosevelt era. One has only to look at the New Deal cultural projects - which, under WPA auspices, would emphasize in its visual arts, especially Walker Evans' photography, the importance of community work in the restoration of America's sense of itself - to see that the anarchically predisposed people of Red Branch would be wholly opposed to such an idea; not so much because of an aversion to the liberal-socialist projects of the Roosevelt administration, but because such closed communities would be hostile to any outside interference.

This resistance to the long arm of federal care is shown a number of times. It is comically depicted towards the end of the novel when the radically individualistic Ownby is finally arrested after shooting at federal officers who in turn are investigating his shooting of the 'government tank' in his orchard (202-205). Because Ownby is an old man of pensionable age, the courts have to "determine whether the gentleman had relatives and, if not, to what department or agency he might properly be assigned to as ward" (218). As Ownby does not have any discernible means, the young interviewer introduces the bemused old man to the idea of welfare:

I represent the Welfare Bureau for the county. Welfare? Yes. We you see, we help people. The old man turned that over in his mind. He didn't seem to be paying

much attention to the thin young man standing just inside the door. He scratched his jaw and then he said. Well, I aint got nothing. I don't reckon I can help yins any. ²⁸

The resistance to federal intrusion is shown in a less humorous fashion in the passage dealing with the young John Wesley changing his mind and refusing to take money for a dead hawk (animal bounty), a species considered a pest by the authorities. Wesley asks the civil servant: "What you all do with em?" Burn em in the furnace I would reckon, she said." Such an apocalyptic end for the dead bird is too much for John Wesley: "Burn em? he said. They burn em? I believe so, she said. He looked about vaguely, back to her, still not leaning on or touching the counter. And throw people in jail and beat em up on em."²⁹

The above demonstrates utter disdain - emphasized by John Wesley's studious avoidance of physical contact with the counter lest he be contaminated by it - for governmental interference in a traditional community still adhering to the principle of self-reliance. The fact that he does not take the dollar is a symbolic rejection of the economic relations of capitalism, especially its monetary form:

He smoothed the dollar in his hand again, made a few tentative thrusts, pushed it finally across the counter to her. Here, he said. It's okay. I caint take no dollar. I made a mistake, he wadnt for sale. He turned and started for the door.³⁰

This whole section - the rejection of federal control over the eco-system, the equation that John Wesley makes with the casual cruelty of incinerating the birds *en masse*, Ownby's own incarceration, and the clear connotation that the dollar is a symbol of moral defilement - adds weight to the idea that the less-than-perfect pastoral of the Red Branch Community evinces political resistance to federal interpellation. Having said this, McCarthy is at pains not to paint the traditional community in glowing colors: the community is

²⁸ Ibid. 218-219.

²⁹ Ibid. 233.

³⁰ Ibid. 233.

frequently shown to be mired in petty disputes and feuds, and also has little regard for ecological conservation.

This pastoral of anti-federal, anti-gnostic, anti-technocratic community is placed and preserved aspic-like between the folds of the prologue and its return at the end of the novel. Crucially, however, we are able to see how illusory such an alternative is: this is exemplified by the paucity of love in John Wesley home, the increasing bitterness of Marian Sylder *vis a vis* the law, especially when it interferes with his moonshine dealings, and the unproductive and negligent pastoralism of Ather Ownby, a keeper of the orchard whose peaches “were long and hard.”³¹

McCarthy’s first three novels play with this idea of history without a subject: whatever calamity or evil that has beset the land cannot be explained by reference to *what once was*. There appears to be no manifest other, no recognizable agent that can be held responsible for the rot that has set in. This is perhaps why Dianne Luce refers to the Southern novels as being by and large unhistorical: dates are mentioned, as shown above, but McCarthy seems to eschew the need to introduce causes for the malignancy and inertia that has infected such communities.³² Perhaps this avoidance of meeting history head-on is behind the author’s decision to present the story in such a convoluted way. As we shall discuss henceforward, the prologue is a narrative feint, for it is really part of the epilogue at the end. For what lies between prologue and epilogue is a series of flashbacks that suggest that the way of life recorded has already ended, that, moreover, the opening of the floodgates of modernity means that the way of life enfolded between prologue and epilogue can never be recovered. It is to this idea that I will turn to now.

³¹ Ibid.17.

³² This is largely the position taken by Dianne C. Luce in her essay “Cormac McCarthy’s First Screenplay: *“The Gardener’s Son.”*” Arnold, Edwin T, and Dianne C. Luce, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. 71-96.

The Proleptic Prologue

In the italicized prologue, the metaphor of metal growing in a tree is introduced to announce the presence of a counter-pastoral within the pastoral. McCarthy in this novel, as well as the three Appalachian novels that follow, introduces a metafictional theme where generic dissonance and experimentation with narrative form becomes as important as the tale itself.

As we have seen, the sense of distortion is everywhere in McCarthy's early writings, but perhaps has its most striking figure in this opening fable of barbed wire "grewed all through the tree." The fable begins with three people - a "man" with three of his fingers bound up in a bandage, a "negro", and a "young man" - trying to remove the tree caught up in a fence. They cut away at it until they are able to remove a chunk for inspection. All three peer at the log as though astonished at what they find:

The young man came over to see. Here, said the man, look sideways here. See? He looked. All the way up here? he said. Yep, the man said. He took hold of the twisted wrought-iron, the mangled fragment of the fence, and shook it. It didn't shake. It's grewed all through the tree, the man said. We cain't cut no more on it. Damned old elum's bad enough on a saw. The Negro was nodding his head. Yessa, he said. It most sholy has. Growed all up in that tree.³³

There is something in this asymmetrical triptych of the deformed older man, the younger man and "negro" at work to suggest that McCarthy already has in place a composite of authorial concerns: one that will be repeated throughout his oeuvre; namely, the evocation of a community of the incongruous, an absurdist carnivalesque that challenges the traditional pastoral's evocation of exemplary individuals dwelling in exemplary communities. In a fictive sense, this feeling of distortion is intensified as the assemblage of characters are shown to be in equal states of incomprehension as they look upon what is, admittedly, a confusing sight: wrought-iron running through a tree.

³³ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Orchard Keeper*. 5.

One must be careful with overdoing the symbolism here, especially as McCarthy's use of the technique in this novel is to offer "symbolism where symbolism will not be allowed to fully develop."³⁴ The symbolism, though suggestive of a conflation of two biblical stories, the cross of Christ studded with nails and Eden's Tree of Knowledge, is, following Jay Ellis, a "narrative feint" that will find no workable correlatives in the story that ensues. However, I would demur slightly from this reading as the image of distortion is echoed throughout the novel: twisted social relations engendering a twisted sense of community.

To understand the prologue, then, we have to see it as part of the story's use of proleptic flashback: the anticipation of the telling of a history that is as convoluted in meaning, as metaphorically elusive, as the tree itself. McCarthy seems to be by suggesting this; for the three workmen, the meaning of the entangled tree, much like the aforementioned effects of the happenstantial, is both inscrutable and illegible. All of this, however, may in fact be a sly authorial joke on the difficulty that will follow for the reader as she tries to make sense of the extremely convoluted plot.³⁵

But the real confusion lies less in the prologue's symbolic opacity and more in the structural organization of the novel itself. As Jay Ellis has recognized, the prologue is textually anachronistic: its function is to initiate the series of flashbacks that constitute the body of the novel; it is only when we get to the novel's last pages (243-246) that the prologue dovetails with the real time of John Wesley's escape.³⁶ The strange opening, then, sutures itself to the end part of the story where we discover that the workmen have

³⁴ Ellis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. 43.

³⁵ Indeed John Cant, in his book *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* sees this novel as a brilliant but naïve failure: suggesting that the structural difficulty is the young McCarthy showing off in this debut work. This, for Cant, explains the "narrative weakness of the novel." 61.

³⁶ For a discussion on these points, see: Ellis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. 42-68.

successfully removed the entangled tree allowing John Wesley to exit through a gap in the fence and leave his community as a grown man: a wry announcement perhaps by the debuting author that Pandora's Box has been opened on the Southern Pastoral, and that more of the kind will follow.

In other words, the story of an entangled tree and fence acts as metonym for the subsequent entangled story of a history beyond the ken of those most affected by it; and, although this is often humorously rendered, most notably in the comically feckless characters employed to disentangle it, the general sense of bafflement is so inscribed that it can only allude to one of the novel's major themes: the quick and ruthless socioeconomic changes that will affect the community henceforward in the novel. In this sense it is important to stress that as the story proper is retrospectively told, the prologue of the entangled tree foreshadows everything that is about to be fictively recounted: the pastoral in the story is thus the very fact that these communities are no more: the three men are already victims of the changes brought about the Tennessee Valley Authority and the concomitant incursions of federal law. The gap in the fence that aids John Wesley's escape, therefore, contiguous as it is to the cemetery where his mother is buried, is a site of possible escape from the broken pastoral of this particular community.

What follows, then, in the novel seems to support this initial vacuum of comprehension: as we learn more of an often warring, decimated community at the edge of law and order we notice that the blind, often violent, action invariably has to be understood as futile resistance. The melancholic ending of the story, which if we place it in its proper chronology has already happened, takes on an extra materially-felt resonance:

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 their names are myth, legend, dust.³⁷

³⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Orchard Keeper*. 246.

Because of the way the amorphous structure of the novel mirrors communal disorder where neither law and order nor anarchic lawlessness are offered up as remedies, one has to step back in order to ask: is McCarthy - already so early in his career - suggesting that we should be wary of any community presenting itself as exemplary? Moreover, by looking back at a community that didn't have much to offer to begin with, does this signify a refusal to engage in any idealism that disengages itself from historical process? To my mind to answer in the affirmative to both these questions can help us understand McCarthy's agonistic view of history. As we shall see, in his next novel, *Outer Dark*, McCarthy's engagement with the pastoral has barely begun.

2) *Outer Dark*: Generic Contamination and the Rejection of the Ideal

The attack on the pastoral's exemplary community is carried over in McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968); its force intensified textually through an overdetermined use of generic contamination. As pointed out in the introductory chapter, McCarthy's allegorical method is one that opposes the ideological comforts of traditional allegory for one that reflects a social reality distorted by the relations of capitalism. It is in this very ideological sense that we can say pure pastoral is rejected by McCarthy. That is why I slightly demur from the positions of critics Jay Ellis, John Cant, and John Grammer who see *Outer Dark* as working within the anti-pastoral tradition of the American Gothic, mainly because to do this would only invert traditional Pastoral, and not, as McCarthy does, renounce it altogether. In McCarthy genres lose their exclusive function, are changed, through contamination: thus the gothic anti-pastoral is just one of many competing genres in the novel.

Having said this, it is clear that the use of the gothic in *Outer Dark* is pervasive, and that its deployment, to invoke Lewis B. Simpson once again, is very much in the vein of an "apostatic" Southern tradition (Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor et al. would fall into this category) that emphasizes decay over growth, darkness over light. But what is also clear in this novel, as well as the Appalachian novels in general, is the debt owed to the non-American existentialist-inflected writings of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. It is the confection of the above writers' various allegories of suffering - especially

the depiction of individuals so cut-off from things that the social reality is a matter of great puzzlement to them - that underscores much of *Outer Dark*.

With the above thoughts in mind, it would be more useful to understand McCarthy's life-long textual argument with generic exclusivity through recourse to the polygeneric model provided by M. M. Bakhtin, which argues that novelistic form, by its very nature, is a composite of different, often, competing styles:

Throughout its entire history there is a consistent parodying or travestying of dominant or fashionable novels that attempt to become models for the genre: parodies on the chivalric romance of adventure (*Dit d'aventures*, the first such parody, belongs to the thirteenth century), on the baroque novel, the pastoral novel (Sorel's *Le Berger extravagant*), the Sentimental novel (Fielding, and *The Second Grandson of Musaus*) and so forth. This ability of the novel to criticize itself is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre.³⁸

This argument for plasticity, along with the critical injunction that the novel is a genre-unto-itself, capable of containing a "heteroglossia" of sub-genres or styles (in the case of McCarthy, it is often the case that the Baroque, Pastoral, Sentimental, and Gothic styles are all mixed up together) should ring bells for any reader of *Outer Dark*. It is indeed a novel that arguably, more than any other in the *oeuvre*, conforms to the Bakhtinian idea of stylistic cross-fertilization.

To supplement Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia," Frederic Jameson's idea of "sedimented forms" (see my introduction: 26-27) lurking within a novel's dominant style (for example, in the case of McCarthy, how the American epic-romance and its sub-genre of pastoral becomes diluted by the pessimism of Naturalism and the Gothic) is another salient way of illustrating the impossibility of a coherent national allegory of pastoral. It is better, then, to follow Jameson and argue that the smorgasbord of styles in *Outer Dark* is part of late-modernism's assault on the stabilizing strategies of generic fiction, especially pastoral.

³⁸ Bakhtin, M. M. "Epic and Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. 6.

Furthermore, McCarthy's generic contamination allows for what David Holloway calls "pastiche pastiche:" (see my introduction: 37) a conscious distancing from the strategies of generic exclusivity, one that, moreover, goes beyond the "parodic" stress that Bakhtin gives the novelistic form. Informed as he is by Jameson's notion of the political unconscious, Holloway argues that, in McCarthy, the device of a metafictional self-consciousness becomes just one more ideological element that needs to be critically parenthesized. By doing this, McCarthy comes closer to Benjamin's notion of allegory as symptom of fragmentation (see my introduction: 29-36) – a position which suggests quite clearly that literary representation, self-conscious, metafictional, parodic, or otherwise, cannot fill up the hole created by all the various contradictions and antagonisms that make up the historical experience. Therefore in order to set up this discussion on McCarthy's use of generic contamination in *Outer Dark* it is important to look at a key passage where the idea is hinted at by a particular word choice.

The "Immiscible" Made Permissible

It is in *Outer Dark's* early pages where we find an interesting word choice that provides a key to McCarthy's mythoclastic ambition. The writer is renowned for inserting archaic, often obsolete, sometimes incongruously technical words into narratives whose dialogical patterns mainly conform to the standard of modern idiom. Such deployment can be found in his use of the scientific term "immiscible," located in a section that describes Culla Holme as he takes his new-born son, the unwanted issue of an incestuous relationship with his sister Rinthy, down a "bloodcolored spume" of a woodland stream with the express intention of killing "it" (the impersonal pronoun connoting the notion of the child as object). 'Immiscible' is a chemical term that refers to elements "that cannot undergo mixing or blending" (e.g., like oil and water):

.... Half a mile downriver he came to a creek, a stream of amber swampwater that the river sucked from high grass banks into a brief immiscible stain of dark clarity.³⁹

³⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 16.

The adjective “brief” is an interesting modifier to “immiscible” and is perhaps used to slyly undermine the phantasmagoric determinations of this scene: it is not nature that is befouled by sin; it is Culla who, perhaps poisoned by his own conscience, renders the scene with evil portent. The next few passages evoke the gothic counter-pastoral whereby the woods are rendered as sublime accompaniment to Culla’s intention to murder his own child: the moss is described as “nitric green” (16); the trees are described as “baleful” and “malign” (17).

There is a strong sense that McCarthy is setting up this scene to pastiche the very style that he is employing: the Calvinist-inflected genre of the American Gothic, especially its depiction of a fallen world where the unelected are harrowed and haunted by visitations from the underworld. McCarthy deliberately, and probably ironically, uses the pathetic fallacy trope to evoke the wilderness as harshly as the birth itself: natural law has been violated by this birth so it must follow that nature has been violated too. This is all well and good, and seems to follow the conventional gothic use of nature as a character: its primary role, in this novel, is to punish unnatural actions. However, as we shall see, the almost comedic violence of the plot itself suggests that McCarthy is using this moment for the distorted journey-motif to begin: the woods reject Culla in order to initiate the life of the tale. Therefore, what is immiscible in terms of social law becomes the very possibility of the story itself.

“Immiscible” with its rhyming echo of “impermissible” is used to describe the effect of light upon water, but, in the sense that McCarthy gives it, it also alludes to the breaking of a taboo that cannot be permitted in the world of men and women. Interestingly, in terms of the story’s arc, the word acts as a trigger for the robust mixing of literary styles that the novel employs; fictively speaking all kinds of blending goes on until the exuberant madness is stopped by a sacrificial ending: the murder of the infant by the evil triune, a denouement that acts as a kind of a wish-fulfillment for Culla’s aborted decision to murder his child:

Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat’s eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child’s throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone

and the black blood pumping its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rippled delicately. The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat.⁴⁰

These awful lines, described by Mark Royden Winchell as some of the most disgusting in literature, bring the distorted journey motif effectively to its end.⁴¹ In a Freudian sense, such a deliberate use of arcane language helps create an overdetermined moment of horror where the language must match the macabre scene. For what becomes evident is the sensuous delight that McCarthy takes in his use of verbs – “rippled,” “moaning,” etc -, perhaps suggesting that this author is having fun in overturning the heuristic element in a great deal of generic literature. Culla’s response to the horrific denouement of his journey is once again muted; there is nothing heuristic for the protagonist to take from his experiences: he is from first to last a bewildered witness to the carnage.

McCarthy returns to this idea of a passive, agentless, morally purblind witness at the altar of horror time and time again. For this reason, it is worth discussing the way the writer plays with the journey motif of ‘self-discovery’ to such horrific ends in this novel.

The Journey Motif as Gothic Dream-Narrative

All novels of journeys, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Huckleberry Finn*, are premised on the idea of breaking free, of being delivered from the constraints of social law. But in *Outer Dark* the idea of escape is ridiculed by the Escherian paths that hapless Culla and Rinty Holme take. Moreover, the impossibility of flight for Culla is foreshadowed always by the fact that his sister seeks the very thing that he fears most: the recovery of their lost child, which, conversely, is the embodiment of his shame and guilt.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 236.

⁴¹ Winchell, Mark Royden. *Reinventing the South: Versions of a Literary Region*. 230.

In this sense, there is no picaresque pathway to redemption for brother and sister: a journey into light, towards self-knowledge, is substituted for an argosy of the blind. The idea of blindness is also echoed in the title, *Outer Dark*, its connotation of night extending into day, and how a darkening landscape is mirrored in the tormented psyches of the siblings. In terms of textuality, the story is blind, also, to its own repetition. The various incidents following on from the incest crime are fractal in their déjà vu-like quality. An endless repetition of ground re-trodden becomes part of the reading experience; the baleful Sisyphean order condemning the protagonists to remain wandering around their own circle of hell.

An example of such recursion is there in the opening pages. Culla has a nightmare where he sees “a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores.”⁴² The dream of the blind prophet becomes actualized at the end of the novel when Culla, estranged from his sister and riddled with guilt over his murdered son, encounters the prophet of his own desolation. It is this frequent blurring of dream-life and reality that leads Steven Frye into conjecturing whether Culla’s actual experiences are “the externalization of his own mind,” a mind, moreover, haunted by images of blind multitudes.⁴³

Blindness, for McCarthy, is a kind of existential misrecognition; an inability to make connections that would help rationalize the malice of the object world:

The sun hung on the cusp of eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again. And the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and

⁴² Ibid. 5.

⁴³ Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. 38.

when they had been blessed and the sun begun to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. Me, he cried. Can I be cured?⁴⁴

Culla's dream presages the aimless wanderings that make up the body of the book. Again, an inversion of another literary journey is ironically alluded to: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. However, as John Cant notes, Culla's journey does not end with an ascent to the City on the Hill, a journey into light: at the end of the novel, he is mired in the marshes, deep in his very own untranscendable Slough of Despond:

Late in the day the road brought him into a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned.⁴⁵

The story that follows Culla's dream at the beginning of the novel is an incarnation of the "landscape of the damned." The dream is also a symbolic representation of a real abomination: the crime of incest that is about to physically manifest itself in the form of a baby. Such an abomination, proscribed as it is by Christian and non-Christian law, renders this unholy trinity, mother, father and infant son, outcasts from the first.⁴⁶ To add to the mélange of biblical resonances here, any sense of a prelapsarian pastoral anterior to this story is rejected: the *in medias res* of the opening scene suggests that poverty and abjection is all this family have ever known, explanation enough for why we are plunged immediately into a universe devoid of succor or redemption. This is made plain, when we are introduced to the siblings (the surname "Holme" deliberately carries the near homonymic echo of "home") living in a single-room shack far from the city and, by inference, outside the religious/moral purview of normative society:

⁴⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 242.

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that the trinity of Culla, Rinthy, and the baby boy are mirrored by their uncanny pursuant, the demonic Triune, who seem to be punishing the whole of the community for the incest crime.

She shook him awake from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under a black sun and a night more dolorous, sitting upright and cursing beneath his breath in the bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly⁴⁷.

The word “delivered” carries multiple meanings: referring literally to the birth itself and to the fate-heavy deliverance into Old Testament-style justice that the murder of the child by the triune at the end of the novel seems to infer. Likewise, “dolorous,” with its echo of the Calvaric *via dolorosa rosa*, accentuates again the kind of theodicy that precipitated from the dying on the cross as well as all the millenarian, apocalyptic notions of the Second Coming so beloved of southern communities spoon-fed on eschatological theology. The horror of this accrues when Rinthy gives birth. The first breath of this misbegotten child is described in horrific terms:

The head had broken through in a pumping welter of blood. He knelt in the bed with one knee, holding her. With his own hand he brought it free, the scrawny body trailing the cord in anneloid writhing down the bloodslimed covers, a beetcolored creature that looked to him like a skinned squirrel. He pinched the mucus from its face with his fingers. It didn't move. He leaned down to her.⁴⁸

Culla, mortified by shame and fear of community censure, becomes unwilling midwife to his own child. The crude severing of the umbilical cord, along with the reference to the child as a “creature” conjoined by the object pronoun “it” adds to the suffocating sense that the situation is so untenable that fictively - such is the roundelay effect of the novel - the beginning could very well serve as a coda for the even more unconscionable actions that come after.

It is arguable, then, that the very notion of the immiscible, the act of incest producing a child damned at the point of conception and nativity allows (the immiscible that,

⁴⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 14.

textually, becomes permissible) the miscreant parents to take the reader on a wild-geese-chase of a tale that has brother and sister circling each other without meeting up.

What, however, welds this story to social realism is the rendering, no matter how fantastic, of Culla and Rinthy's material abjectness: for it is the impossibility of pastoral existing in the skewed property relations of the south that affords this gothic tale its social meaning. Furthermore, it is the expulsion of Culla and Rinthy from their secluded woodland home which brings into play a travelogue of an economically blighted land. This is shown many times in the novel, but is powerfully shown in the following description of poverty and pastoral neglect:

A small garden grubbed out of the loamy soil and beyond that an impenetrable wall of poison ivy The back of the house was windowless. There was a door with no handle and a stovepipe that leaned from a hole hacked through the wall with an axe. There was no sign of stock, not so much as a chicken.⁴⁹

As with *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy offsets any hope of a humanly arrived at Arcadia by plunging headlong into the material situation of his protagonists: "She shook him awake from dark to dark" (5). These opening lines should be understood as much for the social meaning of unremitting poverty as for their existential import. The use of the incest trope, then, in *Outer Dark* can be understood in terms of the attenuation of choices in communities founded on scarcity. Furthermore, since it is clear that the Holmes' have no kith and kin for miles around, the rule of endogamy, exacerbated as it is by the paucity of choice, can often take a perverse turn. It is this grounding of material scarcity that stops the reader short of employing the ahistorical hermeneutic of supernatural determinism.

The aforementioned fractal quality of the tale is similarly evoked in the frequent, often interchangeable descriptions of the Southern poor living on uncultivated land, dwelling in filthy and unprepossessing shacks: Jefferson's Southern yeomanry gone to ruin, perhaps, where dispossessed communities can only find solace in whisky or in an

⁴⁹ Ibid. 118.

animalistic sexuality as fecund as the land is barren. In this sense Culla and Rinthy act as our guides, showing us the very real grotesque that is economic deprivation.

This movement from social exclusion to community is, however, not without its contradictions: Pastoral, with its emphasis on gnostic innocence, does not end with the birth of a misbegotten child: it is carried forward in the figure of the “guileless” Rinthy. Free of guilt and unburdened by shame, she is like a standard bearer for innocence violated by material want. Furthermore, there is something dream-like about the fact that she remains mostly unaffected by the horror for which she is partly responsible. An image of *Stabat Mater*, she is not. This is compounded in the way that her forgetfulness allows her to wander the darkening landscape of the South without becoming aware of her own plight or, for that matter, the plight of others: the pastoral in her head does not match the grim reality in front of her. As she wanders from place to place in search of her errant brother and baby it is clear that her poverty is out-of-sync with a landscape that often presents itself as congruous to Jefferson and Emerson’s notion of sensibility: namely, the soothing role that nature can play in the development of human character. McCarthy seems to toy with this idea: the arresting pastoral images of the following, punctured only by the last long sentence:

She slept through the first wan auguries of dawn, gently washed with river fog while martins came and went among the arches. Slept into the first heat of the day and woke to see toy birds with sesame eyes regarding her from their clay nests overhead. She rose and went to the river and washed her face and dried it with her hair. When she had gathered up the bundle of her belongings she emerged from beneath the bridge and set forth along the road. Emaciated and blinking and with the wind among her rags she looked like something replevied by grim miracle from the ground and sent with tattered windings and halt corporeality into the agony of sunlight.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ibid. 97.

Rinthy's lack of guile is a kind of protection not offered to her brother, Culla. The dream-scape that he is given exposes the horror of the South at every turn. In figurative terms, he represents gnostic weight, while Rinthy represents its lightness. Perhaps this is why the prose style used to describe Culla's journey of shame is sonorously full of King James Bible-style portentousness. An example of this can be shown in a passage from the aforementioned section where Culla abandons his child:

It howled execration upon the dim camarine world of its nativity wail on wail while he lay there gibbering with palsied jawhasps, his hands putting the night like some witless paraclete beleaguered with all limbo's clamor.⁵¹

Here the heightened prose allows for a Brechtian distance from the horror described: the concatenation of epithets, "dim," "palsied" and "witless" imbue the esoteric "camarine," "jawhasps" and "paraclete" with a rolling cadence that makes the passage resonate beyond semantic meaning. But such vocabulary is imbued with a psychological power that seems to match the idea of characters self-haunted by the crimes committed but whose understanding is only partial. The instant effect of this is to enfold the story in a dream-like atmosphere. However, the dark workings of the Id lead always to the impoverished material world of the characters. It is therefore worth exploring the way dream narrative is used to reflect distorted relations in the social reality.

The Darkening of Southern Social Relations

Because of the importance of dreams, and indeed their central importance in the McCarthy corpus, several critics have recognized the influence of Freud's notion of the uncanny in these early novels.⁵² Freud developed his theory in 1919 as a way of understanding how certain repeated clinical behavior or psychic fixation can bring about

⁵¹ Ibid. 18.

⁵² The best essay on the topic is: Madsen, Michael. "The Uncanny Necrophile in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*: Or How I learned to Understand Lester Ballard and Start Worrying." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal Volume 9.1*, 2011. 17-28.

the breaking of a sexual taboo. Freud believed that such repressions, and their displaced presence in the aforesaid clinical behavior of certain characters, were really symbols of the censoring superego's failed attempt at repressing the demands of the Id. In *Outer Dark* this idea is demonstrated, and somewhat parodied, in the choosing of unreliable authoritarian figures such as the tinker or the autocratic squire, or, more comically, the thoroughly corrupt preacher featured in the 'Gadarene Swine' section (220-226) to articulate the community's wrath at the siblings' transgression. Furthermore, it is completely travestied in the creation of "the triune," the evil apocalyptic reckoners who mindlessly and perversely act as moral nemesis to Culla and Rinthy's incest crime.

The sense of thwarted ambition that both Culla and Rinthy experience, seen at its clearest in the way that they wander in and over the same space but never actually meet up, is illustrative of the kind of forgetting, recognized by Sigmund Freud in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, that produces "bungled actions": the carrying out of simple tasks, the literal getting from A to B, is thwarted by the subliminal memory of a trauma. In short, we have to understand this type of pastoral inversion as psychosis resulting from forms of "bungled actions" that have their sources in the everyday social world. In this sense, the triune can be interpreted as a manifestation of the Superego's punishment of the Id impulse.

On a more materialist level, the uncaging of the Id through the incest crime is part of McCarthy's critique of the South's manifestly skewed social relations, and is evident in the way the siblings are condemned to wander the countryside thwarted constantly by the object-world in the form of people, towns, houses and forests that either delay them or stand directly in their way. Again the Jeffersonian dream of an ordered agrarian society where town and country are paradigms of social order is trampled on. We can see this happening with Rinthy's fairy-tale-like (as in the Brothers' Grimm) straying into remote cottages and shacks in her forlorn search for her brother and baby (97-116). It is also evident in Culla's purgatorial punishment for his crime; for example, he is almost lynched for being misidentified as a grave-robber (88-90), nearly drowned in the ferry scene (164-168) and then accused of starting a stampede (220-226). Each time he manages to avert death, another near fatal encounter ensues: the arrest of death is thus Dantean in its sense

of eternal damnation. When he is finally brought before the triune, judgment is again deferred as the greater punishment is for him to witness his child murdered in front of his eyes (236).

But in spite of the surrealistic imagery underpinning all the various intersecting stories, there is always the clear rendering of a community darkened by the unequal social relations that were already in place way before Culla and Rinty committed their sexual crime. For instance, there are very few characters in this novel that are shown to have risen above the tawdry meanness or abjection brought about by material want. In this sense, the triune is more than the manifestation of the Id uncontrolled: it is also a reflection of the violence and inequality endemic in society. The social world is where the repressed, in all its forms, resides. The siblings' flight, therefore, from an excluded woodland home (it is my belief that McCarthy wants us to regard it as a distorted Eden) allows us to see a very real representation of the American South bent out of shape by its distorted social relations.

We can find such social distortion in the section where the work-seeking Culla Holme becomes part of a triptych (trouble always seems to come in threes in this novel) in which a stratified social system takes on the following order: The Squire>Negro>Culla Holme. Here we have a composite of Southern social relations that has been twisted (very wryly, it must be said) to the extent that Culla is consigned to a rung lower than the "Negro." Culla, by being cast on the bottom rung, is able to reveal to the reader the powerful and monolithic class structures in this society. The squire is a typical Southern type: a bourgeois scion who wields power over his community like a feudal lord. Nevertheless, he is not unkindly rendered: he is gruff, but honest, a strong believer in the Protestant concomitants ("shiftlessness is a sin") of work and virtue. On the surface, the chronotope here seems to be fixed, mimicking wryly the accepted social relations of antebellum and Jim Crow literature. Although McCarthy doesn't allow his narrative voice to remark negatively on the evident class differences shown in the following passage, the social critique breaks through because we are compelled to see the world through Culla's eyes –

from, the ground up, so to speak:

After he had washed he sat in the shade of the toolshed and pared idly at the sole of his shoe with the knife he carried. He watched the negro cross from the barn to the house. In a few minutes he came from the kitchen door and returned across the yard again, a small figure scuttling from shadow to shadow with laborious ill-grace, carrying in one hand the squire's boots and disappearing into the barn.⁵³

The social observation here is, like the devil, all in the details. Culla, an outcast *in extremis*, is given the job of being our eyes. He watches the "negro" scuttle (a verb choice that echoes T. S. Eliot's line from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) across his and our view, in and out of the shadows. That we see "the negro" carrying the squire's boots, no doubt to clean them, justifies Culla's stealing of them later on. It is through Culla that we get to see social inequality manifest itself through everyday work.

For these reasons, the South's heavily stratified social relations have to be seen as part of a McCarthy revenge motif that is advanced throughout the *oeuvre*. Although it seems that the triune intermittently wreaks revenge on Culla and his damned community, by randomly murdering everything in its path, there is a strong suggestion that some murders serve as a kind of gleeful *peripeteia* against McCarthy's hated Southern bourgeoisie.⁵⁴ A few pages on, the squire, in furious pursuit of Culla after he had his boots stolen, gets his come-uppance:

One of them said something and then one of them said Harmon and then one of them was seizing the horse reins. The squire stood in the wagon. Here, he said. What do you think you're doing. Here now, by God – reaching and taking up the shotgun where it stood leaning against the seat.⁵⁵

⁵³ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 48.

⁵⁴ I mean: it is very clear that McCarthy singles out this social class for all kinds of horrible ends in his novels.

⁵⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 50.

If we go back a few pages prior to the squire's fatal, and fateful, encounter with the triune, we can see a possible lampooning of an American equalitarian myth: the idea of hard work, fortified by scriptural allusion, as a gateway to both earthly and heavenly reward. The squire here is expounding on this idea, to the point of vanity:

Yes. The Bible reckons. What I got I earned. They's not a man in this country will tell ye different. I've never knowed nothing but hard work, I've been many a time in the field at daybreak waitin for the sun to come up to commence work and I was there when it went down again. Daybreak to backbreak for a Godgiven dollar. They aint a man in this country will dispute it.⁵⁶

The preponderance of "I's" in this passage helps reveal the squire's blustering egotism; more egregiously, such hot air prevents him from understanding that his social station would preclude any public demurral from his opinion of himself. When he sententiously repeats "they's not a man" it's as though he is oblivious to the fact that everyone would be too afraid to contradict his view of himself. The squire's death, then, is a way of suggesting that the cause of his demise is an inability to see outside the self-satisfied status-ideal he has constructed for himself, and, further, that social and economic differences are the material facts that expose the Christian cant that he exercises with such fiery vapidness. The very real class-based attitudes to work and their attendant inequalities reveal a disgusted counter-pastoral as part of McCarthy's critique of Southern social relations.

A Disgusted Counter-Pastoral

The emphasis on material scarcity exacerbated by unequal social relations also qualifies the religious dimension in this novel, which is evident immediately in the novel's citing of Matthew 8:10-12 - the passage where Jesus hears the entreaty of a centurion who asks for his servant to be healed - as its epigraph. The centurion is vilified by the crowd; for

⁵⁶ Ibid. 47.

he is a non-Hebraic outsider so, by implication, an enemy of the Jewish race.⁵⁷ Jesus turns on his own people and says:

Verily, I say unto you, that many shall come east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew: 8-10-12)

This reference impresses upon the novel a mythic layer where, unlike the previous novel, there are very few, if any, direct historical referents. However, a more existentialist influence, especially Albert Camus, is noted by Steven Frye who argues that the “outer darkness” is to a large extent the absolute condition of the human experience.”⁵⁸ Theological and existentialist interpretations share a similar ground in this sense: a general belief in the wretchedness of the human condition. It is possible to argue, therefore, that the parabolic use of scripture has no real symbolic meaning other than to highlight a general sense of material abjection. Seen in this way, its use falls in line with the Benjaminian notion of fragmentation: the use of gospel allegory is another broken piece of text pertinent only to specific moments in the novel. In this sense, the novel’s more secular themes of psychological derangement and retribution are also other broken pieces of old narratives, informed primarily by the absolute impossibility of pastoral in the antinomic South. The underlying idea in this novel is that “outer-darkness” extends to every area of human life where social and material scarcity prevails.

So how is the impossibility of pastoral shown in this novel? It is not done through the anti-pastoral’s critique of modernity as such but through a pastoral that recognizes its own mendacity: in other words, the novel suggests that the serpent has always been in the garden. Like Adam and Eve, Culla and Rinthy were living out a pastoral of seclusion and forgetfulness - one that is albeit farcically founded on scarcity, but nonetheless, still a

⁵⁷ I paraphrase Steven Frye here: *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. 29.

⁵⁸ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 29.

pastoral for a people who don't know any better – until social law, or the law of the father, undoes them.

In spite of the novel's gothic overtones, the clear, almost naturalistic, concentration on the material conditions of these back-woods and very backward people suggest that the pastoral as exemplary community is being pummeled to dust. It is here where the device intersects with American naturalism and realism in order to reveal the inadequacy of utopian representation. With this in mind, it is worth noting that Culla and Rinthy start the novel living deep within a wooded glade which resonates somewhat discordantly with the pastorales of Virgil and Edmund Spencer. The use of the pastoral term "glade" and reference to springtime, suggests that Culla's shame has turned the ideal into a pale simulacrum of its lapsarian referent, where fear of outside judgment is both trigger for all the repression and for its psychotic release.

This judgment is done symbolically by the violation of pastoral space signified by the tinker's entrance into the Holme's community:

The tinker looked up, a small gnomish creature wreathed in a morass of grizzled hair, watching him with bland gray eyes. When the tinker came rattling his cart in drunken charivari through the clearing he was there with wild arms like one fending back a curse."⁵⁹

The fact that the tinker's clamorous intervention represents the outside breaking down the secluded – albeit, extremely warped and depleted - pastoral of Culla and Rinthy suggests that neither outside nor inside is being privileged here. The French word "charivari" – denoting a mock-serenade of pots and pans in which a whole village, noisily and coercively, enjoins an unmarried couple to marry – is deployed here to suggest that the tinker, ironically, intervenes on behalf of social law. It also explains why the sentence ends ambivalently with "wild arms fending back a curse:" ambivalent because, of course, it is

⁵⁹ Ibid. 16.

impossible for Culla and Rinthy to marry. However, there is a strong sense that the tinker as symbol of the world extraneous to the Holmes' remote Arcadia is an outlandish and suspect exemplum of what lies beyond the "glade." Indeed this becomes very evident when Rinthy's own journey out of the "glade" is initiated by the tinker who is shown to live in a shack in disgusting conditions (190-91). After leaving the tinker, Rinthy goes on to encounter all kinds of people, some kind, others less so - all of whom, though, are shown to be living in dire poverty.

The tinker then is a narrative feint, a ringer of false changes: there is no atemporal inside or temporal outside offering deliverance, only an ever-enclosing history that subjects all to its laws. Both Culla and Rinthy leave the nightmare of the woods, but find very little succor outside its environs.

In *Outer Dark*, the pastoral's exclusionary Edenic myth is travestied by the novel's theme of incest; however, such a crime, as Jay Ellis suggests in *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, is part of the unanswerable aporia that is at the heart of the Genesis story:

This, after all, is the implicit problem in the Judeo-Christian origin myth as it first confronts sex: with whom can the son and daughter of Adam and Eve reproduce without committing incest? (Ellis: 118)

The social isolation that leads to incest between brother and sister Culla and Rinthy Holme is similar to the Adam and Eve story in the sense that both pairs are cut off from the possibility of endogamy. If we look at in this way, then incest becomes a metaphor for pastoral's rejection of history. Rinthy's guileless, mostly shame-free peregrinations are symbolic of pastoral forgetfulness. Her lack of self-knowledge is, in this sense, the true grotesque in the novel.

We can see an example of this in the following section's jarring of the pastoral and gothic: the child-like Rinthy is ironically depicted as a bride of nature as she walks to the place where Culla had falsely informed her lies the grave of her dead child:

She went happily, flushed, shuffling through the woods and plucking the shy wildflowers that sat upon the sun-patched earth and half shrouded under old leaves glared back a small violence of color upon the bland March skies.”⁶⁰

It is the strange mixing of the pastoral-inflected “happily”, “flushed” and “plucking the shy wildflowers” with negative vocabulary such as “glared,” “small violence” and “bland March skies” that render this passage both pastoral and gothic. The figure of Rinthy (ignorant innocence personified) imbues the scene with a poetic naivety that, because of the incest crime, underscores the mission as both anti-quixotic: she is trying to find the grave of a misbegotten child, so there is nothing noble in her quest. Death and all forms of corruption contaminate the pastoral’s instrumentality.

To drive this point home, we can look at how the mixing of opposing pastoral and counter-pastoral ideas infuses the following:

With her bouquet clutched in both hands before her she stepped finally into the clearing, a swatch of grass, sunlight, birdcalls, crossing with quiet and guileless rectitude to stand before a patch of black and cloven earth. ⁶¹

Rinthy is always presented as an innocent child betrayed by an incongruous physical maturity; because of this she cannot be condemned for the sin of lust. But McCarthy seems to be at pains to stress the abjectness of her guilelessness, especially as it is the product of unremitting poverty. To these ends, there is no better evocation of the limits to pastoral innocence than in the following passage where we see Rinthy wandering, again guilelessly, through a Southern landscape resounding with the clamor of songbirds, stumbling upon the aftermath of a lynching: “If crows had not risen from a field she might never have looked that way to see two hanged men in a tree like gross chimes.”⁶² The simile of “like

⁶⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. 32.

⁶¹ Ibid. 32.

⁶² Ibid. 100.

gross chimes” is perhaps an ironic allusion to the Aeolian harp, a symbol of inspiration for the Romantic poets.

In this kind of story, the fictive possibility is mostly focused on inversion. The birth of the infant, fathered and mothered by brother and sister in a humble shack, is a kind of distortion of the nativity story in which the seed of life is wasted. The numerous images of hanged men in the novel refer openly to the myth of the hanging man’s dropped semen fathering a mandrake root. This image of distorted fertility can be paralleled with the recursive imagery of an over-lactating Rinthy: the image of her leaking breasts transforms the idea of her as a fertile earth mother - suckler of all things born in nature - into a symbol of guilt and shame: her breast-milk a stigmatic sign of corrupted nature.⁶³

In the child of nature figure of Rinthy, the correspondence of pastoral with innocence is erased; moreover, it is an erasure that prefigures the next two novels, *Child of God* and *Suttree*, rejection of the possibility of pure states of being; a rejection that thematically undoes much of the mystical tapestry of the first two novels in order to weave in the historical factors that challenge the pastoral ideal. Again we have stories that use generic contamination to undermine the exclusionary pastoral. However, this time, it is material scarcity, rather than gothic overdeterminism, that asserts itself as the sign for the impossibility of pastoral as a social idea. We can therefore see a development in McCarthy’s renunciation of pastoral: out go the over-busy generic conflation that parody the use of the Gothic – a baggy genre, anyway, that critic Stephen Shapiro, in his essay “*Transval, Transylvania: Dracula’s World System and Gothic Periodicity*”, sees as transitional from one wave of capitalism to the next – to make way for clearer themes of poverty, property eviction, exile and self-exile as well as environmental despoliation. Furthermore, the reduction of all human relations to those predicated on fiscal exchange becomes the symptoms underlying the psychosis and alienation of the respective protagonists, Lester

⁶³ We should remember that one of the several stories on the Greek theogeny has Gaia, the earth Goddess, coming out of the head of Zeus, her father.

Ballard and Cornelius Suttree.⁶⁴ We will now discuss these novels' themes of expulsion and exile as a way of suggesting that McCarthy's protagonists and antagonists are henceforward doing their growing up in history

⁶⁴ As we shall see, the theme of monetary exchange is especially powerful in *Suttree*.

Chapter Three

3) *Child of God* and *Suttree*: Growing up in History

The limits to what constitutes the good community of pastoral is starkly outlined in McCarthy's third novel *Child of God* (1974), a work of fiction that, following the shock of the incest theme in *Outer Dark*, delineates behavior so abhorrent that necrophilia just about tops a long list of outrages. The sense of community censure against such crimes is expressed in the structure of the novel itself where the faux-objective third person narrative of the decline and fall of ne'er-do-well Lester Ballard is interpolated frequently with the first person accounts of local people. These local-people eye-witness accounts, from the horse's mouth, so to speak, are really narrative feints, for by the end of the novel the community is under as much scrutiny as the depraved antagonist Lester Ballard.

For the most part these first person accounts are in the form of folksy anecdotes about Ballard as a child or as a young man; and though shedding light on an early predisposition for violence, they ultimately offer little explanation for the descent into psychosis. Also, there is a deliberate discordance between the two narrative voices, with the dominant third person voice occasionally parodying the detached objectivity of naturalist writers such as Emile Zola and Theodore Dreiser. We can hear such a register in the description of Ballard's first act of necrophilia (we should note that he is not actually responsible for their death: the man and woman in the car have already died of a kind of asphyxiation whose cause is never properly explained) is delivered first with Gothic overtones: "A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman."⁶⁵ The strange mixture of pathos (It is apparent that Ballard lifelong loneliness is sympathetically rendered: he is an orphan, and has never had a proper loving relationship) with horror is amplified by the cruel epithet 'waxen', which connotes the romantic idea of 'whispering sweet nothings' into a loved one's ear. It also relates to Ballard's first stumbling onto the car containing the dead lovers, where, straight out of David Lynch, the radio is very eerily playing a slushy country tune

⁶⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 88.

whose lyrics, "Gathering flowers for the master's bouquet. Beautiful flowers that will not decay", need, as noted by John Cant, to be seen as bitterly ironic. The wider naturalistic inference is to remind us that our senses are constantly assailed, frequently conditioned by the numerous representations of idealized communities in books, film and music. Thus the music along with Ballard's outpouring of love into the dead woman's ear is synesthetically blended to remind us of the insidious pervasiveness of such representation. The next sentence, "Who could say she could not hear him?" is, as we shall see, an example of McCarthy's frequent use of a rhetorical question or direct address to the reader. The author seems to want us to be witnesses to this story, perhaps even to pass judgment on the often psychologically harmful discourses that make up the social reality. It should be noted that Ballard's perverted sex act happens in a car – another example in early McCarthy of machinery as a site and symbol for distorted sexual behavior:

When he'd finished he raised up and looked out again. The windows were fogged. He took the hem of the girl's skirt with which to wipe himself. He was standing on the dead man's legs. The dead man's member was still erect. Ballard pulled up his trousers and climbed over the seat and opened and stepped out into the road.⁶⁶

The cold description of Ballard tidying himself up after his sex crime before pillaging the possessions of the dead couple goes on for over two pages. The point of this is to enforce the idea that naturalism best sustains horror through matter of fact description. Ergo, naturalism is a suitable form for depicting both the behavior of the human organism and the depravity that it is often predisposed to. Mark Royden Winchell notes that McCarthy's avoidance of the baroque form (used so notably in the previous novel, *Outer Dark*) to ornament the horror makes the act all the more shocking "precisely because it makes the horrible mundane, if not downright banal."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid. 88-89

⁶⁷ Winchell-Royden, Mark. *Reinventing the South*. 233.

Occasionally the voice that seems to address the reader is used in an admonitory way; as a way of understanding Ballard's crimes as part of a wider social malaise. The opening description plainly places Ballard within the human family, a product of environment and heredity - "Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps," - which, though tempering the tendency to regard Ballard as sub-human, suggests paradoxically that it is our own human gene pools that act as incubi for psychosis.⁶⁸ A Larkinesque "Man hands misery onto Man" prognosis is thus implied.

The admonitory finger-pointing is also in the following scene where the implication - validated by America's penchant for the kind of "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" retribution that has its analogue in the widespread use of capital punishment - is that we the readers, members of society all, should be given the task of deciding Ballard's fate. In the following, Ballard is depicted as being at the point of drowning:

He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him? ⁶⁹

The short cynical answer to these questions is that his fictive life as a character is predicated on the fact that he must survive to become the monster we want him to be; thus Ballard is 'borne up' by the possibility of the story itself. The more nuanced answer is that the writer wants to place this outsider within the parameters of the human family in order to understand him. Thus the appeal to first see Ballard as a 'child of God', and, second, pass judgment on his fate is a device which helps give social meaning to Ballard's crimes and gives pause on the inclination to demonize.

⁶⁸ McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 49.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 156.

The idea of society being implicated in the crimes that Ballard will perpetrate is explored in an interesting passage where the Sevier County community is experiencing a flood of biblical proportions:

The High Sherriff of Sevier County came down the courthouse steps as far as the last stone above the flooded lawn and gazed out over the water where it lay flat and gray and choked with debris, stretching in quiet canals up the streets and alleys, the tops of the parking meters just visible off to the left the faintest suggestion of movement, a dull sluggish wrinkling where the mainstream of the Little Pigeon river tugged at the standing water in the flats.⁷⁰

The flat realism of this passage may qualify the tendency to reach for an antediluvian allegorical reading. Dianne Luce has done some interesting research on the contextual source of this flood, citing the historical fact that the Little Pigeon River at Sevierville used to break its banks at regular intervals: the river “flooded at intervals until the TVA widened, straightened, and rechanneled the Little Pigeon River in 1967, effectively eliminating flooding until 1967.”⁷¹ This is very helpful, but we still have to understand such historical sourcing within the parabolically resonating boundaries of the novel itself and further note that the description of the flood comes a few pages after the devastating description of the “unhoused” (Jay Ellis’s term) Ballard, a child of God, lest we forget, desperately clinging onto what remains of his sanity and without shelter from the terrible rains:

Nothing moved in that dead and fabled waste, the woods garlanded with frostflowers, weeds spiring up from white crystal glass fantasies like the stone lace in a cave’s floor. He had not stopped cursing. Whatever voice spoke him was no demon but some old shed self that came yet from time to time in the name of sanity,

⁷⁰ Ibid.160

⁷¹ Luce, Dianne. C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Novels*. 160.

a hand to gentle back from the rim of his disastrous wrath.⁷²

This image of Ballard at the edge of schizophrenia is short-lived; the madness eventually comes unabated like the literal flood that foreshadows it. A page on, we find Ballard's loss of selfhood complete:

He howled aloud. With gingery steps he crossed the stone floor to the water and sat and put his feet in. The creek felt hot. He sat there soaking his feet and gibbering, a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes.⁷³

It is important, then, to view the melding of antediluvian allegory with this historically specific referent as McCarthy's way of introducing a key theme: the very American habit of mythologizing its history to the degree where it becomes difficult to separate fact from fiction. The flood is a natural phenomenon but its occurrence in a remote community such as Sevierville would be often viewed in biblically portentous terms. Since McCarthy is all about generic contamination, there seems to be a metafictional knowingness about such a conflation - and that is why the quickly precipitating fall into psychosis is conjoined here with the pathetic fallacy of the flood. As the sheriff and his deputy row through the flooded streets they find that some places have been looted: "Seems like trouble ought make people closer stead of some trying to rob others. Some people you caint do nothing with, the sheriff said."⁷⁴

The flood is a form of moral nemesis which washes away, temporarily, both the turpitude immanent in the local history, and a community moiled in its own corruption. The very same chapter alludes to this issue by having the townsfolk discuss the Whitecaps: a very real group of religious vigilantes who terrorized the community in the eighteen-eighties and nineties. This group set themselves up as arbiters on the moral behavior of the

⁷² McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 158.

⁷³ Ibid. 159.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 161-162.

community and would often carry out summary executions in the name of “sexual propriety.” (John Cant: 92) The ambivalent perception, within certain communities, of outlaw gangs and vigilante groups in American culture means that their violent behavior is never met head-on: through suppression, they quickly pass into legend, while historical memory as a medium of direct reference is evaded. This is clearly shown in the following exchange: “Here’s a man can tell ye about the White Caps, said the sheriff. People don’t want to hear about that, said the old man.”⁷⁵

McCarthy uses this example for a number of reasons: first to remind us that although Lester Ballard is not referred to once in this discussion - for, at this juncture, he has already turned his back on the community and is hiding in the woods - his violence finds an unlikely correlate in the suppressed history of the White Caps. Perhaps the recognition of ordinary citizens doing evil acts is behind the reticence. It might be important, then, to see Ballard’s exile as symbolically synonymous with the pushing to the background of all that is perceived by a community as unpalatable in its history. The other very much related purpose is to explode the myth of the entirely good community - and along with it the fantasy of a Southern pastoral - by bringing to the surface the violence emanating from the idea of community itself. This fearless confrontation with history works against the idealized medievalization of culture promulgated by the Southern hierarchy - i.e., the privileging of folk-lore over historical fact so long as it tallied with an idealized vision of the social order. Instead McCarthy offers a hard-to-swallow alternative: the *force majeure* of a more concrete, less romantic history. He does this by getting a member of the community to tell it like it is about the White Caps: “The only thing they ever done was to whip women and rob old people of their savins. Pensioners and widows. And murder people in their beds at night.”⁷⁶

McCarthy’s deeply-rooted suspicion of groups of men bent on retribution (‘blood-cults’ as he describes one such cannibalistic assemblage in *The Road*) comes to the fore

⁷⁵ Ibid.162

⁷⁶ Ibid.165.

here. There is no ideological left or right scission to refer to, no good guys versus bad guys, only an atavistic settling of primal scores. This is clearly shown when talk of another group, the Bluebells, ostensibly formed to stand up against the White Caps is equally ridiculed in the discussion:

They was organized to set against the White Caps but they were just as cowardly. They'd hear the White Caps was ridin out someplace like Pigeon Force, they'd get out there and take up the boards in the bridge and lay in the bushes where they could hear em to fall through. They hunted one another all over the county for two year and never met but one time and that was by accident and in a narrow place where neither bunch couldn't run. No, those were sorry people all the way around, ever man jack a three hundred and sixty degree son of a bitch, which my daddy said meant they was a son of a bitch any way you looked at them.⁷⁷

The contempt for both groups of vigilantes is palpable. It is also clear that - in this novel and of the novels in general - there is healthy disdain for male group behavior.⁷⁸ But, to return to the story, this passage shows that Ballard is exiled from a community that is no stranger to violence. Moreover, a major motif is beginning to emerge in the McCarthy corpus: a deeply-rooted fear and suspicion of the crowd in American culture.

Dianne Luce links the violence endemic within a community, as it violently resists that what threatens it, with the tradition of public hanging and lynching in the American south: Violence as part of a collective unconscious that is both ritualistic and voyeuristic. In this regard, Luce sees an interesting cinematic influence in the form of Alfred Hitchcock. The director, most notably in *Psycho*, played on the correlation between the all-too-human predilection for voyeurism and the voyeuristic medium of cinema itself. Likewise, Luce sees McCarthy's detailed description of Ballard's murdering of young girls as Hitchcockian in its

⁷⁷ Ibid. 165.

⁷⁸ The passage, however, does go on to extol one member of the community, Tom Davis, who, according to the old timer's account, single-handedly cleared the district of the vigilantes (166).

compulsive recording of psychosis. Ballard's ritualized taking of gruesome souvenirs from his female cadavers is compelling because it speaks of a peculiarly American fascination with violence.⁷⁹ The novel mirrors this but is also goad and instrument for the fascination. This interpretation by Luce, if we take on board McCarthy's career-long foregrounding of violence in his novels, suggests that, by reading, the reader is implicated in the horror.

To be sure, there is an obvious parallel between the cross-dressing Norman Bates and Ballard's wearing the clothes of his dead female victims: "He'd long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims but now he took to appearing in their outerwear as well. A gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape."⁸⁰ However, although the parallel is apposite, especially in terms of the prurience that this passage conveys, we have to realize that Hitchcock does not bother with exposing the social causes behind Bates' madness, whereas McCarthy is clearly intent on doing this with Ballard. Even Ballard's voyeurism has a social dimension to it. For example, the aforementioned description of Ballard's cross-dressing is preceded by a paragraph whereof we learn that he is secretly observing the occupant of the house that he had been ejected from: "After the snow ceased he went every day. He'd watch from his half mile promontory, see Greer come from the house for wood or go to the barn or to the chicken house."⁸¹ It is this acute boundary line, confined within a radius of a few square miles, where home and homelessness, the normal (as illustrated by the description of Greer going about his daily chores) and the abnormal (as demonstrated by Ballard's deranged transvestitism) are configured. Furthermore, it is this liminal space - a border which signifies possession (Greer) and dispossession (Ballard) - which adds material pathos to the scene. This division has its counterpart in Ballard's own schizoid self-division; his deranged transvestitism a sad reconstitution perhaps of the mother and father that he

⁷⁹ Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. 136-138.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 140.

never really had. Either way, both divisions mark him out as someone beyond the purview of community.

The importance of us watching Ballard watching the site of his old home amidst descriptions of conventional images of community is that we begin to see what he sees: the community from the outside, as it might appear from the position of the outcast. The sentence, "Down there the valley with the few ruststained roofs and faintest wisps of smoke," is clearly a sign that his vantage point marks the boundary between community and exile therefrom: or, to put it another way, the boundary between civilization and wilderness. This is stressed in the next sentence where we get an image of what lies beyond the community: "The ribboned slash of mud that the road made up the white valley and beyond it the fold on fold of mountains with their black weirs of winter treelimbs and dull green cedars."⁸² Ballard will soon turn his back on this community and retreat into the wilderness. We are seeing, therefore, a number of inversions, or substitutions: the effects of necrophilia and transvestitism as they congeal into a form of obsessive *ressentiment* where home and hearth, with their accrued connotations of stable social relations, will soon be replaced by the primordial shelter of caves. As numerous critics have observed, most notably Jay Ellis, there follows a series of domestic substitutes for the original 'unhousing' of Ballard: first, a shack in the woods to house his cadaver brides and then a cave in the woods that will eventually serve as burial chambers for their decomposing bodies. It is clear that the dream of domesticity, one that he shares with *Psycho's* Norman Bates, never leaves Ballard: what he actually does is create a perverse simulacrum of the community that perforce he has left behind. Perhaps this is why the community takes Ballard back, first as sectioned inmate and then as corpse, suggesting again the impossibility of living completely outside the social order.

Around thirty pages on from Ballard's initial vigil above Greer's ranch, we witness its denouement: Ballard, nightmarishly dressed in the full apparel of dead women's clothes,

⁸² Ibid. 140-141.

attacks his usurper. The great irony here is that Ballard has become a trespasser on what was once his own land:

On a good May Morning John Greer turned out to dig a septic tank at the back of his house. While he was digging, Lester Ballard in frightwig and skirts stepped from behind the pumphouse and raised the rifle and cocked the hammer silently, holding back the trigger and easing it into the notch as hunters do.⁸³

The wry allusion to pastoral implicit in 'good May Morning' should not be overlooked: it is there because it helps us absorb the full significance of Ballard's banishment from the land; to make us understand the violence unleashed as a kind of psychotic response to an unpalatable material truth: the real-world etiolation of the utopian Jeffersonian discourse that equated land ownership with human happiness. The terrible cost in human terms of Ballard's original eviction reveals the tenuous line between social harmony and *resenttiment*: in a world where material rights are not universally experienced, social happiness is impossible. However, and this is what differentiates McCarthy from such Southern meliorists as Allan Tate (on the conservative side) and Wendell Berry (on the liberal side): to try and socially engineer harmony is ultimately dangerous and self-defeating. It is no accident, then, that this passage appears only a few pages after the excoriating critique of the White Caps. To compound the rejection of both conservative and progressive utopian ideals, we have the following tragic description of pastoral exclusion:

He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading. Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid. 172.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 170.

In the above quote we see Ballard's waking up from his 'child of nature' fantasy to realize that escape often begets the un-freedom of unremitting loneliness. The pathos of this moment is starkly tragic. Ballard's shooting of Greer provides the coda of the novel in the sense that it brings about his arrest and his final hunting down. Ballard, the rapacious hunter of female prey who, in a final symbolic castration, becomes the hunted after his "hunting arm" is shot off by Greer: "When the nurse came with his supper, he said: "What'd they do with my arm? She swung the tabletop and set the tray on it. You got it shot off, she said."⁸⁵ Quite soon after this we discover that he has managed to escape the hospital after fooling his captors into believing that he would show them where the bodies were. He then leads his pursuers on a less than merry goose chase through the chambers of his multi-roomed mansion of a cave (183-186). In a gross parody of how the exclusionary property relations of the south had economically always ensnared him, he is eventually entrapped in his own primitive house. Nothing is heard from him for a while, but, after nearly dying in the caves, he eventually resurfaces and gives himself up (191-192): thus like a lot of McCarthy's characters he is returned into the community that had once expelled him; but only this time as a broken "Child of God." Ballard is then incarcerated in a mental hospital ("He was never indicted for any crime.") where he died of, so it seems, natural causes. The novel ends when a farmer suddenly finds the earth literally moving beneath him:

*In April of that same year a man namd Arthur Ogle was plowing an upland field one evening when the plow was snatched from his hands. He looked in time to see his span of mules disappear into the earth taking the plow with them. He crawled with caution to the place where the ground had swallowed them but all was darkness there. A cool wind was coming from in the earth and far below he could hear water running.*⁸⁶

From hereafter the community will discover the full extent of Ballard's depravity: underneath the fertile fields is a cave housing all of Ballard's victims; an ossuary containing all the women he has killed. The ossuary in the cave is likened to a catacomb; the bodies,

⁸⁵ Ibid. 175.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 195. (McCarthy's italics)

though in a state of decay, are intact; there is a perverse order to things, a notion that is inscribed by the word choice “mausoleum” (196). If we compare this section with the description of what the community does with Ballard’s body, we can get a sense, once again, that society is also perfectly capable of casual clinical cruelty when it comes to dealing with the dead. This idea is reinforced by the distancing third person iterations of “he” and “his” repeated throughout the paragraph, and in the obvious foreshadowing of the cavernous ossuary transposed by the medical school basement which serves as the site for Ballard’s dismemberment for scientific purposes:

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and his brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations.⁸⁷

This is how a society deals with evil: when it manifests itself it must be dealt with in a severely purgative way if the good community is to survive. This explains the funeral that Ballard is given after the school had finished their clinical examination of his remains: “At the end of the three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred.”⁸⁸ The sardonic “others of his kind” reinforces this civic distancing from evil. In addition, the clinical evisceration of Ballard must be seen as a Girardian-type ritual in which a scapegoat is found to expiate the secular Gods (the mental hospitals, the police and judiciary, etc.) of social order.

The inference here is that violent spectacle is very much part of the history of these communities. In a similar fashion John Cant sees the historical references to the White Caps

⁸⁷ Ibid. 194.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 194.

as part of McCarthy's irruption of the pastoral, the bringing to the surface the violence hidden beneath its arable fields. For Cant, this kind of historical referencing as

not only an aspect of McCarthy's assault on the myth of the pastoral, it is also an aspect of his desire to write into American discourse forgotten, ignored or suppressed aspects of American history. It seems clear that Appalachia was the site of an appreciable segment of this history, although not by any means the only one. Suppression could be regarded as a concomitant to mythicization; thus the representation of the suppressed becomes a necessary aspect of the anti-myth.⁸⁹

Cant argues powerfully here for a reading of *Child of God* as a renunciation of pastoral and how it excludes any history that contaminates its pure vision. In a similar fashion, the reification of land in the Southern pastoral as a mystical place uncontaminated by the social relations of capitalism is also debunked in this novel. Land usurpation, though clearly not cause for Ballard's psychosis, should not be altogether dismissed as a factor in his feelings of social isolation. It is this trope of land appropriation, and how it reaffirms the impossibility of pastoral, that we shall turn to now.

Why the Unhousing of Lester Ballard Also Unhouses the Pastoral

The first few pages of *Child of God* summarily and dispassionately explode the pastoral myth in a terse re-telling of land usurpation. For this reason, we should see the opening pages from the viewpoint of the expropriated Lester Ballard: the eyes of the community are on him and are for the most part acquisitive. Dianne Luce returns to the theme of voyeurism in *Child of God* through her examination of the opening scene's description of a public auction and its drawing of a 'carnival-like' crowd to Ballard's property. She notes that such scenes in the Sevierville community were historically not uncommon, with public hangings especially drawing a similar "carnival-like crowd in

⁸⁹ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 92.

Sevierville.” This “resonates with the auction of Ballard’s property and the attempt to lynch him.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the first long sentence includes the description of “a caravan of carnival folk” journeying toward a farm that was up for auction. There is something about this image that is redolent of a Hollywood movie (*Shane* or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* or, even, *Witness* come to mind) telling of a community coming together to help construct the frame of a neighbor’s house – except in *Child of God*, they are only there to witness the house being taken away from its owner.

Further images of “flowering apple-trees” and the very American image of “an aged clapboard house that stood in blue shade under the wall of the mountain” cannot assuage the sense of threatening violence on the part of the bibulous carnival crowd or the feeling that the farm up for auction is suffering from neglect: “Cars and trucks came on through the weeds in the yard, people afoot.”⁹¹ It will take an accomplished huckster to paint it otherwise:

Friends, six years ago when my uncle bought the Prater place down here everybody tried to talk him out of it. He give nineteen-five for that farm. Said I know what I’m a doin. And you all know what happen down there. Yessir. Sold for thirty-eight thousand. A piece of land like this ... (.).⁹²

There is something about the auctioneer – deceitful and full of hot air, and the crowd – bibulous, credulous and uniform, more proto-fascistic than democratic - that casts doubt on Alexander De Tocqueville’s and Walt Whitman’s notions of America as locus for a competitive, but friendly plebiscite. McCarthy describes the crowd as “an illusion of multiple voices, a ghost chorus among old ruins.”⁹³ It is not just a rural pastoral that is evanescent in front of our eyes here; fading too is the pastoral ideal. Because the crowd is

⁹⁰ Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Novels*. 150.

⁹¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. 3-5.

⁹² Ibid. 6.

⁹³ Ibid. 4.

happily witnessing the usurpation of land, there is something beyond even Dianne Luce's aforementioned comparison with America's propensity for mob-like behavior - a violation of ideal communal behavior, perhaps. Something secularly sacred has been transgressed here. As if the crowd is herald to all the violence that ensues in the novel.

McCarthy is thus involved in the worthwhile activity of breaking down the accrued signifiers of pastoral enchantment. In the first few pages, we have further evidence that the traditional, unmediated pastoral is again broken by McCarthy as languid images of "wasps (that) pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments, gold and trembling between black and black" jolt against an image of Ballard "micturating" on the barren soil: "Buttoning his jeans he moves along the barn wall, himself fiddlebacked with light, a petty annoyance flickering across the wall-ward eye."⁹⁴ The deployment of the clinical term "micturation" suggests that McCarthy is in figurative terms pissing all over the Southern pastoral.

The title "Child of God" therefore needs to be understood as a kind of demand to the reader that we should qualify outrage at the perversions that follow by reminding ourselves always of the tragedy of paternal loss and the forced eviction that follows. Jay Ellis concurs with this position:

My argument on *Child of God* is that whatever the mental insufficiencies and psychological deformities of Lester Ballard, the plot is launched by this action of unhousing; every subsequent action of Lester Ballard –including necrophilia – follows from that initial scene. Ballard is a child of God without a home because it has been auctioned away from him.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ibid. 4-5

⁹⁵ Ellis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. 70.

Ellis, as noted by Michael Madsen, uses the unusual term 'unhousing' for its echo of 'unheimlich,' the German word used by Freud in his theory of the uncanny.⁹⁶ I agree with this dual reading: the unhousing of Ballard needs to be understood in both material and psychological terms: the material circumstances are very much part of Ballard's self-haunting. Thus, in the character of Lester Ballard, we find an individual shunned from his community: first, by unfair property appropriation, and second, by his abject poverty. Both factors initiate a chain of events that leads him to social ostracism, murder, madness and ultimately self-exile: the wilderness of eremitic insanity.

Such enforced ostracism goes against Thoreau's ideal of voluntary self-isolation. In McCarthy's next and final novel in the Appalachian series, *Suttree*, we are given the obverse of such a condition: the eponymous hero who chooses self-exile over all normative forms of community. Typically such a turning away does not come without its problems. The self cannot island itself anymore. Henceforward the allegory of fragmentation points to the pervasiveness of monetary exchange in all human relations. The predominance of this will not allow for its heroes to reconstitute themselves as inviolable symbols of outlawry. What is also apparent in this next novel is the beginning of concerns which tally well with the philosophy of the alienated human: a hallmark of twentieth century existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre, in particular. So as a form of resistance to the hegemony of market forces, we see in McCarthy a twist in the old pastoral's dream of seclusion: the possibility or impossibility of authentic-selfhood in a pervasively homogenizing world. It is this that we will turn to now.

⁹⁶ Madsen, Michael. "The Uncanny Necrophile in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*: Or How I learned to Understand Lester Ballard and Start Worrying:" *The Cormac McCarthy Journal Volume 9.1*, 2011. 18.

2) “All These Good Men”: *Suttree* as Messiah of the Knoxville Netherworld.

A lot of modernist writing is riddled with the pastoral trope of forgetfulness. Some modernist texts, however, often forget to forget and, because of this, the more sensitive protagonists inevitably confront the object of their abjection: the technological world and its rampant, environmentally wasteful materialism:

With his jaw cradled in the crook of his arm, he watched idly surface phenomena, gouts of sewage faintly working, gray clots of nameless waste and yellow condoms roiling slowly out of the murk like some giant form of fluke or tapeworm.

Watching is everything here. In the old Arcadian pastorate, shepherds and landscape are so attuned that they seem to interpenetrate one another; here, the watcher’s face is shown back to him as a distorted reflection: “The watcher’s face rode beside the boat, a sepia visage yawing in the scum, eyes veering and watery grimace.” The overriding sense is that the “phenomena” floating on the water has rendered everything ugly, the perceiver and perceived. We also encounter, on the same page, the protagonist in the third person - a mere bystander to his own pastoral disinheritance: “A welt curled sluggishly on the river’s surface as if something unseen had stirred in the deeps and small bubbles of gas erupted in oily spectra.”⁹⁷

The broken inheritance of pastoral is everywhere in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* (1979), a novel that is almost exclusively set in the sometime of the late 1940s and early 1950s of McCarthy’s home town, Knoxville, Tennessee. It is a novel which cannot help but allude to the other famous Knoxville novel: James Agee’s melancholy middle-class urban pastoral, *Death in the Family*. Whereas Agee’s novel offers up tender, poetic evocations of childhood, depicting in its first few pages loving intergenerational families picnicking

⁹⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 7.

harmoniously on well-kept lawns in the suburbs, *Suttree* evokes a city turned upside down: an elegy of social and familial dislocation where the Knoxville underworld - with disinherited Cornelius Suttree as our guide - takes primary position. Thus according to critic Rick Wallach, the way to understand *Suttree* is to regard it as an anti-novel which shows us the places where Agee's novel could not go.⁹⁸

The novel also signifies in a more consistent way a developing condemnation in the *oeuvre* of the social relations of capitalism: primarily, the predominance of the economics of exchange in post-war America. Stylistically it is the author's most self-consciously modernist text, yet beneath its fragmented form is an old message: the old 19th century warning - outlined in the writings of Marx, Dickens and Carlyle, Emerson and Thoreau - that the subordination of the individual to technology will lead to the disappearance of selfhood through its subsumption to the commoditized world. As in the previous novels, this is evinced frequently through the protagonist in a condition of inertia:

He woke in the logy heat of full summer noon with the sun beating on the tin roof above him and raising a sour smell out of the old wood of the cabin. He could hear the howl of the saws in the lumbermill across the river and he could hear the intermittent scream of swine come under the knacker's hand at the packing company. He turned his face to the wall and opened one eye. Watched through a split in the sunriven boards the slow brown neap of the passing river. After a while he struggled up, blinking in the dusty slats of sunlight that sliced through the hot murk.⁹⁹

In the previous novel, *Child of God* (1971), characters are seen to be swept up, literally and metaphorically, by a flood. In this novel, however, people are swamped by the forces of production: "He could hear everywhere in the hot summer air the drone of

⁹⁸ Wallach, Rick. "Ulysses in Knoxville: Suttree's Ageean Journey." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy, Volume One*. 78-87.

⁹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 63.

machinery, the lonely industry of the city.” The effect of all this “lonely industry” means that the natural world - “the slow brown neap of the passing river” - is rendered in stagnant terms.

The watcher is Cornelius Suttree, eponymous hero of this novel. A few pages on we learn of a more prosaic disinheritance: Suttree is told by his father to stop all his idle forgetting and become the Randian exemplar that his class expects him to be:

... the world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it. If it is life that you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent.¹⁰⁰

This will be the last letter Suttree’s father writes to his son. It thus indicates that the implied father/son estrangement is predicated for the most part on Suttree’s disgust at his father’s wish for him to swallow the bitter pill of conformity. Such revulsion, in spite of all the numerous metaphysically-loaded references to death and human waste in the novel, is founded on a common experience; that of a son’s intellectual and emotional distancing from his father’s beliefs. However, such a rejection is already implicit in the images of pollution that we have just read: a distancing, by Suttree, from the sins of his father, and from all fathers in fact.

In terms of McCarthy’s developing thematics, we are already a long way from the anti-capitalist imagery of McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*: John Wesley’s refusal to take money from the federal authorities for animal bounty (233). The father’s advice that his son should show some common sense by joining the capitalist herd is delivered in such an obviously hortatory style that it is easy to take sides with the protagonist and mock his daddy’s pro-business credo; especially as, in the course of the novel, the animus to mammon is shown by a thorough rejection of its tenets. This anti-work, anti-business ethos is often satirically implemented, as in the following exchange between Suttree and “the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.13-14.

Greek", ironically known as "Ulysses": "How's J-Bone these days, said Ulysses. About the same. He doesn't come around much more. He's working now. Ulysses smiled. Another victim fallen to employment, eh? All these good men, said Suttree."¹⁰¹ In the novel, there are few, if any, references to the recently ended Second World War or the Korean War that followed, no mention either of the American presidencies of Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose respective incumbencies were hallmarked by America's growing embroilment in The Cold War. For it seems that Suttree and his friends are fighting another war: a war of resistance against interpellation through employment.

Some Material Markers for Suttree's Existentialism

Contrary to his father's opinion, Suttree truly believes that everything is "occurring in the streets", and that is why he prefers to, Jesus-like, throw his lot in with the scum of the earth, "the helpless and impotent." There is, no doubt, a messianic aspect to this choice. Catholic critics such as Farrell O'Gorman regard McCarthy as "Culturally, indisputably, a Roman Catholic, irrespective of his personal beliefs," and further contends that, because *Suttree* is McCarthy's most "biographical" work, we should regard the protagonist as a person coming to terms with his Catholic upbringing.¹⁰² A less religious view is advanced by William Prather who views the novel in secularly existential terms, arguing that the story is really about "chronicling the struggles and growth of an absurd artist."¹⁰³ In light of the studied existentialisms of the subsequent *Border Trilogy*, I would agree that the individual against society motif is becoming a major concern. However, the Catholic idea of metamorphosis, bread into the Eucharist, wine into blood, sin into grace, death followed by

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 170.

¹⁰² For a strongly Catholic reading of *Suttree* see: O'Gorman, Farrell. "Joyce and Contesting Priesthoods in Suttree and Blood Meridian." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Will Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy, Volume 1*: 87-97. And, in the same volume: Giemza, Bryan. "Toward a Catholic Understanding of Cormac McCarthy Oeuvre." 158-173.

¹⁰³ Prather, William. "Absurd Reasoning in an Existential World: A Consideration of Cormac McCarthy's Suttree." Hall, Wade and Rick Wallach, eds. *Sacred Violence*. 71.

resurrection, and so on, is not altogether incompatible with an existentialist reading; for Suttree's own attempt to rise above the mire of modern living is in keeping with the very Catholic idea of transfiguration. Likewise, apropos of his discussion on the Joycean influence, O'Gorman, sees the Catholic influence as part of the church's tradition of heresy: Suttree is by his own admission a "defrocked Catholic" but nevertheless, because he cannot go beyond its vocabulary, he shall always remain a sinning Catholic. Perhaps this is why the strong renunciation of religion finds its substitute in a very spiritual devotion to the recording of phenomena, even if it's often of the scatological kind. O'Gorman presses the case for a Joycean/Catholic dichotomy succinctly: Suttree is very much like Stephen Daedulus, who envisions himself as a "priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of ever-living life."¹⁰⁴

Such transformations, secular or religious, are very much within the novel's romance-epic sites: for the story of Cornelius Suttree is not that dissimilar from Stephen Daedulus' own attempt at sloughing off the lineaments that hinder the pilgrimage to an authentic life. Everything that is rejected – the bad faith of mammon, heredity, marriage, Catholicism, et al. – helps give meaning to the quest. For Lynda Cooper, however, the quest for "uniqueness" is something that undermines the quality of the quest. Although the "protagonist unlearns the socioeconomic and religious hierarchies of identity construction" he ultimately fails because the desire for a "coherent new identity" is built on the "faulty premise" of "uniqueness."¹⁰⁵ This, by implication, rejects Prather's reading of Suttree as a struggling artist. Cooper's point is persuasive in the sense that "uniqueness" must be bracketed as a form of egoistical hypostatization, something that McCarthy throughout his *oeuvre* has consistently dismissed. It is better therefore to see the story as an existential

¹⁰⁴ The quote from Ulysses is cited by O'Gorman in his essay: "Joyce and Contesting Priesthoods in Blood Meridian and Suttree." Wallach, Rick, ed: *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy. Volume 1.* 87.

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, Linda R. "The Sculptor's Art: Mystery and the Material Body in Suttree." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebooks Studies in Cormac McCarthy. Volume 1.* 197.

pursuit of authenticity which, in spite of its appeal, must be caveated since it goes against McCarthy's anti-soteriological schema. The novel's last paragraph is really a figurative jumping off the cliff for Suttree – who knows if he'll land on his feet; that is, if self-crystallization has its desired end: "I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them."¹⁰⁶ The underlying sense that flight does not necessarily mean freedom suggests that self-delusion as much as the delusions in society is what Suttree is really running away from.

The novel may well be a Catholic existential novel in the sense that it uses the ecclesiastical terminology of the church, but its renunciation of the standardized life is too wide for it to be seen within religious terms only. As an alternative, David Holloway offers the more sublunary existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, with its notion of the never-resting, always projective being-for-itself. Regarding Suttree's rejection of his father's exhortation for him to become a captain of industry by his opting instead for a life of lassitude and dissolution, Holloway sees this as a form of existential resistance to the false identity that his father wants to confer on him. Opting out, or as the hippies would say, 'dropping out', is a form of commitment to the purposive project of coherent self-identity:

... (.) it would be a mistake to see Suttree's "project" as some critics have seen it, as a merely passive exercise. For much of the narrative, Suttree's project – a great refusal of his inherited class identity in the bourgeois mores and class privilege of his family – and his anti-intellectual disinclination to engage the world analytically, may look like an exercise in passive resistance against the material conditions in which he is caught.¹⁰⁷

Holloway finishes his point by suggesting that the protagonist's general listlessness, exemplified by endless descriptions of Suttree floating on his skiff, is a kind of studied "practico-inert" (Sartre's term for an existence without purpose or commitment) which in

¹⁰⁶ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 471.

¹⁰⁷ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 118.

a strange way connotes a form of “praxis”. To nail this point he concurs with William Prather’s argument that “Suttree is making a commitment simply by not committing himself: a continuing lack of commitment is a form of commitment.”¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the story of Cornelius Suttree can be inserted within the counter-cultural ethos of passive resistance: doing nothing, dropping out, is a political statement.

For instance, we are apprised immediately of the fact that he is a voluntary exile from the bourgeoisie; that he is educated and literary and self-consciously artistic; yet his apparent lack of interest in the superstructural world of books and culture helps forge identification with the netherworld of the city of Knoxville. Here we have an early allusion to the “optical democracy” outlined in the next novel, *Blood Meridian*. Cornelius Suttree is a conduit for a world beyond knowledge where all things and beings are equal and on the same leveling plane.

This waterside netherworld, the aptly named ‘McAnally Flats’, is the site most proximate to the hollow underworld (“He had not known how hollow the city was.”) (161), the series of limestone caves that the city of Knoxville is built on. From this underworld the sewage spews out the excremental waste of its citizens into the river. Shit, as John Cant observes, is everywhere in the novel – “Suttree is the most scatological of McCarthy’s texts” - and serves as a linking metaphor for some of the key themes, sex, death and money.¹⁰⁹ Sex, or more precisely, the biological consequences of sex, childbirth, is so described as to give the impression that we are permanently traumatized by our emergence from the mire of the maternal womb, the source for Julia Kristeva of all future conditions of abjection.¹¹⁰ The womb is configured as both entry and abyss to existence – we are pulled from and fall into life at the same time, a kind of originary trauma which produces the abject association of all things with the viscosity of nativity. That the river - an ancient symbol of fertility, and

¹⁰⁸ Prather, William. “Absurd Reasoning in an Existential World.” Hall, Wade, and Rick Wallach, eds. *Sacred Violence*. 71.

¹⁰⁹ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 114.

¹¹⁰ See: Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

one that Joyce uses in a fecundly metaphorical way in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* - in Knoxville is repository for all the human waste ("gouts of sewage") (12) of the city is another example where a lost pastoral becomes metaphorically aligned with a rejection of fertile maternity. Death and birth are so conjoined in the novel that the latter is seen as terminus rather than beginning: in other words, existence is a recessive experience whose end is analogous to a return to the non-being of the womb. But it is this very being-in-itself, to use the Sartrean vocabulary, that can paradoxically actuate the rebirth, the being-for-itself of a more authentic identity.

However, the queasiness toward sex needs to be seen within economic as much as existential terms; for example, the commoditization of sex as personified by the prostitute Joyce (another sly reference to the Irish writer), with whom Suttree has a brief but intense relationship, might mean a desire for more authentic, less exchange-dominated relationships. In the following vignette we are shown that the romance hides the fact that Joyce's money comes from the selling of her body:

She was very business-like. She gave him five dollars and he went out and he and the cabdriver carried things and stacked them on chairs and on the desk and draped clothes over the banister rail. The driver fumbled around for change but she waved him off and they went up the stairs with armloads of varied finery.¹¹¹

The flat prose of this helps accentuate the sense that all the relations here are tainted by money: the cab-driver, Suttree and his girlfriend, even the clothes and furniture, are reified in a tableau dominated by fiscal relations, while natural human exchange is seeped out. A few pages on, the tragic sense of something missing or lost in human relations is illustrated in a melancholy-inflected fairground scene where Suttree wondered if his prostitute lover was

ever a child at a fair dazed by the constellations of light and the hurdy-gurdy music of the merrygoround and the raucous calls of the barkers. Who saw in all that

¹¹¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 396.

shoddy world a vision that a child's grace knows and never the sweat and the bad teeth and the nameless stains in the sawdust, the flies and the stale delirium and the vacant look of solitaires who go among these garish hoardings seeking a thing they could not name.¹¹²

In spite of the fact that this scene has no reference to a dying agrarian world it is yet inflected with all the elegiac elements associated with a lost pastoral: memory propelled by the necessary occlusion of a truer, uglier reality; urban pollution, architectural decadence, physical abjection accompanied by images of diseased sexuality, and so on. This is especially apparent if we cross-reference the above with a dream that Suttree has in an earlier passage, where he "dreamed old dreams of fairgrounds where young girls with flowered hair and wide child's eyes watched by flarelight sequined aerialist aloft."¹¹³ It is arguable, then, that such melancholy images suffuse *Suttree* with the air of an urban pastoral - one that also works counter to Agee's suburban pastoral - distorted by the social relations of city life.

As many critics have pointed out, the sexual unease is very much part of a Catholic mortification of the body (McCarthy, like Cornelius Suttree, is Catholic born and was educated in Catholic schools). The fear of a return to the womb (in existential terms, the attraction of the practico-inert) perhaps explains the following passage where Suttree begins to hallucinate during a visit to Mother She, an African-American witch, an African-American witch skilled in voodoo:

Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers. Her thighs spread with a sound of rending ligaments, dry bones dragging in their sockets. Her shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghastr black succubus.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid. 408-409

¹¹³ Ibid. 50

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 427.

Jay Watson is one of several critics who have picked up on the “hallucinatory” racism, and “misogyny” in this passage. In addition Nell Sullivan, in her contextualization of the late forties and fifties milieu of the novel, argues that Suttree’s misogynistic fantasy is compounded by racial fear, and is representative of a general ‘white panic’ in Southern society at the idea of integration.¹¹⁵ I agree that this is possible: Suttree’s general non-discriminatory attitude to race and sexual difference might under certain drug-induced conditions reveal the darker workings of a paranoid, racist id. However, given that the whole novel seems to evince a fear and revulsion of bodily excretions and orifices, I would venture that the above works better as a general fear of bodies, feminine and social. It is clear that the feminine body in this novel has been commoditized to the point of dehumanization, whereas the social body, if we take this to include the civic society members of Knoxville, is one that is not only oblivious to environmental collapse but is also shown to be supportive of a punitive and persecutory legal system. Of the latter, Suttree’s constant harassment by the police and as victim of two prison terms is proof enough that the social system is being impugned in this novel. Further, a fear of the feminine body, the way that it has been reified as another form of exchange, stops Suttree from having any meaningful relationships, while a distrust of the body politic prevents him from engaging in concrete socio-political interaction. This is what lies behind the idea of the use of the word dissociate in the novel’s prologue - “a world beyond all fantasy, malevolent and tactile and dissociate” (3) - and the description of the city on the previous page as so out-of-sorts that it seems to be “constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad. (3)” Everything is distorted and perverted, turned into shit. Moreover, if we regard Suttree as a conveyer of “fantasy structures,” with the protagonist a conduit for the horde of literary

¹¹⁵ Watson, Jay. “Lighting out of Civil Rights Territory: Suttree, the Quentin Problem, and the Historical in Unconscious.” Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy’s Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy. Volume 1*. 128. Watson, in his essay, refers to Nell C. Sullivan’s conference presentation: “Stabat Mater Dolorosa: Abject Maternity in Suttree.” The Suttree 25th Anniversary Celebration and Conference, TN. 15 October 2004.

allusions in the novel, then we can see the obvious scatology as part of a long tradition of reviling the body in literature as well as the more existential desire to transcend such baseness.¹¹⁶

How Money, Time and Pollution Foreshadow the Anti-Humanism of Late-McCarthy

If we look at it in this way, then the eponymous Suttree is very much in the mold of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* and the narrative voice in *The Wasteland*, archetypes with one foot in the modern world (modern Culture = shit) and the other in antiquity (traditional culture = Gold). It becomes obvious that money, along with sex and death, is equated with the former. For instance, we learn that Suttree's much-maligned mother is from a lower-class background and had entered into a morganatic marriage with his wealthy father. Money in this sense is also about the corruption of love by material means – we have to remember also that Suttree's only meaningful adult relationship is with the prostitute Joyce. It is no wonder then that the bank-vaults, the very ones that Suttree's friend Harrogate decides to blow up, are buried deep in the feces-strewn basements of the caves. Suttree after a long search finds the hapless Harrogate in the most abject condition: "the city mouse wore only shreds of clothing and he was covered in dried sewage. True news of man here below."¹¹⁷ Money (filthy lucre), the pursuit of it, is synonymous with human decrepitude. Suttree's almost evanescent personality (there are very few, if any, physical descriptions of him), his inchoate materiality, is matched by his indifference to material things, money in particular. By bringing "true" news from the underworld of man's fallen condition,

¹¹⁶ Cooper, Linda R: "The Sculptor's Art: Mystery and the Material Body." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville*. Casebooks Studies in Cormac McCarthy. Volume 1. 197.

¹¹⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 276.

Suttree is archetypically a late-modernist messiah, one who turns offal into ambrosia and shit into gold.¹¹⁸

The detritus of modernity bumps up against modernism's amnesic protagonists in ways that force them to look for what reviles them the most. Thus Joyce's Stephen Daedulus (a voluntary exile from the culturally conservative Ireland of the early 20th century), D. H. Lawrence's Rupert Birkin (fragile bulwark to the predations of the progressive age), T.S. Eliot's emasculated and culturally anaesthetized J. Alfred Prufrock, mark their times by decrying the present social situation and all its obstacles to desired self-autonomy. Like Joyce's Stephen Daedulus we sense that history is indeed a nightmare to escape from: not just social history, but family history, or any kind of history, for that matter, that would ground the protagonist in the present reality.

For all the reasons stated, we can regard *Suttree* as McCarthy's most willfully modernist text, and because of this a psychogeography of wandering displaces any commitment to changing the social reality. In this novel, historical time is generally associated with civic life (e.g., the town-hall clock) and the pollution-strewing factories: with their time-observing whistles and Taylorist systems of work and workers' management. Suttree, on the other hand, is more of a recorder of geological and ecological flux, the often imperceptible changes that shape a landscape over millennia. He stands outside of human quotidian time in order to show a deeper time (the aforesaid "optical democracy" chimes with this idea) that helps minimize a history that dehumanizes its subjects. Such an idea is demonstrated in the numerous associations of clocks with mortality – time runs out for humans but not the world. This is clearly symbolized in the image of the dead man's watch at the beginning of the novel:

¹¹⁸ I paraphrase critic Noel Polk's comments in his essay "A Faulknerian Looks at Suttree." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy, Volume 1.* 62-78.

They stood looking at the dead man. The squad workers were coiling their ropes and seeing to their tackle. The crowd had come to press about like mourners and the fisherman and his friend found themselves going past the dead man as if they'd pay respects. He lay there in his yellow socks with the flies crawling on the blanket and one hand stretched out on the grass. He wore his watch on the inside of his wrist as some folks do or used to and as Suttree passed he noticed with a feeling he could not name that the dead man's watch was still running.¹¹⁹

'What are the roots that clutch?' asks the speaker in Eliot's famous poem. For McCarthy it would be the dead, in all their metaphoric forms, not least how they insinuate their incorporeal selves into the present reality. All you have to do is look more closely, the narration seems to enjoin, and soon you will find shells and triglobytes embedded in the stonework of old buildings. The dead, whether they are geological remnants or bones of dead animals or even people, speak to the present. Even through the most blinding of hangovers, Suttree is able to see expressions of this everywhere:

A wave of nausea washed through him and he paused to rest on an old retaining wall. Looking under his hand he saw dimly the prints of trilobites, lime cameos of vanished bivalves and delicate seaferns. In these serried serried clefts stone armatures on which once hung the flesh of living fish.¹²⁰

The recurring motif in *Suttree* is the eponymous hero as eidetic memorialist of the passage of time; it is shown first in the early passage quoted above and then repeated throughout. It is repeated so many times, that there is a strong sense that Suttree's only function is to be mere prop for the all-seeing transparent eyeball of the narrator. This use of protagonist without purpose, as vessel for an idea, is picked up by Noel Polk who finds it difficult to imagine the narrative voice as being the same as Suttree:

In *Suttree*, though, I have no real sense that the characters, especially Cornelius, are as completely aware of or as interested in the external world as the narrator is.

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 10.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 82.

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.¹²¹

This is tough criticism that has a ring of truth to it. But as Polk goes on to say, but after considering several critical viewpoints, the novel has something of the anti-novel about it (66); therefore, the fact that narrative voice and protagonist are sometimes adrift from each other allows the novel to be seen not only as a political comment on the absolute attenuation of the subject, the melding of the individual to the world of things, by late-capitalism, but also as a critique of novelistic form. Suttree's resistance to this process perhaps means that he has to move beyond subjectivity in order to lament its subsumption by the social system. The protagonist as a symbol of Nietzschean transfiguration, therefore, represents a refusal by McCarthy to interpellate Suttree either as a social type or as a literary character.

A Fragmented Transfiguration

Suttree is surrounded by stagnation: the river itself, he and his friends in various stages of alcoholic self-poisoning, the unregenerate stasis of heredity, and so on. The outward stagnation is mirrored in his own physical inertia. The only fertile area is his protean imagination. This however will not be enough to save him. Towards, the end of the novel, the idea of flux, the river as Heraclitean metaphor for constant change and transformation, which critic John Grammar suggests is the redemptive element in Suttree is barely pronounced.¹²² When someone near the end of the novel says "Shit ... Old Suttree aint dead" (470), there is a sense that the protagonist's survival rests on – similar to Stephen Daedulus in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* – the burning of all his boats

¹²¹ Polk, Neil. "A Faulknerian Looks at Suttree." Wallach, Rick, ed. *You Would Not Believe What Watches: Suttree and Cormac McCarthy's Knoxville. Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy, Volume 1*. 62-78.

¹²² Grammer, John. "A Thing Against Which Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South." Hall, Wade and Wallach, Rick, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. 5.

behind him: family, friends, even Knoxville itself. This is clearly evinced when towards the end of the novel, and after returning from his second stint in prison, he finds someone squatting in his boat (465). The fact that he has been evicted from his own home gives Suttree enough reason to leave the city behind forever.

Death is one of the main themes of the novel, but resurrection also. Suttree, in order to feel less “dissociate” must extricate himself from the Saxon clans of his forebears, but also any bonds that cleave him to the indigent waterside community. The figure of the huntsman that recurs throughout this novel is both a symbol of Death and a goad to life: Suttree has to outrun this figure and the only way to do this is to renounce the familial ties that are killing him:

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities”. The huntsman’s purlius is neither the city nor the country: “His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not.”¹²³

Although this reveals the coldness, the death-principle haunting all pastorals, the novel, in its evocation of place and character, is one of the most vivid and colorful descriptions of early post-war urban living in American literature. Several critics have already noted the homology between the name of the city, Knoxville, and the mythological river Nix, the river of Oblivion that leads to the underworld in Greek Legend. But the particular river in this novel is above ground and leads always to life: its underworld tributaries spewing up the filth of life in such a way, however, that we can’t forget the accompanying lamentation for a lost, always impossible, pastoral.

For in many ways Suttree is a powerful echo of the aforementioned Joyce and Eliot archetypes. He too wanders a city devastated by death and pollution, defiled yet slightly above its cloacal miasma. He, too, is a symbol of disaffected modern man, removed and exiled from the garden. The outpourings of his mind: a vessel for a narrative vision that though able to see everything is unable to make any connections other than through an

¹²³ McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. 471.

impotent lyricism on the passing of all that was once known. It is this lyricism that endows *Suttree* with the quality of an urban pastoral.

As mentioned earlier, Suttree's interest in the cultural productions of civilization is negligible, yet he is by no means ignorant. Instead, he seems to symbolize an Aeolian concordance where the world stirs within him in a way that seems to point to a non-hierarchical, eco-pastoral knowledge of all things:

Suttree leaned his head against the hot boards and watched the river go past. The shadow of the bridge had begun to lie long oblique and sprawling upstream and pigeons ascending into the concrete understructure evoked upon the water before him shapes of skates rising batwinged from the river floor to feed in the creeping dusk. He closed his eyes and opened them again. Plovers along the shore jerking like wired birds in a shooting gallery. Down there a pipe piping gouts of soap curd and blue sewage. Dusk deepened. Swifts vanished back and forth over the pewter face of the river. On thin falcon wings nighthawks dipped and wheeled and a bat fluttered past, circled, returned.¹²⁴

Here we see the aforementioned antimonies of nature and humanity reaching a strange congruence. Suttree, the messiah of the Knoxville netherworld, is able to marry the pastoral and the anti-pastoral and make them if not compatible then at least contiguous. The tragedy in this novel, however, is that such concordance contains an irrevocable sense of environmental doom: the immiscible pastoral fatally mixed up with the anti-pastoral of an industrialized natural world. The above passage brings together the elements necessary for the Romantic pastoral: the sensitive solitary absorbed, listening to a riverine nocturne: "he closed his eyes and opened them again". This is mixed with a gothic description of the crepuscular "batwinged," the chiaroscuro of dusk-darkened birds wheeling around at day's end. This beautiful passage, however, enters the realm of parody when we see a deliberate echo of Blake's 'The Echoing Green' in: "Down there a pipe piping gouts of soap curd and blue sewage."

¹²⁴ Ibid. 88-89.

Suttree is a novel whose Romanticism is compromised by a tragic evocation of a society blighted by environmental despoliation along with the subordination of the individual to the law of exchange. However, in its refusal to celebrate civilization over nature, it not only foreshadows the ecopastoral concerns of his next novel, *Blood Meridian*, but also the *Border Trilogy's* diminution of the human subject in the face of changes taking place in the late-capitalist world; a world, moreover, that shows little concern for the kind of heroic individualism personified by Cornelius Suttree. To these ends, it is worth speculating that Suttree, after leaving Knoxville heads west at the end of the novel (470-71). But if that is to be his chosen path, there will be no redemption, no return to an ideal condition, only further disillusion. For, as we shall see, the enchantments of the American west are summarily renounced in the blood bath that is *Blood Meridian*: a novel where pastoral is fatally embroiled in the “from sea to shining sea” imperial imperatives of Manifest Destiny. For all such follies, McCarthy seems to suggest, will meet their end in the austere landscapes of the desert wildernesses of the south-west.

Part Two:

Blood Meridian: The Counter-Pastoral Moves West.

Chapter Four

A Culpable Innocence: Optical Democracy's Sublime Assassination of the *Bildungsroman*.

Pastoral is often associated with innocence: that state of being where the individual loses the burden of historical consciousness so as to become a truer version of herself: a child of nature perhaps. Such a notion suggests a return to some ideal state of natural being. From reading the Appalachian series, especially *Child of God*, we should know that this is a dangerous pipedream. In McCarthy's fifth novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) the point is made plainer through a rejection of all the utopian epistemologies that envision a return to an ideal condition of being. This, according to critic Steven Shaviro, is a "uterine fantasy," one that McCarthy implicitly rejects: "for there can be no alienation when there is no ordinary state to be alienated from."¹

It seems oddly appropriate, then, that McCarthy follows his Southern novels of unhappy consciousness's wandering over poorly husbanded terrain with *Blood Meridian*, the first of his novels to be situated in the south-western states bordering Mexico. It is here where, once again, landscape is used to stress the disjoint between humanity and nature; and it is here also where his critique of the pastoral element in the American romance-epic is broadened to smash the illusion of finding a fence-free utopia in the largely unfarmed west. This thoroughgoing rejection of all cultural-philosophical discourses that carry within them the idealism of teleological syntheses is what we shall consider now.

The rejection of finding a home consonant with a child-like dream of heaven on earth is reinforced by the novel's use of desert landscape as a symbol of the primal over the cultural. For in this novel human civilization is leveled with all things animate and inanimate; the prized consciousness a wilderness also. The following - metaphysical

¹ Shaviro, Steven. "A Reading of *Blood Meridian*." Arnold, Edwin T., and Dianne C. Luce, eds. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. 147.

allusions notwithstanding -suggests that an untranscendable gravitational condition is the only reality: “the survivors ... slept with their alien hearts beaten in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon *the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night.*” (*Blood Meridian*: 46) Consciousness here is unmoored from corporeality (“alien hearts”); knowledge of this is all the purgatory we need.

In figurative terms, the westward recourse can be regarded as a search for a pastoral no longer perceivable in the settled communities of the north-eastern seaboard regions or in the slave-blighted lands of the south. This geographically expanded search for freedom, however, must be seen again as a narrative feint: because, as we shall see, the transition proves to be just as nightmarish as the Appalachia described in the previous novels. In short, *Blood Meridian* very soon becomes a rejoinder to the following idealism:

The frontiersman who scrawled out the good news from the banks of the White River probably had no conception of the wide reach of land between his few acres and the Pacific shore. He dreamed no dream of empire. His eye was on the good land he had found, where a “poar man (sic)” could prosper.²

The fact that “empire” was just what the government, railway and cattlemen pioneers of the nineteenth century dreamed of does not lessen the pastoral poignancy of this poor frontiersman vision - it adds greatly to it. Nevertheless, it is vision that McCarthy completely rejects. McCarthy takes us on this journey – one so nihilistic that it eschews even an enchantment-disenchantment trajectory - to perhaps put an end to the possibility of finding any such place anywhere. The metaphor of pastoral attenuation is hammered home to the point where his protagonists – literally, as we shall also see in the *Border Trilogy* –run out of country.

Critically, however, the rejection of either a Kantian moral universe or, even, a Hegelian *Aufheben* (in Vereen Bell’s damning verdict of McCarthy’s nihilism: “no first

² Brown, Dee. *The American West*. 27.

principles, no foundational truth, Heraclitus without Logos.”³) is bolstered by the novel’s historiographic element which argues that the foundational myths of the West are built on nothing but blood. To these ends, the novel is loosely based on the memoirs of Samuel E. Chamberlain who as a young man rode with the Glanton Gang, a group of mercenaries who terrorized the native Indian population living near the Colorado River in the late 1840s and early 1850s.⁴ McCarthy conflates this real history, including a depiction of the Glanton Gang’s factual massacre by Yuma Indians in 1850, with a fictionalized representation of the filibustering expeditions into Mexico that were a feature of this time. Both the historical and fictional coalesce to present a version of the West as the site of unremitting slaughter.

In this novel we are introduced to the largely fictional characters of *the kid* and *the judge*: both will take part in the novel’s endless slaughters, some of which are based on real events, while others are made up. As shall be discussed later on, the conflation of the historical and fictional is a metafictional device used by McCarthy to question the ordering principles of such novelistic styles as the romance-epic and the *bildungsroman*; for in this novel, the largely human-centered strategies of each come under sober review; are, in fact, countervailed by a stylistic, but unremittingly unmediated recourse to the Sublime. It is to this that we shall first turn; for the predominance given to the Sublime, with its stress on wilderness topography unpropitious for human settlement, must ultimately be seen as a rejection of the national allegory of pastoral.

*

At the beginning of *Blood Meridian*, we are introduced to *the kid*, a literary type who is sometimes violent participant, sometimes victim of violence, but more often a silent and seemingly morally neutral observer on the atrocities that accrue throughout the novel. He is the eyes and ears of the novel; crucially, however, he is shown to perceive and

³ Bell, Vereen M. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. 9.

⁴ Chamberlain, Samuel. E. *My Confessions: Recollections of a Rogue*. For a full discussion on the latter, see Sepich, John Emil. *Notes on Blood Meridian*.

understand very little. Such a lack of perception immediately invalidates him as a moral guide. We are apprised very early on that what we are reading is an anti-*Bildungsroman* masquerading as *bildungsroman*, a parody of a genre that typically allows the main protagonist to move from innocence to experience along a personal trajectory that will ultimately lead to a sense of personal moral enlightenment. But in *Blood Meridian*, the kid, more amoral cipher than egregious sinner, is thoroughly unsuited for such a quest: although incredible things happen to him, there is always the sense that he lacks the consciousness to learn from anything.

The opening of the novel parodies the androcentric *bildungsroman*: in the following passage, there is a sly referencing of *ecce homo* ("behold the man") along with an inversion of Wordsworth's romantic-pastoral poem *Intimations of Immortality*:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged lined shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost.⁵

Here we have reasons enough for the kid's subsequent elopement. As in the Appalachian series, Thomas Jefferson's dream of an American yeomanry is once again ridden roughshod over. The sacred garden is desecrated to the extent that a contaminated heredity is the only thing growing. To orphan yourself seems to be the only response to such heredity. In addition, the theme of familial catastrophe traverses all these novels of the south-west: each treatment buttressed by skepticism of knowledge as gateway to moral enlightenment. *The kid's* father, once a schoolmaster but now a "hewer of wood" is depicted as a drunkard, his fall from grace punishment, it would seem, for the Promethean crime of bringing knowledge into the world. Teaching is a redundant profession in *Blood-Meridian's* anti-Gnostic world. It is pointless because all that *the kid's* father can do is quote long-forgotten poets; an early sign, perhaps, that the novel's schema will make no concessions to

⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 3.

the idea of knowledge as restorative or consolatory. *The kid's* nemesis in *Blood Meridian*, *judge Holden*, can be seen as the complete opposite of this heuristic trope. For *the judge*: “Books lie;” the word of God (logos) will never be found in script but “in stones, and trees, the bones of things”; self-knowledge for *the judge* is merely a means to power whose end-point is an ontological understanding of man’s war-like nature.⁶ Furthermore, the father’s learning is rendered futile in a world ignorant of its enlightening function; *the kid* will also be subject to this axiom as knowledge of the world is now only acquired through brute understanding of violence.

The Blakean idea of innocence is rejected here; the child, much like the insect that knows how to sting inside the egg, is born into experience. The world inside and the world outside, with its echoes of William Blake’s “Tyger” poem and its diabolical “forests of the night” offers no respite, only violence and terror from within and without. The *bildungsroman* parody is further evinced by the naturalistic description of *the kid's* escape from this world at the age of fourteen:

He will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark. The firewood, the washpots. He wanders west as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon that flat and pastoral landscape. Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden.⁷

The negation of pastoral to a “shadowed agony in the garden” is a strikingly political reference to the ante-bellum South and its slave society. *The kid* is moving through an American Republic that is a pale semblance of its edenic, pastoral aspirations; a republic that, ten years from the setting of this novel, would be rent asunder through civil war.

Another one of the novel’s sundry literary renunciations that is summarily dispatched to the category of “unworkable” is the Romantic theme of rebirth through a galvanic interaction with nature. This type of pastorally-tempered Sublime is best evinced

⁶ Ibid. 116.

⁷ Ibid. 3-4.

by William Wordsworth who, in his poem *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, attempts to reconcile the various forms of beauty, *the sublime*, *the beautiful*, and *the picturesque*, within a matrix that signifies their healing effect on an alienated consciousness. American transcendentalists, such as Thoreau and Emerson, tried to create an American template of this idea. Both writers emphasized the idea of the transcendent soul rising from a numbing corporeality in order to see “into the life of things.” (Emerson) In *Blood Meridian*, however, such an idea of subject/logos/world identification is rejected outright through its conferment of a primary place for sublimity’s separation from the tempering forces of the *beautiful* and *picturesque*.

The use of the Sublime in McCarthy nullifies both the picturesque and the beautiful. In terms of *logos*, it simultaneously renders the prose both coldly beautiful and resolutely opaque: language itself becomes as hard and as intractable as the environment it describes. The novel is full of such descriptions, so the following image of humans moving in a desert landscape is one of many examples of the leveling schema where all things are whittled down to the primal:

Dustdevils stood on the horizon like the smoke of distant fires but of living thing there was none. They eyed the sun in its circus and at dusk they rode out upon the cooling plain where the western sky was the color of blood at a well they dismounted and drank jaw to jaw with their horses and remounted and rode on. The little desert wolves yapped in the dark and Glanton’s dog trotted beneath the horse’s belly, its footfalls stitched precisely among the hooves.⁸

The author’s hand, if we understand this in terms of the Romantic idea of the author as a vessel for the divine, is nowhere to be seen: no room, even, for either the *oversoul* or the *transparent eyeball*. By expelling the beautiful and picturesque from the trinity, the historical moment is shorn of a content that in less severe novels would be able to confer temporal and spatial meaning upon the text. It is the notable achievement of *Blood Meridian*, then, that the historically meaningful content is countered by sublimity, the topos

⁸ Ibid. 152.

that is always incommensurate with the understanding. Harold Bloom, in his fulsome tribute to this novel, picked up on this foregrounding of sublimity, when he described the novel as “the authentic American apocalypse novel.”⁹

Georg Guillemin notes that the beginning of the novel follows *the kid* wandering through a desecrated, and seemingly defunct “agrarian pastoral.”¹⁰ In order for the *bildungsroman* to be rejected, it is necessary for the *Bildungs-kid* to be transformed into guileless and witless picaro, a compass-less nomad whose wanderings through the barren landscape are reflected by his equally desiccated consciousness. In dialectical terms, there is no series of sublations for *the kid* to pass through (i.e., ejection from the garden to the alienating wilderness followed by, after many trials and tribulations, the synthetic moment of a fertile return to origin).

To understand why McCarthy eschews one of the most cherished paradigms in modern literature, the purposive, self-determining consciousness, it would be useful to look at Georg Guillemin’s helpful comments on the curious phrase “optical democracy,” quoted in my introduction, to describe a landscape where all phenomena exist on an equal, non-hierarchical plane:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence.¹¹

The term “democracy” is usually applied to the political sphere and is often invoked, in the American version anyway, to connote a desired contractual consensus whereby all existing social divisions between individuals are legally papered over. But McCarthy appropriates this term in an absurdist sense, thus questioning the politically positivist application of the term “democracy.” Instead of positive law, we have a sublimely

⁹ Bloom, Harold. “Foreword.” *Introduction to Cormac McCarthy: Modern Critical Views*. 1.

¹⁰ Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. 74.

¹¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 247.

undiscriminating naturalistic world in which the human personality is absorbed into landscape. In short, McCarthy describes a plenitude of undifferentiated being-in-itself, ergo, “optical democracy.” Guillemin believes that “optical democracy” pretty much defines McCarthy’s radically “pastoral aesthetic” a rigorous relegation of man from his anthropocentric podium to a relation of equality with nature.¹² There is no preferment in this landscape for subject over object, for individuals over things: it is, in short, the Romantic dream of plenitude turned into etiolated nightmare; plenitude shorn of the active consciousness. Perhaps this is why the un-self-conscious *kid* is perfectly suited for assimilation into this kind of world.

What is important, according to Guillemin, is how the novel makes no distinction between humans and landscape. This gives the novel a paradoxically “egalitarian aesthetic,” one that can, in turn, “elevate nature” - as in *Child of God* - to an existential rank equal to that of human beings. The intention is to identify a wild element, a concomitant wilderness ethos too, on all levels of existence.”¹³ This is true: the characters’ lack of empathy either towards each other or to the landscape that they pass through instills within them an organic wilderness ethos. But if we are to regard them as mere literary types, what is it exactly that they represent?

McCarthy’s *kid* wanders through the novel’s landscape palpably untouched by what he sees. In a curious way, this also neuters the reader’s interest in him. The effect of this is to abandon him for the much more interesting attractive/repulsive qualities inherent in the omniscient, polyglot, fiddle-playing *judge Holden*. *The judge*, like the devil, has the best tunes. As a counterpoint to the monosyllabic *kid*, *the judge* is all eloquence: a worldly and sublime intelligence. As the demiurge in the novel, he is able to go beneath the thick skin of *the kid* and appraise his personality for us. *The kid* is fundamentally a marker for the reader to follow, a way of leading us out of the narrative maze. Because he acts as witness, and because he appears partially to carry within him a residual moral code, the reader, at first,

¹² Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. 79.

¹³ Ibid. 79.

is also able to claim a stake in the story. But, because *the kid* can at best only offer single-syllable denunciations of the bloodshed, the weight of epistemological explanation falls, ironically, on *the judge*. The novel ends with both protagonists encountering each other after a gap of twenty four years. They reminisce about the slaughter of Indians at Yuma (155-158) as well as other sorties that they were involved in. As *the kid* has shown at certain times a slight tendency to show mercy, it would, in the normal *Bildungsroman* way of things, force us to side with him over *the judge*. But, in a crucial exchange, *the judge* exposes the fallacy of the heroic witness who does not act. Moreover, *the kid's* lack of agency is turned around by *the judge* as an accusation of tacit acquiescence in the atrocities:

A man seeks his own destiny and no other, said the judge. Will or nil. Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that self-same reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well.¹⁴

It is thus interesting that McCarthy's lets his protagonist meet his nemesis, *the judge*, again after a gap of 24 years. Again this might have something to do with McCarthy's dissection of the *bildungsroman*; for the genre's principal aim is to emphasize the moral formation of mind through experience. Yet after only giving a summary adumbration of the intervening years, there is a sense that McCarthy wants to stress that *the kid* is still the same stolidly unreflective being. Perhaps this explains why his faux-innocence is ridiculed by the judge throughout the novel: "Was it always your idea, he said, that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?"¹⁵

¹⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 330.

¹⁵ Ibid. 328.

The judge obviously sees that the *kid* is full of impostures. To understand the import of this, it is worth looking at the following observation made by the French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson on Moliere's Tartuffe:

He immersed himself so well in the role of a hypocrite that he played it, as it were, sincerely ... Without this purely material sincerity, without the attitude and speech which, through the long practice of hypocrisy, became for him a natural way to act, Tartuffe would be simply repulsive.¹⁶

There is something in *the kid's* demeanor that also makes him "materially insincere". The *judge*, on the other hand, as the embodiment of pure evil, does not deviate from such a position throughout the novel. In this way, *the judge's* amorality can be regarded as sincere, whereas *the kid's* morality, mediated by a passive hardly-acted-upon good conscience, is repulsively insincere because he does not act on his good conscience. So, rather like the do-nothing liberal conscience appalled by totalitarianism, McCarthy suggests that evil incubates most powerfully in the sphere of inaction.

It is important to note this because *Blood Meridian* has in its antinomian sights the atavistic violence that incubates war, all wars, and by this seems to suggest that a propensity to war lies latent in the humanist/enlightenment itself. *The kid* is a classic humanist *trompe l'oeil*: he appears to offer some kind of moral focus or hope, but ultimately, because he does not act, needs to be regarded as being just as culpable as *the judge*. By doing this, McCarthy smashes the *inside/outside* dualism that is so much part of the Enlightenment taxonomy. In terms of the pastoral, then, the garden is rendered as evil as the demonized city. In this way, it can be seen as both the locus of the fall as well as symbolic of a desperate desire for transcendence. However, the idea of a self-generating culture secluded from history is revealed as corrupt at origin. This is why *the judge* is able to say with such conviction that his obsessive inventorying of all that he sees into notebooks is because "All other trades are contained within that of war." (249). And this is

¹⁶ Bergson is quoted in Slavoj Zizek's: *The Plague of Fantasies*. 5.

why the wilderness-motif used by McCarthy and the novels that follow is as much to do with the wilderness in human culture as it is with the landscape.¹⁷

In this sense, the “shadowed agony in the garden” is emblematic of all the antinomies that build up and finally break apart the idealisms of an American mythos which endeavors to plaster over historical, economic or cultural divisions. McCarthy is rejecting the Romantic pastoral tradition which, borrowing as it does from European forbears such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, infuses the writings of the American Romantics, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman. Following Kant’s delineation of the Sublime in his *Critique of Judgment*, all these writers argue that it (sublimity), though often incarnated with horror, can be arrested by a mind pliable enough to resist the omnipotence of nature. According to Kant, the power of nature, its terror-inducing quality, is sublated by the understanding: the concomitant belief that humans are “independent of nature,” and that mind has preeminence over matter.¹⁸ These combinatory factors allow us to subdue any feelings of terror *vis a vis* the external world. In the course of its story, *Blood Meridian* vehemently rejects such idealisms.

It is worth pointing out here that McCarthy’s use of the Sublime in this novel is more conversant with Edmund Burke than Kantian ontology. Burke describes the effects of the Sublime on the individual as being closer to “astonishment” and “terror” than “understanding;” this suggests that the dualism between humans and nature, where the former takes the higher ground, is untranscendable.¹⁹ The implication for pastoral, then, is plain: for McCarthy, it is better to understand difference biocentrically rather than anthropologically.

¹⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 249.

¹⁸ From Immanuel Kant’s: *Critique of Judgement*. Cited in *The Longman Anthology: British Literature. Volume B*. 317-319.

¹⁹ From Edmund Burke’s: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ibid. 303-304.

By implication, such a renunciation of a human/nature covenant does devastating damage to the American set of exceptionalist principles which stress the importance of inherited values, of ancestral covenants binding each successive generation to the ideals of the founding fathers. This is the real orphan in *Blood Meridian*. The various characters personify a rejection, and veritable distancing from, the moral legacy of heredity. Instead they are instruments of a deterministic *Weltanschauung* averring to the principle that all fathers have to be murdered. There is a telling allegory, told by *the judge*, in which a father's confession of his crimes cannot stop the son from making the same mistakes:

All his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to which he can never attain. 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. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way.²⁰

So, in a sense, *the kid* is our guide for a journey that goes beyond the frozen god of American history, to a place where violence is as foundational as Plymouth Rock. Fittingly, and somewhat presciently (since the kid's last encounter with *the judge* also occurs by a latrine), when *the kid* arrives in Texas, his first violent encounter happens outside a latrine. The fight between *the kid* and the character Toadvine is indicative of McCarthy's wish to dive into the sewer of history. It takes place in the town of Nagadoches, "which, significantly, "is located on the ninety-eighth meridian, identified by Frederick Jackson Turner as the boundary line that separates the frontier and wilderness."²¹ It is also the town where he meets *the judge* for the first time: two markers, then, one historical and the other fictional, that signify the sanctioning of violence for political ends. In this way the frontier symbolizes a crossing over into lawlessness so that the law of the US government

²⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 145

²¹ Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. 69.

can be enforced. The fight begins when *the kid* refuses to get off the narrow plank leading to the Jakes (the latrine) in order to let *toadvine* pass:

He swung with the bottle and the kid ducked and he swung again and the kid stepped back. When the kid hit him the man shattered the bottle against the side of his head. He went off the boards into the mud and the man lunged after him with the jagged bottleneck and tried to stick it in his eye. The kid was fending with his hands and they were slick with blood. He kept trying to reach into his boot for his knife.²²

This random act of violence acts as a foretaste for the bloodbath about to come. What is notable about it is the *kid's* stolid animal acceptance of it as social fact: in this kind of world, it's either kill or be killed. Before joining Captain White's army, *the kid* has a number of further violent altercations, yet his reaction to them carries always an undertone of seeming indifference. When he is finally picked up and recruited into Captain White's army, there is little sense that he regards this as fortuitous or, even, potentially dangerous. Each change in circumstance is met with a stolid indifference bordering on imbecility. In the following passage, we find him recovering from a terrible hangover, a by-product of another night of gratuitous violence. A man, who turns out to be a recruiter for the aforementioned Captain White, finds him resting naked in the bushes after bathing in the river. The recruiter is a little taken aback at *the kid's* pitiful condition, but, in the final sentence of the following, offers him a Darwinian wager:

Kindly fell on hard times aint ye son? He said. I just aint fell on no good ones. You ready to go to Mexico? I aint lost nothing down. It's a chance for ye to raise yourself in the world. You best make a move someway or another fore ye go plumb in under.²³

The recruiter is a familiar literary type: an intervening angel/demon, used to help propel the hero into fortune or despair. What is different about *the kid*, however, is that his

²² Ibid. 9.

²³ Ibid. 29.

lack of agency is less to do with unwitting innocence and more to do with moral diffidence: nothing, in short, surprises, shocks, or moves him. This makes him the ideal absurdist protagonist for a novel which refuses both the compensation of moral redemption as well as nihilistic despair. *The kid* watches only for what is coming around the corner. When the recruiter describes his own journey from wretchedness to salvation by *Captain White* he is hoping that *the kid* too will be inspired to join the army. But, in response to the recruiter's proselytizing, *the kid* merely remarks: 'Don't reckon it will hurt nothing.'²⁴

It is this apparent stolidness that makes *the kid* the perfect witness to the infamous description of the Comanche raid on a group of unsuspecting mercenaries. Here "optical democracy" is behind each fatal moment of misrecognition: for what comes towards *the kid* and his fellow mercenaries has no known precedent or frame of reference:

Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons and hands and the rising sons and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on canvas."²⁵

The reference to a palimpsest here is a clear reference to the fact that, in spite of the outlandish image of the Comanche, there is something familiar about the scene also: it has already happened many times over in history. The passage continues with a full-blown description of the advancing army coming into view:

... and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones, and some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of these ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid. 30.

²⁵ Ibid. 52.

²⁶ Ibid. 52.

In this “optical democracy,” the unsuspecting Americans have no notion of what is coming towards them. Farther down the page, we regard

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained wedding veil ... (.)²⁷

The above description of the Comanche raid is absurdist to the letter. The “fabled horde,” “the legion of horribles,” the disorienting historical and racial attributions (“attic,” “biblical,” “monguls,” “Saxons”), the stream of paratactic sentences – all of these serve to frustrate a transparent historical interpretation. For like the desert it speaks of the primal rather than the cultural. Crucially, however, the violence is altogether human. That is why the army about to massacre the mercenaries is an amalgam of all the armies in history; a notion that dovetails with the Sisyphean (the endless repetitions) preoccupations of Camus, Beckett, et al. There is, in sum, something fantastically familiar about the horror: it resonates with images of the Somme, of the Holocaust, Mai Lai, and all the other massacres of modern history. However, to understand this novel in full, we need to understand that there is also another kind of war that McCarthy seems to be engaged in: the author’s sustained assault on the various epistemes that support the American mythos. It is this that we shall discuss now.

A Number of Rejections: Calvinism, American Exceptionalism and Historical Revisionism

Blood Meridian is more than just an anti-*Bildungsroman*; it is one almighty quarrel with the various historiographies and epistemes, whether rendered in fictional or in non-fictional form, that perpetuate America’s mythic conception of itself. So what we see in *Blood Meridian* is, to borrow the critic John Cant’s term, a “mythoclastic” rejection of

²⁷ Ibid. 52.

cherished American ideals.²⁸ Interestingly, it also rejects some of the more austere epistemologies embedded in the American version of the pastoral, in particular, the evil-routing theology of Calvinism.

Calvinism is a strain of Puritanism that views the environment as analogous to the good and evil residing in human hearts. For Calvinists, it is not just men who have fallen: the world itself is suffused with a postlapsarian *Weltschmerz* as it, too, has been ejected from the world of ideal forms. For the original puritan settler, the American wilderness is a locus that needs to be purged of the evil that afflicts it: to carry out God's work the wilderness must be encroached upon in order to exorcise the evil that contaminates it.

What is curious about this process is that the cleaning-up entails a double, or dialectical, catharsis. The Calvinist, by bringing God with him into the wilderness, is hoping to purge the evil in his own head and heart by routing the godless heathens. The wilderness therefore corresponds with the evil incarnate within the Calvinist, a soul perennially beset by sin, perennially trying to rid itself of such a burden. As Richard Slotkin, in *Regeneration Through Violence*, explains:

The Wilderness was seen as a Calvinist universe in microcosm and also as an analogy of the human mind. Both were dark, with hidden possibilities for good and evil. Through the darkness the Indians flitted like the secret Enemy of Christ or like the evil thoughts that struck where the defences of good were weakest and, having done their deed, retreated to hiding. Often they carried off good men and pure virgins into hellish captivity and sexual temptation, as an evil thought will carry a good man forever out of the light.²⁹

The corollary of this is clear: the Manichean struggle between good and evil, the potential for good to ultimately triumph over its opposite, resides in the breast of the Calvinist settler only. The Indians, on the other hand, are represented as pure evil; for it is

²⁸ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 8.

²⁹ Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence*. 77.

they who connote the site of battle, and it is they who are *of* and *for* the wilderness. Moreover, it is their expulsion which guarantees the wilderness as a garden fit for God.

A descent into savagery lies at the heart of Calvinist paranoia. The representation of the Indian as analogous to wilderness along with the further convolution whereby such an archetype is seen as a correlative to the potential evil within the white settler's breast is symptomatic of the way Native Americans and white American settlers were depicted in movies and literature up until the 1950s and 1960s. The wilderness is the site of epic conflict, with the white settler cast as hero with grail-like qualities, attempting to subdue the demon/Indian rising within and without.

This kind of cultural topos allowed for the occasional discrepancy; for example, the massacres enacted on largely outnumbered or outgunned Indian villages, was depicted as a kind of aberration brought about by the Calvinist losing the battle against the savagery, the evil, incarnate in his soul. The Indian therefore is re-introjected into the Calvinist mind-set as the evil that is always latent, ready to spring up if the defenses are down. Moreover, the Puritan's recourse to extreme violence could be explained away as a degeneration that was excusable in the sense that one evil, the Puritan's, did away with the greater one, the Indian's. To stress this point, Slotkin quotes the Indian Wars narrator, Puritan writer John Underhill's, weak justification for the massacre of an Indian village:

Many were burnt in the fort, both men, women, and children. Others forced out ... which our soldiers received and entertained with the sword. Down fell men, women and children ... great and doleful was the bloody sight to the view of young soldiers that had never been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground, so thick in some places, that you could hardly pass along ... Sometimes the scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents, but we will not dispute it now. We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.³⁰

As Slotkin goes on to argue: underpinning "the Calvinist-Puritan vision of the New World was the perception that the most terrible power on the continent was not in the

³⁰ Ibid. 76.

physical wilderness, but, rather, was locked in their own heads and hearts.”³¹

Psychologically convincing as this insight is, it occludes other more material factors. By simultaneously incorporating the wilderness/savage into the Puritan heart and then expelling this as the irrational, evil other that must be routed, the Puritan was able to look upon the wilderness as a kind of *terra nullius* upon which the spiritually reborn settler could find a home in. This is exactly what Slotkin means by “Regeneration by Violence.” Total War followed by human settlement is the material aim behind the Calvinist theology. It is here, too, where we see the imperial origin of the exceptionalist American Adam myth: the creation of Canaan can only occur once the interloping Indian has been vanquished.

What we have here, then, is the coldest of pastorals: a Calvinist vision which argues that the wilderness has to be psychically and physically purged for it to become a garden. The flowering of the wilderness is a form of ethnic-cleansing sanctioned by an austere Calvinist God who watches at all times for the reappearance of evil. This helps explain the paranoia that lies so much behind the one-dimensional early histories, and, indeed, the novels of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe.

Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* rejects this American historical configuration: because in the novel’s foregrounding of evil there is a rejection of the idea of grace through purgation. Evil can never be diluted into Good. Crucially, however, the author also rejects another myth that is just as persuasive: the notion of the *Good*, historically oppressed, largely innocent Native American.

One of the consequences of American society’s growing disenchantment with its country’s involvement in the Vietnam War was the proliferation, mostly in literature and film, of a re-investigation into America’s own history. Such a re-examination can be seen as a form of protest at America’s taking of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny onto the world stage. Movies such as *Soldier Blue* and *Little Big Man*, non-fiction books such as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (all produced and published in 1970), began to redress and re-

³¹ Ibid. 77.

assess the Euro-American bias of the country's historical accounts. These new assessments graphically described the wanton destruction of Indian tribes and communities, while simultaneously lamenting the decimation of a people whose cultural sophistication, customs and moral laws were in many ways equal and often superior to white American culture. The ideology behind these new cultural productions was to encourage the insightful reader or viewer to draw parallels between what was going on in Vietnam and the historical plight of Native Americans. Such historical revisionism had at its heart an enlightenment sensibility which on the one hand positively re-corrected the distortions of the mainstream history but, on the other, negatively renovated the *Rousseauian* image of the Noble Savage. Instead of the Calvinist equation of savagery and wilderness, we now had the configuration of the noble Indian as persecuted victim of the predations of colonial white America.

Blood Meridian, however, should be looked upon as a repudiation of both the exceptionalist repletions found in American mainstream history as well as the liberal revisions of the 1970s and 1980s. If it has a moral compass, it is in the apocalyptic idea that war consumes all, is self-generating, and those who get caught up in it soon share a common blood-lust. One thing that it shares with Calvinism is a belief in the presence of evil. Unlike Calvinism, however, such evil is cross-cultural, cross-ethnological, and, in a sense, trans-historical. A being-for-war, the book argues, is in the hearts and heads of cowboy and Indian alike.

For all these reasons, *Blood Meridian* can be regarded as a literary renunciation that is unique in the Western genre. It is a renunciation of all the philosophical schools that places *man* outside of nature, of all the mythologies that attend such schools of thought, whether these are classical theological ideas which place *man* dead center of the universe, or the enlightenment variants which presuppose an ontological dualism between *man* and nature; a dualism that, in turn, helps subordinate nature as ancillary to humanity's needs. It is also a renunciation of teleological or quasi-teleological ideas that argue that, in spite of the sorrowful litany of history, humans are inexorably moving towards a kingdom of God on earth. Lastly, it is a renunciation of textual endorsements that invest its representations

with an ontologized moral vision. It is, in sum, a quarrel, a gigantic one at that, with all hitherto myth-laden idealisms of the human being.

The novel is therefore a disturbing but often accurate entrance into McCarthy's representation of the west, one that acts as an interesting counterpoint to the superficially more emollient novels that follow. Moreover, it is the most severely pessimistic of McCarthy's work – and that is saying something! For in its pages we will find the integrated allegory of American destiny displaced by an allegory of fragmentation without restoration: an allegory that historicizes America's disastrous attempt at national mythologization. Instead of the boundless western pastorals of Arcadian restoration at journey's end, we have exhaustion and entropy; instead of Whitmanesque amplitude, we have the narrowing down of perspective and horizon.

For all the reasons stated, it is better to read the novel as a transhistorical novel of American decline, one which - as Edwin T. Arnold's notes - "defines us as a time and a people."³² Arnold's idea of the novel as resonating over time might have been prompted by the judge's lapidary elegy on mankind; a judgment which, according to Steven Shaviro, blurs the difference between "zenith and horizon." (147). Such a point of view is amply summed up by *the judge*:

In the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day.³³

In conclusion, the critical reaction to *Blood Meridian* though universal in its praise, focuses mainly on claims for its singularity, not just in the American Canon, but also in terms of the McCarthy *oeuvre*. While not altogether disputing these claims, I would venture that there are shared commonalities with the whole body of work: principally, the strongly ecopastoral and anti-humanist themes that are already in the Appalachian novels are

³² Arnold, Edwin. T. "Foreword." Sepich, John. *Notes on Blood Meridian*. XVI.

³³ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. 146-147.

repeated in *Blood Meridian*. They are also present in the novels that follow. However, one other major theme begins to develop here and is carried over to all the other works thereafter. We are beginning to see a more sustained critique on the substitution of traditional forms of social exchange for relations that are becoming increasingly dominated by money. It should be remembered that the section in the novel that deals with Captain White's army's ill-fated expedition into Mexico is predicated also on the promise of money and land: "Fine grassland ... A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver." (34). The reduction of all human behavior to the ceremony of monetary exchange, therefore, becomes a major theme in these Western novels. It is this strongly materialist vision that allows us to view the Arcadian inflections in the *Border Trilogy*, along with their valorization of heroic individualism, with an unwaveringly skeptical eye.

Part Three:

Historicizing the Inexplicable in the Border Trilogy.

Introduction to the *Border Trilogy*

Unlike McCarthy's most historically-resonating novel, *Blood Meridian*, the subsequent novels of the south-west, often referred to as *The Border Trilogy*, use the narrative feint of the cowboy romance-epic to submerge direct historical reference. This notwithstanding, it needs to be emphasized that the time-period covered in these novels is largely our own – spanning approximately the late nineteen thirties right up till the millennium. That is why it is important to consider them as novels which in their own fashion are responses to the dizzying changes in the social and property relations of late capitalist America: for example, the move that America made from a society of manufacturing to one of consumption. These changes are reflected in the main by the characters' general sense of alienation from an increasingly commodity-obsessed culture which seemed to no longer value the old working practices and traditional forms of living. Unlike the romance-heroes of traditional Americana, however, the protagonists have nothing redemptive to offer their beleaguered communities: their only tactic is to leave them and cross the American-Mexican border in search of an unattainable cowboy pastoral. Indeed it is fair to say that the late novels of McCarthy, from the *Border Trilogy* through to *No Country for Old Men* and his most recent, *The Road*, are responses both to the extreme cultural and socio-economic shifts in post-war America as well as a rejection of the American Romance-epic. The myths, it seems, are no longer sustainable in a crumbling republic. McCarthy late novels, therefore, need to be seen as deeply political allegories on the permanent state of emergency that is post-war America.

The very obvious fact that McCarthy, as Sara L. Spurgeon notes, “embeds his texts in larger, literary, cultural, and historical matrices” suggests that a deeper consideration of the political and cultural resonances needs to be addressed.¹ Contemporary criticism of McCarthy, therefore, is moving beyond pure textual appreciation: the early championing

¹ Spurgeon, Sara L. “Introduction.” Spurgeon, Sara L, ed. *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. 21.

for a canonical appreciation of McCarthy has made way for a more nuanced approach that looks at how the novels, especially those late works that are under consideration now, address socio-economic factors that are intrinsic to this era of late capitalism.² Critics such as Stacey Peebles' essay, "What Happens to Country: The World to Come in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," Stephen Tatum's book length study, *All the Pretty Horses: A Reader's Guide*, and the oft-mentioned David Holloway have done fine work in foregrounding the predominance of exchange and bartering tropes in these novels, suggesting that the idea of "use-value" – an idea that, I shall argue, is fundamental to the allure of the pastoral - has been supplanted by a thoroughgoing climate of exchange. In the following discussion of *The Border Trilogy*, I shall also discuss this new direction: first, how it produces a more entrenched socio-economic critique that is very much in keeping with his career-long attack on pastoral; and, second, how beneath the style's totalizing surface a much more troubling allegory of fragmentation emerges. For fragmentation is now demonstrated by the deep fissure between the purposive movement of the cowboy-heroes (a major theme of the cowboy-epic is the idea of a quest or mission) and the often expressed incomprehension at the changes that are taking place in front of their eyes.

I will explore this problem of the loss of the subject-agent by looking at critic David Holloway's utilization of some key concepts - for example, "being-in-itself," "the practico-inert" and "counter-finality" - in the existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre. Holloway uses such concepts to help explain a major concern in these late novels: namely; how the fragmentation of the social world in this era of late-capitalism has intensified the alienation of the subject. The subsumption of the subject to the commoditized world is hinted at in the first two novels in the trilogy but becomes very apparent when we get to the last, *Cities of the Plain*, where the protagonist has little resistance left to the overwhelming hegemon of exchange. However, implicit in my use of Holloway's delineation of Sartrean concepts is a critique of his reliance on subject-centered epistemes as explanation for the historical processes which led to the victory of the imaginary over the real. For this reason, when we

² I paraphrase the comments made by Rick Wallach in his foreword to David Holloway's *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. xi-xiv.

begin to look at the last novel in the *Border Trilogy*, *Cities of the Plain*, and the works that directly follow this, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, I shall employ the anti-subject theories of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser in order to argue that subjectivity is another enchantment that McCarthy questions in his work.

Chapter Five

1) The Search for Pure Pastoral in *All the Pretty Horses*

As noted already, McCarthy's characters often express – paradoxically, through their inarticulations – an irreducible sense of incomprehension at the given world. For in spite of the frequent deployment in the novel of mystics and soothsayers to help shed light on the opacity of experience, his protagonists' incomprehension is often a reaction to changes in the social reality.

For example, at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, the first novel in the series, the sense of mystery and incomprehension that John Grady Cole's feels over his grandfather's death smothers the material fact that the family's cattle ranch is up for sale because it cannot compete with the oil rigs and other commercial enterprises that have displaced cattle farming as the main economy in Texas. The novel, therefore, begins, as in *Child of God*, with an eviction: John Grady Cole's family ranch, employer of the local Mexican migrant community, is being liquidated because the business can no longer feasibly represent itself as a going concern. This hard fact of market obsolescence is a recurring theme in these late novels – old ways, old professions and old cultural practices are all under the hammer. The common-sense factuality of this is plainly told to John Grady Cole by his mother, a character who, bizarrely, is treated as villain while his morally impotent father - gambling terminally ill melancholic that he is - is seen as a saint:

All the money. You don't know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasn't been a white person worked here since before the war.³

This image of a farming business coming to an end (for John Grady it stops with his grandfather's death), though pointing to economic indices that have forced the business to rely upon non-American labor, should be read also as psychological loss brought about by

³ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 15. My criticism of the father should be qualified, however. For, as in my discussion on Cornelius Suttie, inertia in McCarthy is sometimes a kind of praxis - dropping out is a form of resistance.

the death of certain forms of work. The old ways of work, in this case a fatally flawed, in the case of John Grady, pastoral vision of cattle-farming has been superseded by the oil business. Again this concern of economic supersession – not just in the form of obsolescent forms of work but also in the fear that racially specific work (cowboys are never anything but white) is being supplanted - is echoed throughout the late McCarthy.

The sense of futility in challenging these changes in the local economy is starkly shown in the following where father and son are passively watching the changes taking place in front of their eyes:

.... he and his father would sit in the hotel room in the white wicker furniture with the window open and the thin crotched curtains blowing into the room and theyd drink coffee and his father would pour a little whiskey in his own cup and sit sipping it and smoking and looking down at the street. There were oilfield scouts' cars parked along the street that looked like they'd been in a warzone.⁴

The killer line here is the last sentence and helps explain John Grady's father's complete indifference to what has happened to the farm: the use of "war-zone" becomes an apt metaphor as these late novels trace the socio-economic state of emergency felt by certain communities in post-war America. Moreover, the father's terminal illness is a metaphor for the malady infecting the land. The abandonment of the rights and obligations of inheritance along with the loss of a natural paternalism (fathers always seem to be literally or figuratively dead in McCarthy) as an adhesive binding one generation to the next is a recurring trope in these novels of American decline.

Paradoxically, and in a fictive sense, John Grady's refusal to heed his mother's explanation allows for the romance-epic to begin in spite of the obvious fact that its mythological power is on the wane; for without the hero's rejection of the culture that spawned him, there would be no adventure. Moreover, the mother's prosaic straight-talking allows for American gnosticism's agon of civilization versus wilderness to come into

⁴ Ibid. 11.

play: John Grady's transfiguration into a cowboy archetype can only happen if he orphans himself; regeneration needs a sacrifice of family and home. As Richard Slotkin has shown, the idea of regeneration is an important part of American mythology: the purgation of the contaminated self and community is predicated on a journey into the wild; it is only after self-exile that the hero can return to cure his community of the moral malady infecting it. But what happens when there is no community to return to? No civilization to stand at a variance with the wilderness? This is why it's important to see McCarthy's romance-epics as elegies for disappearing communities as much as wilderness.

The fact that John Grady's community is moribund, a metaphor for America itself at this juncture in late capitalism, suggests that the hero's sacrifice of community and home is for the greater good. The twist in this modern reworking of the hero narrative is that at novel's end John Grady, very much like Billy Parham in the next novel, *The Crossing*, is shown to return without the magic cure for his community - and thus rides off once again. What we see here is an interesting renunciation of the old hero narratives, which were all about invigorating the individual with a historical and spiritual mission; in its place is an "allegory of impotence:" the hero's ethical mission is nothing more than a barren seed planted in the wilderness he wishes to cultivate.⁵

For all these reasons, it is worth exploring why John Grady Cole feels compelled to run off. To do this, we have to ask: what does the father's inertia represent in this tale? David Holloway very usefully applies Sartre's idea of the "practico-inert" (Being-in-itself) to describe the tendency of people to revert to "pure facticity:" the function where a human is reduced to pure instrumentality - eating, smoking, enslavement to primal drives, etc. - and is either unable or refuses to transcend such an abject condition. This inertia is ultimately identification with animals and inanimate objects of the world: in this sense the reduction into "facticity," the social end-game of "optical democracy," is very human. Furthermore, the father's dejection, his premonitory warnings of a future that, terminal illness

⁵ I have borrowed the phrase "allegory of impotence" from an unpublished paper by Rick Wallach.

notwithstanding, he doesn't want to be part of (26-27), is in Sartrean terms, the factual world of things thwarting consciousness by "reimposing itself as a "counter-finality" on being. The father's refusal to eat food (26), to generally stay in his hotel room, to passively accept estrangement from his wife, and to prepare himself abjectly for death, suggests that "counter-finality" is absent in him. Holloway writes;

But humans also have a quality that forces them to go beyond or transcend this state. We contain all the primal appetites – hunger, fear, pain and pleasure – but such appetites are always intent on something: to feel hunger is to want food, to be angry is to react toward toward whatever causes anger, to be scared is to be scared of heights, or of dying in a plane crash, and so on. What this means is that the "intentionality" of human consciousness is a meaning-giving process that actively inscribes qualities, values, or order in the objects it "intends".⁶

The father's surrendering to facticity is an example of "bad faith" as he does not realize that even wishing for "being-in-itself" is an act of consciousness: "For human consciousness is by definition an entity that cannot help "going beyond" its own level of facticity, its own inertness within the world of material things."⁷ John Grady, on the other hand, again according to Holloway, is that consciousness going beyond material inertness: the escape to Mexico is an example of what Sartre called "Being-for-Itself: a necessary escape from pure matter to the project-ness of a future."⁸

Such a projection, however, is riddled with pitfalls. The above use of Sartre is largely the philosopher's position delineated in *Being in Nothingness* (1943). By the time he came to write the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), Sartre had already begun to reconfigure his existentialism within the categories of Marxist thought. The concept "being-in-itself" was changed to the "practico-inert:" Sartre started to see that the alienation arising from

⁶ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 111.

⁷ Ibid. 111

⁸ Ibid. 111.

the dialectic of “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself” is a historical problem that can only be resolved if the causes of scarcity – scarcity of economic power, love, human solidarity, and so on – are extinguished.

It is now the material environment, rather than consciousness, itself that produces unhappiness.⁹ In this sense, although John Grady goes beyond facticity and exhibits counter-finality by literally riding beyond his moribund community, he, like his father, is riven by “bad faith.” The life that John Grady chooses is chimerical: instead of countering his own national myth, the myth of an America where there is no exchange value, he immerses himself into another fantasy: Mexico countenanced as a site of pure utility. Such an illusion allows for the displacement of material reality for the world of myth.

The ruse of pastoral as well as the ruse of the capitalist imaginary is to entice the agent/hero on a journey that will lead to a better life. It is not, however, a journey toward absolute change but a journey that attempts the impossible return to pure origin. John Grady Cole, like all self-blinding picaros wrapped up in American myths, is a cultural conservative who dreams of a way of life commensurate with his own idealized vision of what proper work is: he is not, in his fantasy, the scion of a land-owning dynasty gone to ruin, but a propertyless, nomadic cowboy. He leaves home because home is no longer what it was: the pastoral that through his leaving he projects himself into is thus an imagined vision of community uncontaminated by social and cultural change. This idealization is invoked at the beginning of the novel: the use of the picaresque means it is necessary to believe in the integrity of the hero even when logic demands otherwise.

As an example of how logic is eschewed for idealism, John Grady visits the family lawyer to hear some plain-talk about his mother and the ranch: Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and going to heaven.

⁹ Here and in the preceding three sentences, I paraphrase Holloway’s interpretation. 11

She don't want to live out there, that's all. If it was a payin proposition that'd be one thing. But it aint."¹⁰

The ethical dimension here is clearly infused with the pastoral fantasy of an American hero uncontaminated by market imperatives. This embodiment of pure utility, a mainstay of pastoral writing since the 18th century, is so powerful, that it is easy to be swept away by the idealistic purity of the hero and make us forget that large-scale cattle-farming in the hallowed south-west has always been aggressively capitalistic and owes its erstwhile economic dominance to the ruthless exploits of the 19th century cattle barons who not only forced small farmers off the land but also contracted the open frontier through the putting up of fenced boundaries to protect private property.¹¹ Not only that: the transformation of the wilderness into pasture land was done by driving the buffalo into extinction and clearing the Indian civilizations living on it.¹² By foregrounding the cowboy archetype as tragic hero, the paradoxes underpinning the protagonist's world-view are deliberately obfuscated. Another example of this is shown when John Grady's idealized father is allowed to distaff on the decline of the cattle-ranch by offering a dystopian vision of a Texan future where the white man was no longer king: "People don't feel safe no more, he said. We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We don't know what's going to show up here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be."¹³ These comments go unanswered by John Grady as though they are irrefutable truisms. There is no socio-economic explanation here for what is fundamentally a crude atavistic vision of racial decline.

¹⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 17.

¹¹ David Reynolds provides a solid overview of this period in *America: Empire of Liberty*. 156-158.

¹² See Brown, Dee: *The American West*. 285-300.

¹³ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 26

Another facet of how the ethical dimension works is perhaps reinforced by critics' too quickly identifying with the hero. The novel's point of view is clearly that of John Grady's. So when the narrative voice ratchets up a number of lapidary observations about our hero – whether these are the hierarchical principles of “ardent-heartedness” (p.6) over reason, or horses as the truly beloved, or the cattle business as the only proper occupation for men - there is a tendency to view the countervailing voices as aberrantly wrong.¹⁴ It is important, however, to put a halt on this and understand that McCarthy is writing within a tradition in order to seriously question its enchantments.

It is this study's view that it is better to see the foregrounding of the picaresque at the expense of real history as a displaced presence, one that can provide social meaning for the protagonists' overdetermined sense of disaffection with the modern world. To give an instance of this, we can argue that the opening pages demonstrate most powerfully the way that mid-twentieth century American materialism had replaced the human need for more meaningful social relationships; disaffection from this elicited a nostalgia, no matter how specious, for a more organic relationship between community and land.¹⁵ For it is clear that the landscape - studded now with highways and advertising hoardings; the prairie itself broken up by cross-fences and roads - that protagonists John Grady and Lacey Rawlins grew up in had, in their eyes, been transformed to the detriment of tried and tested social relations:

By noon the day following they'd made the some forty miles. Still in country they knew. Crossing the old Mark Fury ranch in the night where they'd dismounted at the crossfences for John Grady to pull the staples with a catspaw and stand on the wires while Rawlins led the horses through and then raise the wires back and beat the staples into the posts and put the catspaw back in his saddlebag and mount up to

¹⁴ Nell Sullivan, Linda Cooper and Gail Ann Morrison are but three of a growing number of feminist critics who are addressing this critical perception. See bibliography.

¹⁵ The popularity of the Western during this period, in movie and pulp novel form, suggests this.

ride on. How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country? said Rawlins. They don't, said John Grady.¹⁶

The flat rendering of this scene matches the tedious and, for the cowboys, unnecessary exertion of energy. These constraints on freedom are all about the cluttering up of the Texan pastoral so as to thwart both Grady Cole and Rawlins desire to move fluidly into the pure space of pastoral. Their escape is thus compromised by a historically very real obstacle: the inescapable encounter with ecological ruin brought about by modern capitalism.

To give an illustration of how McCarthy does not just attack the socio-economic operations of American capital but also the culture arising from it, the following shows how the institutions of America and its cultural representations are linked together. Before John Grady Cole leaves the Texan town of his birth, he says goodbye to a girlfriend who had recently thrown him over for a new boyfriend. The sense that the romance-pastoral of young love has been tainted by its association with modern American life is shown in the following:

He stood back and touched the brim of his hat and turned and went up the street. He didn't look back but he could see her in the windows of the Federal Building across the street standing there and she was still standing there when he reached the corner and stepped out of the glass forever.¹⁷

The fact that this scene takes place in the reflecting window of a federal building suggests that John Grady, by walking out of its frame, is walking away from the United States and its implied uncritical embrace of all things commercial. It is, therefore, both a rejection of statehood as represented by federalism and of all the idealized experiences of American life. Given the history of Texas and its historic resistance to federalization it seems that John Grady's flight across the border to Mexico is a search for purer social

¹⁶ McCarthy, Cormac: *All the Pretty Horses*. 30-31.

¹⁷ Ibid. 29.

relations. But what is also important about this passage is that it is consistent with an anti-federal, anti-technocratic and anti-bureaucratic approach to social organization that is in McCarthy from the outset. We have to remember that it is federal money that John Wesley rejects in *The Orchard Keeper* (233); moreover, it is federal connivance that helped oil supplant cattle farming as the main industry of Texas. All of this is true, but we must not fall into the trap of believing that such a recursive trope in McCarthy represents the views of the author; what it does show is that pastoral can only emerge with the repudiation of positive law; for it is the pastoral as a literary form that carries within it the hidden ideological solution to ideological problems. The escape to Mexico, as Holloway points out, takes largely the form of repression: the manifest commoditization of everything – land, people, etc. - that is modern America finds its unworkable alternative in an idealized identification with Mexico.¹⁸ The repression, as we shall see, is so deeply embedded within Grady Cole that a clearly commoditized sphere, the *La Purisma Hacienda*, is misperceived as a utopian vision of pure utility.

But even before Grady Cole and Rawlins reach the hacienda, McCarthy puts the worm of doubt into the pastoral apple through his use of landscape as portentous warning to the myth-blinded young heroes: historically, the idyll of freedom has always been saturated in blood. This is strikingly shown in the passages describing a terrible lightning storm and its aftermath:

Gray nameless birds espaliered in attitudes of stillborn flight or hanging loosely in their feathers. Some of them were still alive and they twisted on their spines as the horses passed and raised their heads and cried out but the horsemen rode on.”¹⁹

The word choice is again revealing. The choice of ‘espaliered’ suggests an orchard of peach and apple trees trellised to a wall. But in this case we have birds pinned to the thorns

¹⁸ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 123-125.

¹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 73.

of a thorny cholla plant; a gross parody of pastoral that carries a Dantean echo of suffering humanity in purgatory.

To these ends, Tim Poland goes as far as to see the author using landscape as an ancillary character, one whose personality changes according to narrative decisions on whether to evoke danger or surcease from it:

... (.) in much western literature, the usual relationship between character and landscape is inverted. Rather than a landscape that exists as setting for human action and is imprinted with human qualities, the landscape in much western writing functions more like a character in itself and imprints on the human characters its own qualities.²⁰

Although I agree with Poland's position, I would add that the anthropomorphization of landscape is used by McCarthy as a psychological projection of his characters' growing unease with their own idealized investments.

This shattering of the ideal is prevalent throughout and is often buried in imagery that on the surface seems to be full of admiration. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, we are provided with an epiphanic description of the original inhabitants of the Texan plains, the Comanche, who are depicted as vaunted warriors, as noble as anything in a Greek or Norse saga:

At the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only.²¹

²⁰ Poland, Tim. "A Relative to All That Is: The Eco-Hero in Western American Literature." *Western American Literature* 26, no.3. 197.

²¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 5.

There is a strong sense that this atavistic fantasy of blood and lactation conjured up by Cole becomes all the more potent when contrasted with his own family's impotence at dealing with the uncertainties of the modern world. With his grandfather dead, his father in the last stages of terminal cancer and his estrangement from his mother, John Grady Cole, the last of his line, looks at the prairie; the barrenness of the scene matching his own sense of failure. His temporal abjection, compounded by the sterility of his familial situation, is contrasted further by the spatial amplitude of the phantom Indian caravan:

When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide and the rattle of lances and the constant drag of the travois poles in the sand like the passing of some enormous serpent and above all the low chant of their travelling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of a nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives.²²

The use of the Arthurian term 'grail' becomes ironical for that reader who remembers the terrifying description of the Comanche raiders in *Blood Meridian*; but, with John Grady, there is a sense that he is completely enraptured by this reverie. That the Comanche are elegiacally described as a "lost nation" points to John Grady's own sense of being lost in an America that makes little sense to him. This suggests that the recourse to mythic representation is at its most powerful when the social reality has little to offer its members. Such dejection is clearly shown, at novel's end, when the returning but broken-hearted hero John Grady is asked by Rawlins: "Where is your country? I don't know, said John Grady. I don't know where it is. I don't know what happens to country."²³

The need for purity imbues the image of the Comanche, despite their warlike mien, with pastoral nostalgia for the authentic. The Comanche here are phantoms, beyond history, rendered as harmless as a Hollywood movie. It is a recessional image, a movement

²² Ibid. 5

²³ Ibid. 299.

away from the dialectics of history to a past embossed by Hollywood celluloid, a vision that in its historical deracination seems to become the *idée fixe* behind John Grady's decision to run away across the border. Such a desire for an authentic existence that can only be evoked through recourse to myth can be contrasted with the scene where John Grady is looking at a horse painting on his grandfather's wall. The horses depicted are dismissed by his grandfather for being "picture-book horses" quickly passed over "as if he'd never seen it before."²⁴ This clear lesson in fabulization goes tragically unlearned by John Grady.

John Grady's recession into the fabular begins just after his atavistic vision of the Comanche. In a sense his history has already been written: he in turn will become a supreme horseman, paramour, wronged prisoner, self-righteous champion of justice, and, finally, a doomed and rejected lover. He is, in effect, as John Cant and other critics have noted, an American *Don Quixote*.

With its emphasis on story and fable over reality, there is a strong sense that John Grady sees no part for himself in what passes for American reality in the late nineteen forties. In another telling passage, where representations of reality are being questioned, Cole goes to watch his actress mother in a theatrical drama. What is being played out on the stage is suggestive of Cole's deep alienation from things:

He sat leaning forward in the seat with his elbows on the empty seatback in front of him and his chin on his forearms and watched the play with great intensity. He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing at all.²⁵

The play that Cole watches is a metonym for the perceived anodyne tropes of American culture. This is why the journey that Cole embarks on in Mexico continually takes on the aspect of the baroque: whether taking the form of encounters with carnival folk, travelling theatre-troupes, or Italian high opera companies. In textual terms, the escape

²⁴ Ibid. 16.

²⁵ Ibid. 21.

across the border elicits a recourse to fantasy that allows John Grady Cole to act out his own cowboy drama.²⁶ In fact, there is strong sense that all the characters are acting out in one way or another. We can see this in the use of games as subtexts for conflicting relationships. John Grady's Hacienda boss does not show his suspicion of John Grady through direct language; the inquisitions are played out in games of chess and pool. In a lengthy discourse, punctuated by the clacking of pool balls, on the impossibility of applying rational thought to the Mexican condition, the Don uses the metaphor of Romantic idealism to puncture John Grady's dreams of marrying Alejandra: "Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason."²⁷ The Don's allusion to Cervantes in this section is the novel's candid identification of John Grady with Quixote. John Cant makes great play with this association, arguing that

The principal significance of the parallel between *All the Pretty Horses* and *Don Quixote* lies in their shared mythoclasm. Don Quixote rides out as a belated chivalric knight in search of adventure to prove both his honor and his valor. His is a quest for the vanished world of the Middle-Ages in which the appeal of pastoral had stronger valency in a society that was largely rural and governed by an adherence to the seasonal calendar. Don Quixote stands at the crossroads of this world and the world to come: a world dispelled by humanism and reason. This is why his experience of the world is mediated by an outmoded culture, an irrelevant mythology. He has been led astray by what he has read in "the books that had occasioned his madness."²⁸

In order for the mythoclasm to work, disenchantment with the prevailing social order must be as strong as the enchantment that offers escape. In a fictive sense, this perhaps explains John Grady's rejection of the mother acting out a realist drama: the novel also eschews realist representation in order for the cowboys' immersion into myth once

²⁶ This largely follows Kenneth Lincoln's argument in *American Canticles*.

²⁷ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 146.

²⁸ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 186.

the Rio Grande is traversed. The renunciation of modern Texas, its oil wells and highways criss-crossing the desert routes, are indeed obstacles to the quest, but, as symbols of the modern world, their rejection allows for a whole-hearted recourse to the American version of the quixotic picaresque, the cowboy fantasy. Such romantic high drama is in stark contrast to the tired, safe, dramas that his mother acts in. The violence, therefore, that both Billy Parham and John Grady experience intermittently in Mexico, is at times highly ritualized as a kind of *Danse-Macabre* suitable to the reified idea of Mexico as the baroquely Catholic *Other* to Puritan America. However, what ensues, once the border is crossed, is a very quick darkening of John Grady's romantic but bourgeois-inflected fantasy.

John Grady-Cole's Mexican Middle-Landscape: A Very Bourgeois Pastoral

It is interesting that John Grady, adventurer that he is, only finds true happiness in a Mexican pastoral exemplum of Jefferson's middle-landscape, *The Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion*. The hacienda is in stark contrast to the neglected ranch of his grandfather's back in Texas. It is worth noting as well that it is in stark contrast to all the neglected rural homes and communities in the McCarthy *oeuvre*:

The Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion was a ranch of eleven thousand hectares situated along the edge of the Bolson de Cuatro Cienagas in the state of Coahuila. The western sections ran into the Sierra de Anteojo to elevations of nine thousand feet but south and east the ranch occupied part of the broad barrial or basin floor of the bolson and was well watered with natural springs and clear streams and dotted with marshes and shallow lakes or lagunas. In the lakes and in the streams were species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side.²⁹

This paragraph opens a section that acts as brief respite for John Grady and Rawlins who, unbeknownst to themselves, are now fugitives from the law after helping the picked-up-along-the-way Blevins take back his stolen horse and gun. With its echoes of Genesis

²⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 97.

(“natural springs and clear streams”) and Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* (“for the desert stretched away on either side”) we are clearly entering a pastoral fable that in a very material sense takes the form of wish-fulfillment for John Grady. The ranch, with its “eleven thousand acres” and well-tended, arable land is everything that his family ranch isn’t. His response to it, because McCarthy seems to be at pains to detail its size and abundance, must be seen as both romantic and acquisitive. He is the grandson of a Texan cattle-farmer after all. The name of the ranch has to be seen in this double sense. The name, as John Cant convincingly argues, conjures up consonant images of the Virgin Mary along with “the Goddess and female principle through which the wasteland becomes fertile.”³⁰ But what also needs to be understood is how the Hacienda, with its name evoking the feudal pastoral dream of a world untainted by vulgar capitalism, represents an image of a purer, immaculately conceived, form of property relations. The following enumeration of its size and accoutrements along with its sensuous, almost heraldic *tableau-vivant* of hacienda life seems to suggest this:

He ran upwards of a thousand head of cattle on this land. He kept a house in Mexico City where his wife lived. He flew his own airplane. He loved horses. When he rode up to the gerente’s house that morning he was accompanied by four friends and by a retinue of mozos and two pack animals saddled with hardwood kiacks, one empty, the other carrying their noon provisions. They were attended by a pack of greyhound dogs and the dogs were lean and silver in color and they flowed among the legs of the horses silent and fluid as running mercury and the horses paid them no mind at all.³¹

This perfect frieze of pastoral’s *naturae amoenis*, the bourgeois, faux-feudal, world where surplus value is all but hidden, obviously captivates John Grady. In its American context, it’s Jefferson’s physiocratic dream come to fruition: a testament of rational bourgeois planning whose beauty and purity still needs to be itemized into things owned.

³⁰ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 187.

³¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 97-98.

A natural bourgeois order of things is also invoked by the passive acceptance of the workers leisurely working in the field as the Don passes by, and in the acceptance of hierarchy - each *païson* in the frieze knowing his station:

The hacendado halloed the house and the gerente emerged in his shirtsleeves and they spoke briefly and the gerente nodded and hacendado spoke to his friends and then all rode on. When they passed the bunk-house and rode through the gate and turned into the road up-country some of the vaqueros were catching their horses in the trap and leading them out to saddle them for the day's work. John Grady and Rawlins stood in the doorway drinking their coffee.³²

McCarthy lulls us into a pastoral blind-spot: a representation of reality imbued with a flattened prose that replicates the static and immutable order of things. That the protagonists' entry into these environs is heralded by a vision of loveliness in the form of the Don's daughter, Alejandra, is part of the siren allurement of the hacienda section. Again, however, there is a sense that in spite of the sensual imagery that is evoked to describe her, John Grady's gaze is an objectifying one: not only does he recognize her beauty but he is also quite taken by her expensive attire. In the following, she becomes a desired material acquisition: "She wore English riding boots and jodhpurs and a blue twill hacking jacket and she carried a riding crop and the horse she rode was a black Arabian saddlehorse."³³

Because of the enumeration of things, Alejandra is not only, to use the vernacular, a classy dame, but also a dame of her class. It is this that we have to focus on as we re-read this idyllic scene as a bourgeois fantasy of feudal grace and power. The image of Alejandra works for John Grady because she is framed in a tableau that comes straight out of Cervantes and chivalric romance. But the auratic power of her is very much tied up with how she is perceived as a pedigree personification of her social class, with all

³² Ibid. 98.

³³ Ibid. 94.

its accoutrements of wealth and power:

She wore a flatcrowned hat of black felt with a wide brim and her black hair was loose under it and fell halfway to her waist and as she rode past she turned and smiled and touched the brim of the hat with her crop and the vaqueros touched their hatbrims one by one down to the last of those who'd pretended not to have seen as she passed.³⁴

In the next few pages we shall learn that the hacienda is very much the well-ordered estate that is glorified in Henry Fielding and other 18th century panegyrists of the propertied gentleman-squire. It is ironic, then, that such a tamed-down simulacrum of the wilderness is amenable to cowboys' Grady Cole and Rawlins. It seems that the search for the freedom that the wilderness ostensibly offers is tempered by an equally strong desire for harmony and settlement. Observing the well-ordered bunkhouses and eating areas for the Vaqueros, Rawlins and Grady Cole have found what they've been looking for: a thoroughly domesticated wilderness operating on a benevolent aristocratic system of commercial paternalism: "This is some country, aint it? Yeah. It is. Go to sleep. Bud? Yeah. This is how it was with the old waddies, aint it? Yeah. How long do you think you'd like to stay here? About a hundred years. Go to sleep."³⁵ Utopia for these boys means an oneiric immersion into Jefferson's "middle-landscape."

With all these structural determinants – bourgeois social relations, Mexican patrician values versus John Grady's middle-class, but poorly educated background, etc. – it is important to take the rapturous overwriting of the central love scene in this section as part of a critique on "bad faith." With its impression of everything working in concert, the lovers' consummation becomes the pastoral dream as monistic fantasy, whereby consciousness is suspended so that nature and being can become one. The use of two similes in the following example, however, suggests analogy not identity: "She was so pale

³⁴ Ibid. 94.

³⁵ Ibid. 96.

in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. That burned cold. Like the moon that burned cold.” The clichés mount up - moon, water, the west, and so on – reaching a, excuse the pun, climax with:

Sweeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for betrayal. Nesting cranes that stood singlefooted among the cane on the south shore had pulled their slender beaks from their wingpits to watch. Me quires? She said. Yes, he said. He said he name. God yes, he said.³⁶

The “bad writing” is deliberate here: a pastiche that sets up the bursting of this pastoral bubble by a number of future interlocutors, the Don and Duenna Alfonsa, the prison officer and the head prisoner Perez, all of whom deliver grand sermons on how history, class and ethnicity will never allow John Grady to break through these barriers.

The hacienda acts as an interregnum for the general disenchantment of American idealism that is the novel’s main theme. Things were beginning to curdle before this section, but once Grady Cole and Rawlins are expelled from their Eden, arrested and then accused as co-conspirators to their friend, Blevins’, murderous crime, the pessimism begins to mount up. The realization that Mexico is a country beset by its own violence and corruption is demonstrated in the summary execution of Blevins by the police (178). It is further demonstrated when they are sent to prison with no real expectation of ever being released (181-208). The prison itself can be thus regarded as a composite of capitalist exchange value stripped of all its trappings: “Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence ... (.)”³⁷ The *Bildungsroman* begins to sour truly here: for it is a journey of self-discovery that leads only towards existential darkness. Rawlins and Grady Cole have to literally fight for their lives: the prison an exemplum of anarchic trading where survival is based on what you can offer in exchange. Grady Cole survives a murderous attack only by virtue of miring himself in this

³⁶ Ibid. 96.

³⁷ Ibid. 182

system. He manages to get a switchblade by using, ironically, money handed to him by Blevins just before he died: "It was better than what he'd expected. A switchblade with the handles missing, made in Mexico, the brass showing through the plate of the bolsters."³⁸ It is as though the prison is necessary for Grady Cole's social blindness to come to an end. But rather than this happening, through the agency of his own conscience, Grady Cole needs to be apprised of this by the legion of significant interlocutors that apprise him of his illusions.

The most stunning of these would be Alejandra's great aunt, the Duena Alfonsa who, by way of a philosophical and lengthy preamble explains to the newly released John Grady why he is an unsuitable match for Alejandra (145). Later on she tells this modern Quixote of the causes behind Mexico's blood-spattered revolutionary history:

When I was a girl the poverty in this country was very terrible. What you see today cannot even suggest it. And I was very affected by this. In the towns there were tiendas which rented clothes to the peasants when they could come to market. Because they had no clothes of their own and they would rent them for the day and return home at night in their blankets and rags. They had nothing.³⁹

The speech contains everything that is absent in John Grady's hypostatized understanding of Mexico. The most important lesson is the divestment of the romantic image that Mexico's predilection for revolution is indicative of a passionate and intense people. Revolution is born of necessity, none more necessary than the kind that has at its root the desperate need to overcome poverty.

At first the above looks like a typical homily on poverty; but it is one that sees dialectic for what it is: an ever accumulating identity of opposites in which a person's fate and time in history, though determined in the last instance by the economic, is random and contingent. The Duena suggests this through the parable of the blind coiner:

³⁸ Ibid. 198.

³⁹ Ibid. 231.

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I'm not sure I share it. He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, *cara y cruz*. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes.⁴⁰

It is only the endless cycle of inequality and poverty that is passed from next to next. The Sartrean idea of scarcity is invoked here, and is reinforced in this damning verdict on the repetitions, a carnivalesque of the wretched, of unequal social relations through historical time:⁴¹

For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on. In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness.⁴²

John Grady Cole's non-ideological gaze had hitherto blinded him from seeing that he too is part of the puppet show of social relations predicated on scarcity. When the Duenna concludes her long discourse by saying "sometimes I think we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work," she is referring as much to John Grady as to herself. After this

⁴⁰ Ibid. 230-231.

⁴¹ In *Search for a Method*, Sartre defines "scarcity" as the "tearing apart of a collectivity crushed by its needs." 132-133. Scarcity is a fundamental condition in a world without freedom; it covers all kinds of unfreedoms: the scarcity of money, of material goods, of feelings, of love, and so on.

⁴² Ibid. 231.

philosophical dressing down he returns across the border and goes on a fruitless mission hoping to find the true owner of Blevins' horse (287-300). Thus the proper epiphanic moment in this deeply pessimistic novel only comes when he stands before the grave of his Mexican nanny who, like many of her kind, had once embarked on her own, highly unromantic, epic journey in search of the kind of work that is always absent from the bourgeois pastoral: "Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living and dead."⁴³

2) *The Crossing*: Billy Parham as Accidental Hero.

The tragedy of *All the Pretty Horses* can be located in the gradual breaking down of John Grady Cole's enchantments. These enchantments operate as forms of self-delusion which can be corralled under one glaring flaw: an uncritical identification with the cowboy myth that effectively blind-sides him from a more political understanding of the America of his time, an America that is, moreover, increasingly beset by commoditization and capitalist property relations.⁴⁴ It is, therefore, the substitution of one myth for another that lies behind the tragedy of this first novel: the borderless dream of endless open country is displaced by a crossing over that misidentifies Mexico as ideologically-pure, as a site free of exchange-value, a utopia of pure utility in which capitalism is left at the border. Because of this ideological misrecognition, a certain critical distancing from the hero needs to be observed. However, when we get to the second novel in the trilogy, *The Crossing* (1994), the tragedy of doomed cowboys becomes more keenly felt as the protagonist, Billy Parham, is one of the more likeable, less ideologically-freighted characters in the McCarthy *oeuvre*. For example, his gentle nature is recognized by a wild Indian, one of the many seers in this novel, who tells Billy what he doesn't yet know: that he is a "huerfano," fated to wander the world in sorrow:

⁴³ Ibid. 301.

⁴⁴ We should remind ourselves that the first two novels in the *Border Trilogy* are set incongruously and anachronously in the years just preceding and just after the Second World War; furthermore the last in the series, *Cities of the Plain*, take us up to the first years of the millennium.

He said that while the Huerfano might feel that he no longer belonged among men he must set this feeling aside for he contained within him a largeness of spirit which men could see and that men would wish to know him and the world would need him even as he needed the world for they are one.⁴⁵

This “largeness of spirit” is also depicted in the novel’s opening lines where he is likened to an ur-shepherd, full of New World optimism:

He 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. In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother’s breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have.⁴⁶

This is different from the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* where we find John Grady’s old life coming to an end because of the decline in cattle farming. Billy and Boyd’s life is just beginning in this new land: thus it is an image suffused with all the idealisms of migration central to American thought, except with the additional caveat that it all rather incongruously happens 30 odd years into the twentieth century, a time when a vision of the frontier was only ever possible on the cinema screen or in other forms of popular culture.

However, the idyll of a promised land is very soon shattered as the plans that Billy has for himself and Boyd quickly go tragically awry. The pastoral-inflections of the opening soon make way for a premonitory note: “On a winter’s night in that first year he woke to hear wolves in the low hills to the west of the house and he knew that they would be coming out onto the plain in the new snow to run the antelope in the moonlight.”⁴⁷ The wolf, as Wallace Canborn has pointed out, is a symbol of the warrior animal – one of many such types in McCarthy: a devourer of innocent calves and lambs, a creature born to fight

⁴⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 134.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 3

fiercely for survival in the world.⁴⁸ Its introduction, just after the idyllic opening scene is a telling example of the ecopastoral irruption of violence onto the pastoral scene.

Paradoxically, the wolf is also a dialectical symbol of absolute freedom: it represents the unconstrained *Other* that must be ejected from a wilderness now circumscribed by the imperatives of civilization. In other words, similar to the Native-American, the border-blind freedom that it represents must be routed in order for the middle-landscape pastoral of fenced-in wilderness - emblemized as the prairie homestead and its paranoid symbols of human presence (the aforementioned fences, guns, animal traps, etc.) - to be initiated. Its presence in this second paragraph raises a question over the freedom that Billy has been born into. As we shall see, his identification with the wolf means the destruction of everything that had hitherto defined him: the cost of this attempted "being-for-itself" will violently bring to a close his known world of fenced-in pastoral. The dark forebodings of this choice continue in the next few pages when he and Boyd encounter an Indian on their land. The Indian is represented as the unsocialized *Other* in this white-man's pastoral; so much so that the description limns the margins of racial stereotype, especially when we note farther along that the opacity of the Indian's gaze is described in similar terms to that of the wolf's:

The indian Boyd passed crouching on his heels did not even raise his eyes so that when he sensed him there and turned the indian was looking at his belt and did not lift his eyes even then until he'd stopped altogether. He could have reached and touched him. The indian squatting under a thin stand of Carrizo cane and not even hidden and yet Boyd had not seen himHe looked into the eyes of the boy. The boy into his. Eyes so dark they seemed all pupil. Eyes in which the sun was setting.⁴⁹

The Indian is different from the type described in *Suttree*. In that novel, the descriptions are more admiring ("Solemn, mute, decorous" (240): he shares his food and beer with Suttree) and less ominous. But the Indian in *The Crossing* is used in a similar way

⁴⁸ Sanborn, Wallace R. *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy*. 65.

⁴⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 5.

to how the wolf is used: both symbolize the elemental that, through socialization, has been emptied out of the white man. What this exactly might be is hard to say; but perhaps McCarthy uses reflecting eyes and windows and mirrors in his writing to suggest that humans conform to a platonic order in which ontological proof of one's socialized being is affirmed through the figure of a reflected image. There is more than a suggestion here that the process of socialization is actuated at a great ontological cost: the losing of an unmediated, organic relationship with the world:

He had not known that you could see yourself in others' eyes. Nor see therein such things as suns. He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child. As if it were some cognate child to him that had been lost who now stood windowed away in another world where the red sun sank eternally.⁵⁰

McCarthy, however, is careful not to elevate the Indian above this ontological fall; for it is humanity in general that is shown to have lost something. The Indian is nothing like Fenimore Cooper's noble savage: he is both cruel and rapacious - "what else have you got in your house?" (10) - and are soon led to conclude that it is he who is behind the murder of Billy's parents (165). In the McCarthy world, all things have fallen. This said: because of the rhapsodic opening scenes, it is Billy's own fall that seems to matter most. John Cant seems to be aware of this when he writes:

The Crossing is at once the most overtly philosophical and profoundly human of all McCarthy's works. None of his characters suffers a more grievous fate than Billy Parham. None of his other novels addresses more directly the question of the role of culture, language and narrative in the mediation of our experience of the world.⁵¹

The above "mediations" are forms of fatalisms that suggest all experiences are either subconsciously chosen or, more troublingly, chosen for us. In David Holloway's view it is

⁵⁰ Ibid. 6.

⁵¹ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 195.

these very mediations that place question marks over all “representations of the real” in the modern world, with language especially failing to determine a collectively agreed reality.⁵² In terms of ideology the adherence to a particular view of the world, in this case, the ideolegeme of the American pastoral, helps explain the Job-like experiences of Billy Parham: he effectively embodies the type of being – archetypically American perhaps -who believes that order can be brought to the chaos of wilderness. The tragedy for Billy is that because he does not understand this, his good intentions will end in nought. For, in *The Crossing*, it is as though the Duenna Alfonsa’s highly tragical and deterministic view of history has come to pass. We humans, subscribers to the principle of free-will, are very much part of structures that are already in place; already inserted into already-in-place narratives that, aside from a few variations, foretell everything that we do. This notion of deep structures tallies with McCarthy’s notion of “optical democracy”: the idea of human history subordinate to the greater truth of geological time. In this sense, the notion of deep structures allies to McCarthy’s pessimistic view of history as the condition for an endlessly repeated violent state of emergency: in other words, there is only one story and it has already been written. All that is left is the telling.⁵³

Since these novels are very much concerned with the telling of history, not just the protagonists’ histories in the stories, but also a more general history, we have to ask: what is the one tale being told here over and over again? It is simply the story that, in the previous novel, finds Duenna Alfonsa asserting: “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 less powerless to change.”⁵⁴ Blood is meant to be seen as metaphysical and atavistic; it is very much the elemental force that drives and shapes history to respond kinetically to all that pushes up against it. Moreover, this blood-knowledge (to borrow D. H

⁵² Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 146-147.

⁵³ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 155.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. 239.

Lawrence's term) is something that all animals share. In this way, the wolf is metaphor of this elementally sublime truth:

What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make an altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.⁵⁵

Billy Parham, even more so than the quixotic John Grady, is soaked within a narrative already written to end in tragedy. The narratives underpinning John Grady's picturesque are *Don Quixote* and the *Daniel Boone* legends augmented by the cowboy-cavalier prototype found in such cowboy tales as Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. As mentioned, such an attachment to mythic archetypes is part of Grady Cole's self-delusion; paradoxically, however, it also bestows him with an illusion of identity that according to Lacan and Althusser is a necessary condition for socialized being.⁵⁶ This means that John Grady's complete immersion into the cowboy construct safeguards him from complete disillusion. As we shall see in *Cities of the Plain*, his death is a cowboy's death. In Billy's case, however, his narrative markers are much starker: namely the naturalism of Jack London's *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*. The egalitarian optimism of *All the Pretty Horses* is replaced by the more primal pessimism of London's blood-consciousness stories. Billy as a character suffers because of this: for it is part of McCarthy's dismantling of the pastoral to have this character shorn of the romantic connotations of the previous novel. The fact that Billy's family are poorer than John Grady and live in the less poetically resonant state of New Mexico is part of this demythologization. The area in the novel is a symbol of the

⁵⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 127.

⁵⁶ My understanding of Lacan's ideas about identity formation is derived from his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of I" in Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: a Selection*. 1-7. Likewise, my use of Louis Althusser political reading of Lacan's concepts is derived from his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. 127-186. From now on, my use of their concepts will be fairly extensive.

frontier-myth under threat; for example, in the opening pages there are numerous allusions to the fact that the migration of such families as Billy's were "crowding out" the wilderness (67). In this sense, the death of Billy's parents so early on in the novel has a deep symbolic resonance: John Grady Cole's quest begins with the end of a dynasty; Billy Parham's begins with the extinction of a first generation family working on America's "hard" pastoral fields. It is this more than anything else that suggests that McCarthy is signaling a deep dissatisfaction with the romance-epic in this novel.

Another factor in this defenestration of both romance-epic and pastoral possibility is Billy's role in the trilogy as witness to the decline: not for him the tragic romantic deaths afforded to his brother Boyd in this novel and also to John Grady Cole in *Cities of the Plain*. His fate is to outlive everyone in order to become the recorder and eye-witness of the blood-soaked tragedies that the series describes. Both Boyd and John Grady get their girls and embark on tragic, but highly romantic journeys with their beloveds. Billy, on the other hand, is only allowed procured dalliances with prostitutes (*Cities of the Plain*), while his one carnal moment in *The Crossing* is in the role of the voyeur:

A hundred feet away in water to her thighs stood the primadonna naked. Her hair was down and it was wet and clinging to her back and it reached to the water. He stood frozen. She turned and swung her hair before her and bent and lowered it into the river. Her breasts swung above the water. He took off his hat and stood with his heart laboring under his shirt.⁵⁷

This highly sensual scene happens the morning after watching the primadonna sing in the opera. There is a sense that the image above blurs the line between fact and fiction – with Billy dissociate from what had happened on stage the night before and what is now before his eyes. The scene is also voyeuristic – echoing the famous "Nausikaa" section in Joyce's *Ulysses*. The main feeling is that Billy is only able to be a spectator here, just as he is

⁵⁷ Ibid. 219-220.

when watching the opera. In spite of his bravery, he is not a game-changing hero. And romantic love will never be on the cards for him.

Except, that is, if it comes in the form of sublimated love for animals and land. It is this appreciation that sometimes makes Billy's world more tolerable – as in this description of antelopes running on the plain:

He was very cold. He waited. It was very still. He could see by his breath how the wind lay and he watched his breath appear and vanish and appear and vanish constantly before him in the cold and he waited a long time. Then he saw them coming. Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again.⁵⁸

It is made clear from very early on that Billy has tremendous sympathy and empathy for animals, and would rather watch than hunt them down. For this reason, it is worth noting that McCarthy's ecopastoralism is strongly anti-game hunting and, as we shall see in his savage dismissal of trapper Old Man Echols, rejects the myth of the gun-toting frontier hero as a natural pastoral-spirit. Dee Brown, in a passage that McCarthy would probably sympathize with, exposes the brutality of such heroes as Buffalo Bill:

Buffalo Bill used a Springfield which he called *Lucretia Borgia*, and he preferred firing from his horseback. He would ride to the head of the herd and turn the leaders until he had the buffalos revolving in a circle. Then he shot the animals which broke off in a straight line. A good hunter could average fifty and hundred killed per day.⁵⁹

Billy Parham seems to be the absolute opposite of such holocaustic behavior toward the animal world: in this sense, the setting free of the wolf is as radically eco-pastoral as it gets.

Billy's feelings for the wolf that he finds trapped in the hills of his father's farm is as close as he will get to a love interest in this novel. In the following, we find him speaking

⁵⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁵⁹ Brown, Dee. *The American West*. 274.

tenderly to the wolf, now mortally wounded after its Mexican captors had pitted it against fighting dogs:

He talked to her for a long time and as the boy tending the wolf could not understand what it was he said he said what was in his heart. He made her promises that he swore to keep in the making. That he would take her to the mountains where she would find others of her kind.”⁶⁰

There is little reciprocity here: Billy’s recognizes that the wolf’s eyes only mirror back the unappeasable loneliness in his own being. Furthermore, the impossibility of Billy finding some kind of spiritual concordance with the animal is a hallmark of the novel’s attempt to de-anthropomorphize the Jack London influence by making clear that the wolf is always “unreachably Other.”⁶¹

The idea of the *Other* that is unreachable can also be understood in human-to human terms. We are also animals, McCarthy’s writing seems to infer, *Other* to each other. In this sense, Billy’s love for animals is boundless; but it is a love that cannot be returned: the natural world, therefore, is a harsh substitute for the severely contracted exhibitions of love in human relationships. For instance, Billy’s own family - except, crucially, his younger brother Boyd - interact in polite but emotionally distant ways. An incredible human-felt solitude permeates people and landscape. Indeed in the opening few pages of the novel, aside from Billy’s parents, a lot of men either live on their own or live with cold-hearted nieces or helpers.

This lack of romantic and familial love, Sartre’s ‘scarcity’ in the form of emotional privation, is shown when Billy visits an old Mexican who is being looked after by a woman who is barely a relative:

⁶⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 105.

⁶¹ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 201.

The woman was leaning against the kitchen door. She was silhouetted against the yellow light and he could see her figure through the thin dress she wore. She did not seem troubled that the old man lay alone in the dark at the rear of the house.⁶²

The image is redolent of an Edward Hopper painting: figures standing in desolate light, in desolate space. It is also, somewhat amusingly, in line with D. H. Lawrence's withering critique of the representation of woman in frontier literature. Remarking on Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Lawrence observes the nebulous presence of the "amiable spouse ... put (ting) on her best apron to be *Im Bild*, for all the world to see and admire."⁶³ McCarthy uses women as unformed characters in his writing, but one senses that it is for the purpose of unceasing disconsolation – the pastoral's *ubi sunt* in the form of an Arcadia without love.⁶⁴ After Billy speaks to the old man, he leaves the house but the woman calls to him: "He is nothing to me, she called. No hay parentesco? You know what is parentesco? Yes mam. Think it over. He unlooped the bridlereins from the post and untied them. All right, he said."⁶⁵ The woman denies all kinship, even of the human kind, with the old man: her remark "think it over" is a challenge, a goad, to Billy, and, perhaps, to the reader, to find philosophical repudiation for such nihilism. Yet again, we have an example of how the "practico-inert" pins people to the stolid materiality of being: the ties that bind people together are flimsy at best. Given that *The Border Trilogy* as a whole is about the search for meaning in a world that no longer believes in such ontologies, it is no accident that the woman's denial of kinship precipitates Billy's second return to Mexico. The quest, therefore, becomes a search for the kind of kinship that will confer meaning on the miasma of modern life.

⁶² McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 47.

⁶³ Lawrence, D. H: *Classics in American Literature*. 30.

⁶⁴ It's worth remarking here that the original pastoral poems of Theocritus celebrated male homosexual love.

⁶⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 48.

The absolute aloneness of men and women as well as the perfunctory attempts at interpersonal intimacy is very powerfully expressed in these opening pages. Such an absence is perhaps behind Billy's bonding with the wolf. We can see the scarcity of love in the formal relationships Billy and his brother Boyd have with their mother and father. The mother, only ever shown inside the kitchen preparing food, is unnecessarily sharp with her very well-behaved kids, and can only show her concern for them through a litany of commands: "You be careful, she said. Yes man. You be in by dark. Yes mam. I'll try. You try real hard and you wont have any problems. Yes mam."⁶⁶ The father, though closer to his children by dint of the fact that they work for him, is gruffly kind, delivering his affection in perfunctory laconisms: "Go on to the house and get your supper, his father said. I'm all right. Go on. I'll put the horses up."⁶⁷

Sartre's notion of scarcity, economic and emotional, is shown here in the oppressive power that the parents have over the children. It is little wonder, then, that Billy is at his most alive when he is allowed to go out and look for the wolf on his own: suddenly the naturalism of his social condition and environment is temporarily transformed into wilderness pastoral:

Before him the mountains were blinding white in the sun. They looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who'd perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them. That kind of new. The rider rode with his heart outsized in his chest and the horse who was also young tossed its head and he took a sidestep in the rode and shot out one hind heel and then they went on.⁶⁸

As mentioned, the parental world is full of admonitions on unchecked freedom. Boyd and Billy constantly have to lie to their mother and father in order to experience stuff that would not bring censure. This happens, perhaps fatefully, when they lie about taking a

⁶⁶ Ibid. 31.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 24.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 31.

cup filled with coffee for the Indian (12). Moreover, the sense of original sin, the repercussions of committing it, is clearly a constraint on their freedom. If you lie, the God of Grown Ups will show his wrath. Boyd intimates this when, after returning from the Indian, he says: “we ought not to have gone out there to start with.”(12) Lying, the breaking of patriarchal moral codes, will allow evil in. Another portentous reference to lying comes when Billy is shown to have done something against his father instructions: the cardinal error of burying the trap underneath an abandoned campfire. When learning of this, the father delivers this harsh homily:

All my life, he said, I been witness to people showin up where they was supposed to be at various times after they'd said they'd be there. I never heard one yet that didn't have a reason for it. Yessir. But there aint but one reason. Yessir. You know what it is? No sir. It's that their word's no good. That's the only reason there ever was or ever will be.⁶⁹

The narrow morality of the father's viewpoint here, along with Billy's automated responses of “yes sirs” and “no sirs,” intimate material reasons behind Boyd's superstitions: the world that his father's sees is informed by a protestant ethos that sees the world soaked in original sin, a world, where work is the only defense from damnation. Part of what Billy learns from the various sagacious interlocutors along the way is how to unlearn such instruction in order for him to see that his father's viewpoint is just one narrative among many. Furthermore, it is significant that this is the last exchange that Billy will have with his father before he releases the trapped wolf and takes it and himself across the border. There is a sense, then, that like all McCarthy picaros, Billy has symbolically orphaned himself.

The wolf in this story obviously represents the kind of freedom that does not recognize any constraints upon its movements:

⁶⁹ Ibid. 51.

She come out of Mexico. Crossed through the San Luis Pass and come up along the western slope of the Animas and hit in along about the head of Taylor's Draw and then dropped down and crossed the valley and come up into the Pelocillos. Come up all the way in the snow. There was two inches of snow where she killed the calf at.⁷⁰

The underlying motif in these opening pages is the killing or suppression of what is free. Billy's parents are part of this suppression in the sense that they, understandably enough as New Mexico is depicted in these pages as a dangerous environment, want to control their children's movement; the wolf in this sense acts as the impulsive Id that the superego, in the form of the parents, must suppress.

In a curious way objects, too, become the arsenal of the superego. The counter-pastoral of human-made objects designed to maim the environment – metals and plastics in the Appalachian novels - continues in this novel. Its most powerful expression is found in the character "old man Echols" – a somewhat satirical soubriquet for a man whose folksiness occludes the fact that he is an expert in trapping and killing animals. We soon discover that Echols is a cold-blooded killer of animal predators, who uses a warped apothecarian knowledge to kill the wolves. Echols only features in the novel as a reputation: he is spoken of with awed reverence by everyone; his arcane hunting skills renowned for ridding the valley of wolves which were once abundant in this area:

When we used to bring cattle up the valley from down around Cienega Springs why first night we'd generally hit in about Government Draw and make camp there. And you could hear em all across the valley. Them first warm nights. You'd nearly always hear em in that part of the valley. I aint heard one in years.⁷¹

The wolf symbolizes freedom and, in a rather hackneyed way, Mexico as the unknowable *Other*. It also represents the routed *Other* of tamed New Mexico. Therefore, the fact that Billy takes it back across the Mexican border produces a double critique: firstly,

⁷⁰ Ibid. 16

⁷¹ Ibid. 60

on the pseudo-wilderness of his American world and, secondly, the fatally-flawed racial presumption that Mexico is a country best suited for the wild and untamed. The extermination of wolves comes at the cost of taming the wilderness. Billy's spirit too is under threat here. When he visits Echols' cabin with his father and Boyd, the death paraphernalia of iron traps and animal-scent jars are so coldly delineated that they surely foreshadow Billy's subsequent decision not to kill the beast:

In the jars dark liquids. Dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys. The inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more The jars stood webbed in dust and the light among them made of the little room with its chemic glass a strange basilica dedicated to a practice as soon to be extinct among the trades of men as to the beast to whom it owed its being.⁷²

The sense that all of these jars contain the inward parts of beasts (no doubt, the image would have Leopold Bloom smacking his lips) so as to trap them adds to the horror here. The horror is advanced further when they find what they've been looking for: a vessel that has the clinically sounding name of "No. 7 matrix." When we think that Echols and all the other lonely solitary men have lived a life that lacks natural fecundity, predicated on destroying whatever opposes them, it is not so hard to understand why McCarthy ends this novel with an elliptical reference to the testing of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo:

... when he looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on to the east and where there was no sun and no dawn and when he looked again towards the north the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark and the birds that flew had lighted and all had hushed once again in the bracken by the road.⁷³

Harnessing the elemental in order to destroy the elemental informs Echols' death factory. It is such forms of dehumanization and transformation of landscape through "alien"

⁷² Ibid. 17.

⁷³ Ibid. 425

clinical means that provides the tragic existential core of the novel. Billy needs to escape this world and attempts it through a primal engagement with world and animals. That he fails to divest himself completely of his repressed upbringing and fails also to find the *home* that he craves for is part of the novel's counter-pastoral aims.

McCarthy's refusal to anthropomorphize the wolf, *ala* Jack London, is the first step in proposing the impossibility of such a dream. Man and wolf are at the same time ontologically apart and similar. In other words, both species are capable of annihilating anything that stands in their way; both are instinctively capable of showing empathy and loyalty to one's kind. Just before Billy discovers the wolf in the trap, we learn of her wanderings in New Mexico with her mate. The male wolf had got itself trapped. Pregnant with its cub, the she-wolf initially refuses to leave her mate's side:

She carried a scabbedover wound on her hip where her mate had bitten her two weeks before somewhere in the mountains of Sonora. He'd bitten her because she would not leave him. Standing with one forefoot in the jaws of a steeltrap and snarling at her to drive her off where she lay just before beyond the reach of the chain. She'd flattened her ears and whined and she would not leave.⁷⁴

These scenes seem to suggest that the wolf is capable of empathy and kinship, something that is missing a little in Billy's own human community. However, we are quickly disabused of such sentimentality when a few paragraphs on:

At this season the does were already carrying calves and as they commonly aborted long before term the one least favored so twice she found these pale blue unborn still warm and gawking on the ground, milkblue and near translucent in the dawn like beings miscarried from another world entire. She ate even their bones where they lay blind and dying in the snow.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid. 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 26.

McCarthy tempers the hard-boiled naturalism of the above, by stressing the irreducible solitariness of all living beings in a world reduced to necessity. It is this descent into the necessity suffused world of the practico-inert that Billy, tragically, is trying to fight against. Just after her devouring of the aborted calves, the wolf is described as thus: "Before sunrise she was off the plain and she would raise her muzzle where she stood on some low promontory or rock overlooking the valley and howl and howl again into that terrible silence."⁷⁶ This void at the heart of pastoral is echoed by Billy in the penultimate line of the novel where: "He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and wept."⁷⁷

Yet the true tragedy of the novel may lie in Billy and his brother's attempt to unlearn all the negative instructions of their upbringing. It is here where the crossing-over into Mexico represents that element of pastoral forgetfulness which becomes a social critique of inherited American ideals.

The Stripping-Off of American Identity

In the second section of the book we learn of the terrible murder of Billy and Boyd's parents. Such a thing, awful as it is, helps turn the brothers into *heurfanos*; this allows for the beginning of a picturesque which sees them cross over (It will be Billy's second visit) into Mexico in search of their father's stolen horses. A tremendous sense of anticipation leavens their grief as - unburdened as they now are from familial surveillance - they become the outlaws that they had always wanted to be. We see this in the numerous images of nakedness, of clothes literally falling off their backs, as they proceed on their journey; metaphors both of emancipation and transfiguration. Mexico thus seems to represent a figurative stripping-off of the old uniforms of American propriety along with the concomitant sacrifice of self to religious and filial piety. The word naked is used numerous times in their Mexican peregrinations, especially when water is symbolized as a kind of baptism, or rebirth:

⁷⁶ Ibid. 26

⁷⁷ Ibid. 424.

They'd ride the horses out across the fields to the river and Billy would throw down the saddle and bedrolls and while the girl made camp he'd take the horses downriver and strip off his boots and clothes and ride bareback into the river leading Boyd's horse by the reins and sit the horse naked save for his hat ... (.)⁷⁸

Here the social meaning of pastoral as alternative to the somber and deterministic Protestant/Calvinist abnegation of self is demonstrated. In the lighter moments, Billy is the hero of another tale – echoes of Roy Rogers singing his way through the prairie on his piebald horse are conjured up –, joyously meandering his way through a new life, and without the un-freedom of parental control.

As Billy and Boyd move into Mexico they begin to lose semblance of what they once were. The use of clothes falling off their back connotes a kind of existential transformation that points to what Nietzsche termed in *The Birth of Tragedy* “as active forgetting.” D. H. Lawrence, once again, is a wise guide to this idea. In his essay on James Fenimore Cooper, Lawrence argues that Europeans “came to America for two reasons: first, to slough off the old European consciousness completely; and, second, to summon a new skin, a new form, growing underneath. This second is a hidden process.”⁷⁹ The attempt at sloughing off skin can have disastrous consequences, however: “Sometimes snakes can't slough. They can't burst their old skin. Then they go sick and die inside the old skin, and nobody ever sees the new pattern.”⁸⁰ Lawrence seems to suggest that this failure to produce a new skin leads to an American neurosis: remaining civilized entails the repression of a freer nature. In Billy Parham's case, because the frontier had all but disappeared in his time, the sloughing off of the old means a new identification with wilderness. This of course comes at a tremendous cost; for beneath the new skin, the memory of the old skin itches: “It needs a real desperate recklessness to burst your old skin at last. You simply don't care what happens to you, if

⁷⁸ Ibid. 234.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, D. H. *Classics in American Literature*. 58.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 58.

you rip yourself in two, so long as you do get out.”⁸¹ This warning is behind the story of Boyd who sheds his skin so completely that, although in corporeal terms he dies, his spirit passes into legend.

The very title of the novel, *The Crossing*, suggests a going over, a transgression, to the other side in which the old borders are erased. Early on in their odyssey, Billy and Boyd ask some old timers the way; each one, in turn, is unable to give a conclusive answer to how they should proceed. The forgetting of self, home, ideology and nationality allows these cowboys the momentary joy of ripping up the strict codes that they had hitherto lived by. After only a few weeks in Mexico – the place where American law “cain’t go to” – Billy is unable to recognize himself or his brother:

Billy was watching the reflections of two riders passing in the glass of the building’s window across the street where the gaunted horses slouched by segments through the wonky panes when he saw the illjoined dog appear also and realized that the rider at the head of this unprepossessing parade was he himself.⁸²

Boyd is the only one who, by dying and attaining mythic apotheosis, succeeds at sloughing off his American skin. Billy, on the other hand, and this is his tragedy, is torn apart by the wearing of two skins: old American Protestant moralist vying with new transnational subversive. The facticity of nationality, the need to affirm one’s American identity, if that’s what Billy ultimately represents, is shown through the fact that he applies twice, and fails twice (333-341), to join the army in order to fight in the Pacific wars. It is also in his decision to retrieve Boyd’s bones from Mexico (390-393) and bury them in American soil. The sense of being self-haunted by the wearing of two skins shadows Billy’s return to origin, to American soil. This is further demonstrated in the dream he has just before burying Boyd:

⁸¹ Ibid. 58-59.

⁸² McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. 195-196.

He slept that night in his own country and he had a dream wherein he saw God's pilgrims laboring upon a darkened verge in the last of the twilight of that day and they seemed to be returning from some deep enterprise that was not of war nor were they yet in flight but rather seemed coming from some labor to which perhaps these and all things stood subjugate.⁸³

Another way of putting this, and perhaps in a less mystical way, is to say that Billy is very much aware that outside the ranch and homestead there is a violence that cannot be repelled by putting up fences, either figuratively or physically.

McCarthy, especially in *The Crossing*, seems to suggest that there are two kinds of history: the first is the history of artifacts, the official history of archives, military, political, and economic, which help form a nation's identity and ideology. Such a historiography is backed up by eye-witness accounts, photography and, before that, painting and journalistic testaments. It is the history of imperial commission and is slanted to preserve and conserve a nation's ideology. The other history is counter-propulsive; it is the history of the oppressed, of victims, of communities crushed or pushed aside by national armies and bands of mercenaries steamrolling everything that stands in the way of their sense of progress. This history is often non-historiographical; it is the history of hearsay, of rumor and of legend, authenticated only in song and story. Billy as witness has to place himself apart from such mythic interpellation: his burden is to carry an American consciousness wherever he goes. But, as the story so tragically evinces, even he cannot stop himself from listening to the romance-pastoral's siren song:

... in the mountains a hawk passed before the sun and its shadow ran so quick in the grass before them that it caused the horse to shy and the boy looked up where the bird turned high above them and he took the bow from his shoulder and nocked and loosed an arrow and watched it rise with the wind rattling the fletching slotted into

⁸³ Ibid. 421.

the cane and watched it turning and arcing and the hawk wheeling and then flaring suddenly with the arrow locked in its pale breast.⁸⁴

Billy is shown here in the mountains, altogether disconsolate after shooting the wolf rather than allowing it to be torn apart by fighting dogs (112). He is grieving here for the wolf, but also because he senses that his parents are dead. The narrator seems to intercede here, allowing for a temporary transfiguration in which Billy becomes an exemplary man of the wild. But it is only temporary: for the rest of the novel the mythos enshrouds his brother Boyd, not Billy:

Finally she said the word was abroad in the country. That all the world knew that the guerito had killed the gerente from Las Varitas. The man who had betrayed Socorro Rivera and sold out his own people to the Guardia Blanca of La Babicoa. Billy listened to all this and when he was done he said that the manco had fallen from his horse and broken his back and that he himself had seen it happen.⁸⁵

This does not stop the people from apotheosizing Boyd as an outlaw hero: Mexico, with its extreme poverty, endemic illiteracy, and failed bloody revolutions, lends itself well to the oral tradition of folk song. In this kind of country, news of derring-do has a significance way beyond credible fact. Boyd, because of his premature death, and because he stood up to fearsome authoritarian figures, is apotheosized as the “gerente” who dared to rob banks.

McCarthy’s version of history, similar to his “optical democracy,” is a non-vertical version from the ground up. This is often nebulously felt: it is evidenced mostly on a prosaic level though the various protagonists’ wry and often dismissive comments on agency and causality. But overall the narrative vision is there to record the disaffection felt by Americans as changes in the socioeconomic situation took from under them the myths that had hitherto nurtured them. The meaning of this can only be understood if we

⁸⁴ Ibid. 130.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 322.

separate the mythic mosaic into the fragments that they are. This is why the anachronous use of cowboys is perfectly suited for an overriding sense of mythical disillusion. In this way they become perfect historical conveyers of this confusion. The nebulous, then, acts as a natural and realistic register for the protagonists' sense of unease and alienation with their particular *Umwelt*. This sense of disquiet is difficult to express, especially when the stabilizing sign of subjectivity is under threat by the forces of late capitalism. This is why I will argue henceforward that the Sartrean concepts used by David Holloway need to be jettisoned and replaced by ones that can challenge the very notion of immanent subject identity. For in *Cities of the Plain*, the final novel of the *Border Trilogy*, the theme of frontier attenuation and obsolescent forms of work suggest that the various myths surrounding the cowboy-subject are losing their potency.

3) Detours of the Imaginary: *Cities of the Plain* and the Cowboy Pastoral

For Louis Althusser, in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," it is impossible to ignore the coercive "hey, you!" that hails us into social being. It is the unavoidable call that, once answered, constitutes the subject as "subject-to" the social formation. Subjectivity, therefore, is never a Cartesian act of consciousness, never a cognitive leap from Sartre's "practico-inert" ("being-in-itself") to "being-for-itself," but something that is imposed on us by social structures already in place. This means that consciousness is determined by the economic relations of any given social formation; and it is this latter extrinsic determination that makes most, if not all, social activity ideological.⁸⁶ Moreover, the level or intensity of this relation is contingent on the specific social and property relations of any given historical period. In this era of late capitalism, where systems of exchange seem to permeate nearly every human activity, ideological disorientation is heightened to the degree that we mistake what is imagined as real. Everything thus takes the form of mirage and hallucination: the imaginary is a substitute for the real that is unreachable. The main ruse of this, the reason why we don't all end up in the madhouse, is that certain social practices (family, school, work, sport, so-called high

⁸⁶ Slavoj Žižek, for one, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, seems to subscribe to this viewpoint.

and pop culture, etc.) help give the impression that we are free, self-totalizing, self-directing subjects.⁸⁷ The master-illusion is the one that tells us we are the central actors in our own stories. But the crisis in this last novel in the *Border Trilogy*, *Cities of the Plain* (1995) is that these once 'meaningful' social practices have been ripped apart by the new forces of capitalism in post-war America. Because there is much more emphasis on the effects of the modern than the previous two novels, we shall consider this novel as going beyond the existentialist perspective of Holloway, and thus take recourse to the anti-subject theories of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, as a means of understanding McCarthy's signaling the ratcheting up of a new state of emergency in contemporary American life.

The Search for Meaning

Althusser's theory of ideology was very much influenced by Jacques Lacan's notion of the Symbolic. The human subject is indeed constituted by language: but because the words that the subject uses are based on a system of signs already in place, access to the real is only relational at best. Language may well be a conveyer of meaning, but meaning is always contingent on the other units of words that make up a speech utterance. The crux of the matter though is even more complex: to refuse the law of the Symbolic leads to madness; for it means the death of ego and enslavement to the uncontrolled drives of the Id. The mediations of ideology and language are therefore necessary to protect the ego from the libidinal energy of the Id and a complete descent into the imaginary.⁸⁸

In several ways the tragedy of the *Border Trilogy* is the search for the real beyond the symbolic, something - whether this manifests itself as familial duty, religious vision, or patriotic sentiment - beyond the constraining ordering systems that American life has to offer. It is tragic because the search for the authentic in these stories becomes another

⁸⁷ All of the above ideas attributed to Louis Althusser can be found in his essay: "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. 127-186.

⁸⁸ See Jacques Lacan: "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I." *Ecrits: a Selection*. 1-7.

detour into the imaginary: a cowboy pastoral of enchantments: hallucinations, mirages and nothing more. The fly in the ointment is the acute social changes taking place in front of Billy Parham and John Grady Cole's eyes as they fight their corner in a wilderness bisected by highways, military enclosures, oil derricks, and fenced-in pastureland. The trouble, as we shall see, with this is that their "meaningful" resistance to these changes is often incongruous: the life of the cowboy is at its moment of obsolescence. And when all is said and done, sullen obstinacy and stylized lugubriousness to this or the oft-spoken desire for simpler times seem to be rather weak responses to the socio-economic determinants spoiling the pastoral idyll.

For in this novel there are vast fissures now in the ordering realm of the Symbolic: the triumph of the imaginary now attacks some of the more cherished units of the American pastoral, especially its idea of finding a pleasant place of seclusion far from the noise of history. In short, the novel seems to register a vanquishing of all former meaningful, albeit imaginary, representations of American life. It is this that McCarthy elegizes and it is this also that links this novel to the one that follows, *No Country for Old Men*.

McCarthy seems to be concerned with seepage from the real: i.e., the frequent crises in the economic base that produces a lingering sense that the values his protagonists live by are chimerical at best. Billy Parham at the end of this novel has fallen into the latter camp. In a twist of the old Homeric story he returns to his place of origin, New Mexico, but unlike Odysseus it is a homecoming fraught with sadness at how the world has not matched up to his ideals: "In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong."⁸⁹ This is said just before Billy leaves the wilderness to end his days in something close to the conventionally domestic. Perhaps it is here we discover why redemption comes at the price of a major tragical concession for the American

⁸⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain*. 266.

romance-hero: the giving up of expressive individualism for the relative un-freedoms of community.

It seems sadly appropriate, then, that the epic idea of Romance and its correlation in American literature with landscape and character ends with Billy Parham living out his last days in a suburbanized New Mexico. As discussed in the chapter on *The Crossing*, the accoutrements of the hero never quite suit him. Perhaps this is why the trilogy's heroic narrative is cut short half-way through by the insertion of an epilogue that brings the story to its close. For here we find Billy in an alien city landscape (Los Angeles), homeless and redundant, encountering a mystic in the thoroughly unromantic setting of a highway underpass.

The stranger-mystic tells a story, a dream of another man dreaming, a figuration that in itself seems to indicate an extreme sense of dislocation. The dreamer dreamt is a man who, having fallen asleep on a table of rock in the middle of a desert, wakes up to see a large troupe of people, pilgrims perhaps, moving towards him, pushing along a woman who is obviously going to be offered up for sacrifice. The pilgrims are carrying a large horn with a strange potion contained within. They offer it to the dreamer: "He drank it down and handed back the cup and almost at once all was taken from him so that he was like a child again and a great peace settled upon him and his fears abated ---(.)"⁹⁰ David Holloway sees this mystifying dream within a dream sequence, along with the sudden abridgement of the story into epilogue, as a final "unmooring of the subject to the signifying chain ... everything is now disorienting; the dream within a dream sequence unmooring language itself so that it drifts along in ever receding lines of signification."⁹¹ Seen in this way, the potion functions as a numbing narcotic to McCarthy's career-long insistence that "there is no life without bloodshed"; a way for the "unmoored subject" to face what is the dream's central

⁹⁰ Ibid. 280.

⁹¹ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 287.

scene: a horrific blood sacrifice. Billy, who has been our witness through all the accruing horrors in *The Crossing*, witness, too, to the death of his friend John Grady Cole, also stands as a modern archetype of the human being who each day is an “unmoored” bystander to the horrors of war and genocide. It is also a metaphor for how such myths as the American pastoral pushes history aside, a narcotic that will stop the dreamer from thinking he is an “accomplice in a blood ceremony that was then and is now an affront to God.”⁹² However the price paid for imbibing the philter is severe: flight from the social reality can only succeed if history and violence are forgotten: “Was that the penalty? No. There was a greater cost even than that. What was it? That this too would be forgot. Would that be such a bad idea? Wait and see.” (290).

What is the lesson of this mini-allegory? Billy, like his namesake, Billy Pilgrim, in Kurt Vonnegut Junior’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, must survive as witness to the violence that he has experienced, but survival means impotent acceptance of the Escherian narrative that encloses him, “where nothing inside the text can be grasped in any determinate manner, and where any outside or “otherwise” to the text seems irretrievable.”⁹³ Forgetting means drowning oneself in the miasma of late-capitalist amnesia:

A form without a history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future. 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.⁹⁴

The parable helps usher in Billy’s return to origin; but, with the onset of old age and death imminent, it ultimately means the final rejection of pastoral fantasy, a rejection, sadly, that has nothing heuristic to offer other than a sad and pathetic death-bed admission: “I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothing.” (292). The implied decline into senescence of

⁹² McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain*. 280

⁹³ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 299.

⁹⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain*. 261-262.

Billy at novel's end acts as a parallel metaphor for the pastoral's end of days in which the temporal narrative of community is reasserted over the atemporal narrative of wilderness.

Billy's eventual return to his New Mexico origins represents the final acceptance of the symbolic over the excesses of the pastoral imaginary. Myth loses its valency in times of scarcity and contraction; this is especially true of the Western variant of the American pastoral, which needs a kind of perennial youthfulness, endless wilderness and an open frontier for its sustenance. If this is no longer there, then the myth becomes a form of pathology that will end in madness and death. To give oneself up completely to its appeal, to forget altogether, means death. This is shown by the cessation of the cowboy idyll represented by John Grady's own demise early on in the novel at the hands of a Mexican pimp. It is fitting, then, that the more grounded Billy Parham is the one to carry John Grady through the Mexican streets on the Sabbath: the symbolism of which is to confer resurrection on the living rather than the dead: "The dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all out of that passing landscape of street or wall or paling sky ... (.)"⁹⁵ Everything is through the eyes of Billy here; not John Grady. He is dead: "nothing at all" (262). Death means the end of the symbolic and a final entry into the real that is always closed off from the living. The price for this entry is final: John Grady's mythic apotheosis comes at the cost of him not being around to witness it:

This man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads and the woman stepped once more into the street and the children followed and all continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world.⁹⁶

This is very different from the way Boyd's death is viewed in *The Crossing*. In that novel, he is apotheosized as a hero in a *corrido*; here, the witnesses seem not to care. That the mystical fatalism is taken out does not mean the end of social blindness for Billy: it is there

⁹⁵ Ibid. 262.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 262.

to mark the continuation of the symbolic as material facticity; as an unproductive normalcy cut off from the real.

In Search of A Meaningful Symbolic

In this novel, we find John Grady and Billy Parham chummed-up and working on a New Mexico ranch in 1952. We soon find that this ranch is another example of *The Orchard Keeper's* "precarious and happenstantial" motif. It will soon be taken over by the US military, a now thoroughly corporatized institution that obviously sees the wastelands as an ideal site for weapon experimentation. Quite literally the ranch has bumped into the nuclear age and is, in John Cant's words, no longer

A last refuge for a disappearing world. This largely all-male world is the last, but now thoroughly broken, redoubt of America's pastoral realm. Texas cattle will give way to Texas oil. Agriculture will be superseded by industry and corporate capitalism.⁹⁷

The sense that a particular way of life, albeit imaginary, in the sense that Althusser means it, is coming to an end, and will be supplanted by an aggressive, less mythically-emolliating economic order, is palpable. Moreover, the sense of pastoral loss, and the disconsolation attending it, is heartbreakingly expressed by Billy:

When you're a kid you have these notions about how things are goin to be, Billy said. You get a little older and you pull back on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everthing. I don't think people even know it yet.⁹⁸

Here we have a good example of Billy as more than stolid picaro. There is historical perspective here which allows us to see him as a witness to the acute changes taking place in the social reality: as a character, he is on the border between the mythic and the real. This type of writing is close to what critic JanMohammed means when he divides literature

⁹⁷ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 225.

⁹⁸ McCarthy, Cormac: *Cities of the Plain*. 78.

into “imaginary” and “symbolic” codes.”⁹⁹ The writer of the imaginary text tends to “fetishize a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and other. Threatened by a metaphysical alterity that he has created, he quickly retreats to the homogeneity of his own group.” Writers of “symbolic” texts tend to be more open to a modifying dialectic of self and other; and it is this preparedness to consider syncretism that is the most important factor distinguishing it from the imaginary text. Ultimately it is the ability to bracket the values and bases of imperialist culture that determines the success of the symbolic text as a vehicle for subverting or avoiding the economy of Manichean allegory.¹⁰⁰

McCarthy is adept at limning the boundaries between the symbolic and imaginary codes; for instance, there are moments where certain tropes point to an acceptance of the prevailing order (e.g. the idyll of the hacienda in *All the Pretty Horses* or the domestic coziness of the ranch scenes in *Cities of the Plain*); however, if we agree with JanMohammed’s idea of the dialectic working within the symbolic, we can see that the recurring themes of pastoral enchantment and disenchantment, homelessness and nomadry, freedom and unfreedom, constantly irrupt notions of the “normal,” and by doing so bring about a tension between the symbolic and imaginary.

A powerful demonstration of the blurring of imaginary and symbolic codes is provided by Billy’s friend, Troy. In the following anecdote, we witness an inventory of actions which describe, *en passant*, the end of the war, meaningless monetary exchange, imprisonment, violence, and so on. For Troy, one meaningless peregrination follows another.

⁹⁹ Although JanMohammed is known as a post-colonial critic, his Lacan inflected “imaginary” and “symbolic” distinctions helps explain McCarthy’s textual innovations.

¹⁰⁰ My use of JanMohammed here is derived from Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 134-135.

Here the numerous simple sentences give off a sense of both dislocation and disaffection:

Worked in Colorado. Worked up in the panhandle. Got throwed in jail in this little chickenshit town I won't even name it to you. State of Texas though. I hadn't done nothing. Just in the wrong a blues song of endless repetition. I got discharged in San Diego. Took the first bus out. Me and another old boy got drunk on the bus and like to got throwed off. I got off in Tucson and went in a store and bought a new pair of Judson boots and a suit. I don't know what the hell I bought the suit for. I thought you was supposed to have one. I got on another bus and come on to El Paso and went up that evening to Almagordo and got my horses. I wandered all over the country.¹⁰¹

This travelogue stripped of all romance, with its reference to the end of the war and Alamogordo (home of the nuclear test referenced at the end of *The Crossing*) is the flipside of that great American myth which John Grady and Billy Parham have bought into: the romance of movement that is both free and purposeful. Here each sentence suggests a discontinuation, a meaningless progression, whose nodal points fail to connect up with each other. The deathlessness of the *corrido* seems to have met its most powerful adversary: language as a broken signifying chain: "I like to never got out of there. I'd got in a fight with a Mexican and like to killed him. I was in jail for nine months to the day. I wouldn't of wrote home for nothing."¹⁰² However, if we piece this mosaic together, it is possible to recontextualize it as a fragmented but very real representation of the life of the cowboy as proletarian journeyman.

¹⁰¹ McCarthy, Cormac: *Cities of the Plain*. 22.

¹⁰² Ibid. 22-23.

It thus becomes clear that in this last novel of the *Border Trilogy* McCarthy is at pains to dismantle the pastoral elements in the cowboy myth. The cowboys on the ranch may often use the locutions and gestures (the studied laconisms, the spitting, the obligatory raising of the Stetson while astride a horse, and so on) but they are always presented as hired workers who are very clearly contracted labor.

In this way the fictionalized enchantments mirror the enchantments of the social reality: both then become fused in a critique that looks at the problematics of fictional and social representation. The need to forget in order to identify oneself with a more pleasing mythology, the compulsion to merge into a fictive pastoral set in the romantic playground of Mexico, is constantly placed under erasure by McCarthy. By making his heroes play straight, to believe too much in the truth and value of what they do is one of the devices that McCarthy uses to undermine the suspect nature of the cross-border enterprise.

McCarthy to the end allows his heroes to play it straight. In this way their failure to attain a life commensurate with their lofty ideals becomes all the more tragic. The gradual foreshortening of such ideals often comes in the form of the anti-hero, a character whose very outlandishness, baroquely evil to the point of being comical (very much like the judge in *Blood Meridian* and Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*) is diametrically opposed to the “play-it-straight” heroes in the McCarthy *oeuvre*. The fact that John Grady is done away with half-way through the novel suggests a certain wry distancing from his heroic status.

The Foreshortening of the Epic Hero

The foreshortening of the centrality of the hero, the carrier of the fire into the wilderness dark, is best exemplified in the knife fight that ends John Grady Cole's life. Eduardo, his nemesis, reveals to him the possible truth to all the reasons that brought him to meet his fate while also handing out a crushing verdict on the naïf stupidity of the American sojourner in Mexico:

In his dying perhaps the suitor will see that it was his hunger for mysteries that has undone him. Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That It contains nothing save what stands before one While your world – he passed the blade back and forth like a shutter through a loom – your world totters upon an unspoken

labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you, my friend. You and your pale empire.¹⁰³

If we can dwell a little on this last epithet, “pale empire,” it can shed a bit more light on the above comments about epical foreshortening. The adjective “pale” suggests something more than just a reference to the lighter skin color of Americans with European ancestry. Echoing a motif that is implicit in the full title of his first western novel, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the Sun*, McCarthy also suggests here that the empire is in tragic decline, that it is indeed dying, is no longer in full flame and perforce ebbing away. And, in its death agony, its cultural forms are dying along with it too. There is little left to be written about the West; an allegorical figuration that, anyway, is anachronistic in its use of semi-feudal, pastoral and chivalric motifs.

McCarthy in this death scene avoids the “economy of Manichean allegory” by giving moral equivalency to Eduardo’s devastating speech. Readings of McCarthy have generally accepted that the texts display a preoccupation with the idea of “the dangerous man” or “men” who arrive out of the blue to either wreak violent havoc on a person or community or articulate some terrible prophecy that ends up becoming true. These dangerous beings are supposed to represent the ineluctable struggle between good and evil, and are suggestive of Gnostic ideas about the prevalence of good and bad angels in the world.¹⁰⁴ With McCarthy, however, the “good” characters are often so good that the values they adhere to fall dangerously within the parameters of the imaginary; they become utterers of banalities, so blinded by their perception of what is true that they end up as evangelists of the status quo. This is manifest in the characterization of John Grady Cole who is somewhat derisively referred to as the “All-American Cowboy” by Billy Parham on the opening page. By allowing John Grady to function as a kind of noble knight in this story and then have him

¹⁰³ Ibid. 253.

¹⁰⁴ For a good discussion on the ‘dangerous man’ motif and how it is used from novel to novel, see John Cant’s *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. The index will provide you with numerous page references for this idea.

die halfway through the story at the hands of a man who offers some sharp insights on the illusions attending such conceptions of the self, we are able to see that beneath this masquerade are a set of assumptions not that different from any person who blindly accepts the inherited values of a particular culture.

It seems no accident, then, that *Cities of the Plain* is a very short, almost novella-like novel. The reasons for this should be explored. Firstly, by abruptly cutting the romance epic short after Grady Cole's death through the interpolation of a lengthy epilogue, suggests a self-reflexive exhaustion with the genre itself: If we understand it in this sense, then the comments become a wry political commentary on the ideological illusions of such representation. Secondly, and very much related to the last point, because Eduardo's remarks cast scorn on the idea of Mexico and the Border States as repositories of the extraordinary, places for those Americans disillusioned with the staid conventions of home, they question the dubious politics of epical fiction. Lastly, in a very neat inversion Eduardo's comments suggest that Mexico, even with its exotic image, is more knowable than the latent complexities that underlie America's celebrated transparency. Behind America's manifestly open society is a labyrinth of Calvinist/Puritan values that with the added inscrutability of a commoditized culture casts darkness on its surface of lights. The foreshortening of the epic in McCarthy is therefore a political decision freighted with concern for America's imperial past.

If we add to this the anarchy of the market place, then we have a poisoning of all notions of self-autonomy. For example, the idea of transgression acts as both a repression and a goad even in its most conservative families: yet throughout the novel we see John Grady Cole and Billy Parham either in brothels or embroiled in uncritical scenarios of money-dominated relations. The descent into the sensual pastoral is, therefore, never just that: money, exchange value, contaminates everything. This foreshortening by McCarthy of the Western epic suggests a substitution of Arcadia for the capitalist arcade in American society. This, as we shall see, is tragically rendered in the novel's description of the last days of Billy Parham, who because of old-age has no more labor use-value to offer, and is thus set adrift in a world of signs with little correspondence between them.

The Arcadian Cowboy in the Capitalist Arcade

There is, it has to be said, something absurdly anachronistic about cowboys having epic adventures in the middle of the twentieth century. In *Cities of the Plain*, it becomes clear that McCarthy is parodying this idea, with Mexico as a medieval Disneyland, another form of entertainment consumerism for the young American bored with mass culture, tormented simultaneously with a vague horror of a slow death in suburbia. However, the fact that Billy and John Grady are both already saturated by the ideology of exchange suggests that they cannot help but bring such things to the Mexican table. A luminous example of how the American Dream has been vitiated by exchange value is shown in the following passage:

He stood there for two hours. The whores came across the room one by one to solicit him and one by one returned. He didn't ask about her. When he left he'd had five whiskies and he paid for them with a dollar and put another dollar on top of it for the barman. He crossed Juarez Avenue and went limping up Mejia to the Napoleon and took a seat in front of the café and ordered a steak. He sat and drank coffee while he watched the life in the streets. A man came to the door and he tried to sell him a Madonna made of painted celluloid. A man with a strange device with dials and levers asked him if he wished to electrocute himself.¹⁰⁵

This image of Juarez as a microcosm of capitalist exchange is a long way from John Grady and Billy Parham's vision of Mexico as a place which modernity had forgot. Thus, as David Holloway has also noted, the early scenes of cowboys at work and play always operates in a reality where everything is up for exchange - labor, women, food, horses, and so on.

This is a way of life that despoils its own pastoral ambitions. The first few pages describe a whorehouse: the most quintessential and ancient form of exchange:

The whores in their shabby dishabille looked up from the shabby sofas where they sat. The place was all but empty. They stomped their boots again and

¹⁰⁵ McCarthy, Cormac: *Cities of the Plain*. 37

crossed to the bar and stood and thumbed back their hats and propped their boots on the rail above the tiled drainway while the barman poured their whiskies.¹⁰⁶

These are familiar habits: cowboys acting like cowboys. The flat prose serves to highlight what Sartre would call the seriality of actions that signify group behavior in the practico inert.¹⁰⁷ Everything in these first pages suggests the kind of leisure that people working for a wage in a male-dominated environment would do: the banter, the cajolery, the crude egging each other on: “She’d bounce John Grady off the ceiling. Not the all-american cowboy she wouldn’t. The cowboy’d stick like a cocklebur.” (4). This is male working class life, the emollient of wage-slavery. Billy Parham, the least romantic cowboy, refers to this truth a few pages on: “daybreak to backbreak for a godgiven dollar, said Billy. You love this life, son. I love this life. You do love this life, don’t you. Cause by god I love it. Just love it.” (10). It’s hard to know whether Billy is joking or being serious here; somewhere in between, I suspect.

And perhaps it is this very acting-out that explains why Billy Parham, near the end of the novel, finds work in the movies. The temporal setting of this novel, as well as some of the early novels marks the young heyday of Hollywood cinema, its very birth coinciding with the death of the American West. The only place left for a cowboy is in the movies: “In the spring of second year of the millennium he was living in the Gardner Hotel in El Paso Texas and working as an extra in a movie.” (150). In this late era of capitalism, art imitates life to such a degree that there are disorienting reflections of it everywhere. In the next few sentences Billy’s disaffection – for his age precludes him from working as an extra in the movies - is shown with the enormous reflecting screen of the movie replaced by the television screen: a perfect metaphor of epical contraction:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. 259-264.

When the work came to an end he stayed in his room. There was a television set in the lobby and men his age and younger sat in the lobby in the evening in the old chairs and watched television but he cared little for it and the men had little to say to him or he to them.¹⁰⁸

Billy here seems to be adrift in a world of cinematic images whose screens reflect all kinds of imaginaries. The irony of this is that Billy the Cowboy and Billy the Actor are perhaps one and the same. This is why the faux-naturalism of the cowboys-at-work scenes of the first half of the novel is abruptly replaced by an epilogue that focuses on the idea of dreams-within-dreams, and stories-within-stories. David Holloway sees this as the culmination of a debate that McCarthy has been having with language since the first novel in the *Border Trilogy*, *All the Pretty Horses*:

The culmination of this debate ... arrives in the imaginative leap McCarthy makes between a shattering of the real into so many acts of mere representation and the pain of historical closure that accompanies this vanishing of the world as a verifiable totality."¹⁰⁹

The shattering of the real is replicated in the novel's truncated ending. The epilogue begins in real time and shows Billy leaving the ranch after John Grady's death. It then, in a few sketchy paragraphs, details Billy's wanderings across the New Mexican and Texan farmlands. The land has changed to the degree that it is no longer fit for cattle pasture:

There was no work in that country anywhere. Pasture gates stood open and sand drifted in the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind and he rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old."¹¹⁰

These last sentences suggest that the law of surplus value has contracted the pastoral world that Billy wanted to be part of.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 262-265.

¹⁰⁹ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 217.

¹¹⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain*. 217.

Is McCarthy suggesting that his characters' very dissociation from society abets their tragic ends? Or that the wrapping of oneself up in myths, the adherence to an imaginary self and an imaginary national conception, are the very things which both ravel and unravel the American ideal? It would seem so. What is also apparent is how the death of a particular mythology, the possibility of a wilderness pastoral in a country that is running out of space, ratchets up the despair to apocalyptic levels: a despair that becomes all the starker after taking note of the fact that these late novels are temporally much closer to our own time. Seen in this way, it is possible to argue that *Cities of the Plains* is thematically similar to the concerns in his next novel, *No Country for Old Men* as well as McCarthy's most recent publication, the post-apocalyptic *The Road*. All these novels seem to question the veracity of the old values that America bases itself on. And all seem to regard the all-devouring capitalist imaginary as a much more dangerous entity.

Part Four:

**Pastoral Termini – South and South-West:
Visions of Social Apocalypse in *No Country
for Old Men* and *The Road*.**

Chapter Six

1) The Shape of Things to Come: The Ambivalent Voice of Cultural Conservatism in *No Country for Old Men*.

In this next novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) we discover a shifting of generic, thematic, temporal and geographic concerns. The two previous novels are for the most part set in New Mexico and Mexico, whereas here we see a return to John Grady's original stamping ground, the Texan towns of the south-west bordering Mexico. Though the "hard" wilderness pastoral of the desert landscape is rendered in the usual absolute fashion, as in -

The raw rock mountains shadowed in the late sun and to the east the shimmering abscissa of the desert plains under a sky where raincurtains hung dark as soot along the quadrant. That god lives in silence who has scoured the following land with salt and ash.¹

-, the desolations brought about by economic change, especially the rise in violent drug-related crime, have atomized the traditional communities to the extent that an untraversable cultural desert now stands between the values of the young and the old. The temporal shift reflects this: it is now the beginning of the 1980s, a period that will soon come to be defined as the "Reagan Decade" (the Reagan presidency will last two terms: 1981-85 and 1985-89), one in which greed and corruption, and the growing confluence of politics and crime, will be covered-up by the gloss of the president's "All-American cowboy" smile and his government's alliance with the Christian conservative right known as the "Moral Majority." In other words, the counter-pastoral contaminants of violence and apocalyptic presentiment are congealed into social fact.

It was the perceived failures of previous administrations that helped prepare the ground for the aggressive neo-conservatism of Reagan's two terms. As early as the mid-60s the New Conservatives together with their nominal leader plotted to bring to an end the

¹ McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 45.

excessive social spending and high taxation of previous governments as a way of cauterizing the social-contract legacy of The New Deal. More sinisterly, the Reagan ascendancy brought to bear Richard Hofstadter's 1956 prediction that the up-and-coming era would see an end, or reaction to, the liberal American century epitomized by the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, from within the ranks of liberalism itself:

... perhaps for the first time since the 1890s this situation is changing, for there are some signs that liberals are beginning to find it both natural and expedient to explore the merits and employ the rhetoric of conservatism ... (T)hey feel that we can better serve ourselves in the calculable future by holding what we have gained and learned, while trying to find some way out of the dreadful impasse of our polarized world.²

The agenda was to introduce the economics of *laissez faire* as a way out of the liberal impasse. The targets of this economic *volte-face* on the general culture would be, among other things, the sudden deregulation of public sector industries, the attack on organized labor, and the beginning of a mass privatization program that would scar the industrial landscape for many years after. This release of pent-up libidinal energy engendered the feeling that anything was permissible as long as the end goal chimed with profit. However, the radical shift from a more centrally-controlled social policy further atomized a culture – still reeling from the effects of Vietnam and the political assassinations that had spoiled the Sixties' liberal dream - that was already coming adrift from its moorings. In the various conservative heartlands this feeling of disaffection was felt most acutely. Moreover, in the general culture a threnody of loss was underscoring the literature, movies and music of the time. Part of the social message of *No Country for Old Men*, therefore, is its film-noir-like inquiry into the differences between traditional conservative values – as represented by

² Richard Hofstadter is quoted in: Johnson, Haynes. *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*. 66.

besieged protagonist Sheriff Bell and his pastoral-inflected meditations on a simpler, more innocent American past – and the radical conservatism that was about to take its place.

No Country for Old Men's principal prophet of the shape of things to come is Sherriff Bell. At the end of the novel, and after the terrible fall-out of the murders committed by Anton Chigurh, he hears, and uncritically accepts, an apocalyptic warning from his wife:

At supper this evenin she told me she'd been readin St. John. The Revelations. Any time I get to talkin about how things are she'll find something in the bible so I asked her if Revelations had anything to say about the shape things was takin and she said she'd let me know. I asked her if there was anthing in there about green hair and nosebones and she said not in so many words there wasnt. I don't know if that's a good sign or not.³

The references to punk hairstyles and body accessories appear to mark Bell out as a cultural conservative. Yet what is much more interesting than these very common brickbats thrown at juvenile degeneracy is how they self-blind the sheriff from the often violent eschatological imagery of his wife's bible-reading articulations; for it is through her that we get a glimpse of the fire and brimstone projections of the resurgent conservative right who will soon suddenly and incongruously become lynchpins in the Republican bacchanal of anything-goes economics. In this sense, Bell's uxorious and somewhat saccharine descriptions of his wife are very much in the vein of the media-savvy Ronald Reagan's use of his marriage to Nancy Reagan: the media-image of their relationship elicited a pastoral of permanence that suggested nothing has changed when everything in fact had. In a similar fashion, Bell's referencing of his beloved is a normalizing device that allows chaos to be seen as something that is in direct opposition to his way of life. This can be evinced in the moments where, now and again, Bell and his wife are described as enjoying a pastoral life a little beyond the horrors affecting the community in the town:

³ McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 304-305.

She was riding along a red dirt ridge to the south sitting with her hands crossed on the pommel, looking toward the last of the sun, the horse slogging slowly through the loose sandy dirt, the red stain of it following them in the still air. That's my heart yonder, he told the horse. It always was.⁴

In this falsely emolliating image, we find Bell and his wife momentarily in a frieze of pastoral restoration. However, we soon find out that the chaos engendered by Chigurh has made them want to leave and sell-up. As in *The Orchard Keeper*, *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, the image of a secluded homestead is graven with evil portent – it cannot hold out against that which lies outside its gates. In this novel, it is an ineffectual redoubt against the shock and awe changes that Chigurh, as metonym for the social transformations hitting America at this time, represents.

For Apocalypse of a more secular and social kind was just around the corner. The Reaganite renunciation of the worst governmental and personal excesses of the 1960s engendered a political revolution that simultaneously preached against cultural degeneracy while creating a fiscal program tantamount to economic hedonism. Thus part of the tragedy in the novel is that Sheriff Bell, our confused guide on the changes taking place in America, is both symptom and victim of the cultural malaise that would gather pace once Reagan took office.

The obstacle for Bell's *objet a*, the traditional conservative pastoral with its valorization of the "common people" (196), is obviously the ramifications of perceived sixties libertarianism: e.g., the prevalence of abortion (197), drug use and, as mentioned, punk haircuts. Bell's forlorn backward glance tries to settle on an alternative: a dewy-eyed idyll of Eisenhower's America; a pre-rock-n-roll America where everyone lived on the main-street of civic virtue. It is this unarticulated comparison that lies behind his anguish about the younger generation:

⁴ Ibid. 300.

I read in the papers here a while back some teachers come across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools around the country. Had this questionnaire about what was the problems with teachin in the schools. And they came across the forms, they'd been filled out and sent in from around the country answerin these questions. And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature. So they got one of them forms that was blank and printed up a bunch of em and sent em back to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder, Drugs, suicide. So I think about that.⁵

As already stated, Bell is clearly a cultural rather than political conservative. His condemnation of sixties libertarianism is generally a moral hand-wringing at the rise of violent crime and a general decline in the respect for civic behavior. Bell's distaste for the values of progressive politics would have made him a prime target for the Reaganite moralizers about to pop up all over the place. However, the reactionary voice of Bell should not be mistaken as the voice of the novel *per se*. The novel's schema, as in the *Border Trilogy*, is to trace the various delusions of the American imaginary. In order to understand this, we shall discuss how McCarthy's recurring device of dream narrative is used to reflect fragmentation in the social body.⁶

How Collapsing Dream Narratives Mirror Collapsing Social Structures

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, collapsing generic structures, in the sense that they often fold into one another, seem to mirror collapsing social structures in McCarthy. It should be regarded as no accident, then, that the story of *No Country for Old Men* occurs at a significant transformation in the American economy: the end of the post-war social contract and the beginning of the Reaganite supply-side monetarism of the 1980s. In this novel, McCarthy records this terminus by writing a novel where the libidinal energy induced by such a change is

⁵ Ibid. 195-196.

⁶ The use of dream-narrative is used extensively in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*.

baleful and unpredictable. The amorphous structure of the novel mirrors this and is perhaps behind the confused critical reception when it was first published, and why also so many critics saw it as a failure in the aesthetic vision of McCarthy. In the following, Jay Ellis admits his own initial confusion:

I must confess that in one reading, this novel seemed a failure, a tossed-off screenplay barely redacted into a novel in a genre that does not hold much interest for me I began to suspect (as many reviewers have) that this indeed indicated the frightened political views of an author now twenty years older than Bell and yet speaking through him. The structure collapsed so obviously as to raise the question of waning aesthetic powers ... a waning political sensibility as well.⁷

Ellis' re-reading initiates a more symptomatic analysis in which he goes on to consider the various fetishisms that accrue in the novel: for example, bad guy versus good guy characterization; plot (political conspiracy, moral decline); and objects (especially money and guns) – and concludes by arguing that the novel is an aesthetic parody of hackneyed old tropes. I, however, regard the fascination with generic collapse in a similar way to David Holloway: the collapse of fictional narrative in these late works is analogous to the waning of historical understanding in the social reality.

It is true that at first *No Country for Old Men* reads like a hastily put together novel rework of an old screenplay, one that often panders to the cliché-ridden genre of detective-noir. But a quick sober revision will show that the borrowed genre is only there in fragmented form; for instance, the apparent protagonist, Moss, is killed seventy-odd pages before the end, while the antagonist, Chigurh, much like the triune in *Outer Dark*, disappears before the novel's end, never to be seen again. Shifting chronology along with the aforesaid killing-off of the respective protagonist and antagonist is frustrating – deliberately so. Likewise, the theme of chance, exemplified in Chigurh's tossing of the coin before he kills his victims (57), can be understood in two ways: first it helps explains the

⁷ Ellis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. 226.

general randomness – the novel is part-picturesque, part-romance-epic, part-detective noir – of the narrative; and, second, it reminds us of the historical context, specifically, the aleatory nature of “Reaganomics,” its adherence to supply-side economics and its advocacy of casino-style *laissez-faire*.

Such generic confusion mirroring social upheaval gives the novel the quality of a bad dream. Indeed at the end of the novel we are given two dreams by Bell, suggesting that we have two possible ways of understanding the moral meaning of the story. Here is Bell on his dead father: “*I had two dreams about him after he died. I don’t remember the first one all that well but it was about meeting in town somewhere and he give me some money and I think I lost it.*”⁸

According to Freud the “dream work” is that part of consciousness which organizes, edits, and then revises a dream in order for the most unpalatable parts to be excised during its course. However, there is the habit of also revising (secondary revision) the dream as it is recounted on waking, first to oneself, and then to others. Because dreams are often confusing and disorienting we have a natural tendency to impose some narrative order on them; moreover the significance of some dreams are lost to the dreamer and can only come to light through symptomatic analysis, by looking at the omissions in the dream condensation, usually aided by an interlocutor in the form of a psychoanalyst.

The point is that we often dismiss as trivial dreams that after analysis may reveal some latent truth lurking behind their appearance. For this reason, we have to ask why Bell includes this first dream-fragment in his narration; for if he could hardly remember why, then, mention the dream in the first place? One way of understanding its inclusion is that Bell’s recounting of it happens only a few pages on from another memory of his wife reading from *Revelation*: it is the memory of this that triggers the first dream. However, since we are already apprised of the violence that follows in the wake of Moss stumbling on the drugs money, and since there are already several key episodes where money as a form

⁸ McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men* (the author’s italics.) 308-309.

of exchange is shown as material cause for all the mayhem, we have to ask why this dream is deemed less important, especially since the very story that Bell is chronicling seems to center on the disorienting affect that money has on people? Nevertheless, Bell gives the second dream center-stage:

But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothing. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.⁹

As we can see the shortness of the first dream account is in inverse proportion to the length of the second. The latter is clearer, more expansive, and is superficially much more allegorical. We should be careful with such a reading, however. Freud insists that we often put too much emphasis on the verisimilitude of a dream once it has been adequately represented in words spoken or written. According to Freud,

When we reflect that only a small minority of all the dream-thoughts revealed are represented in the dream by one of their ideational elements, we might conclude that condensation is brought about by *omission*: that is, the dream is not a faithful translation or a point-for-point projection of the dream-thoughts, but a highly incomplete and fragmentary version of them.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. 309.

¹⁰ These quotations are from Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretations of Dreams*, extracts of which are cited in: Rivkin, Julia and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 402.

The “ideational elements” in these two dreams are respectively: a) money that is lost, and, b) light leading a way out of darkness. The father is associated paradoxically with something that is lost (money and an America ruined by materialism – the symbolism with the founding fathers is cogently inscribed) and something that is found or re-found (a leading away from the present darkness toward a future America living up to its ideals). It is clear that Bell prefers the latter idea. However, it is the first dream that seems closer to the novel’s themes; its dismissal, therefore, by Bell casts some critical light on his role as reliable chronicler of the horrors besetting his Texan community.

John Cant prefers to see the second dream as McCarthy coming to terms with the oedipal torments of his previous novels: like Bell, the author is an old man; however, unlike Bell, he is a recognized man of letters, who no longer needs to “strive to usurp the voice of his literary fathers and that his own voice can now be heard clearly.”¹¹ I, however, see the second dream as a secondary, much lighter revision of the darker first dream. The second dream therefore is a false redemption and should be rejected. It is the first dream, the idea of money and loss that allows us to ask the question: if something has been lost, what exactly is it that’s being looked for? Or, to invoke Freud once again: “If only a few elements from the dream thoughts find their way into the dream content, what are the conditions which determine their selection?”¹²

A way of answering these questions is to look again at a recurring motif in the writings of Cormac McCarthy: the intervention of a demonic force that lays violent waste on a community that has either been reckless in its moral behavior or been deluded by the social and religious values that it holds dear. A similar thing happens in *No Country for Old Men*. Psychotic action in this novel acts as reflex to an event that opens the novel: good old boy Llewellyn Moss’s discovery of drug money found at the site of a drug heist gone wrong

¹¹ Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. 244.

¹² The quotation is from Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretations of Dreams*, and is cited in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 402.

in the Texan desert. This opportunistic seizure of criminal money by Moss unleashes a chain of events that soon becomes replete with diabolical retribution. Psychosis, in the form of the character Anton Chigurh, functions very much like the evil triune in *Outer Dark*: havoc is wreaked upon a community who regardless of its innocence must pay for the original crime. As members of a community that Moss belonged to, the community, they become implicated in his crime. In this sense it is better to see arch-villain Chigurh as an obstacle to the displaced libidinal wishes of the people he executes.

Since Freud the work of Jacques Lacan has deepened our understanding of the dialectical nature of the mind/body, ego/unconscious nexus by focusing on the inextricable connection between them. Thus we now see pleasure, for instance, as predicated on its opposite, the prohibitive fear of castration, and regard the fantasies that arise out of this repression as fuelled by the notion that “enjoyment would be attainable if it were not forbidden.”¹³ Because of this, the “pleasure principle” is shown to be the half-baked thing that it is; always subject to its primal master, the “Death Drive”: the desire to go beyond what is forbidden to experience infinite *jouissance*, a desire, however, that is always thwarted by the unconscious fear that this would end in death. Thus in the Lacanian taxonomy, the “pleasure principle” functions as the ego’s avoidance of pain. Because of this, full satisfaction is always deferred: desires are only ever partially requited and that is why we often misperceive things by devoting all our energies to people or things that act as substitutes for what is truly desired.¹⁴

Freud’s notion of partial objects that stand in for what is truly desired and Lacan’s notion of *objet petit a*, the fixation on a particular person or thing that once realized only deepens a sense of frustration, is very much the psychological and material ground of the novel. This is powerfully evident in the character Moss: his compulsion to risk death and keep the money is not predicated upon money as material reality, but upon what it

¹³ Evans, Dylan. *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. 91-92.

¹⁴ Ibid. 148-149.

represents: the condensation of the unstoppable libidinal drive ("pure life"). Thus Moss symbolizes transgression, Bell represents the desire for moral, puritanical sublimation, while Chigurh is the obstacle that if surpassed will end in death.

To support this argument, it's worth looking at Slavoj Žižek's very wry comments about the Coen Brothers' movie version of the novel, a version which most certainly understood the stylized, deeply parodic element in McCarthy's representation of character. Žižek sees the role of Chigurh as prime example of the obstructive presence of the "cunning of reason," "the obstacle which always perturbs the realization of our goals."¹⁵ In this way, Žižek argues, we should not look upon Chigurh as a "real character." He is a symbol of chance, of the aleatory, of the fact that dreams of attaining the desired *objet a* are always thwarted. In this way, Sheriff Bell's desire for a mythical wrapping up, for a re-identification with America's conservative pastoral, fails because the America he wishes for is in ruins. Bell's first dream, therefore, because it is in keeping with McCarthy's allegories of fragmentation, is truer than the second dream of pastoral seclusion – emblemized in the form of reconciliation with the Father (Bell's father as a substitute for God) – from an irremediably fallen world.

The fly in Sheriff Bell's ointment is the dark assassin Anton Chigurh. The sense that Chigurh uses such an outlandish weapon as a cattle gun to kill his hapless victims, usually after he has teased them into begging for mercy (in the case of Wells (173-178) and Moss' wife (254-260)) supports the idea that too much libidinous hope for the desired object will always guarantee "that, one way or another, things will always somehow go wrong."¹⁶ Bell may well dream of a "horn of fire" to illuminate the darkness, but throughout the novel Chigurh offers a counter argument that says this is the way we live, especially in the capitalist imaginary, blindly stumbling through one obstacle after another, so caught up in

¹⁵ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. xxi-xxii.

¹⁶ McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 323.

our passions that we can never really know what we really want. Thus the *objet a* is never found – by either Moss or Bell – because the obstacles to fulfillment are insurmountable.

Zizek asks us to imagine the film without Chigurh. This way, the Sheriff loses his role as moral opposite to Chigurh. In addition, the Jeremiads against the violence of the age would disappear also, perhaps even allowing characters at odds with each other, such as Moss and Wells, to come to a satisfactory agreement so that bloodshed can be avoided. But this doesn't happen: because Chigurh is "the fourth element, the *objet a* that ruins the game."¹⁷ Zizek concludes by suggesting that Chigurh is

the objet a (that) prevents the letter from arriving at the destination –but does it? Is there not a Cunning of Reason at work here, so that through the very fact of the letter having missed its true destination, we are compelled to change our perspective and redefine the destination.¹⁸

Zizek compares the obstructive *objet a* that is Chigurh with Sheriff Bell, the ostensible hero of novel and film. On closer inspection, he argues, it would be better to see Bell's set of beliefs as a composite of the failed master-signifier that once held sway: its powers at diffusing the paternal order that American society based itself on are so weakened that people like Bell can only weakly lament upon the violence and corruption of the age. In this sense, the second dream at the end of the novel is Bell's *objet a*. It is better, then, to ask one more question: if we agree that the use of Bell as pastoral elegist for a lost America is a narrative feint, what is the destination of this letter called *No Country for Old Men*?

Gun-Loving Sheriff Bell as Unreliable Defender of Cultural Conservatism.

Distorted, or displaced, libidinal desire in the form of money is the destination of the letter in this novel. Money, not as a material object but as an instrument of exchange, is referred to constantly - for most of the characters, the primacy of its place in American

¹⁷ Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. xxi.

¹⁸ Ibid. xxi.

society means that it is seen as intrinsic to all social relations. Bell as chronicler of all that has gone wrong with his society is the most egregious offender of this misapprehension. For him, the evil infecting the community is not the absolute preeminence of exchange but one of its effects: another *objet a*, drugs: “*I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up something that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics.*”¹⁹ This is clearly a misreading by Bell and shows not only his limits as a reliable narrator but also the limits of his cultural conservatism.

Bell is a confused, querulous, oddly half-baked hero; a traditionalist overrun by modernity. His italicized monologues are on the one hand bitter-sweet commentaries on a country in decline and, on the other, reactionary, often patronizing, objections to anything new in the world. Such metonymies of ingrained obduracy of character are very middle-American and often serve as an impenetrable second skin for the person who espouses them. But, in the hands of McCarthy, the impostures of decency that some of these characters emote, reveal, on closer inspection, ambivalent notions of false self-effacement that help obscure the fact that they have little understanding of the changes taking place in society.

For someone like Bell, old and close to retirement, the cognitive dissonance that Chigurh’s crimes have disseminated has led to pastoral-like reveries of better times when men were men and things had less of an inbuilt-obsolescence about them. This lack of understanding with what is happening in the social reality is sometimes starkly shown. In the following, Bell is worried about how easy it is for villains to acquire assault weapons; yet, instead of identifying the causes behind this phenomenon – mainly deregulation spearheaded by the Republican Party’s support for the NRA – he argues for common-sense:

I don’t know that law enforcement benefits all that much from new technology. Tools that comes into our hands comes into theirs too. Not that you can go back. Or that

¹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac: *No Country for Old Men*. 17. (McCarthy’s italics)

*you'd even want to. We used to have them old Motorola two way radios. We've had the high-band now for several years. Some things aint changed. Common sense aint changed. I'll tell my deputies just to follow the breadcrumbs.*²⁰

Guns, along with money, are the principal characters in *No Country for Old Men* (I can say this with impunity because on nearly every page references are made to them). All of the main characters, except, predictably, the women, carry them. Near the beginning of the story, we find Moss out hunting with a rifle in the desert. It is through the rifle's sights that he first sees the vehicles abandoned in the desert. On closer inspection he finds the shot-through bodies of drug dealers billowing out of the cars, their automatic weapons on the ground. The novel is both saturated with the blood that these guns have engendered but also with detailed descriptions of their size, velocity, and classifications. What makes such descriptions less of an endorsement of gun culture and more of an implicit critique is the subtle way that McCarthy satirizes their reified place in American society.

Bell's love of guns, in turn, casts doubt on him as a gentle shepherd looking out for his community: his pastoral is the pastoral of the wilderness-fortress under siege. Thus the very anti-Virgilian symbol of the gun is uncritically valorized by Bell, even though he laments most plaintively on the bloody violence around him:

*I still like the old colts. 44-40. If that won't stop him you'd throw the thing down and take off runnin. I like the old Winchester model 97. I like it that it's got a hammer. I dont like havin to hunt the safety on a gun. Of course some things is worse. That cruiser of mine is seven years old. It's got the 454 in it. You cant get that engine no more. I drove one of the new ones. It wouldn't outrun a fatman. I told the man I thought I'd stick with what I had. That aint always the best policy. But it aint always a bad one neither.*²¹

²⁰ Ibid. 62.

²¹ Ibid. 62.

There's a lot of interesting stuff going on in this passage. The sensuous fetishism is clear enough; but added to this is a pastoral of things. That Bell, a defender of the peace, cannot see the irony of loving a commodity that kills people is very much part of McCarthy's life-long concern with self-blindness and self-delusion: the imaginary relations of capitalism that obscure the contradictions inherent in the value-systems that we live by. The repeated use of the verb "like" suggests that Bell's expressed faith in the humanist principle of "people and community first" is compromised by a materialistic fondness for things. If we read the above section in this way, it is possible to see Bell as a symptom of the cultural malaise that he inveighs against.

The Hegemon of Exchange

The idea of the capitalist imaginary fostering the idea of limitless libidinal energy is shown as soon as Llewellyn Moss stumbles upon the aborted, violent end of a drugs-for-cash exchange in the Texan desert. Instead of seeing it for what is, ill-gotten money resulting from ill-gotten exchange, he becomes immediately enchanted:

It was level full of hundred dollar banknotes. They were in packets fastened with banktape stamped each with the denomination \$10,000. He didn't know what it added up to but he had a good idea. He sat there looking at it and then he closed the flap and sat with his head down. His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel.²²

The last sentence, where the money is described as it materially is, "forty pounds of paper," is in stark contrast to the appeal that it has for Moss. As previously stated, Moss is beguiled by what the money represents – access to the capitalist imaginary for the first time in his life. Money, therefore, as a symbol of exchange permeable in every social activity is a major motif in this very anti-pastoral novel. It is palpably shown later on in the novel in Moss's encounter with the American youths at the border bridge (116-117). Instead of voluntarily helping the wounded, the youths ask for 500 dollars in exchange for a jacket. It

²² Ibid. 17-18.

is also there at the end of the novel, when the severely injured Chigurh comes out of a car-wreck and has his escape made easy by a couple of teenagers whom he asks to make a tourniquet out of one of their shirts (a nice pun on “take the shirt off my back.”) Money is exchanged for the service and the boys also discover that Chigurh, in his haste to get away, has left his gun on the floor of the smashed truck: “They could already hear the sirens in the distance. Get it, the first one said. Go on.”²³ Through these exchanges, a violent, greedy, everything-has-a-price legacy has been casually passed down to the next generation.

In a political sense the story covers some of the concerns of the Reagan era: firstly, the growing crime rate centered around cross-border drug trading, a phenomenon that would precipitate the “War on Drugs” campaign of Reagan’s second term; secondly, in its subtle allusion - through the characterization of a shady behind the scenes businessman and his ex-army hireling, Moss, - to the corporate/criminal/military confluence; and, finally, through the meta-fictional device of a fragmented allegory that casts questions on an America adrift from its narratives of noble endeavor.

On this latter point, it is worth noting that all of the main characters are linked by the experience of war: the two mercenaries, the hapless Moss, the villain Chigurh and his adversary Wells, are linked by their involvement in Vietnam (Moss and Wells) and Contra-Nicaragua (Wells and Chigurh). Sheriff Bell, the hero of the novel is a Korean War veteran. The sense that the good and the bad in this novel are all implicated is very palpable. But the historical theme that encompasses all in this novel is the theme of inherited values gone awry. Bell, desperate to re-forge links with his noble forefathers is often seen floundering in an American soup of corruption, narcissism and materialism.

No Country for Old Men is set in an America where millenarian pastoral hope has been displaced by millennial anguish – set in a Texas where the supplanting of traditional rural farming by the oil business has helped enrich and consolidate powerful corporate elites. Moreover, it is a Texas that cannot contain the hedonistic demand for drugs, in spite

²³ Ibid. 263.

of the faux-Puritanism of the imminent cross-border war-against drugs campaign instigated by Reagan in his second term. It is also a Texas that has nothing to offer its war veterans, Moss and Wells and others like them, than crime. In a very telling exchange, Wells visits Moss in hospital, who is recuperating from a near fatal gun battle with Chigurh. Wells has been hired by a mysterious corporation to retrieve the drug money that Moss found in the desert. The two characters find they share a common history:

Were you in Nam? Yeah. I was in Nam. So was I. So what does that make me? Your buddy? I was in Special Forces. I think you have me confused with somebody who gives a shit what you were in. I was a lieutenant colonel. Bullshit. I don't think so. And what do you do now? I find people. Settle accounts. That sort of thing. You're a hit man. Wells smiled. A hit man. Whatever you call it.²⁴

The sense of deracination mounts up in this story: Wells and Moss have returned to an America that has no use for the old ways of doing things; now nameless business corporations function as cabals operating in secret behind chrome windows. This is shown early on in the novel when Wells goes to visit his contractors in a building that towers over the city: "The office was on the seventeenth floor with a view over the skyline of Houston and the open lowlands to the ship channel and the bayou beyond. Colonies of silver tanks. Gas flares, pale in the day."²⁵ There is something Randian about this image in which commerce is the new theocracy, omnipotent and above all mundane laws. When Wells finally meets his employer, he is more than curious about something that had been puzzling him on the way up to the office:

Can I ask you something? Sure. I couldn't come up in that elevator, could I? Not to this floor. Why? I was just interested. Security. Always interesting. It recodes itself after every trip. A randomly generated five digit number. It doesn't print out

²⁴ Ibid. 156.

²⁵ Ibid. 139.

anywhere. I dial a number and it reads the code back over the phone. I give it to you and you punch it in. Does that answer your question?²⁶

It is this backdrop of normativity vis-a-vis business malpractices, and the pervasiveness of such ideas in communities that is at the heart of McCarthy's critique of late century American society. Money is now the only status-evaluator in these communities; the getting of which is now unconstrained by moral markers. Thus the occasional flattening of prose style (Jay Ellis' notion of McCarthy parodying "Hard-boiled" (228) detective-noir seems relevant here) mirrors McCarthy's recording of a morally adrift America. For instance, a maddening linguistic repetition hovers around the word "money" in the following exchange between Moss and a taxi driver: "What's in there, the driver said. Money. Money. Money. ... He turned the lights on. How much money? A lot of money."²⁷ The repetition is very much part of the fetishism, the endless pursuit of the *objet a*, that McCarthy is satirizing. Apocalypse is therefore analogous to the new economic relations of late-capitalism in which a more radical money-is-all system of exchange is having a deleterious effect on the social order. To put it in a more ironical way: the anarchy of the marketplace is the only trickle-down effect that society is feeling.

It is arguable, then, that the *objet a* of the romance-epic is the pastoral. For in this late novel, pastoral is represented in vestigial form only: in the nostalgic melancholy of Sherriff Bell, in the dream of a life beyond care and violence. It is with these thoughts in mind that we shall now turn to the final novel in the *oeuvre*, *The Road*, and argue that, although the novel is a continuation of the career-long theme of attenuated pastoral, its apocalyptic vision describes the point where all imaginaries have come to an end.

²⁶ Ibid. 142.

²⁷ Ibid. 208.

2) *The Road* as Conclusion: How The Pastoral Dream of Pure Utility Reaches its Dead-End.

McCarthy's most recent novel *The Road* (2006), which has been described by journalist and environmental activist George Monbiot as "the most important environmental book ever written" (Monbiot: 2007) acts as a suitably symbolic conclusion to this study. For the cumulative crisis of social apocalypse, documented in McCarthy's writing from *The Orchard Keeper* to *No Country for Old Men*, has reached tipping-point in this story of a culture where nothing works in the old ways anymore. There is, then, a pattern to this: a pattern, albeit, that over the course of McCarthy's career has become, increasingly, textually threadbare and fragmented.²⁸ McCarthy - as stated in the introductory chapter and restated in the foregoing discussion of the various novels - uses the tropes and themes of the romance-epic, the idea of the journey as a metaphor for the American historical experience, to attack and dismantle its most appealing constituent part: the pastoral. For without the promise of finding "a pleasant place," a home in the wilderness, there would be no point in embarking on the journey in the first place. Each novel uses such themes of wandering and searching for a better place in order to show the impossibility, indeed the madness, of such an enterprise. That is why we discover Culla and Rinty Holme in *Outer Dark* and Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, wandering lost in the south's blighted pastoral fields. And that is also why several of McCarthy's characters, Cornelius Suttree in *Suttree*, John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy Parham in *The Crossing* and the man in this last novel, are often shown in conditions of absolute despair, howling at Providence for allowing them to believe in such follies. There is, then, a kind of resolution to this last novel. In its amplification of the dire warnings of apocalypse advanced in *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* is terminus for the consoling idealisms of the romance-epic and pastoral.

²⁸ It's worth noting that McCarthy's last three novels have each been fewer than three hundred pages in length: Big subjects; fewer pages: the shortness of the text replicating the diminution of the pastoral vision.

Because of this extreme coda to a lifelong critique of pastoral, it is possible to view *The Road* as a harrowing summing-up of the pastoral's impossibility; a summing-up, moreover, that here and throughout the *oeuvre* attacks an idea central to it: the notion of a life without toil, commensurate with God's selection of America as the site of its realization. Moreover, because of the sustained leeching out of traditional forms of work in American society along with the values concomitant to them, this novel, in spite of its gothic overtones, alludes very much to an ongoing social crisis within contemporary American society as it grapples with the new uncertainties brought about by a thoroughgoing adherence to neo-conservative ideology. With these thoughts in mind, we shall consider this last novel in the *oeuvre* as a settling of accounts with the social impossibility of the national allegory of pastoral, especially in the way it explores and questions two fundamental elements to the American variant: the idea of happy work and pure utility.

Nothing to Do; Nothing to be Done.

As remarked upon in the last chapter, the idea of exhaustion, generic, thematic or otherwise, is now reflected in the social reality. This idea is taken to its extreme: a post-apocalyptic description where the feral advances of capital and consumption are replaced by a feral humanity killing and consuming one another. What stands between the utter darkness of this is the story of *the man* and *the boy* who - like Beckett's Lucky and Estragon - continue to go on despite the fact that the country that they once knew, the United States, is no longer strictly speaking country:

Why are they the state roads? Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states. But there's not any more states? No. What happened to them? I don't know exactly. That's a good question.²⁹

Although everything that was known - country, land, home - no longer exist in their old forms, the novel's protagonists, the man and the boy, still adhere to the road and to the idea of possibility. At the end of the above exchange, the man asks the boy: "are you ready? The boy nodded?" (43) Here the old pioneering spirit of forbearance until journey's end is

²⁹ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 43.

compromised by the notion that movement is now reduced to instinct. Moreover, there are now no fences to mark off the wilderness, no animals to hunt down, to corral or pen-in, and nothing to arrest the eye. All that remains is a blighted pastoral that yields nothing except buried, “shriveled” apples (121) or the occasional hardy mushroom (40-41). The only constant is an apocalypse generating only itself: “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more grey than each other. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.”³⁰

Putting eschatological imagery aside, David Holloway sees the novel as a “return” to a main concern in McCarthy’s writing: his willingness to remain engaged in the grand narratives of Western thought. In terms of McCarthy’s apocalyptic debunking of America’s own grand narrative of exceptionalism, Holloway argues, there is an engagement that strives to put things in a “broader cultural context,” whereby such a narrative could be seen as “a product of changing historical circumstances.”³¹ If we read it in this way, the novel can be seen as a bitter commentary on the end-times of an American story whose pastoral tropes and exceptionalist visions have been ripped apart by the forces of late-capitalism. *The Road*, in this sense, needs to be considered as not only an elegy to a non-violent, utopian-pastoral dream that America has about itself, but also McCarthy’s own conclusion to his career long critique of the American pastoral.

The historical circumstances behind this novel are obviously 9/11 and the subsequent war-on-terror. These two events have produced a plethora of books, fictional and non-fictional, which envision America experiencing an end-of-days in ways that are horrifying and catastrophic. McCarthy’s contribution to the *zeitgeist*, however, is a novel which is less to do with apocalypse and more to do with the crisis of values that would lead to it. There is a sense, then, that the man embodies these values and should be thus regarded as much a social as a literary type. The fact that he is terminally ill, and dies at the end of the novel, should be interpreted as terminus for this social/literary type also.

³⁰ Ibid. 3.

³¹ Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. 266.

For example, he is an embodiment of certain values that in many ways veer closely to the Protestant work ethics of John Grady Cole and Sheriff Bell who, in their own ways, are twentieth century versions of frontier types such as Daniel Boone and, in literature, Natty Bumppo: bearers of values that have little place in late-capitalist corporate ideology. The Lutheran ideal where a man finds his calling and self-value through the kind of work that brings him closer to God is obsolete in post-industrial America.

Curiously, work finds residual meaning in this novel's post-apocalyptic world, but its placement is mainly for elegiac purposes. Working on things, savoring the ritual of molding and shaping them, of eking out their use-value, is a sacred enterprise – even when it is just involves the refashioning of a shopping cart:

He pulled the bolt and bored out the collet with a hand drill and resleeved it with a section of pipe he'd cut to length with a hacksaw. Then he bolted it all back together and stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything.³²

The last sentence is crucial: for it signifies the many lessons of socialization that the man will give to his son before he passes away. Work is the article of faith passed down from one generation to the next; it underpins numerous rationales for migration and settlement on the American sub-continent. Its social meaning is the perpetuation of the lie that paradise is there for all those willing to work for it. The shopping-cart that the man has refashioned into a baggage conveyor is an ironic symbol of all the machines, all the dead labor inhered in them – the wagon, the locomotive, the motor car, etc., - that would speed up access to the wilderness as well as contribute to its attenuation.³³

Since it is possible to read *The Road* as a form of journey-novel, we can regard the man as an urbanized vestigial romance-epic shepherd of the plains, protector of civilization

³² McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 16-17.

³³ Of course, the shopping cart can also be regarded as an ironic allusion to an American consumerism that has cannibalized itself.

from without, whose Protestant/Lutheran “life-task” is to find the kind of work that would please his maker. But in this post-everything world there is no work left to please God: the covenant has been so broken that the man now can only impotently rage at the God who once singled out America as a heaven on earth: “Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.”³⁴

The man has clearly lost his belief in a higher divinity here. The frequent references to prophets and deities in the novel have persuaded some critics to read the novel as a religious parable, with the boy as the new messiah. Steven Frye, for instance, sees it as a “biblical allegory,” an “allegory of the soul” that in its “capacity to transcend, perhaps in passing moments of hope, and more important in the permanent inscription of the Word, gone now from the pages of books, but resident with latent emotional force in human memory” offers a glimmer of hope.³⁵

I disagree with this interpretation. There is little doubt that the religious dimension is prevalent in the novel, but its theological gaze is skeptical at best, formulated only in a series of handwringing imprecations, or in the shape of desperate self-reassurances about each soul carrying the inscription of a God who might not exist: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said. If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”³⁶ A parabolic reading, therefore, needs to be partial: for as in all McCarthy, the allegory of fragmentation will not allow for a master-hermeneutic to piece everything together.

Because of the man’s skepticism - which goes much deeper than Sherriff Bell’s in the previous novel - it is better to read the book as a series of questions on the intrinsic value of the inherited Christian system which he as a former believer brings into the post-apocalyptic world. That he fails to pass everything onto the son – a child who has only known the post-apocalyptic world he was born into – is the only, albeit bitterly, redemptive

³⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 16-17.

³⁵ Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. 346.

³⁶ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 5.

aspect in the novel. The man's world of exceptionalism, of war, of exchange-hegemony, and so on, is found wanting. Therefore, a whole value system is being questioned here: the man's impotent anguish chillingly redolent of Chigurh's remarks to Wells in the preceding novel: "If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?"³⁷

For it is this level of disquiet that reveal the powerful antinomies at the heart of this book, antinomies that are best exemplified by the man's wife' who, as we learn in a flashback had decided to kill herself rather than remain in world given over to scavengers and cannibals: "You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take."³⁸ Seen in this way, the novel reflects another "state of emergency," a crisis of values where, according to Kenneth Lincoln, modern anxieties tally with ancient stories of providential catastrophe.³⁹ It is this cultural and literary terminus for an American way of life predicated upon religious and pastoral values (the two are often interchangeable) that needs to be looked at.

The Futility of Cataloguing

The utter sense of cultural exhaustion that resonates throughout McCarthy's late work is now depicted in this novel as the end of everything – culture, community, civilization - as well as all forms of discourse that give humans a sense of belonging:

No list 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 in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you.⁴⁰

³⁷ McCarthy Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 175. The wording of this passage also carries an ironic allusion to the Agrarian Movement's *I Take my Stand*.

³⁸ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 57.

³⁹ Lincoln, Kenneth. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. 164.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 55.

The Lutheran cult of doing, of finding work that is commensurate with God's grace is at the heart of the American theological vision. In more secular terms there is the material incentive which says that, in a country whose resources are as superabundant as America, prosperity will come to those who are willing to work for it. Lists are all about things that needed to be done, things to be acquired, and added to. However, if there is nothing to put on the list, whither the culture? What happens when Luther's notion of "worldly asceticism" as precondition for a rigorous work-ethic is no longer translatable in a world where everything has stopped working and growing? ⁴¹

This deeply pessimistic use of the catalogue-making trope signifies a more radical transition than may first seem. In Alfred Kazin's afterword to the Bantam Classics edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, the critic cites Hemingway's contention that all "modern American writing comes out of *Huckleberry Finn*." Kazin goes on to assert that Hemingway's habit of cataloguing objects, borrowed from Twain, was based on a "compulsion to say about certain objects- *only this is real, this is real, and my emotion connects them* (Kazin's italics)." ⁴² There is, it seems, unlike *The Road*, a "later" for this kind of writing; a day even that is more than "providential to itself." In short, tomorrow is a definite possibility; not only that, it is to be looked forward to. Further, he suggests that in the naming of useful things, there is something sacred, a kind of rite of nomenclature in which subject and object are at home with one another. Naming things is very much part of the American journey, a lexicon of origin that helps the past connect to the present and be informed by it. To support this idea he quotes the famous passage where Huck makes good his escape from his father:

⁴¹ Weber, Max. *The Protestant and the Spirit of Capitalism Ethic*. See, especially, the following chapters: "Luther's Conception of The Calling." 39-50; and "The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism." 53-80. The man - resourceful, self-reliant, deeply interconnected with the natural world as he is/once was - is an end of the line literary type: the stoic hero of the American Romance-epic whose understanding of scripture is Lutheran through and through.

⁴² Kazin, Alfred. "Afterword." *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. By Mark Twain. 303-304.

I took the sack of cornmeal and took it to where the canoe was hid and shoved the vines and branches apart and put it in; then I done the same with the side of bacon, then the whisky jug. I took all the coffee and sugar there was and all the ammunition. I took the wadding; I took the bucket and gourd; took a dipper and a tin-cup and my old saw and two blankets and the skillet and the coffee pot. I took fish-lines and matches and other things-everything that was worth a cent. I cleaned out the place. I wanted an axe but there wasn't any, only the one out at the woodpile, and I knowed why I was going to leave that. I fetched out the gun and now I was done.⁴³

The cataloguing is reinforced by the use of the rhetorical device of anaphora: the repetition of personal pronouns with active verbs at the beginning of each sentence. When we get to McCarthy, however, there is, because of the scarcity of provisions, something funereal about such repetition – funereal, also, in the sense that McCarthy's borrowing of this literary device, by way of Hemingway, seems to be tired and without luster:

He pulled the blue plastic tarp off of him and folded it and carried it out to the grocery cart and packed it and came back with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bag and a plastic bottle syrup."⁴⁴

The verbs mount up here but the underlying tone is of routine, monotony and artificiality. The latter point reinforced by the repeating of the very un-pastoral "plastic." That important element in Kazin's observation, "emotion," and the get-out-of-bed injunction implicit in Luther's notion of the "calling" is missing. Work, (to mix metaphors a little) that great American categorical imperative, is stripped bare of its mythic enchantments. Toil without pleasure; work without harvest.

We have to assume that Huck's kindly nature would not allow the "cleaning out of the place" to bring about his father's death by starvation. There is a hidden assumption here on Huck's part that his father is a boat-ride away from either replacing his goods or

⁴³ Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 32.

⁴⁴ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 5.

falling on the charity of his community. This kind of naming of things implies the possibility of their relative abundance as well as their reproduction: the listed objects are for the most part products of mass manufacturing, machine-made rather than fashioned by the human hand. It has to be said here that “self-reliance,” even in *Huckleberry Finn*, interfaces with industrialism along with the labor of others. But, importantly, at this early stage of capitalist production in America, and especially in the not yet fully industrialized American South, there is still a folksy attitude to these commodities: their exchange value is still loosely equivalent to their use value.

This may explain American literature’s abiding fixation with the cataloging of useful objects; suggesting that the ever-optimistic idea of the dream of pure utility is contingent on the absence of scarcity, famine and blight; that such absences actually give the inventory the imaginary of endless replenishment. It is therefore noticeable that scarcity, famine and blight are the backdrop behind the Man’s painstaking inventory of all his possessions. The use of the catalogue-device in *The Road*, therefore, is a requiem for the time of plenty; the contents of the protagonists’ shopping-cart are the surviving remnants of a once endlessly simulating commoditized world.

It is telling, therefore, that the idea of American exceptionalism as a site of endless possibility, personal salvation, and material abundance is still with us in the 21st century. And this in spite of a rapid decline in: the US’s economic and technological power in the face of competition from Japan and China, in the growth of foreign companies on native soil, in the decline in immigration, and in the very real fact that its natural resources have reached their threshold. In *The Road*, however, the juggernaut is replaced by a literal diminishment by dint of the fact that nothing works anymore; the cities are ransacked ruins, and people scour the country-side looking for scraps. It should also be mentioned that one of the most reified of all American commodities, oil, is now squeezed out of cans or siphoned out of desolate pump stations.

This is the end result, as already adumbrated by McCarthy in *Cities of the Plain* and *No Country For Old Men*, of capitalism’s displacement of libidinal energy: the cannibalistic consumption of the world’s material resources means that in this after-world, the

corporate world, the world of exchange value hegemony, are part of a pastoral joke where nostalgia for a time when commerce ruled is now represented in a faded insignia on the clothes of an anthropologist: “Dressed in a pair of filthy blue coveralls and a black billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it.”⁴⁵

The Road is an exercise of storytelling in shards. For example, the sentences, like the communities of men and women, are cut off from each other: “everything uncoupled from its shoring.”⁴⁶ The structure of the story replicates this. Sentences are short and rendered often only in fragments; the narrative itself comes in short paragraphical gasps as though language itself is at the point of exhaustion. Dialogue between the two principal characters, father and son, come in the form of terse questions followed by monosyllabic answers. War and horror are the social reality: “the frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night.”⁴⁷ McCarthy offers a minimalist style to evoke a year zero, an “uncalendered” reality; moreover, the prevailing lexicon is a series of negatives: “nothing”, “no more”, “the last”, “over”, and so on. In addition, the landscape evoked uses colours associated with death – “yellow” and “grey” - while the atmosphere is full of funereal ashes coming from the burning cities and forests:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in the clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid. 63.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 6.

The road as the traditional *mise-en-scene* of the picturesque has been replaced by a journey of undifferentiated attrition: father and son walk along a highway devoid of color, of anything that may arrest the eye: the constant objective is shelter and self-defense, not adventure. It is the end of pastoral as compensation: the above quotation's clear allusion to Hemingway's classic short-story "Big-Two-Hearted River" suggests that it will not survive as a literary trope either. It is also the end of the pastoral, "hard" and "soft": the grudging presence of a residual pastoral inside modernity has now been permanently erased.

The pastoral, along with other stories that once offered comfort in the darkest parts of American history, is shown to be woefully out-of-sync with the times. The father, especially towards the end of the novel, desperately trying to pass on the idea of goodness to his son, is unable to tell such stories with any conviction: "Those stories are not true. They don't have to be true. They're stories. Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people."⁴⁹ The boy obviously sees a disjunction between the stories his father tells and the social reality; however, it also points to the fact that American history is often presented as "storied," "famed" and "providential." The boy persists in his inquiry:

You don't have any happy ones.

They're more like real life.

But my stories are not.

Your stories are not.

No. The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?

What do you think?

Well, I think we're still here.

A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here. Yeah.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 268.

You don't think that's so great. It's okay.⁵⁰

There is a grudging, hard-won desire to continue here, no matter what. The realism helps provide a rationale for the father and son's refusal to roll over and die. For this reason, it is worth looking at what is salvageable, in terms of ideas, in this novel. The fact that the father and son seem to want a reality unadorned by the imaginaries of various past American mythologies provides a small remnant of hope. For at the end of McCarthy's career long assault on the hegemon of exchange, we have a post-apocalyptic novel that suddenly produces images of a world where, tragically and dialectically, things of utility seem to be appreciated for what they are rather than what they represent. In short, we have a possible world of pure utility replacing the primacy of exchange. We shall look at this now.

Post-Apocalypse as a Return to Use-Value

The Road is not a happy story, but it is a story that nonetheless tells of human persistence in the face of impossible odds. It is also a story that dialectically shows frailty as a form of toughness; the refusal, for example, to give up on the idea of what it means to be a good person is a radical decision in the face of a general decline into barbarism.

All the imaginaries of the old culture: the salve of art and of human fraternity, romantic love, the hallucinations induced by commodity-fetishism, are no longer possible in this novel. What remains, however, is a sense of becoming that is untrammelled by exchange-value. The Man and Boy use what little materials they can find to keep moving on, to stave off extinction. They are the last of their kind, the "good guys," the carriers of "the fire", salvagers of pre-apocalypse detritus, but also salvagers of a lost humanist world. In a wry echo of both the above quotation from *Huckleberry Finn* and the environmentalists' mantra of conservation, we find the following passage typifying the novel's themes of scavenging and salvaging:

⁵⁰ Ibid. 268-269.

In a pantry they came upon a part of a sack of cornmeal that rats had been at in the long ago. He sifted the meal through a section of window screen and collected a small handful of dried turds and they built a fire on the concrete porch of the house and made cakes of the meal and cooked them over a piece of tin.⁵¹

This is worth comparing with the quote from *Huckleberry Finn*: where the latter implied restitution, the above implies destitution.

Such salvaging, however, has a political point to make. In a wasted world, nothing goes to waste; everything becomes pure utility. This is demonstrated several times in the novel - and none more poignantly than when Man and Boy finally reach the sea and espy a stranded ship bearing the forlorn name *Pajaro de Esperanza* (Bird of Hope). Even so, the father braves the freezing water twice in order to take what can be used:

He filled the bag with odds and ends of clothing. A pair of women's sneakers he thought would fit the boy. A foldingknife with a wooden handle. A pair of sunglasses. Still there was something perverse in his searching. Like exhausting the least likely places first when looking for something lost.⁵²

Here detritus, the scourge of *Suttree*, gains primacy. The father realizes that he is just collecting stuff without thinking. It will take him sometime to find something really useful: a flare gun that can be used as a weapon. Most of these things, aside from the ironic choice of the sunglasses, are selected for their utilitarian value. It is pure utility - nothing has been selected for exchange. This is why there is such a tragic concentration on one of the items that will be left behind: a beautiful hand-made sextant, lovingly but elegiacally described:

Inside was a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old. He lifted it from the fitted case and held it in his hand. The brass was dull and there were patches of green on it that took the form of another hand that once had held it but otherwise it was

⁵¹ Ibid. 84.

⁵² Ibid. 226

perfect. He wiped the verdigris from the plate at the base. Hezzaninth, London. He held his eye and turned the wheel. It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him.⁵³

The man is obviously moved by the beauty of this instrument, representing as it does intricate craftsmanship of a kind that is no longer in the world. But in this exchange-value-free utopia/dystopia, it has little use-value, so therefore needs to be discarded: "He held it in his hand and then he fitted it back into the blue baize lining of the case and closed the lid and snapped the latches shut and set it back in the locker and closed the door."⁵⁴

In a very perverse dialectical sense, the thing that is the source of all their pain and anxiety, the end of civilization and the descent into barbarism, is what liberates them. In this world of pure utility, father and son, still desperately trying to cling on to the old values and old certainties have to take terrible Kierkegaardian leaps of faith every time they put one foot in the front of the other:

What if there's someone here. Papa? There's no one here. We should go, Papa. We've got to find something to eat. We have no choice. We could find something somewhere else. It's going to be alright. Come on.⁵⁵

In this scene, it isn't going to be alright. The opening of the cellar door will show a larder of humans, in various stages of decomposition – a full store of "food" in ironic contrast to all of the empty supermarkets that lined up their way down south. The scene takes place in a mansion, typical locus for the venting of McCarthy's spleen at the old slave-owning bourgeois order that once ruled the south:

The boy clung to him as he climbed the steps. One of the windows was slightly open and a cord ran from it and across the porch to vanish in the grass. He held the boy's

⁵³ Ibid. 227.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 228.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 106.

hand and they crossed the porch. Chattel slaves had once trod these boards bearing food and drink on trays."⁵⁶

There is a strong sense that the horror in this story is as much about us as it is about telling a story: here, we are enjoined to look (McCarthy wants us to see everything through the boy's eyes: for he sees what his father does not see) and bear witness to the violence that the old southern society was based on. This is powerfully shown in the following description of a mansion's decaying opulence where McCarthy slows the horror down to dwell on the craftsmanship commissioned by either slave-owners or supporters of Jim Crow:

Then they stepped into a broad foyer floored in a domino of black and marble tiles. A broad staircase ascending. Fine morris paper in the walls, waterstained and sagging. The plaster ceiling was bellied up in great swags and the yellowed dentil molding was bowed and sprung from the upper walls. To the left through doorway stood a large walnut buffet in what must have been the diningroom.⁵⁷

Here the old world of exchange which had built a whiteman's arcadia out of the slave-labor of others, becomes the site of another atrocity: cannibalism. Soon after, in an adjacent room, the man and boy make us see the following:

Piled in a windrow in one corner of the room was a great heap of clothing. Clothes and shoes. Belts. Coats. Blankets and old sleeping bags. He would have ample time later to think about that. The boy hung on to his hand. He was terrified. ⁵⁸

McCarthy has returned to the south of his early novels; thus the gothic imagery is ratcheted up. However, there is strong historical anchoring here: the depiction of a post-apocalyptic south that cannot but help reference its equally apocalyptic past.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 106.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 107.

Even so, other doors open to offer temporary respite, as in the scene where they find a bunker full of food: crate upon crate of canned goods. But nevertheless, we are additionally reminded of pre-apocalyptic preparations: the end-of-days eschatology of religious sects who would have regarded such preparation of provisions as necessary:

Tomatoes, peaches, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toilet paper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said. He looked back at the boy. It's all right, he said. Come down.⁵⁹

History, the pre-history of this apocalypse survives in remnant form - in things. However, unlike the objects in Huck's cabin, none of the above can be replaced. As they travel through the ruined farms of the south, the earth yields up Native Indian "arrow heads" (203) and coins of former colonial masters (204) to remind us of past conflicts and how much blood has been spilled over America's pastoral fields. These remnants are now just mere curiosities for man and boy. Sadly, it is the more familiar commodities that, once consumed, will be lost forever.

The dwelling upon these precious near-to extinction commodities, the deliberate placing of them into categories, is sensuous, almost epicurean. The libidinal energy is now directed at commodities use-value and not what they represent in a system of exchange. This is shown most movingly in the Coca Cola scene which at once elegizes a powerful symbol of the old commoditized world and the utter insignificance of money once it has lost its meaning as condensed value:

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal

⁵⁹ Ibid. 138.

cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at the Coca Cola. "What is it, Papa. It's a treat. For you. What is it? Here. Sit down."⁶⁰

The boy quaffs the drink and, because he was born after the catastrophe, has no knowledge of what this particular commodity signifies. In fact, for the boy it isn't a commodity at all: he has no knowledge of what money means – so the sensuous life-activity, as Karl Marx put it, the correlation between humans natural inclination to shape and transform the material resources for pleasure, finds its realization in the father offering the boy the coke to drink. Notice now how McCarthy dwells, ritual-like, on the physical sensation of opening the can:

He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said. The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.⁶¹

The idea of an object's use-value, its irreducibility, is the unspoken ideal that drives a lot of American pastoral writing, McCarthy included. Humans and things seem to co-exist in the American pastoral as mutually interdependent; nothing goes beyond utility; consumption and commodity fetishism are largely alien concepts. The value of a thing is in its utility. Marx is, of course, the author of this concept:

A thing can be a use-value, without having value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not due to labour. Such are air, virgin soil, natural meadows, etc. A thing can be useful, and the product of human labour, without being a commodity. Whoever directly satisfies his wants with the produce of his own labour. Creates, indeed, use values but not commodities.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid. 23.

⁶¹ Ibid. 23.

⁶² Marx, Karl. *Das Capital*. 17.

Marx's comment of entities "such as air, virgin soil, natural meadows, etc." that have use-value without monetary value is very appropriate to the mythic representation of frontier life in American literature. McCarthy protagonists also replicate this idealism in their actions and rejection of exchange-value and commoditization. The thematic tension, however, lies in the juxtaposition of a dying myth and its non-sustainability in a country driven by capitalist exchange-value ideology.

The father in this novel, however, as a survivor of a post-capitalist world, represents the bringing of such antinomies into a fallen world. His is an America that believed in the impossible paradox of a Calvinist-inflected pastoral: the duality of Arcadia in a sin-contaminated world. In this sense he is an anachronism; his son, because he was born after the apocalypse, is better suited to this new world. The death of the father at the novel's end is symbolic of the impossibility of old-world values, especially the dichotomies underpinning much of the Protestant work-ethic. For in this new world things are what they are, and work is no longer reified as something separate from the activity of human beings.

The novel is not just an exegesis of the impossibility of culture in the post-apocalypse; it also suggests that culture as an ideological series of productions is at end too. This is interesting: when Marx suggested in *Das Kapital* that the fetishization of the commodity, the transference of a commodity's use value into exchange value, was a necessary consequence of the division of labor, he was pointing out that the fetishization of all things was *ipso facto* an inviolable law of capitalist social relations. Therefore, since the end of civilization means the end of capitalist social relations, it also can mean the end of all forms of reification and fetishism, none more so than the centrality of the idea of work in American culture. Thus in the few moments of respite where the protagonists enjoy a swim in a waterfall or wallow in the tangy taste of a tin of peaches, pleasure is immediate and not vitiated by any cultural representation. McCarthy uses this idea to good effect in the passage describing morel-mushrooms, durable remnants of the old pastoral; this time it is pure pleasure, pure utility, that is being evoked:

Something in the mulch and ash. He stooped and cleared it away. A small colony of them, shrunken, dried and wrinkled. He picked one and held it up and sniffed it. He bit a piece from the edge and chewed.⁶³

This is the world that the boy will inherit: a world where the stumbling upon rare things, morel mushrooms and apples buried in the soil (120-121), will be seen as a benediction.

This story of a fallen world represents McCarthy's final disenchantment with the world of exchange value and the various mythologies that cover up its primacy in social life. First among these is the American pastoral idea of pure utility in a world founded on oppositions. The story, therefore, is in many ways a kind of literary border crossing in which the old shibboleths of American individualism, exceptionalism and the dream of authentic living through work, is finally put to rest. In this novel he addresses head-on the shadowy disquiet that seems to haunt even his most manually adroit protagonists. The description of a world on the verge of nothingness is a visionary critique of the vanity and destructiveness of America's reign in the sun; crucially, though, it is also a critique of the naïve dream of attaining an authentic existence through self-reliance.

This is clearly shown in the bunker scene where the father ruminates despairingly on how to explain the old world to his son, with all its irreconcilable antinomies:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he himself was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he.⁶⁴

It is as though the caul of the imaginary has slipped from the 'man's' eyes and he is beginning – arguably more than all of McCarthy's previous hero-protagonists - to see things as they are. It is this moment of self-realization – seeing things as they are - that marks *the man* out as a singular character in the *oeuvre*.

⁶³ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 153.

Conclusion

The above moment of self-perception (a much too-late moment of *anagnorisis*) sharply defines the rationale behind McCarthy's lifelong renunciation of pastoral enchantment: the allegory of American pastoral is a form of national self-blindness that stops a large number of its citizens from facing up to the uncomfortable truths of a violent history. Not only does *The Road* represent the apocalyptic end of an apocalyptic investigation into America's history of violence, it also represents a final say on the pastoral as a literary form.

In conclusion, *The Road* suggests that the American pastoral experiment, where work and leisure are inextricably fused, has singularly failed. We are tragically reminded of this when the wife of the *man* refuses to be both mother and begetter of any more of his children: the last man has lost the last woman capable of continuing the race of Noah (55-59). The recourse to third-person past-tense in the final paragraph, its intertextual allusion to the trout streams in Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories*, where a burnt landscape surrounds the idyll of secluded space, suggests a final reckoning in which the human is erased altogether in the pastoral:

Once there were brook trouts in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the amber current flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were 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.⁶⁵

If there is any hope in this last paragraph it lies in the fact that there is no image of a predatory human standing over the stream: a depiction of a wilderness pastoral that is thriving because it has not been subsumed into any system of exchange. The "optical democracy" ("in the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man.") that

⁶⁵ Ibid. 286-287.

McCarthy seems to be inscribing here can only aspire to pastoral if the human is removed. It is this beautiful, but terrifyingly austere image that corresponds most powerfully with McCarthy's profound critique of the human-centred American allegory of pastoral.

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