



European journal of American studies Reviews 2018-2

King, Daniel Robert, *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author*

Thomas Mantzaris



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13304>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Thomas Mantzaris, « King, Daniel Robert, *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2018-2, Online since 25 July 2018, connection on 05 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13304>

This text was automatically generated on 5 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

King, Daniel Robert, *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author*

Thomas Mantzaris

- 1 King, Daniel Robert, *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author*.
- 2 Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016. Pp. 232. ISBN: 9781621902478
- 3 Thomas Mantzaris
- 4 Cormac McCarthy's literary achievements have granted him a position among the greatest living American authors of our times. Marked by a distinctive style and double-edged realities, his literary works have constituted seminal points in the development of American literary history. In the present volume, Daniel Robert King explores the archive of Cormac McCarthy, uncovering valuable information with respect to the author's writing practices across his career as well as the process of his evolution as a literary figure. Via a meticulous examination of the material purchased by the Texas State University and the University of Virginia, *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author* sheds light on the intricate processes that have marked the making of the author as well as the shaping of his work. Aware of the inherent limitations of his project — “to operate within any archive is to make assumptions and to draw inferences which are based on an interpretation of a record which has been both consciously and unconsciously tampered with” (5) — as well as the essential sacrifices so as to ensure the focus of the project — the exclusion of the author's published and unpublished work as a playwright and as a screenwriter — King has sharply captured McCarthy's literary development from the young and promising author of *The Orchard Keeper* to the “confident and independently minded author of *The Road*” (2).

- 5 The historical trajectory into McCarthy's work begins with King's collaboration with the editor Albert Erskine at Random House. Against the changing environment of the publishing industry and the "increasing drive for profit" (23), Erskine and McCarthy worked together for twenty years despite McCarthy's disappointing sales. Erskine's deep commitment to the author as well as his engagement with McCarthy's work becomes evident from the efforts he made to sustain McCarthy financially via awards and prizes. Moreover, as King's research demonstrates, Erskine and McCarthy developed "a close and collegial working relationship between equals" (39). Defying the pervasive transition within the publishing industry from the figure of the editor to that of the agent, Erskine sustained a close relationship with McCarthy, exerting significant influence on the shaping of his work while at the same time "allow[ing] the writer to avoid becoming entangled in the details of the publishing industry in order to focus on his writing" (33). According to King's research, Erskine's determination to "cement McCarthy's place as a promising young novelist" (28) makes him "mine his personal contacts" (26) as advance readers of *The Orchard Keeper* and, later on, as "part of future publicity material" (28).
- 6 Overall, McCarthy found in Erskine "an ally possessed of a similar perfectionism" (49). King's archive study of the correspondence between the two men suggests that McCarthy can be viewed as "a craftsman prepared to work and rework his novels with the help of Erskine, one unafraid of experimentation but in need at this stage of his career of a fellow perfectionist to ensure the clear communication of his ideas" (52). King eloquently sketches the journey from the initial submission of *The Orchard Keeper* to Random House in 1961 to its publication in 1965 with a devotion to detail making it "intensely revealing of both his [McCarthy's] and Erskine's working methods" (61). McCarthy emerges from the archive King has examined "as a critical and meticulous creative reader of his own work" (55).
- 7 Delving into the stages in the creation and formulation of *Suttree*, King goes beyond established scholarly assumptions about the spatial setting of the novel and its direct association to McCarthy's childhood years in Knoxville; King suggests that the author's long process of re-drafting and re-working the material results in its distancing from direct associations with real-life characters and places. In light of Erskine's initial criticism that the novel "seems to be marred by so much that is repetitive and extraneous" (68), McCarthy seems to be willing to make considerable cuts "while also retaining his artistic independence" (70). The archive reveals that McCarthy may have started working on *Suttree* more than a decade before its publication, while he was engrossed in the project of *The Orchard Keeper*; more than that, King's thorough study reveals that "*Suttree*, or at least its writing process, [constitutes] a sourcebook for other McCarthy material" (74), exemplified by a bear scene which is initially cut during the re-workings of *Suttree* but ultimately finds its place in *Blood Meridian*.
- 8 A letter to Erskine in the archive reveals McCarthy's views on history; in his own words, "historical material is really—to me—little more than a framework" (82). *Blood Meridian*, according to King, constitutes McCarthy's most researched novel, demonstrating the development of his "working methods as a historical novelist" (82) as well as his beginning "to take a more active role in the aftermath of his work" (99). The process of formulating the novel involves significant cuts of which there is "substantial archival evidence" (82), and McCarthy uses an impressive amount of sourcebooks in order to ensure historical accuracy. The early drafts show that McCarthy has, for instance, "deracialized" the kid from its mixed-race associations, thus "universaliz[ing] the

character” (88). Also, several key passages seem to have been “separated from the rest of the manuscript to be worked on in isolation” (93) and this demonstrates the writer’s changing methods as well as his willingness “to undertake rewrites of his own material, independent of editorial oversight” (100).

- 9 The archive research on *The Border Trilogy* reflects a transformed environment in the publishing industry, with Gary Fisketjohn being McCarthy’s new editor. The material shows that the trilogy was written in a different order than the one in which it was published as well as for a different medium; *All the Pretty Horses* was originally written as a screenplay. While writing it, King notes that McCarthy was “prepared to track down and utilize the testimony of experts” (108), including the doctor Barry King who, in his correspondence with the author that King brings forth, provided valuable insights into drafts of scenes with medical procedures. The study of the archive also interestingly reveals that “any details of the selling of the screenplay [*Cities of the Plain*] are strangely absent” (117).
- 10 What makes McCarthy a “household name” (123) is the publication of *No Country for Old Men*. The Texas archive indicates that it was written originally “as a screenplay” (127) although there is “no archival evidence that *No Country* was very seriously considered by any studio, director, or actor” (128). McCarthy’s attention to detail is exemplified by his decision to re-place one of the character’s, Bell, operations from the Pacific to Europe so as to disassociate the character from American imperialism and the artless violence against Japan, as King notes. His growing confidence in his working methods and skills is manifested when McCarthy starts becoming involved in the Santa Fe Institute as a proofreader of scientific work, “eventually being installed as its ‘writer-in-residence’” (136).
- 11 Finally, the publication of *The Road*, only a year after the previous novel, earns McCarthy the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as a selection in Oprah’s Book Club, which boosts his sales. Being more willing to appear in interviews and other public events, the author enters a new phase in his career in which, as King notes, McCarthy’s “reputation caught up with his own confidence in his working methods” (162). Indeed, the archive shows that the author’s new editor, Dan Frank, has a “relatively minor role” (159) particularly when contrasted to that of Erskine, owing to both McCarthy’s “willingness to contribute to all stages of his novels’ development” (165) and the emerging compartmentalization of roles that the changed publishing industry environment features.
- 12 King’s study into the archive material sheds significant light not only on the crafting of McCarthy’s novels, but also on the making of the author. What emerges from King’s thorough exploration of the archive material is the portrait of an American author that is shaped via his interaction with his editors as well as via the changing publishing industry. Published in an increasingly transitory and volatile environment, King’s *Cormac McCarthy’s Literary Evolution: Editors, Agents, and the Crafting of a Prolific American Author* constitutes essential material for McCarthy and American Studies scholars, as well as uncovers historical traces of the dangers that the raw/uncompromised/abject quest for profit can entail for the development of American literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Random House, 1985.

---. *No Country for Old Men*. London: Picador, 2005.

---. *Suttree*. New York: Random House, 1979.

---. The Border Trilogy: *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. London: Picador, 2002.

---. *The Orchard Keeper*. New York: Random House, 1965.

---. *The Road*. London: Picador, 2007.