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**Trying the Stuff of Creation:  
Biblicism, Tragedy, and Romance in the  
Fiction of Cormac McCarthy**

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## Abstract

This essay presents an analysis of the religious and philosophical ideas present in the early fiction of the contemporary American writer, Cormac McCarthy. It is intended as an intervention into the controversial debate within McCarthy scholarship concerning how the perceptibly 'religious' nature of the author's fictions may be described according to recognised and coherent confessions or perspectives. I argue that McCarthy's fictions cannot be shown to conform to any particular theological or metaphysical system without significant remainder on account of their being essentially heterogeneous in their construction; and that their religious 'significance' lies not in their communication of a positive message, but in the presentation of what is at stake in the contrary interpretations that they uphold.

I argue that the essential heterogeneity of McCarthy's fiction is a development of the author's reception of the complex aesthetic of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the posture of serious and searching scepticism which that touchstone of American literature presents. The peculiar aesthetic of *Moby-Dick* alloys the Hellenic and Hebraic imagination, creating a synthesis of the concrete images of mythical and biblical literature, and of the narrative patterns that are native to tragedy and to romance. The effect of this complex is a literary mode that performs a suspension or opposition between a shapeless, circular, mythical world, and the created and teleological worldview declared by the biblical religions. I demonstrate how McCarthy takes up and imaginatively revises this complex of ideas in three novels (*Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian*) in terms of their relation to the motifs and tropes of tragedy and romance, with a particular concern for their relation to the literature of katabasis, or spiritual and metaphysical 'descent'.

The three novels I have selected demonstrate a consistent and developing approach to McCarthy's examination of various accounts of the material and physical nature of the world. My analysis sets out how the author's aesthetic and narrative strategy describes an opposition between a view that is attributable to a broadly defined atheistic naturalism on the one hand, and notions of a teleologically orientated creation that is concordant with the transcendent God of the biblical religions on the other. In providing this description, I interpret how McCarthy uses this Melvillean pattern to test the viability of such oppositions, and in doing so, argue that the author's distinctive vision should be understood as an apophatic mode that is appropriate to a faith 'beyond the forms of faith'.

## Acknowledgements

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Yet, I reserve the greatest thanks for my wife, Bridget Thornhill. In the years in which I have been engaged in this study our lives have been touched by tragedy and by grace, and it is above all her love, patience and kindness that have been, and continue to be, my courage and my strength.

I dedicate this work to our children: To Elijah, whose brief life blazed through the early period of this project and inspired many of its insights; and to Kezia and Isadora, who continue to be my guides to the wonders in this daunting world.

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## Introduction

### *Cormac McCarthy*

There can be little doubt that Cormac McCarthy (b.1933) is now to be counted among the most significant literary voices of the last half century. Having spent the best part of three decades publishing in obscurity, McCarthy and his work now enjoy belated acclaim by an increasing number of popular and critical readers. He has gained such honours as the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for lifetime achievement in American literature, and his works, which include ten published novels and a small clutch of dramatic works, have achieved a status that we might call canonical, even at a time when the idea of a canon has been subject to shrivening reassessments.

McCarthy's fictions, for the most part, hark back to familiar, even *mythic*, narrative patterns, in which the protagonists, usually young men, leave a disastrous domestic situation and venture into the sublime in anticipation of a new home, security and even on occasion, love, or commit transgressions that have terrible consequences. Yet, reading and interpreting McCarthy's work is something of a trial in two major respects. The first is the subject matter, which charts degrees of human degradation and excesses of violence with a dedication that goes beyond even the direst confessions of American writing in the twentieth century. The second challenge is the style and form of the fiction itself. McCarthy writes in a dense and richly allusive prose style

that is at times difficult to follow and determinedly difficult to interpret. His syntactic constructions are elaborate and often extended, although he uses minimal punctuation so that words and distinctive voices are woven together in a matrix of image and language. Moreover, the characters themselves are represented through bare accounts of their actions, with very little information from which to discern their interior lives and motivations, just as the formalities of conventional narrative are avoided. Instead, various frames and digressions run together in a story-telling style that frustrates expectations of clarity and reader satisfaction. For these reasons, the task of undertaking to read McCarthy's writing and to discern its meaning requires an unusual commitment on the part of the general reader and serious critic alike to *work* with the material, while at the same time accepting the possibility that final understanding may remain doggedly elusive. As the material gathered in the McCarthy Papers held as part of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University shows, the author's creative process entails repeated revisions and rewritings of discrete sections of texts, paring down the functional elements of the language and amplifying their allusive and poetic resonance, as they are meticulously shaped into continuous works. <sup>1</sup>As Steven Frye has aptly described, the task of the reader must be to 'explore how these various layers integrate or remain purposefully distinct ... Individual passages must be read, reread, and pondered, always with a playful acceptance of their ambiguity'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos. The papers in the collection preserve draft forms of novels and scripts, as well as notes and correspondence, preserved as they were received. That is to say, often erratically ordered and misfiled. The drafts themselves preserve the various generations of revised passages, usually heavily annotated, in an associative or haphazard order. I wish to express, again, here my gratitude to Katie Salzmänn for assistance during my time spent examining this vast and, at times unruly, resource.



There is an organic heterogeneity to McCarthy's texts in which different elements grow and bind together in the unity of the author's singular style, just as the individual works exhibit correspondences and an interrelatedness which cohere in a unique visionary imagination. Indeed, one of the main insights gained from my time working on the author's collected papers is that he has consistently worked on multiple projects simultaneously, as evidenced not only by the dates on the manuscripts, but also by the movement of ideas, notes and passages of text between different project files, giving concrete assurance to the perception of the continuity within the range of his works toward the development of a unified vision. Laying open and pressing into the mysterious unity that characterises McCarthy's oeuvre will be a central concern of my examination of a portion of his work.

McCarthy's thematic concerns across his body of work are consistent. Questions of moral and natural order, the place of the human in the matrix of existence, and the limits of human understanding pervade his texts, as does a self-conscious regard for the centrality of the tale and a testing of the narratability of a life. These matters are explored alongside questions of the divine and examinations of the notions of God as creator, redeemer, and most subtly, as witness to the world and human affairs in it. These matters will be of paramount concern to the present study, in which I will interpret three of McCarthy's most difficult texts, *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) in a manner that demonstrates their particular involvement with biblical texts as well as their

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 4-5.

strange hybridisation of the literary and religious dimensions of tragedy and symbolic romance.

Although McCarthy's thematic concerns remain consistent, it is customary among scholars to divide his career into discrete phases or periods.<sup>3</sup> The earlier fictions are commonly referred to as the Tennessee or Appalachian works. This group includes the novels: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965); *Outer Dark* (1968); *Child of God* (1973); and *Suttree* (1979). These works exhibit a dense and heady sense of the Appalachian landscape and culture with which their narratives are situated, and revel in many of the characteristics of the Gothic tradition which is particular to the region. Their indebtedness to Faulkner is undeniable in the weighty, extended syntactic style, though, equally, there is an obvious affinity with the distinctively American grotesque devised by Flannery O'Connor, and the texture and tensions of the postbellum cultural and social milieu examined most memorably by Carson McCullers. There then comes a shift as McCarthy's writing leaves the south for the southwestern border regions, and in doing so, largely resigns from the tales of the bizarre and marginalised curiosities of Appalachia to take up the conventions of the western. This second phase begins with what is the author's most celebrated and imposing work, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) and continues with the three volumes of the Border

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<sup>3</sup> The description of McCarthy's chronological development according to genres and settings is a custom that began with the publication of Wade Hall and Rick Wallach's seminal edited volume *Sacred Violence*, which was originally published in 1993, but presented in a second edition in 2002 as two volume collection which divided up the 'Appalachian Works' from the 'western novels': See Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (eds.), *Sacred Violence. Vol. 1: Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Works*, 2nd ed. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002) and *Sacred Violence. Vol. 2: Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*, 2nd ed. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002). This division is followed and again updated in Steven Frye's career overview, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, in 2009, though now with the additional division of 'latter works', within which he gathers those novels which appeared after the Border Trilogy.

Trilogy: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992); *The Crossing* (1994); and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). *Blood Meridian* is very much the bridging moment between these two phases, representing the culmination of the difficult and delirious style of the earlier works even as it announces the author's movement into new geographic and literary terrain. The novels of the Border Trilogy are noted for a distinct change in style and mood. Violent disruption and epistemic frustration remains at the fore, although a lighter and more inviting prose style replaces the tangled confections of the earlier work, and with it, an ostensibly more optimistic world view. Having resigned from the western, there then follows a period marked by a diversity of form and setting that is perhaps most fairly referred to chronologically as the 'later works'. These include: the noirish thriller *No Country for Old Men* (2005), which was adapted for cinema by the Cohen brothers to huge critical acclaim; *The Sunset Limited* (2006) a Beckettian dialogue presented as 'a novel in dramatic form'; and the post-apocalyptic quest narrative, *The Road* (2006), for which McCarthy earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. These later works continue in McCarthy's trajectory toward a sparer syntactic style and economy of words although they forfeit nothing of the rich poetic resonance which distinguished the preceding work.

### ***Mosaic texts: McCarthy and literary tradition***

An important element of approaching McCarthy's fiction critically entails an appreciation of the author's self-conscious address to and use of the literary tradition and this is a fact which is increasingly recognised among scholars

undertaking dedicated work on the author.<sup>4</sup> When reading McCarthy's work, one is confronted by a formidable ambition to stand alongside the canonical works of the ages, but one which declares that ambition and fulfils it through a kind of assimilation. Indeed, one of the central expressions of the heterogeneity of McCarthy's texts is the devising of a novel vision which incorporates a host of antecedent literary voices and their texts. To begin to describe this process and its implications, we would be well served to regard one evocative image from the closing pages of *Cities of the Plain* which seems illustrative of McCarthy's method. Billy Parham, the hero of the Border Trilogy, is being cared for in his old age by a woman named Betty. One detail of the interior of the modest home is reported:

On the hallway wall hung a framed photograph that had been printed from a glass plate broken into five pieces and in the photograph certain ancestors were puzzled back together in a study that cohered with its own slightly skewed geometry. Apportioning some third or separate meaning to each of the figures seated there. To their faces. To their forms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, is, of course, a critic whose default is to analyse works according to what he perceives as their participation with and 'anxious' struggle against their precursors, and his appreciation of Cormac McCarthy is no exception. See his "Introduction" to *Cormac McCarthy: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, new edition (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2002), 1-8; *How to Read and Why* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 254-262. In the field of dedicated McCarthy research, I again refer to Steven Frye's *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, which consistently curates McCarthy's works in light of their relationships with the work of other authors. In addition, Nicholas Monk (ed.), *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossing*, (London: Routledge, 2011) collects work which seeks to interpret McCarthy according to certain perceived intertextual relations.

<sup>5</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (London: Picador, 2011), 291-92.

The image is an illustrative one that contributes to the tentatively articulated sense of completion and restoration with which the life of the character and the novel itself are concluded. Yet, considered outside the narrative context, the image seems a somewhat disclosive statement that communicates to the reader something of McCarthy's understanding of the imaginative enterprise with which he is involved. Indeed, the image is emblematic of McCarthy's fictions themselves, which may be viewed precisely as a 'puzzling together' of certain literary ancestors and of his literary vision as one that abides with a certain 'skewed' coherence.

The evocation of 'certain ancestors' in McCarthy's texts betrays a sympathy with the sentiments laid out by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in which the poet lays out his account of the dynamic nature of tradition and describes how the writer or artist is in possession of an 'historical sense', with which she has a perception 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the arch-modernist affirms a decidedly spectral quality to these relations of literary influences:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Prose*, edited by John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 21-29: 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 23.

As we will see, keeping company with the dead is an idea that McCarthy explores narratively, though it is also a notion that is practised in the texts themselves in their perpetual reference back to the works that preceded them.

What we know of McCarthy's thoughts concerning literary influence and production is summed up in his characteristically austere and now much quoted dictum: 'The ugly fact is that books are made out of books... The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written'.<sup>8</sup> This 'ugly fact' is a corrective or qualification of naive ideas of originality which affirms that an author's works do not arise *ex nihilo*, but are dependent upon and conditioned by the texts that are already at hand. Indeed, the pre-existing texts provide the very substance from which her own vision may be realised.

McCarthy's works betray their dependence upon their literary forebears to an extent that is uncommon in contemporary fiction. In distinction to a postmodern presumption of a 'holistic' rootlessness in its pursuit of novel sentiments and expressions, the words, figures, characters and narratives that McCarthy crafts seem to always put us in mind of the work of other artists. We can easily discern his near kinship with writers of the American tradition and his relationship to the great writers of the western tradition, both secular and sacred. Evocations of Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, T. S. Eliot, the King James Bible and classical myth and philosophy are woven together to produce texts marked by an uncommonly composite in nature. These appropriations are carriers of their own meaning but like the photograph, they also communicate with each other in juxtaposition and therefore must be read

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<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Woodward, "McCarthy's Venomous Fiction", *New York Times Magazine*, 19 April 1992, 28-31: 31

in a way that is sensitive to how they may apportion ‘some third or separate meaning’ and achieve a coherence in the author’s vision.

McCarthy’s sense of the composite or derivative nature of the text finds ample substantiation in theoretical considerations of literary influence and production. In her landmark essay “Word, Dialog, Novel,” Julia Kristeva instructs us that ‘Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’<sup>9</sup>, and Harold Bloom similarly makes use of the terminology of the mosaic in his theory of poetic influence, to describe the appropriation and repositioning of ideas and figures and forms through changes and continuity.<sup>10</sup> The present study gives serious credit to such a notion and moves toward an understanding of the meaning and implications of McCarthy’s texts by considering them alongside certain preceding texts to which they seem to point—in particular, the Book of Genesis, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Greek tragic myths, and Dante’s

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialog and Novel’, in *The Kristeva Reader* edited by Toril Moi, (London: Blackwell, 1996), 34-61:37.

Edwin T. Arnold has made some apposite preliminary remarks on McCarthy’s writing in light of Kristeva’s terms. See: Edwin T. Arnold, “The Mosaic of McCarthy’s Fiction”, in Hall and Wallach (Eds.), *Sacred Violence Vol. 1: Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian Works* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002), 1-8; and “The Mosaic of McCarthy’s Fiction, Continued”, in Hall and Wallach (Eds.), *Sacred Violence Vol.2: Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002) 179-187.

Commentating at a time at which McCarthy studies attaining maturity, Arnold perceptively identifies that consideration of the essential intertextuality of McCarthy’s oeuvre is likely the most instructive path towards understanding the author and his work. He writes: ‘to perceive both the intertextuality of the works—the way they relate or react to, reflect, respond, grow from, and speak against other works, traditions, cultural assumptions, historical surroundings—and the intertextuality of the books—the interconnectedness and cross-fertilization of the stories and images of the stories themselves—and we can thus begin to apprehend the larger construct of McCarthy’s art’. Arnold, “The Mosaic of McCarthy’s Fiction”, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Bloom’s use of the image and terminology of the mosaic is intrinsic to his theory of poetry as ‘revision’ and ‘misreading’, as explored in his sequence on influence: *Anxiety and Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); *A Map of Misreading*, second edition, (New York: Oxford University Press 2003); and, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 2005). The image appears also in *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), his mammoth late survey of literary figures, organised according to the constellations of influence as he perceives them.

*Divine Comedy* among others. This is not undertaken merely to indicate similarities and points of comparison and contrast for its own sake, but in order to demonstrate how those absorbed texts bring their own meanings to McCarthy's texts, and to show how the assembled or 'puzzled' configurations the author devises are generative in the production of what we might discern as his own meanings.

The question of the meaning of McCarthy's text is a vexed one and one that requires subtle consideration when approached in these terms. The image of the mosaic is, of course, one which is shadowed with a sense of preceding trauma. Just as McCarthy's emblematic photograph is a 'broken' plate 'puzzled back together', there is a sense that the mosaic text presents something of an attempt to recover an elusive unity of truth in resistance to the postmodern era's tendency to cast such a stable notion into obscurity beyond fractured surfaces. The poet and essayist Robert Hass offers an enlightening assessment of McCarthy's appropriative practice and striving for truth that goes some way to address this concern:

If [McCarthy] seems postmodern in his sense that everything is a quotation of a quotation, he parts company with postmodern practice in thinking not everything therefore refers ultimately to nothing, but that in human life certain ancient stories get acted out again and again, and that a writer's moral relation to these stories is like nothing so much as a craftsman's relation to his tools, and that nothingness is not to be courted for the pleasure of merely circulating, but built against, sentence by sentence—and here certain Faulknerian adjectives might come into play—if hopelessly, in the knowledge of the doom of all human intention, then indefatigably, in the knowledge of the skills of a trade that



has been passed down to one and that will pass down in turn to other hands.<sup>11</sup>

This sense of ‘building against nothingness’ will be at the fore of the argument my analysis will make, but here it will suffice to say at the outset that it seems that something like ‘truth’ is affirmed in McCarthy’s vision, even as it proves elusive and somewhat vulnerable. With regards his position at the juncture of the modern and the post-modern, we are perhaps best advised to adopt David Holloway’s description of McCarthy as a ‘late modernist’<sup>12</sup>—that is, as an author who retains a sense of the integrity of truth and of the craft of writing as being the *service* of truth, even within the historical and existential moment that such an office and the authority it serves are poised on the precipice of oblivion.

### ***McCarthy, religion, and the idea of God***

Doubtless as an effect of this pairing of such ambition with a portentous tone that juxtaposes matters of ethical and cosmic concern, McCarthy has generally been viewed as a ‘philosophical’ or ‘religious’ author in the broadest sense. Indeed, critical engagement with McCarthy has, since its most decisive first steps, undertaken the consideration of his oeuvre in a manner that marries the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Hass, “Cormac McCarthy’s Trilogy: or, The Puritan Conscience and the Mexican Dark,” in *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination, and the Natural World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 421-431: 422-423.

<sup>12</sup> David Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

regional character and generic qualities of the texts with the larger questions that they engage. Nevertheless, despite the maturation of McCarthy studies and the confluent energies of a broad range of scholars, assessment of McCarthy's oeuvre in terms of its philosophical and theological outlook remains somewhat frustrated, issuing in contrasting and at times conflicting conclusions. At the centre of this debate lies a controversy as to whether McCarthy's writing can be thought of as possessing a religious message at all. This interpretative challenge correlates with the uncertain nature of the author's own religious commitment. Having been raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, McCarthy ceased to practise the faith sometime in his youth, and when asked by Oprah Winfrey in 2006 if he believed in God, his response was 'That would depend on what day of the week you asked me.' That is not to say that the religious is itself difficult to perceive in McCarthy's fiction; on the contrary, it is an ineluctable presence. Drawing primarily but not exclusively on Judeo-Christian tradition, McCarthy make use of a wide range of ideas and motifs, of imagery and iconography drawn from religious culture to ornament his narrative and to lend it a charge of the sacred. However, it is also true that these easily recognised images and motifs are consistently problematized. A kind of literary iconoclasm seems to be at work in which biblical narratives are borrowed and profaned just as religious rituals are sensible only in their disintegration. The questions that we are undertaking to answer concern how and to what end do these deconstructions work. Are they mere confections, or do these ruins bear witness to something more profound?

Among the variety of readings offered, certain catchwords have gained prominence. The earliest assertion was that McCarthy's work is nihilistic. This view was inaugurated by Vereen M. Bell's 1983 article, to which he gave the declarative title "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy", the interpretations of which were subsequently developed in his 1988 book, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*.<sup>13</sup> This first book length study of McCarthy considers the novels from *The Orchard Keeper* through to what reads like a hastily composed chapter on *Blood Meridian*. Bell opens that first essay with the remark that those early novels are 'as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot',<sup>14</sup> and the book describes at greater length his view of the tales as comprised of scattered events upon a terrain that has no formal integrity of time or space, in which mindless acts of violence are annunciations— at once revelatory and utterly banal— of the total dearth of meaning in the world as it exists:

This gives us McCarthy's metaphysic summarised: none, in effect—no first principles, no foundational truth, Heraclitus without Logos. In each of these novels existence not only precedes but precludes essence. But if essence has been precluded, the human dream of it has not, so the pressure of meaningfulness remains even when meaning will not separate out.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vereen M. Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy", *Southern Literary Journal* 15 (Spring 1983): 31-41; *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy", 31.

<sup>15</sup> Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy", 32.

In Bell's 'nihilistic' reading, what we might call the generative curiosity which shapes McCarthy's writing is the fact of human inclination to look for or locate meaning in the exterior world even though none is forthcoming. In truth, Bell's position would have been better described as a dark strain of existentialism, within which atheism, as either a constitutive or an effective fact, is more or less assumed. However, as Rick Wallach has noted, Bell never wholly refutes that there are instances of 'levity' to be found within McCarthy's Tennessee work,<sup>16</sup> although the 'ambiguousness' he discerns is never given full account or considered in terms of its implications. Bell's early assertion confirms the manifold problems of sustaining a definition of nihilism for the purposes of accounting for a literary work, and indeed, in his response to *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, Bell conceded in definite terms that a more optimistic and affirmative outlook could be discerned.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the assumption of a general spirit of atheism has proved persistent among scholars, particularly with regards to the decidedly darker Tennessee novels. Critics which have followed in the course established by Bell have sought to relate McCarthy's work to ideas and motifs from Pre-Socratic thought and their echoes in the thought of Nietzsche and the so-called 'philosophers of suspicion', as well as outlining affinities with other dismal or pessimistic tones of philosophy. Such approaches have frequently offered interesting and rewarding commentary on elements of the author's work—particularly in respect of ideas of nature and ecology—although they

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<sup>16</sup> Rick Wallach, "Foreword" in Manuel Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), ix-xii: ix.

<sup>17</sup> Vereen M. Bell, "Between the wish and the thing, the world lies waiting." *Southern Review* 28.4 (October 1992), 920-927.

have not convincingly described the general outlook of the work with such sources.

Another early champion of McCarthy's work who laid the foundations for a counter view to Bell's diagnosis of nihilism is Edwin T. Arnold. As a scholar who is critically astute and confessionally sensitive to the Christian, and specifically Roman Catholic, tones and detail in McCarthy's work, Arnold regarded the dire confessions of the Tennessee fiction as 'moral parables' constructed in the tradition of the *via negativa*, and his subsequent assessments of the Border Trilogy further extolled the religious feeling of those works as being one which, while by no means orthodox or didactic, certainly issues from a mind formed in the catholic imagination.<sup>18</sup> Arnold's work is interesting, although perhaps not always totally convincing, having a tendency to focus in on relevant textual evidence but stopping short of extensive consideration of the framing ambiguities or latent stores of allusive meaning that can be drawn from those motifs, images, actions and words that he is right to privilege. Manuel Broncano's recent book sustains and builds upon Arnold's positive reading of religion. Broncano reads a sequence of McCarthy's novels that begins with the Westerns and resolves in the later works *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* in terms of the canonical and the apocryphal, tracing key moments in which McCarthy's work connects and departs from received biblical sources.<sup>19</sup> He is guided chiefly, it seems, by a

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<sup>18</sup> See in particular: Edwin T. Arnold, "Blood & Grace: The Fiction of Cormac McCarthy," *Commonweal* 121, no. 19 (Nov. 1994): 11-16; "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*." In *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*, edited by James D. Lilley (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 215-238; and "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables." In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 45-69.

<sup>19</sup> Manuel Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).

concern for the function of allegory as a literary mode, but in taking McCarthy as his subject he succeeds in making sense of McCarthy's enigmatic engagement with the Judeo-Christian tradition to produce a commentary that is most insightful, but again, does not really venture many bold interpretations of what metaphysic(s) this ambiguity may indicate.

A third position on McCarthy which has been ventured, and which has something of a 'middle way' has considered the author's work in terms of Gnosticism. This trend was initiated by Leo Daugherty's 1992 article on *Blood Meridian* which interprets that novel as a recasting of the cosmic mythology peculiar to certain Judeo-Christian heretical sects of the early centuries of the Common Era.<sup>20</sup> The basic Gnostic myth which Daugherty identifies describes an essentially dualistic cosmic reality which opposes spirit to matter, an eternal, changeless and heavenly Pleroma to an obstinate, mutable and hostile earth. Variations of the cosmogonic narrative amalgamate elements of Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus* to describe an ignorant or outright malign creator god or demiurge, often attended by demonic minions or Archons ('rulers') that despotically rule over the creatures of the sublunary world—creatures whose sentience and intellect betray their intuition of or vestigial affinity for the heavenly realm from which they are exiled. Such a reading of the author's work has the excitement of the arcane, and to be sure, McCarthy certainly supplies plenty of allusion to arcane systems of religious truth. However, 'Gnosticism' is a deeply controversial term in whatever disciplinary context it is used and, as such, it brings its own problems when it is used as a

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<sup>20</sup> Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy." In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 159-174.

hermeneutic shibboleth.<sup>21</sup> This much can be gleaned from a survey of those Gnostic studies of McCarthy themselves. Although Daugherty is apposite in identifying strong invocations of Gnosticism in *Blood Meridian*'s smattering of Judaic, Hellenic and hermetic motifs and terminology, his attempt to fit the novel to a structuring pattern of Gnostic mythos is misguided and leaves a considerable remainder of ostensibly uninterpretable material. Daugherty's model of Gnostic mythology is itself dubious, and simply does not fit McCarthy's novel.

The work of Petra Mundik follows the dubious path opened up by Daugherty in her attention to McCarthy's involvement with heterodox texts and ideas.<sup>22</sup> Mundik's readings of the border fiction are commendable for their illumination of many of the strange words and figures which McCarthy imports from Gnostic and occult traditions that are used to invest his writing with a sense of the hermetic. Following apposite textual cues, she points out

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<sup>21</sup> For a survey of the controversy of this term in the study of the history of religion see: Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (London: Belknap Press, 2003); Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). For a critical discussion in the realm of contemporary philosophy see Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001). O'Regan opines that 'the words *Gnostic* and *Gnosticism* [sometimes] simply function as a longhand [*sic*] for a particular state of mind regarding the world, most often an agitation with respect to its polymorphous out-of-jointness. Certainly, quite often the terms have more rhetorical than propositional force' (25).

In addition, we might also consider Harold Bloom's adoption of Gnosticism as a note on Bloom and Gnosis the 'religion of literature'—a premise which runs throughout his work, and summarised in *Genius*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>22</sup> Petra Mundik, "All Was Fear and Marvel: The Experience of the Sacred in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing: Book I*" *Southwestern American Literature* 36, no. 1 (Autumn 2010): 9-32; "The Illusion of Proximity: The Ex-Priest and the Heretic in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing: Book II*" *Southwestern American Literature* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 9-34; "Mourners in the Darkness: Blindness and Insight in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing: Book III*" *Southwestern American Literature* 37, no. 1 (2011): 9-29; "The Right and Godmade Sun: Fate, Death, and Salvation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing: Book IV*" *Southwestern American Literature* 37, no. 2 (2012): 10-37; "Striking the Fire Out of the Rock': Gnostic Mythology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" *South Central Review* 26, no. 3 (2009): 72-97; "This Luminosity in Beings So Endarkened: Gnostic Soteriology in *Blood Meridian*" in *They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West: Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy, Volume 2*, edited by Rick Wallach, 196-223.

obscure affinities with the Gnostic texts of the Nag Hamadi corpus, figures of early modern mysticism, as well as Vedantic and Buddhist traditions.

However, Mundik fails to persuade on account of her assumption of the basic unity of all such traditions under the rubric of the so-called ‘perennial philosophy’. Mundik’s Gnosticism—and, so she would have us believe, that of McCarthy also—follows a standard New Age formula that opposes ‘esoteric knowledge’ to ‘exoteric practice’ and issues in a rather bland sense of the religious that seems incommensurate with the force of McCarthy’s ontological and ethical provocations.

Dianne C. Luce’s study of the Tennessee novels, *Reading the World* discusses a broad range of topics that are touched upon in those works, giving particular attention to the evocations of dualistic and ostensibly Gnostic thought throughout.<sup>23</sup> Luce demonstrates an awareness of Gnosticism as a heterogeneous and at times profoundly strained alignment of texts and ideas drawn from Platonic, Hebraic and proto-Christian sources, rather than as a coherent system in its own right, and uses key themes to examine some of the philosophically and theologically suggestive episodes in those darker novels. Moreover, she wisely follows cues from Hans Jonas (whose seminal work, *The Gnostic Religion*, McCarthy is almost certain to have read) to consider the relevance of Gnostic thought to twentieth century existentialist philosophy and how a trans historical synthesis feeds McCarthy’s imagination. Indeed, she acknowledges that the diverse nature of ancient Gnosticism is echoed in McCarthy’s own matrix of religious thought when she writes: ‘Although one philosophical/mythic system predominates in some early pieces, McCarthy’s

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<sup>23</sup> Dianne C. Luce, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).



mind and method are syncretic and in his subsequent works he often blends systems'.<sup>24</sup>

Gnosticism certainly contributes to McCarthy's writing, but the assumption that it performs a structuring function is misguided. Indeed, other dualistic systems also have an important bearing on the text, from the Platonic to the Calvinistic. Indeed, this latter category has provided McCarthy with an important point of affinity with Flannery O'Connor—another prominent 'Catholic' voice in Southern literature.<sup>25</sup> Whereas McCarthy obviously lacks O'Connor's commitment to the faith and so also her didacticism, McCarthy likewise finds himself confronted with the challenge of figuring the continuity or correspondence between heavenly things and earthly things in the context of an imaginary terrain that is largely determined in accordance with the Calvinistic doctrine of 'total deprivation'. However, again, such a reading cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated as structural. A more profound counter to the charge of Gnosticism in McCarthy's writing comes from those moments in the texts in which the materiality of the world is presented not as profane and resistant to the movement of the spirit, but tentatively regarded as the graced participant of the life of the divine.

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<sup>24</sup> Luce, *Reading the World*, viii.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent examination of O'Connor's peculiarly 'Southern' Catholicism and its address to the Protestantism and 'modernism' of her milieu, see Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). And for a study that sets O'Connor alongside McCarthy see Gary M. Ciuba, *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007). For comparative studies of McCarthy and O'Connor that address the place of religion in their fiction while acknowledging the rift between them see: Louis H. Palmer, "Southern Gothic and Appalachian Gothic: A Comparative Look at Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 3 (1991): 166-176; and Timothy Parrish, "The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and the American Religion" in *Sacred Violence. Volume 1: Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Works*, edited by Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002), 31-50.

It is necessary to dispense with the assumption that there is a schematic religious or irreligious position which structures or determines the work, and regard the play with sources as an aesthetic strategy in which different religious and philosophical systems are brought together. Although many of these works cited have proved useful, they have tended to limit themselves to indexing motifs and allusions to different systems, admittedly, having done some admirable forensic work and exposition in the process, but have stopped short of offering detailed interpretation of those allusions and of the implications they bring to bear on the texts in respect of their sustained ambiguity. It is the latter approach to which the present study is committed.

Certainly it has to be admitted that the method and mood of McCarthy's religious feeling is negative, even at times somewhat deconstructive, and therefore my own interpretation considers his tales as a particularly modernist take on the tradition of katabasis—the literary mode of narrating spiritual estrangement and epistemic crisis through the movement of protagonists into dark, chaotic, and deathly realms. McCarthy's distinctive approach is to bring religious themes and motifs to bear on his text only to put them under intense strain, in order to test their plausibility, or acceptability, to profane them and see what remains. It is in this way that we find that there is a real synthesis of the nihilistic with monistic and dualistic metaphysics, and of heterodox and orthodox scriptural traditions, in which each is brought to bear upon the text in an attempt to describe a core truth that risks becoming invalid or inadequate when given systematic or programmatic expression.

In much the same way that McCarthy prepares the texts themselves, he pares away indications and confirmations of metaphysical support, in order to

give expression to a simple, though profound truth that he hesitates to express in apologetic or even positive terms. Yet as Terry C. Muck has articulated it, for all his ravaging and relativisation of religious belief, McCarthy does not ‘give up on the idea of God.’<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in a review of *Child of God* for the *New Yorker*, Robert Coles observes that:

[McCarthy] is a novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning. His characters are by explicit definition children of Whoever or Whatever it is that we fall back upon when we want to evoke the vastness and the mystery of this universe, and our comparative ignorance and uncertainty’.<sup>27</sup>

Coles articulates a perception of the way in which the created nature of the world appears hazily in McCarthy’s text as a barely definable background fact. Furthermore, he speaks directly of how the same horizon of benign mystery, however dimly perceived, figures in the lives of McCarthy’s protagonists, who are difficult to know and even harder to love. In an investigation into the formation of the author’s vision, Mike Gibson presents a reflection from Anne Delisle, McCarthy’s former wife, who discerns an irreducibly religious dimension to his concern for such characters:

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<sup>26</sup> Terry C. Muck, “From the American Dream to American Horizon: The Religious Dimension in Louis L’Amour and Cormac McCarthy,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in American Culture*, revised edition, edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 56-76: 66.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Coles, “The Stranger” *New Yorker* 50 (22 Aug. 1974), 87-90: 89-90.

[McCarthy's] singularly authentic literary bent has more to do with a centuries-old theological construct, with the notion that God, in His grace, can justly bestow life, and therefore adoration, on even the most imperfect creatures.<sup>28</sup>

The views of both Cole and Delisle get to the crux of the issues concerning McCarthy's perceived dualism insofar as they identify his commitment to examining the relationship between earthly and eternal things, or the natural and the supernatural. In the three works that I will be considering—*Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian*—the author exhibits a preoccupation with the coincidences of form and matter, name and object, providence and fate. In these examinations the author displays a non-commitment that is of the greatest seriousness and which is married to a vigorous scepticism that aims for the source or generative moment of religious thinking, where the bare fact of existence is considered alongside the possibility of its investiture with essences, and within which the dynamic flow of events is reckoned as absurd or attributed to blind chance, but perhaps also graced. It is by bringing us to this point of suspension that we may see nihilistic hopelessness open up to notions of creation and redemption.

It worth repeating here also Robert Hass' perceptive affirmation that, in McCarthy's writing, 'nothingness is not to be courted for the pleasure of merely circulating, but built against, sentence by sentence.'<sup>29</sup> Without doubt, McCarthy's fictions entertain the possibility of a meaningless void in the heart

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<sup>28</sup> Mike Gibson, "Knoxville gave McCarthy the raw material of his art. And he gave it back" in *Sacred Violence. Vol 1: Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Works*, 2nd ed., edited by Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002), 23-34: 33.

<sup>29</sup> Hass, "Cormac McCarthy's Trilogy," 422-23.

of the world, but equally, he affirms in the work of poesis a means of affirming an incipient and quicksilver sense of benign mystery that is perceptible even amid the greatest loss and darkness. Thus, my project here is to examine how McCarthy proposes a religious-literary mode that attests to this ambiguous or precarious sense of faith. It is a mode that is developed largely under the influence of Herman Melville, whose commitment to a ‘faithful doubt’ resounds through the three extraordinarily dark novels by McCarthy that I will consider below.

***McCarthy’s Melvillean inheritance: Biblicism, tragedy, romance***

Of all the literary ancestors that are found strangely configured in McCarthy’s fictions, it is the aspect of Herman Melville that looms most insistently. In all McCarthy’s strange wanderings through the world and his tarrying with its darker mysteries, it is Melville’s vision whose McCarthy’s writing most frequently resembles. Certainly, Melville’s bequest to McCarthy exceeds that of any other single author, but it is also different in kind. Indeed, Melville’s influence exerts a determinative force such that examining McCarthy’s reception of the earlier author serves as an instructive hermeneutical method. In a very straightforward sense, the fact that Melville’s presence should be felt so forcefully should not surprise us, given what we know of McCarthy’s literary tastes. Indeed, we know that he ranks Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as his clear favourite among a very select handful of novels which he holds in the greatest esteem.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, more than expressing mere affection, McCarthy

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<sup>30</sup> Woodward, “McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”, 31.

seems cognisant of the fact that Melville's achievement has proved determinative of a major course in American literature in which he stands in receipt of much of the spirit and substance of his forebear.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, describing precisely *what* Melville achieved with his extraordinary masterpiece is not a simple task, having given its most enthusiastic interpreters recourse to devising such perplexing designations of merit as 'powers of blackness'<sup>32</sup> and 'negative splendors'.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, as a stylist and as a story-teller, Melville is the major precursor to McCarthy's own enigmatic and difficult vision, and certain conspicuous aspects of the later author's involvement with the extensive reserves of imagery bequeathed by his forebear has been acknowledged by several critics.<sup>34</sup> However, the idiosyncratic theological-literary service to which those ideas and images are

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<sup>31</sup> In his Kabbalistic scheme of literary influence, Harold Bloom describes a dominant course in the American tradition which has its 'origin' in Melville (though, of course, Melville has *his* origins elsewhere) and descends through William Faulkner, Nathanael West, Hart Crane, and Thomas Pynchon, down to McCarthy himself. See in particular his *How to Read and Why*, 235-276; *Cormac McCarthy: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, v-xiii.

<sup>32</sup> This phrase, adapted from Melville's own praise of Nathaniel Hawthorne, forms the title of a classic study of three giants of nineteenth century American literature. Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> This extravagant phrase is, of course, Harold Bloom's. *Genius*, 305-313.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Frye shows particular commitment to marking details in McCarthy's text that are continuous with 'Melvillean romance' in his *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, though he offers no substantial discussion of what these traits actually consist. Scholars commenting on *Blood Meridian* have noted correspondences between that work and *Moby-Dick*, beginning with Steven Shaviro's "The Very Life of the Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*" in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Dianne C. Luce and Edwin T. Arnold (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 145-158. Harold Bloom offers some very characteristically extravagant, although somewhat cursory remarks when relating *Blood Meridian* to Melville's epic in *How to Read and Why*, 254-262. A single example of a McCarthy scholar looking at McCarthy's engagement with Melvillean motifs in order to discern the meaning of his texts is John Vanderheide, "Sighting Leviathan: Ritualism, Daemonism and the Book of Job in McCarthy's Latest Works" *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (2008): 107-120, which interprets the motif of the colour white in *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* in light of the celebrated chapter in *Moby-Dick* on "The Whiteness of the Whale".

directed has not been properly considered. It is with these matters that my own approach is principally concerned.

What the present study argues is that what McCarthy inherits from Melville, and from *Moby-Dick* in particular, is a literary mode that gives stirring expression to a serious ambivalence or 'faithful doubt' concerning the biblical religions. This is achieved by the conflation of references to biblical texts and classical myths in the devising of an allegorical or initiatory narrative which oscillates between intimations of consolation and despair. By knitting together the conventions of tragedy and symbolic romance, Melville produces a version of the archetypal 'pilgrim's progress' which, in its tense hybridity, purposefully eludes simple reduction to one or other of the theistic or naturalistic ontologies it entertains—or, indeed, any of the heterodox variations which fall in between.

The energies which propel the quests that are at the foreground of *Moby-Dick* are the disposition toward restless spiritual adventure and the ocean of metaphysical confusion which whorled in Melville's own breast. It is a masterpiece of intense *religious feeling* which refuses to advance an unambiguous *religious view*, and so is justifiably *the* antecedent literary work which may assist us in our explication of the energetic ambiguities which sustain McCarthy's works. Exploring how this affinity is conveyed in the fabric of the texts themselves, therefore require us to consider how McCarthy adopts and adapts a peculiarly Melvillean biblicism and synthesis of symbolic romance and tragic despair. To begin to do so, it is necessary to set out here precisely what is conveyed under these rubrics.

*Moby-Dick* is a work which is formed by a ‘biblical imagination’ in which the Bible is somewhat uncoupled from the traditional theism which granted its peculiar authority. As James Wood has discussed in a recent article, Melville and his work are situated at a critical point at the onset of modernity in which Enlightenment issues in a scepticism of religious faith, such that he was bound to consider—as Adam Smith had in the memorable fancy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—that the universal benevolence affirmed in faith recedes in the confrontation of a world that is perceived as being ‘fatherless’.<sup>35</sup> And indeed, a radical scepticism and a profound spirituality coincide in Melville’s genius and attitude so conspicuously that Nathaniel Hawthorne could write of his friend that ‘He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief, and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.’<sup>36</sup> It is precisely this tension which issues in the biblicism of *Moby-Dick*—an epic which Melville referred to as his ‘wicked book’, in light of its bold and frequently blasphemous revisions of ‘the good book’.<sup>37</sup>

The bewildering heterogeneity of Melville’s ‘whale of a book’ reproduces what Northrop Frye laconically describes as the ‘very long and miscellaneous’<sup>38</sup> nature of the Bible, and plays liberally with its ‘great code’

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<sup>35</sup> James Wood, “Everything, Something, Nothing: The Modern Novel and the Departure of God” ABC Religion and Ethics (November 2015), <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/11/26/4360472.htm>, accessed 26th November 2015. Wood’s discussion refers to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [VI.ii.3.2]. My source is the text of the edition prepared by D. D. Raphael and A. L. MacFie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 235.

<sup>36</sup> Hawthorne, Notebook Entry, November 20 1856. Quoted in Levin, *The Power of Blackness*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> In a letter to Hawthorne concerning *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote, ‘I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.’ See *The Letters of Herman Melville*, edited by Merrell R. Davies and William H. Gilman, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 142.

<sup>38</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Harvest Books, 1982), xii.



of characters and concrete symbols. Melville's conceit is to incorporate the theological and existential terror of the fatherless world into the novel by the careful paring away of solid indications of the continuum of divine initiative that extends through creation, revelation, and redemption, so as to evoke a sense of the mythic—that is to say, of a view of the universe as enclosed, constituted by plastic entities, and governed by inscrutable internal forces. It is a world that is caught between the Hebraic and Hellenic imaginations; between impressions of a benignly conceived, teleologically orientated creation, and of the circular repetition of transient phenomena. And as such it, its revelations oscillate between gloriously supramundane and reductively naturalistic versions of apocalyptic.<sup>39</sup>

The key characters in Melville's book manifest this synthetic dual heritage. The conspicuous naming of the protagonist as 'Ishmael' after the son of Abraham who was banished to the wilderness, and so into the shadow edges of the grand narrative in the book of Genesis, is a clear example of Melville's attachment to suspended, 'in between' figures within the Bible itself, although this ostensibly 'Hebraic' character and his pursuit of wisdom and *catharsis* is clearly intended to evoke the uprooted wanderers of the Hellenic imagination. Likewise, the hero-villain Captain Ahab's incarnation of Job alloys the

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<sup>39</sup> Most topics that may fall under the heading of 'religion' in Melville's life and works have been dutifully debated, though a few merit particular mention here. On Melville's unique (ir)religiousness see: Stan Goldman, *Melville's Protest Theism: The Hidden and Silent God in Clarel* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993); Walter T. Herbert, "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*" *PMLA* 84, no. 6 (Oct. 1969): 1613-1619; "Calvinist Earthquake: *Moby-Dick* and Religious Tradition" in *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, edited by Richard H. Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 109-140; and *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977). For excellent discussion of Melville's biblicism see: Elisa New, "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 281-303; and Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

awkward, proto-existential, cosmic estrangement of the Hebrew anti-hero to Prometheus and Oedipus (characters who will feature in my own analysis of McCarthy's work). Though perhaps most significant of all is the enigmatic figure of the white whale itself, which is realised in an intensive association with the biblical figure of the Leviathan—the monster who is emblematic *both* of the primordial chaos or Dionysian nature, and of the glory of divine creation.<sup>40</sup> It is toward an encounter with this polysemous figure that both Ahab and Ishmael move into the danger and delirium of the open ocean.

Yet what is most perplexing in this complex of alien derivations, is the way in which these respective wilderness journeys knot together two distinct forms of allegorical narrative.<sup>41</sup> The narrative mode that is native to the Hellenic or mythical world is that of the tragic agon—the *urnarrative* in which an individual transgression or rebellion against the immanent order provokes an inevitable corrective response that reaffirms the terrible power of the totality against the one. For Ahab, this is the challenge of the individual against the cosmic forces of fate and against the gross indifference and implacability of material nature, with which Moby Dick himself is identified as 'agent' or 'principle'.<sup>42</sup> As such, it is a campaign that by necessity must end in Ahab's annihilation in an Orphic *sparagmos*. His life is a journey toward a

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<sup>40</sup> An excellent discussion of the various guises and aspects of the figure of Leviathan in the Bible and beyond runs throughout Timothy K. Beal, *Religion And Its Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2002). An equally excellent discussion of the relationship between the biblical Leviathan and Melville's whale features in the chapter dedicated to *Moby-Dick* John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and the Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2004), 116-126.

<sup>41</sup> This bipartite distinction is at the heart of the structuralist perspective of Angus Fletcher's landmark study, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1982).

<sup>42</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: Wordsworth, 1992), 136. Hereafter, references to this work will be given in the text using the abbreviation *MD* along with page number.

death in which the *moira* against which he had set himself is violently reaffirmed, and a participation in a sacrificial rhythm which promises the perpetual return of the same.<sup>43</sup>

This circularity is countered by the biblical imagination, which insists on the linear motion from origination to completion or consummation, in the life in the universe and in the life of the individual creature. It is this theme in which the symbolic romance is rooted, as a protagonist moves from ignorance to knowledge through successive encounters with persons and entities that are intrinsically communicative of their essence and purpose. It is at the root of all initiation narratives, although it becomes prioritised in the Christian imagination in the conversion stories of saints and of the fantastical journeys of Dante and beyond. Within these narratives, the katabasis, or movement through spiritual estrangement and cosmic descent, is invariably understood as a progression toward redemption. Melville obviously uses Ishmael for this aim, whose sojourn on the whaling ship incorporates elements of these examples.

Yet, Melville deliberately confounds and frustrates the expectations of these two narratives, allowing each to intrude upon and subvert the other. Ahab's rebellion is unquestionably a heroic stand against 'nature' as the principle of inhuman power, coloured by its associations with Job's lament, and with Christ's stand against sin and death. Similarly, Ishmael's journey yields little in the way of secure insight and concludes abruptly with his own stranding at sea. His is a journey into the sublime which does not lead him to a

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<sup>43</sup> Without wishing to present a too formalised account of the contested notion of 'tragedy' and its religious dimensions in the ancient world, I do here have to acknowledge a particular affinity with the complex of anthropological, psychological and religious account of the religion glimpsed through the lens of tragic myth by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

new domestic security, and even though he attains a near-miraculous survival, he remains just ‘another orphan’ (*MD* 469).

McCarthy, as we shall see, takes on this complex and revises it to achieve his own voice. His protagonists, who are also invariably reckoned as ‘orphans’ similarly perform this synthesis of biblical and mythical characters and tropes, and of Hebraic and the Hellenic narrative patterns in their movements from obscure origins into indeterminate wildernesses as they query the order of the world or seek to secure themselves against its inscrutable dynamism. Indeed, it is the non-human world itself which seems to be the most engaging component of McCarthy’s fiction. If the sustaining fascination of *Moby-Dick* is attributed to the mysterious white whale and the vast vision of nature of which it is emblem, then it is the enigmatic renderings of landscape, natural processes, and of diverse flora and fauna that command ongoing and exacting interest from the reader of McCarthy’s fiction. It is a cliché employed in much appreciation of post-Romantic literature that the setting or landscape of a fiction functions as a ‘character’, yet in McCarthy’s case this is a fair comment in light of his minimal rendering of human figures in combination with his naturalist’s understanding of the terrain his tales inhabit and allegorist’s predisposition to perceive agency and intention in the non-human forces that are capable of shaping human destiny. If we are considering McCarthy’s work in light of its ‘revisionary’ reception of Melville’s constellation of images and figures, we may view McCarthy’s terrestrial (and subterranean) settings as transpositions of the ‘heartless voids and immensities’ of *Moby-Dick*’s oceans and of the elusive yet titanic creature that is its principal symbol (*MD* 162). In the earlier Tennessee fiction, we must

regard this revision specifically as an exchange of the eidetic and phenomenological chaos of Melville's oceanic wilderness, for the tangled, sinuousness and haptic materiality of the southern landscape.<sup>44</sup>

It is a point of note that a good deal of scholarly attention given to McCarthy's work attends to his presentation of the natural world and of the various senses of 'naturalism' that seem to inhere in his representations.<sup>45</sup> At present, the most extensive study of McCarthy's ecological outlook is that presented in Georg Guillemin's *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, which argues that McCarthy's fiction supersedes the pastoral mode and its assumptions of an egalitarian and hierarchical organisation of the natural world, with a presentation of an 'ecopastoral' vision which 'respects the ecological equality of all creatures and favours undomesticated nature over agricultural land' and 'equates the external wilderness of nature with the social wilderness of the city and the internal wilderness of the human mind'.<sup>46</sup> Although it does not present itself as a contribution to the debate on the religious dimension of McCarthy's writing, Guillemin's work fords into these waters precisely because what he introduces as the 'wilderness typology' and

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<sup>44</sup> One of the features which distinguish the Tennessee works from the later novels of the Border Trilogy is where the focus falls in their negotiation of materiality. The Tennessee works involve themselves with the haptic aspect of material entities, exaggerating their organic, resistant, and perfidious qualities, whereas the Border Trilogy concerns itself with more eidetic and evanescent images, and thus comes closer to the aesthetic precedent of *Moby-Dick*. For a sound discussion of the later westerns that touches upon the issue of this strange intangibility of objects see Dianne C. Luce, "The Vanishing World of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," in *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 161-197.

<sup>45</sup> The most notable short pieces on this subject are: James R. Giles, "Outer Dark and Romantic Naturalism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* edited by Steven Frye, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95-106; Eric Carl Link, "McCarthy and Literary Naturalism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, 149-161.

<sup>46</sup> Georg Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2004); 13.

decentring of the human devised by McCarthy accords with the mythical sense of the Leviathanic, even as it accounts for itself as being the working out of the contemporary science of ecology. Here ‘wilderness’ serves as re-codification of the mythical sense of nature in which hierarchies and discrete entities are resistant to interpretation and dissolve into a unified totality.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it is a restatement of Bell’s diagnosis of McCarthy’s metaphysic as being ‘Heraclitus without logos’. That considered, Guillemin’s study is perceptive, and one which I will have frequent cause to consult and argue against in my analysis.

Furthermore, McCarthy’s idiosyncratic appropriation of biblical language intensifies this drawing together of the Hebraic and the mythical, insofar as it models this slippage between the pastoral and the wilderness view of the natural world. This is achieved through his extensive and extended use of the parataxis that is distinctive of the style of the King James Version. As Robert Alter has discussed, this syntactic formality in which ‘and’ is used as the dominant conjunction has the effect of joining up details and features in a manner which obscures causal and hierarchical relationships between objects and events.<sup>48</sup> Thus, McCarthy finds precedence for his subversive vision through an affinity with the deconstructive tendencies within the texts and traditions that are supposed to stand in opposition. Even in its Hebraic styling, McCarthy’s prose approaches the antithetical aesthetic of the Dionysian, and so produces a vice that is continuous with the revelatory word of a divine

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<sup>47</sup> I will engage with critiques of the natural sciences that expose the mythical foundations of ostensibly ‘rational’ discourses in Chapter Three, with regard to the (un)natural philosophy and theology espoused by the figure of judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 173.

Creator precisely in its admittance of darker tones which are suggestive of fatherlessness.

Fatherlessness appears in many guises in McCarthy's text, although never unambiguously. Equally, a sense of the manifold manifestations of contingency in the world and of the need for a witness or guarantor beyond the persons and events he describes pervades even the author's most wretched fancies. In McCarthy's vision, the idea of the tale itself seems compromised by the possibility of its own inconsequentiality, though the desire to tell it anyway betrays a certain discomfort in such unbelief. It is in this respect that the very fabric of McCarthy's fictions accord with a drive to approach nothingness in order to build against it. In his shaping of quest narratives which seem doomed to tragic failure, and his presentation of material existence as both brute fact and the medium of tentative revelation, McCarthy achieves a suspension in which we are given cause for both despair and for hope. Teasing out the details of how the author achieves this suspension will enable us to see that in the profound darkness of his vision, McCarthy, indeed, does not give up on the idea of God.

### ***Project outline***

In the chapters that follow I consider three of McCarthy's darkest and most difficult novels: two thoroughly Appalachian novels, *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, and finally *Blood Meridian*, a work which stands as both the culmination of that earlier phase and the transition into the subsequent westerns. This latter arguably represents the pinnacle of the author's aesthetic achievement and is

the work upon which his reputation will always be founded. It is also the work within which many of the ideas I consider in the earlier novels achieve their most exacting expression. My intention is to demonstrate a development throughout this sequence in which McCarthy establishes a tension between the mythical and the theological with reference to the elements of tragedy and romance that are engaged in the narrative and in the allusive texture of the prose.

Both ‘tragedy’ and ‘romance’ are somewhat imprecise terms in discussions of literature and philosophy, and certainly in the case of the former, deeply contested.<sup>49</sup> My purpose is not to demonstrate a fidelity to particular definitions, nor to prioritise individual definitions in my interpretation of McCarthy’s fiction. On the contrary, in keeping with the heterogeneous nature of McCarthy’s fictions themselves, I make use of several distinct approaches to these terms in so far as they enable the exposition of the texts, and indeed, of the range of texts from which they are derived. Similarly, my engagement with the Bible does not favour any particular confessional or hermeneutic method, but instead approaches this unique cultural document with a broadly aesthetic appreciation of its contents and of the body of tradition it upholds. As I have already indicated, McCarthy follows Melville in his method of appropriating biblical texts and ideas only to make them strange or even profane, to which the critical respondent attempting to uncover their meaning is as often obliged to return to the source texts to read them obliquely as to reaffirm interpretative orthodoxies.

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<sup>49</sup> Terry Eagleton’s *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) presents a comprehensive and frequently polemic survey of ‘the idea of the tragic’ and the aesthetic, political, and philosophical systems to which it has been yoked. I share Eagleton’s suspicion of formulations of tragedy as an absolute.



Furthermore, it is important to declare at the outset what the present essay is intentionally *not* trying to achieve. My study does not present a thoroughgoing synthesis of the growing range of scholarship of McCarthy and the ‘religious’ aspects of his fictions. As I hope to have made clear above, previous attempts to discern the philosophical or theological worldview or ‘message’ of McCarthy’s texts in definite terms are somewhat wrong-footed at the outset. They begin by asking the wrong questions, so to speak, such that the narrow definitions they venture are strained by the irreducible disorderliness of the evidence provided by the texts themselves. I do not venture to describe a structuring logic of McCarthy’s fiction that is continuous with a particular theological or philosophical position, and although I have tendered McCarthy’s reception of Melville as an instructive point of entry toward a better understanding of McCarthy, it is nevertheless the case that this inheritance is to be regarded as a collection of instructive clues rather than a strict code. It is by taking up these clues that I set out to describe what it is about the unruly ambiguities of McCarthy’s vision itself that testifies to a serious mindedness about the relationship between religion and literature, and a sincere albeit tenebrous orientation to the mysteries that they mutually address.

The three novels that I consider here have a common footing in the examination of the ‘stuff’ of creation, and convey a sense of the density, weight and resistance of material existence while testing its relation to the subtler notions of life, language, and time. With regards their biblicism, there is a particular focus on the book of Genesis and an address to the idea of creation as a providential formation of integral entities in which matter and

spirit, object and name are regarded as coincident. They are, thus, also connected by provocative reprisals of the narratives of key characters from the book of Genesis: Adam, Moses, and, of course, Ishmael; although the distinctive language and narratives of New Testament texts which participate in these ideas are also engaged. The matter of McCarthy's address to ontological dualism is discussed throughout with regard to the thematic preoccupations of his tales: *Outer Dark* trials the separation of word and flesh when a father neglects to name his child; *Child of God* presents a tale in which the call to reconcile a perception of the eternal and the earthly induces terrible obsessions in the mind of a murderous necrophiliac; and *Blood Meridian* describes the attempt to erase all sense and meaning from the world in pursuit of a return to a mythical unification of existence. Written through all this tragic destruction is, of course, a negative suggestion of a nascent tendency *within* materiality toward fulfilment in language, time and narrative.<sup>50</sup>

It must be stated explicitly at this juncture that the work of interpreting McCarthy necessitates a process of 'deforming', or even dissecting, the texts themselves. Indeed, the shape and form of the texts is often so imposing that

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<sup>50</sup> I have opted to focus on the Appalachian works due the fact that this portion of McCarthy's oeuvre presents such a coherent and developing sense of McCarthy's voice in a particular aesthetic terrain. As I have already suggested, the subsequent novels present not so much a transformation of McCarthy's vision, but a movement into a different terrain and so aesthetic tonalities. Though I focus on the Appalachian works, I have selected not to present sustained analyses of *The Orchard Keeper* or *Suttree*, and I make a particular case for each omission. *The Orchard Keeper*, is simply too naïve a work, in the sense that it does not yet present the full force of McCarthy's emergence from the influence of his forebears—or, rather, it does not show him fully as an author producing work that deals with the 'burden' of influence in a distinctive way. *Suttree*, on the other, presents quite a different challenge. On the one hand, it exhibits many elements which are thoroughly in keeping with the points of my critical focus. But on the other hand, its great length and ambition encompass a number of idiosyncrasies (in particular, the warmer, livelier vitality of its extensive cast of human characters) that are difficult to accommodate within a work of critical analysis which attempts to plot the development of certain themes and their examination. *Suttree* is without doubt a masterpiece in its own right, and stands as an instance in which McCarthy's own process of production wavers between linear progression and circuitous deviation.

one is required to abstract portions and characteristics in order begin to see what is going on philosophically and theologically within its rigging.<sup>51</sup> We might appropriately call this a ‘Gothic’ or ‘katabatic’ strategy itself, since it requires us to move into the disorderly sublimity of the texts in wandering and at times circular motion, in order to progress toward an understanding of its integrity.

To this end, each chapter begins with a prefatory section which presents an overview of the novel under consideration, including a disentangled synopsis of the often deeply obscured plot, along with a summary of relevant contextual details, stylistic peculiarities, and indications of pertinent intertextual relations. After this initial configuration or orientation, my interpretative strategy proceeds to close readings of the themes and ideas under consideration. To aid the presentation of my readings, I often give substantial portions of the text. I do so in order to communicate an appreciation for the qualities of McCarthy’s prose and in order to demonstrate that the work of uncovering meaning in McCarthy’s work—or, indeed, of describing the manner in which the author achieves a suspension of possible meanings—requires us to be attentive to the way in which motifs, figures and allusions are woven in studied proximity to each other within the matrix of the texts themselves. From these close studies I move to more discursive consideration of the texts’ engagement with the biblical, theological and philosophical ideas that are evoked in order to demonstrate how these ideas enable us to return to McCarthy’s text with suitable resources for laying out the latent meanings contained therein.

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<sup>51</sup> I use the term ‘deform’ after the strategy laid out in Jerome J. McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

A few further words are required with regard to the texts with which I set McCarthy's works alongside for analysis. With regard to the Bible, I have taken it for granted that McCarthy's Catholic upbringing would have formed him to be familiar with the range of texts contained within the canonical versions, and that, equally, the saturation of biblical narratives and motifs in American culture—in its literature and in the peculiarities of its demotic language—have conditioned the kind of prose that he may have produced with little in the way of what we might call 'critical reflection'. As an American writer of the twentieth century, McCarthy is almost by necessity an author who is some way directed by his involvement with the Bible, even as he seems somewhat aloof from the conventional pieties of the biblical religions. However, it is my contention that McCarthy is an author who *thinks about* the Bible with the same vigour as he *thinks with* the Bible, and that many of his evocations of the characters, figures and idioms of certain biblical texts issue from serious consideration of the ideas that they advance, and with certain interpretative traditions and trends that have accompanied them, despite the apparently profane effects of his treatments.

Evidence from outside of the published works for McCarthy's engagement with formal 'biblical studies', in both its confessional and non-confessional approaches, is decidedly lacking, though it is my sincere belief that many of McCarthy's treatments are informed by an uncommon degree of sensitivity or erudition regarding his sources, which takes them beyond mere affectations. Hence, the connections that I make are based on my own discernment of clues within the novels. I have identified direct and indirect allusions to a range of biblical texts and have assessed them in light of what

they contribute to an understanding of the novels. In some cases, this *does* in fact amount little more than affectations of tone, but in many instances these connections illuminate the metaphysical schemata and ethical underpinning that seem to hold the works together. To this end, I have privileged certain perspectives and traditions of exegesis insofar as they best elucidate the meanings of the sacred texts as they are translated or synthesised in McCarthy's vision.

Likewise, my method of investigating McCarthy's fictions in terms of how they relate to a broader tradition of religious and secular texts follows the discernment of intertextual clues and allusions that are woven into the texts themselves. I take seriously McCarthy's assertion that 'books are made out of books' and investigate the obvious or oblique correspondences and vestigial traits that have been absorbed from preceding authors. In certain cases, the archival material provides clear indications that McCarthy has deliberately engaged certain literary and philosophical works, and this evidence will be admitted, either in the main text or in footnotes. However, such clues are rare. For all McCarthy's assertions of his dependence upon his literary forebears, he is an exploratory writer who is in the habit of covering his tracks and obscuring his origins—a fact which is in itself, testifies to the complex of contradictions which pervade his narratives. Therefore, most of the work of discerning the assembly of textual ancestors and literary and philosophical forebears must necessarily include the examination of discrete details, the careful pursuit of one's critical suspicions, *and* a bold embrace of the creative spirit that inheres in the act of interpretation.

In the pages to follow, I hope to demonstrate that this combination of forensic sensitivity and interpretative audacity is essential for understanding McCarthy's beguiling navigations of the wild places—in the world and in men's souls.

# 1. Word and Flesh: Origination, Transgression and Conversion in *Outer Dark*

## *Introduction*

*Outer Dark* (1968)<sup>52</sup> is more like a nightmare than a novel. It is a work that challenges readers in its wilful neglect of contextual detail and literary convention and, most of all, its portrayal of unspeakable horror—a horror that is difficult to comprehend within the bizarre and nightmarish framing of the work as a whole. It is a work which has also challenged McCarthy's committed critics, having rarely received committed attention. Yet, in many ways, it sets out the foundations of McCarthy's visionary enquiry into the nature of the world through its testing of dualistic ontologies within a tangled synthesis of biblical and classical narratives, organised around the themes of origination and transgression, which lead to a tentatively ventured evocation of redemption, that is figured here as the reunification of darkness and flesh with light, word and spirit.

For all its apparent strangeness, *Outer Dark* presents a rather tight plot. The narrative follows the actions of Culla Holme and his sister, Rinthy. When the story begins, the two siblings are in young adulthood and living together in relative desolation and considerable squalor in a decrepit cabin in the woods and Rinthy is pregnant with her brother's child. When she goes into labour,

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<sup>52</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Outer Dark* (London: Picador, 2010). All citations are of this edition, with page numbers appearing in parentheses.

Culla, out of shame or sheer foolishness, refuses to fetch a midwife and delivers the child himself. He informs his sister that the child is 'a chap' before declaring, ominously, 'I don't look for it to live' (15). Importantly, the child is never named and when Rinthy, exhausted by her labour, falls into a deep sleep, Culla steals the infant away and abandons it in the woods beyond their home. With some modicum of fortune, the child is discovered by a tinker who carries it into the nearby town in the hopes of finding a nursing woman to care for it. When Rinthy awakens, Culla tells her that the baby had died and that he had promptly buried him. Rinthy asks to be taken to the child's resting place to mourn and, although Culla tries rather coarsely to dissuade her, he eventually agrees to lead her into the woods where he tries to deceive her with a false grave site. However, moved by suspicion or some other compulsion, Rinthy begins to dig and sees that the ground has been undisturbed. Following the discovery and the ensuing fallout, the two siblings then begin independent journeys which make up the continuing plot of the novel: Rinthy in search of the tinker, whom she supposes has her child; and Culla, ostensibly, in search of his sister. Each passes through strange terrain and unfamiliar habitations and each encounters bizarre characters along the way. Rinthy receives hospitality and assistance, as well as exploitation; Culla, likewise benefits from other peoples' generosity, although he is met with almost universal suspicion and the successive episodes of his progress invariably descend into some manner of calamity.

Woven through the siblings' wanderings is an account of the journey of three mysterious men. The progress of this 'grim triune' is tracked for the most part in enigmatic, italicised interludes that are heavily imbued with a



sense of the apocalyptic.<sup>53</sup> These evocative passages seem to suggest that the three figures inhabit a level of reality which is oddly distinct from the plane on which Culla's and Rinthy's experiences are tracked, though we are made progressively aware through little glimpses and details that their worlds do indeed coincide and that they are following Culla, raising havoc and murdering many of those with whom he has consorted. Eventually, the three men and Culla come together in two separate face-to-face encounters that have qualities of both a trial and an initiation. Their final meeting proves to be the novel's horrifying climax when the three men, having found the tinker, killed him and taken possession of the lost child, present Culla with the son he abandoned to die. Still refusing to fully acknowledge the child as his own, Culla is then made witness to the gruesome murder of the son he has refused. Sometime later, Rinthy discovers the burned remains of her son and Culla apparently continues his wandering in a swampy wasteland, where he encounters a blind man who speaks cordially, although sparingly to him about the truth of 'word and flesh'.

*Outer Dark* is, in some ways, the strangest of all McCarthy's works and something of an anomaly with respect to certain conventions that seem to be so essential to his fictions. The distinctiveness of *Outer Dark* is centred upon the peculiarity of setting that the author designs for the narrative, which seems situated in an eidetic 'story-book' reality. Though the novel is suffused with the dialect and details of the cultural and natural environment that are

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, Vereen M. Bell refers to the three men as 'night riders'. This is imprecise since we never see the men riding or indeed with horses, yet there is something in the fleetness of their movement that certainly evokes the imagery of the 'horsemen of the apocalypse'. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 35.

characteristic of Appalachia, it nevertheless appears to be decidedly detached from any independently verifiable realities of the region. McCarthy's technique of countering the mythical elements of his fiction with minimal but significant indicators of historical and geographical setting—a strategy that seemed fully realised already in his debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, and which is such an integral element of the subsequent novels—is suspended in this work in favour of generic locations and invented settlements. Relieved of these obligations to verisimilitude, the narrative of *Outer Dark* seems to take place in a more densely mysterious, otherworldly realm; less an 'imagined Appalachia' than an Appalachian fantasy or dream. Indeed, the movement of the narrative between various locations conveys little sense of the distances travelled, nor the time elapsed between successive episodes, such that it is suggestive of a reality that seems to possess the kind of aesthetic integrity that is more appropriate to a dream. And we might extend this figurative sense of the nocturnal imagination and say that the novel presents a vision that arises 'out of darkness'. Evocations of dream and delirium are, as we shall see, abundant in *Outer Dark*, and the plot itself incorporates events that are often so bizarre that they approach the fantastic.

The novel presents a fantastic journey narrative, or rather a pair of journey narratives, which features allusions to Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* and to Dante's *Inferno*, and like those poetic 'pilgrimages' presents a panorama of distorted forms and images of general disorder that protagonists and readers alike are challenged to interpret. Indeed, it is a novel in which certain aspects of McCarthy's tendencies toward stylistic and aesthetic excess are concentrated in such a way that the very fabric of familiar phenomena often

seems contorted beyond sense, especially in the oddly deformed faces of many of the figures that the siblings encounter and the extraordinary encounters with the non-human world. In this respect, the novel may be considered the strongest precursor to what the author achieved with the desert pandemonium of *Blood Meridian*. As is ever the case with McCarthy's works, critical discussion cannot hope to remain untouched by the inherent challenges presented in his texts, and so it is that a consideration of *Outer Dark* will by necessity be obliged to participate in the 'dream logic' that inheres in the novel's weird amalgamations of image and event.

The bizarre circumstances and bewildering events that ensue are all wrought for excess and contribute to the over-the-top horror and overwhelming weirdness of *Outer Dark*. Its strangeness is so exaggerated that situating it in relation to literary forms of tragedy and romance is not so straightforward. Considered in terms of genre, the fabula of the novel is much like a fairy-tale. What details there are to suggest historical and social circumstance are sufficient to evoke the customary setting of such stories—a time just out of remembrance, where the natural and supernatural seem to overlap, and in which the poor and ordinary may still be sites of the marvellous. It recalls the folk tales that were of great interest to the Grimm brothers in the nineteenth century, and, certainly, the elaborate details of much of the scenery and setting of the novel, which revel in preposterously exaggerated evocations of the ugly, the unclean, and the generally abject, are evocative of the darker aspects of the Gothic folk tales and fairy lore which absorbed the European imagination during the era of Romanticism and at the fin de siècle. And, of course, Gothic and grotesque narratives are touchstones

in the era of surrealism and psychoanalysis, which take the constellation of fantasy, dream and taboo subject matter as primary. In its presentation, McCarthy's tale thus exhibits itself as an attempt at a self-conscious redaction of an *urtext*, in which various determinative factors and their respective interpretative keys are conspicuously displayed—the narratological, the moral, and the psychoanalytical—though none is tendered with particular energy or conviction. *Outer Dark* is presented to us like an old tale, and McCarthy is well aware that the contemporary interest in old tales is sustained as much by competing fashions of analytical 'decoding' as it is to their dogged irreducibility and insistent mysteriousness.

Yet for all its allusive appeal to older forms of the tale, *Outer Dark* cannot disguise its debt to its nearer precursors in the American tradition. In its lively and perplexing vignettes it apprehends the peculiar sense of the quicksilver that inheres in the Southern imagination, and amply warrants its early comparisons to Faulkner.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the fictive Appalachian locales call to mind Faulkner's 'apocryphal county' of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, and there is much in McCarthy's novel that is reminiscent of *Light in August* (1932) and especially *As I Lay Dying* (1930). The movement of the narrative through chapters that alternate between the perspectives and experiences of its two characters is one clear debt to the latter, and there is something of the haphazard and grimly ineffectual progress of Culla and Rinthy's quests that evokes memories of the Bundren children's woeful attempt to transport their

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<sup>54</sup> In his brief treatment of the novel, Steven Frye notes the consistency with which contemporary reception of the novel likened McCarthy's prose to, and measured it against, that of Faulkner. Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 30-32.

mother, dead in her coffin, across Mississippi.<sup>55</sup> But whereas as Faulkner's novel borders on the miraculous in the way it renders the complex and capacious interior lives of even the meanest minded characters, McCarthy offers little disclosure of Culla and Rinthy's thoughts and motivations. Indeed, McCarthy's inheritance of the Kafkaian piety of excluding all traces of psychology from the telling of a tale seems to be an especially appropriate ingredient of this strange dream, or nightmare, of a novel.<sup>56</sup> Deprived of such details, McCarthy tempts us to explore further the allegorical dimension of the tale and to examine these extraordinary experiences and their settings for pathetic inferences concerning the emotional, psychological and spiritual currents that are at work.

In addition to its Faulknerian traits, *Outer Dark* is the novel in which we see McCarthy moving in the long shadow of Flannery O'Connor. Culla and Rinthy resemble the distorted and grotesquely rendered characters that populate her morality tales, and the sequence of violent murders performed by the grim triune calls to mind the lightning-like intrusions of grace that concludes stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) and *The*

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<sup>55</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, it is in the relatively brief and blackly comic *As I Lay Dying* that we may perceive most clearly Faulkner's own attempt to process his inheritance from *Moby-Dick*—the novel which he is rumoured to have remarked, 'I wish I had written it.' (See: George Cotkin, *Dive Deeper: Journeys With Moby-Dick* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.) The relationship is apparent in its frustrated quest narrative, polyphony of voices, and projection of psychologies onto the natural settings. Appropriately, Harold Bloom situates that novel between *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* in the chain of influence he sets out in *How to Read and Why*, 239-244.

<sup>56</sup> Among Kafka's posthumously discovered papers was a file of enigmatic fragments and aphorisms which Max Brod gathered for publication under the perhaps too prescriptively religious title "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way." Among the hundred or so notes, numbered by Kafka, is a brief note that contains only the words "Never again psychology!", struck through with pencil by Kafka, but not discarded. The brief text seems to speak equally of Kafka's own disillusionment with psychological therapies, and of his commitment to stripping away or obscuring of psychologies in his own idiosyncratic parables. Kafka's influence on McCarthy has hitherto not been examined, though certainly merits pursuit outside the present context. Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, edited by Max Brod, (Cambridge, MS: Exact Change, 1991), 87-100: 96.

*Violent Bear It Away* (1960), though, importantly, McCarthy's novel lacks the didacticism of O'Connor's fiction, which we cannot help but read with reference to her commanding body of concurrently published apologetic prose.<sup>57</sup> As Edwin T. Arnold has argued, *Outer Dark* presents itself as a kind of morality tale,<sup>58</sup> although it seems designed to confound the conventions of such stories. It describes transgressions of order, taboo acts and deprivations with a strange innocence<sup>59</sup> in a tone which is remote from any stable index of value, so that we are left to wonder what manner of wisdom has been gained, or, indeed, if there is anything to be gained at all. As is ever the case in McCarthy's fictions, discerning precisely what is at stake in this allegory requires careful attention to the bricolage of image, motif and allusion, and a serious sensitivity to what is being revealed negatively—even as a clear sense of the negative seems to dissolve into a cloud of indeterminate darkness.

Despite its notable peculiarities, *Outer Dark* is exemplary of McCarthy's Melvillean formula of combining elements of tragedy and romance in its knotting together of biblical and classical source material. As Vereen M. Bell perceptively remarks, both Culla and Rinthy 'wander about as if in a maze that has no center to it or exit,'<sup>60</sup> so that they seem to be progressing in a trap.

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<sup>57</sup> See: Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> Edwin T. Arnold states that the novel conjoins a 'grand evocation of the mystery of the world' with 'a profound belief in the need for moral order'. Arnold, "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness", 46.

<sup>59</sup> In this respect, there is in *Outer Dark* a subtle anticipation of *Blood Meridian*, the protagonist of which is an adolescent whose 'taste for mindless violence' is juxtaposed with a gaze that is 'strangely innocent'. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: or, The Evening Redness in the West* (London: Picador, 2010), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 34.

Consequently, each of the sibling's journeys waver between being narratives of formation or conversion, and descents to desolation, such that it presents a vision that is uneasily suspended between the healing or restoration of the story's premises and an affirmation of the darkness of the world as it is given. And it is the nature or status of the world which is so frequently held up for examination by McCarthy's appropriation of Biblical texts pertaining to creation and perdition.

The familial unit at the centre of the story is a parody of the biblical story of Adam and Eve that incorporates elements of the Oedipus myth, and many of the weird events of the novel can be understood as continuations of the study of the themes which attend those two distinctive, though comparable narratives. The auspices of origination and natality, the importance of naming, and the nature of sin and evil, are all scrutinised in the novel's successive episodes, creating a sustained sense of the siblings' wandering as a journey out of a very unlikely Eden, or as the permutations of an essential shapelessness, or 'wildness' in the garden of creation. Other important biblical proof-texts that are taken up and played with along the way are Matthew's gospel, from which McCarthy derives his title and a certain account of evil that compliments the Hellenistic logic of corruption and disease that attends the Oedipus myth, and the Johannine corpus, which provides the rhetorical sense of the 'dark' world that is fundamentally divorced from the divine 'light'.

Indeed, the late evocation of the prologue of John's Gospel draws to the surface the engagement with dualisms which run throughout the novel. The Johannine corpus is characterised by an imaginative framework that G. E. Ladd describes as 'vertical' dualism which divides higher or heavenly reality

from the lower or earthly reality (as opposed to the 'horizontal' dualism of the synoptic gospels, which divides time or epochs).<sup>61</sup> *Outer Dark* plays with the oppositions of light and dark, word and flesh, heaven and earth, indulging those dualisms at the same time as troubling the viability of holding them in absolute distinction. Its descriptions of extremes of depravity are undertaken in order to question if such a metaphysical darkness is, in fact, total, or if some relief might be discovered. Yet, as I will show, McCarthy is subtle and slippery in his address to these biblical sources, and the evocation of those texts and themes bring their own prerequisite assertions. His presentation of the manifold privations of the tale conserve something of the *via negativa*, such that these delinquencies and distortions appear as privations of goodness. In the perplexing final episodes of the novel, we will find that the dualistic ontology which it pretends to cannot be considered to be final, as McCarthy conspires to present us also, through measured irony and ambivalence, with a vision in which the natural world makes an incipient movement toward restoration, and within which we may see the operation of a force we may dare to call grace.

***Delivered into a deep gloom: Biblical and mythical familial paradigms***

As I have already suggested, the disordered or dissolved family and the loss of the home are stable features in McCarthy's recurring narrative pattern, through which the predicaments of his 'orphaned' protagonists are established and his broader existential and metaphysical themes are sketched. One of the quirks of

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<sup>61</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1974), 223-225.



*Outer Dark* is that the motif of the disordered family unit remains at the centre of the novel's action, even as the narrative segues from its initial premises into a road or quest narrative. Indeed, the family is of particular importance to this most mythical of McCarthy's works as a motif that frames the cosmic dimensions of *Outer Dark*, giving form to the metaphysical questions it entertains. The familial unit, with its associations of natality and sociality, is used figuratively in the novel's questioning of the auspices of creation and the nature of evil, and the distortions and aberrations of its form and functions are indicative of the tortured ambiguities of the world the novel represents. We see in the siblings' name, 'Holme', a subtle corruption of the word 'home' and so also of the sense of the figurative space in which life arises and within which it has proper residence. It is a name that is suggestive not only of the perversion of sexual and domestic propriety that has taken place with Culla and Rinthy's incest, but also perhaps of some more general condition which the extremity of this recasting of the archetypal family aims to make us aware.

In his rendering of the Holme family, McCarthy draws together elements of the prototypical families that belong to the broad traditions that inform his vision: the Bible, Gnostic literature, and Greek mythology. The biblical is represented by allusions to the story of Adam and Eve, found in its canonical form in the book of Genesis, and also in references to the 'Holy Family' of the New Testament who, in the Christian tradition, are typologically connected to the 'first family' of Genesis. We can discern also, elements of the personified 'celestial family' of the ancient heterodox writings. But perhaps most conspicuous are those details that connect McCarthy's tale to the myth of Oedipus. These diverse sources bring with

them quite diverse valuations of being, of creation and natality, and of fate or 'moral luck'.<sup>62</sup> As ever, McCarthy's art folds together these diverse elements in an ambiguous confection that examines these contesting claims and further establishes the author's sustained theme of troubling the very idea that origination and natality may be thought to be endowed with unqualified auspices, or, alternatively, to demonstrate such auspices precisely by entertaining the possibility of their neglect or corruption. Elaborating on some of the elements McCarthy employs in this regard and the resonances and dissonances that ensue will give us a greater grasp of the ambiguous nature of the 'outer darkness' of the world of the tale itself.

In its initial premise, *Outer Dark* seems to establish a perverse parody of the first human family of the book of Genesis, whose existence recapitulates the creation of the world by the benign God, and establishes the paradigm of human creatureliness in the earthly paradise. In this light, the novel firmly reasserts the intention on behalf of the author to problematize the Edenic or Arcadian notions of original innocence.<sup>63</sup> Living in relative isolation in their cabin in the woods and having no other kin in the world, the Culla and Rinthy are somewhat reminiscent of Adam and Eve, and their incest, as well as being an import from the Oedipus myth, also strikes this reader as a perverse extrapolation of the biblical assertion that the first human sexual partners were, in both the figurative and literal sense, 'of one flesh'. Culla's

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<sup>62</sup> The term is that employed by Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, revised edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>63</sup> This preoccupation was signalled at the outset of McCarthy's career in the title of his first novel *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) (London: Picador, 2010). Although the novel is by no means McCarthy's strongest, it is impressive insofar as it testifies to the early formation of his thematic interests, not least the suspicion toward or testing of the pastoral mode.

performance of the archetypal human father and analogue of the heavenly Father, are thereafter recognised only negatively in his failure to work the land and above all in his abdication of responsibility for the human creature he himself begat, figured perhaps most significantly in his refusal to name him. I will offer more extensive discussion of these failings below, but for now it will suffice to say that these inclinations mark Culla out as a fallen Adamic type, or perhaps more accurately, as a perverse anti-Adam.

Rinthy's character can likewise be described according to its continuities and distortions of the Eve paradigm and other significant maternal figures from biblical literature to whom she is typologically related. The subservience of the first woman to her male partner is mutated into the disturbing passivity which we see in Rinthy's character at the outset of the novel. In those early chapters she is frequently likened to a doll, or a marionette. Thereafter, this sense of her inertia shifts into an even more disquieting sense of powerlessness as we grow aware that she has been the victim of neglect, coercion and, most likely, rape at the hands of her brother. This seems to be indicated in the scene in the glade in which Rinthy is sat beside the false-grave and Culla approaches her in anger. The text reads that 'his long shadow overrode her' (33), giving us a retrospective suggestion of the sexual act through which the child was conceived, and also echoing darkly the words spoken by Gabriel to Mary in Luke's Gospel, where the virgin conception is explained in terms of the spirit of God moving 'over' the young woman, just as the spirit of God had moved benignly over the void at the beginning of the creation (Genesis 1:2; Luke 1:35). In this contrast between

spirit and shadow, then, we see consent and potentiality displaced by victimhood, and the creation of new life as following from violation.

Naturally, Rinthy is a more sympathetic character than Culla. Her defiance of her brother and her resolution, however naive it may seem, to set out in search of the tinker and her child dispels any sense we may have had of her inertia. From this point on, she emerges as a more faithful, though frustrated, representative of other significant figures of the Bible. In her roaming, she becomes like Rachel, mother of the tribes of Israel, who is invoked in Jeremiah's oracle as 'weeping for her lost children' (Jeremiah 31:15). She is similar also to Mary—the 'new Eve'—in her devotional role as Queen of Heaven, willing the return of all the children of God. Furthermore, Rinthy's also displays a peculiar physiological resemblance to the heavenly mother or, at least, to her iconographic representation as the nursing Madonna and, perhaps most significantly, the miraculously lactating image associated with Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. For, despite having never nursed her son, Rinthy's breasts continue to lactate six months later as she continues her searching, though the doctor who tends to her can scarcely countenance the possibility of such a situation (158-160). Rinthy elects to interpret such a fact as proof that the child is still alive, and this motivates her to continue her search, though, ultimately, the probability of her being reunited with her son while he is still alive seems infinitesimally small, given that the child, along with the tinker, have receded from the narrative. It is an intriguing and fairy tale-like detail, which at once alludes to the excessive beneficence implicit in the Marian mystery, just as it entertains the possibility that goodness, manifest

in the milk, could dissipate as inconsequential waste—as the dark stains on Rinthy’s dress (115).

It is also a detail that draws another biblical text into closer proximity with the tale. As Edwin T. Arnold has noticed, the name ‘Rinthy’ is evocative of ‘Corinthians’, and, indeed, there does seem to be a substantial connection to Paul’s address to the church at Corinth.<sup>64</sup> It is in the first letter to the Corinthians that Paul’s rhetoric makes use of maternal imagery:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. [1 Corinthians 3:1-3]

The allusion introduces one aspect of biblical dualism in the distinction it draws between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’, and contributes to the determination of Rinthy’s role as a mediatrix or conduit in which those two ‘substances’ might coincide. Furthermore, the well-known personification of love that Paul invokes in this letter seems to cohere with Rinthy’s charitable disposition. Paul writes:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [13:4-7]

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<sup>64</sup> Arnold, “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness,” 48-49.

Rinthy, likewise, in her simplicity, demonstrates kindness and humility as she moves beyond the ruins of her own home, engaging with strangers and receiving their hospitality. But most of all, she exhibits remarkable endurance and a hope that propels her forward through dismal circumstances.

Yet, for all the text's involvement with orthodox sources, the tale maintains a connection to heterodox ideas. McCarthy's engagement with the anti-cosmic elements of Gnostic and heretical mystical thought are subtly brought to bear upon the author's various articulations of the embroilment of natality and calamity. In Gnostic thought, the existence of the universe necessarily follows from a cosmic catastrophe in which the divine light falls into the darkness of the material, and thus the Gnostic texts such as *The Hypostasis of the Archons* offer striking revisions of the Genesis narrative which work to demonstrate that this realm of suffering and change is not the true home of the soul. McCarthy's allegorical revision of the Eden myth participates to no small extent in this tradition, albeit according to his own imaginative idiom.<sup>65</sup> But in addition to this, we can discern that McCarthy's tale also takes up the illicit nature of the ideas of conception that predominates in the 'celestial' dimensions of Gnostic mythology. In particular, the taboo circumstances in which Rinthy's child is conceived recalls the actions of the Gnostic figure of Sophia—the feminine cosmic principle who conceives the cosmos without the authority of her celestial father. Far from being an assertion of feminine autonomy, as some commentators have concluded, the

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<sup>65</sup> Dianne C. Luce has indexed allusions to 'Gnostic' texts in the novel, as well as determining the likely sources on the subject available to McCarthy in the period in which he was undertaking work on the novel. See: Luce, *Reading the World*, 66-68. My preferred edition of the text "The Hypostasis of the Archons," translated by Roger A. Bullard and Bentley Layton in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 161-169.

myth presumes that the deprived nature of the created world is precisely the result of Sophia's transgression of eternally inscribed structures of authority. In this light, it would seem significant that the Holme siblings' own father and mother are absent, presumed dead. The brief mention of 'daddy's gun' is the only testimony of their existence. The sallow figure who, when she is introduced to us, seems oppressed to the point of pitiful passivity, hardly fits this model of autonomous rebellion, yet the absence of the paternal authority seems hugely determinative in Culla's culpability.

The conspicuous absence of the siblings' 'daddy' is concordant with McCarthy's Melvillean theme of devising his texts in the shadow of a perceived cosmic fatherlessness. Yet, it is also a detail which, together with the incest and child exposure, is elements of familial disorder which are familiar from the Oedipus myth. The breaking of this most fundamental sexual taboo and the subsequent abandonment of a child as an attempt to divest oneself of the shame of that transgression are the gross determinants in McCarthy's plot, and are the locus for the novel's knotted thinking on the subjects of generation, as well as of the nature of fate as it relates to notions of the tragic. Like the ancient Greek myth, the breaking of the incest taboo in McCarthy's novel is figured as a violation of the structures that define and organise identity: even the most crooked and kooky personalities whom Rinthy tells of her predicament seem to instinctively disapprove, no matter how far their own lives and speech suggest a resigned acceptance of evil and corruption in the weft of life. It is for his step against the *nomos* of the natural order that Oedipus' transgression is an offence to the gods, and for which he is marked, albeit unwittingly, with a form of sickness that engenders in its course

the universal disorder of pestilence. Culla's transgression plunges him into a kind of unacknowledged sickness, which accompanies him as a form of *miasma* that extends his chaotic influence to those in his company.

It is interesting that the breaking of the incest taboo in both the Oedipus myth and in McCarthy's novel is somewhat predetermined. Oedipus' transgression was foretold in an oracle pronounced upon his birth, provoking his father, Laius, to abandon the infant in the hope of escaping such a fate, and Culla's incest is predetermined in its own way, being established already as a past and ineradicable event on the first pages of the novel as we are introduced to the heavily pregnant Rinthy. In this sense, the act of incest and the conception of the child seem equally as inevitable, though we are given occasion to think quite differently about the determinants. In place of the gods and oracles of Oedipus's story, we have a kind of anterior vanishing point in McCarthy's narrative; a lacuna that withholds the time and events that would make the present situation more intelligible. The corruption of this family is, perhaps, always already the case, and the novel's mythic form gives us plenty of scope to suppose that this may be the condition of the world entire.

Finally, we should give some consideration to the possibility of the novel's conscious involvement with the treatment of the myth within psychoanalytic discourse—the so-called 'Oedipus complex', first described by Sigmund Freud.<sup>66</sup> The rudimentary details of the 'complex' are well-known and much discussed, but certain aspects deserve summary attention here in so

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<sup>66</sup> Freud begins to develop his idea of the Oedipus complex in earnest in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by James Strachey, (London: Penguin, 1991), though he continues to develop and elaborate upon the theory over many years. I have benefitted from the overviews and analysis provided in the following: Marte Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud's Jewish Identity*, translated by Ralph Manheim, (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1977); Peter L. Rudnytsky, *Freud and Oedipus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and Anthony Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



far as they may be shown to be of some concordance with the novel's overall conceit. Freud considered the myth of Oedipus as illustrative of the drama which takes place within the structure of the developing psyche as the (male) child as comes to maturity through successive psychosexual stages. Successful development to psychosexual maturity occurs through the dynamic repression of the (male) child's libidinal attraction to his mother and perceived rivalry with the father—the animosity which induces the related phenomenon of the 'castration' anxiety. As has been extensively argued, Freud's theory hardly satisfies as an interpretation of the various textual versions of the Greek myth, nor does the literal mindedness with which Freud applied its motifs in the practice of his therapies. But once we dispense with the notion that Freud's ideas constitute an order of science, we may still find some insights that are apt for our present analysis.

The incest described by McCarthy is, crucially, not that which is committed between a son and his mother, yet the importance of the absent or displaced authority of the father is of interest. Indeed, if we are reading with the psychoanalyst's eye for symbolism, we might interpret Culla's possession of 'daddy's gun' as evidence of his triumph in the contest of castration anxieties. But more subtly, the failure of Culla to divest himself of his libidinal orientation toward his sister may be regarded as being of a piece with his failure to achieve a secure ego (which we may, in this context, feel free to use as a synonym for the self, character or identity) constituted over and against the knotted desires and confused identities that psychoanalysis takes as primary. It may be that Culla's failure of 'repression' can be read as being of a piece with his failure to rise above the plain of undifferentiated phenomena

and into discrete and individuated life. In this light, his peculiar name is suggestive not only of his attempted ‘culling’ or killing of his child, but also the cutting off of his own life ahead of its ‘natural’ progression toward fulfilment. Such a failure to graduate beyond undifferentiated identities and chaotic ‘material’ forces is, as I will illustrate below, examined through other key motifs.

*Soaring darkness and auguries of dawn: Biblical metaphysics*

The siblings’ respective conditions become determinative of the journeys they set out to make following the implosion of their already precarious domestic set up. Rinthy’s aim is clearly stated and consistent throughout the text as she travels in the hope of recovering her child. Hers is, or aspires to be, a quest narrative in the proper sense. Culla’s journey is of a stranger kind, however, and his transgressions seem to commit him to a shapeless movement through the dreamy wilderness. In the bifurcation of their respective journeys, the narrative framing of the novel begins to describe one facet of the novel’s play with Johannine dualism—namely, the dualism of darkness and light.

In his First Epistle, John writes:

He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. [1 John 2:9-11]

The siblings do indeed take separate paths: Rinthy moves in light toward her end, whereas as Culla moves in darkness, in a kind of perdition within a lower realm. And yet the text finds ways to problematise this distinction, describing a weird equality in the form and function of their movements through the dreamy terrain.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks of those 'who will be cast out into the outer darkness, where there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth' (8:12; 22:13; 25:30). This memorable formulation appears three times in the conclusions to three distinctive passages that, among other things, seem to speak about the nature of sin and evil: the cleansing of the leper and the healing of the centurion's servant (8:1-12); the parable of the wedding feast (22:1-14); and the parable of the talents (25:14-30). The image of the casting out is certainly provocative and what it connotes with regard to judgement and damnation within the context of the Gospel and New Testament writings is difficult to determine precisely and without controversy. McCarthy most likely appreciates the phrase precisely for the grotesque sense of the hellish that it evokes, but the story's involvement with these passages goes beyond a mere indulgence in unpleasantness. Indeed, it is possible to discern how McCarthy takes up certain elements of these passages to describe the transgression and the subsequent perdition of Culla as a 'fallen' Adam in biblically resonant terms—in particular, the motifs of sickness or uncleanness, and uncleanness, and of negligence or shiftlessness.

The first invocation of the 'outer darkness' in Matthew is in the address that follows two healing miracles: the cleansing of the leper (8:1-4) and the curing of the centurion's servant (8:5-9). Read allegorically, the text

suggests an understanding of sin as lack of health or imperfection, the cure for which is the encounter with Christ in an attitude of faith.<sup>67</sup> The dramatic force of these acts of healing is further guaranteed by the particularly abject status of the two patients, understood according to type: the leper is the epitome of the toxic other, and the servant, on the grounds of being a Gentile, is ‘unclean’ in the eyes of Jewish law and ostensibly set apart from, or outside of, the revelation with which Jesus’ activity as Rabbi and Messiah is continuous. We may read in Jesus’ hard words, then, a distinction between those who recognise their sickness and in so doing find healing, and those who remain alienated from God on account of their unacknowledged sickness.

Of course, the association of transgression with ‘sickness’ is also a feature of the Oedipus myth—both in the particulars of its ancient setting, and in its centrality to Freud’s schema of ‘perversions’ and their ‘cures’. It is appropriate, then, that the theme of sinfulness and sickness is established in the account of a dream that serves as our introduction to Culla. In the dream, Culla is among a ‘beggared multitude’, a ‘delegation of human ruin’ gathered to hear a prophet as a solar eclipse is taking place. The prophet proclaims to them that in the hour of the sun’s diminishing ‘all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again.’ Culla seems more anxious than most, pushing forward through the crowd and holding up his hand to call out: ‘Me, he cried. Can I be cured?’ (5). The prophet reassures Culla that he thinks

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<sup>67</sup> The assimilation of Platonic theme of the administering of truth as the ‘cure’ for spiritual malady with Christian allegories of healing achieves full realisation in Augustine’s *Confessions*, a text that narrates its own katabasis in the progression of the life of faith. Pertinently, Augustine’s own katabasis passes through the confusion of Manichean dualism (Book IV), before he attains to an understanding of his creaturely participation in the being of the divine ‘light’—an understanding in which he finds ‘rest’ from his incessant wandering. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

perhaps he will be cured, but the scene grows calamitous as the period of darkness begins to seem interminable:

The sun did not return. It grew cold and more black and silent and some began to cry out and some despaired but the sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up in the crowd and the stink of their rags filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage.' [6]

The dream is interesting not only because it establishes the novel's thematic concerns, but also because it contains within it Culla's only explicit admission of culpability and of his need for 'healing'. Contra to certain readings of the novel that decry the dearth of psychological depth to McCarthy's characters, and jarring slightly with the author's own concern to pare away intention from the description of action, this passage nevertheless presents Culla as a character with a degree of reflective interiority, or perhaps a troubled conscience. The extent to which the conscious and sub-conscious aspects of Culla's psyche remain divorced from each other, that is to say, whether he ever recognises this subsumed sense of guilt, will be one of the questions that the novel proposes without offering an unambiguous conclusion.

In Culla's waking life he continues to be associated with sickness or uncleanness in various respects. There is a rank irony in Culla's attempt to stop the tinker entering the house and discovering the scandal of Rinthy's

pregnancy by calling out to him from the door, ‘Sickness here ... Got sickness’ (6). It is a lie that betrays Culla’s fundamental lack of self-examination and failure to evaluate his actions throughout the novel, and which serves along with a great many related images to describe his unshakable but psychologically insignificant culpability. This sense of the peculiarly auxiliary nature of Culla’s ‘uncleanliness’ is captured by the image of Culla waiting disinterestedly outside the house while Rinthy is in the early stages of her labour: ‘[Culla’s] shadow pooled at his feet, a dark stain in which he stood. In which he moved’ (13). Subsequently, when he has delivered the baby, Culla’s arms are ‘stained with gore to the elbows’ in a terrible anticipation of his attempt at infanticide (15). It is after his ominous remark to Rinthy (‘I don’t look for it to live’) that he sets about washing his arms ‘slowly and with care’ (15)—an act that is apparently devoid of the psychomachia of a Pontius Pilate or a Lady Macbeth. It is precisely this ignorance of his own moral sickness or uncleanliness that establishes Culla as an Oedipus-like character, a matter which I shall consider further later.

Further to the healing miracles, the parable of the talents also figures somewhat in our understanding of the ‘outer darkness’ that Culla inhabits. Interpreted broadly, the parable describes the various fortunes of those who honour what has been granted to them, fulfil their duties and strive assiduously toward the good, and those ‘worthless slaves’ (Matthew 25:30) who squander their boons or desert their duties. It is easy to see Culla as an example of the latter. Indeed, he exhibits an habitual shiftlessness that determines him in another respect as a fallen or anti-Adam on account of his failure to fulfil the commandment to ‘work’ or ‘subdue’ the earth (Genesis 1:28). Throughout his

journey, he declares that he is looking for work, and on three occasions manages to find employment: cutting up a fallen tree for the Squire; painting the barn roof in Cheatham; and digging graves in Preston Flats. In each instance, Culla works half-heartedly and skulks, off leaving the work unfinished. It is these details that flesh out the sense of Culla as one who holds back from duty and social custom, not in the positive sense of noble resistance or self-assertion, but more as a habit of unthinking recklessness. His action, or more accurately, his inaction, is indicative of a failure to enter the ethical sphere of existence.

Culla's attitude is somewhat similar to what Kierkegaard described as the 'aesthetic', which he distinguishes from the 'ethical' mode of existence. The distinction is sketched out at length in *Either/Or* and rehearsed in *Fear and Trembling*, though we can draw together pertinent details in summary form.<sup>68</sup> Above all, Kierkegaard describes the condition of the aesthetic existence as defined by 'immediacy'—that is, the failure to reflect seriously on the implications and consequences of actions and thereby attain the higher ethical sphere. As Patrick Gardiner has summarised:

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<sup>68</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2 volumes, translated by D. F. And L. M. Swensen and W. Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 2003).

A rare clue regarding McCarthy's reading of philosophy is left to us, and identifies Kierkegaard in precisely this matter of the Danish existentialist's hierarchy of ethical attitudes. Among the Author's papers held at the Wittliff Collections, is a draft of McCarthy's late novel, *The Road*. In the margins of the sketched version of that novel's description of a pseudo-sacrificial pact concerning the man and his son, which intentionally recalls the binding of Isaac, is a handwritten note of McCarthy's which reads: 'Check Kierkegaard Fear and Trembling'. (The Cormac McCarthy Papers, Box 87, Folder 3). While we cannot be sure that McCarthy had read these significant works of Kierkegaard prior to his composition of *Outer Dark*, the mnemonic quality of the note indicates that he had in the past been familiar with this key text.

...the man who lives aesthetically is not really in control, either of himself or his situation. He typically lives *ins Blaue hinein*; he tends to live 'for the moment', for whatever the passing instant will bring in the way of entertainment, excitement, interest. Committed to nothing permanent or definite, dispersed in sensuous 'immediacy'.<sup>69</sup>

Certainly, the characteristics of the novel's protagonists recall the binary distinction that Kierkegaard's sharp text describes, albeit as exaggerated forms which accord to the text's own grotesque dualism. Culla moves in a shadow beneath the realm of ethical existence, where all actions have a kind of neutral value in performance and consequence. In the gravest sense, his refusal of his child marks his failure to commit to anything 'permanent', and in the little parable-like narratives that follow we see him drifting away from responsibilities—drifting even from the quest to find his sister which was the original compulsion to leave his home. Indeed, he seems quite literally 'dispersed' in his passivity in the face of external forces, having no real orientation or direction in his wandering.

By way of contrast, we can observe that Rinthy's character stands out from the darkness and her journey is undertaken as one who, to use the Johannine idiom, 'walks in the light' (1 John 1:5-7). Yet, crucially, it is a light that is always perceived in its proximity to darkness. At the opening of the novel, she implores her brother to light a fire (10), a source of light which he makes and tends inadequately. Her hair is 'dead yellow' in colour, giving her a rugged air of holiness (4). This sense of her sanctity is reaffirmed through similarly grimy images, such as when she visits a store and we see her

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<sup>69</sup> Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48.



‘mantled by the noon light that came through the bleary pane of glass’ (79). And equally, we see that her higher qualities are complicated by their involvement with the material world in which they operate. In particular, the sanctity of her maternal identity is destabilised by her encounters with other mother figures on her journey, including a woman whose five children are all dead (108), and a sow that regards her with ‘a look of hostile cunning’ (119). Rinthy’s ardent-heartedness in her search for her ‘chap’ seems to raise her above her own obscure and abject origins, and set her apart from the darkness, though she does not wholly transcend it.

It is therefore necessary to pause here and give some thought to these assumptions as to whether it is Culla’s personal transgressions that are the real focus of this peculiar morality tale. Are we really to think that the ‘outer darkness’ that he inhabits is entirely the consequence of his own sinfulness, or does a greater sense of cosmic deprivation hold sway here? It may be of some significance here that the biblical phrase that McCarthy takes for his title also appears in the heretical, Gnostic literature with which McCarthy was quite probably well acquainted with at the time he was working on the novel. The phrase ‘outer darkness’ appears in the text known as *Pistis Sophia* as a description of the earth in the narration of its version of the myth of the cosmic catastrophe through which the terrestrial realm came into existence.<sup>70</sup> In place of the canonical gospel’s casting out of individuals of no faith, this heretical idiom speaks of the earth itself as miserably aloof from transcendence and the good. Rather than a condition that is predicated on moral imperfection, the darkness of the world is the mark of a profound ontological poverty.

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, second edition, enlarged, (Boston: Beacon Books, 1963), 116.

There is plenty of detail in McCarthy's novel that is evocative of Gnostic cosmology and of a world that is divorced from any sense of the transcendent or the good. If we look back at the dream that prefaces the novel, it is possible to discern there a kind of recapitulation of the Gnostic cosmological myth, in which the day and night are sundered forever and the sun, the symbol of the divine light and the good, vanishes. Furthermore, there is that interesting indication that this mythical or cosmic darkness is continuous with the siblings' waking life when Rinthy 'shook him awake from dark to dark' (5)—a sense that is reaffirmed in the final chapter when the blind man Culla meets on the road declares that there are 'darksome ways afoot in this world' (250). Yet, we cannot move from this, as some have, to an assumption that the work is grounded in an absolute dualism.<sup>71</sup> We may justifiably set this problematic category of the 'Gnostic' aside and choose instead to regard this darkness as an assertion of the Calvinistic doctrine of 'total deprivation'—a dogma that is presented in Calvinist discourse as a necessary corollary both of the absolute ontological distinction between God and world and of the priority of divine grace in the work of salvation (and Culla's dream could feasibly be read as narrating a similar incident of divine withdrawal from creation and total rejection of the damned). Though this doctrine issues in a certain Calvinistic dualism of imaginative or rhetorical discourse, the intention of such a doctrine is not to uphold a dualistic metaphysic. Calvinism is swept into the encyclopaedic patchwork of McCarthy's imagination, just as various Gnosticisms are, though it would be quite wrong to regard either system as providing the structure of his aesthetic.

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<sup>71</sup> Vereen M. Bell is the originator of such a reading, describes the novel's metaphysic as 'Manichaeism', and its world as a realm in which "some demented and unapproachable God invisibly presides", *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 35, 38.

As I will go on to consider below, it is the dualism of the ‘named’ and the ‘unnamed’, alongside the Johannine pairing of ‘word’ and ‘flesh’, that will prove to be of highly persuasive significance in how we understand McCarthy’s allegorical use of the duality of ‘light’ and ‘dark’. But at this juncture, it is important to affirm that the dualisms which McCarthy’s prose quite obviously entertains, are pushed to their extremes, that is to say, they are vivid, but they are pushed to their breaking point, too, such that darkness, sickness, and disorder, may yet be presentations of incipient movements toward rectification, just as we have begun to detect in Rinthy’s mutual involvement with the darkened world and with light.

***If you cain’t name somethin you cain’t claim it: Biblical creation and the importance of the name***

As I have begun to describe, the perennial sense of dualism which the novel evokes emerges in the distinction between the ‘dark’, undefined and undifferentiated and indifferent state of being, and the ‘luminous’, constituted or teleologically orientated state, apparent in the differences between Culla and Rinthy and the journeys they undertake. This contrast is found in the sustained concern for the significance of names and specifically for the act of naming itself. The child never receives a name and its fate seems to be indissolubly connected to this omission. While gathering flowers to place on the (false) grave, Rinthy expresses a desire to give her child a name—much to the consternation of her brother: ‘It’s dead, he said. You don’t name things dead’ (32). The novel seems to suggest that Culla’s greatest crime is his failure

to name his child. Indeed, his quite literal abandonment of the child is fundamentally connected to this refusal to name the infant, and within the metaphysical purview of the allegory, seems to be just as determinative of the infant's dreadful fate. In the final, dreadful meeting with the dark triune, the leader of the company asks Culla what the boy is called, yet he still refuses to acknowledge his son. The child dies it would seem, for want of a name as much as for anything else. This notion that the act of naming is of paramount importance as a kind of guarantee of security is a peculiar feature of the Eden narrative, in which it is the special task of Adam to name the animals (Genesis 2: 19-20). To appreciate what precisely is going on in this regard, it is crucial to set out in more detail how the act of naming in the Book of Genesis has been expounded upon philosophically.

Adam's work of naming the creatures establishes his position as a partner of God in the creation. Indeed, the task of naming has all the qualities of a divine action in its own right, as Adam's pre-eminence as the creature endowed with language is confirmed by virtue of the fact that it is precisely through language that God created the world. Walter Benjamin offers many valuable remarks on this aspect of the Genesis narrative in his seminal essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", which I propose to use to interpret the role of naming in McCarthy's novel.<sup>72</sup> Benjamin points out that God's creation of the world proceeds precisely by the acts of naming its constituents (e.g. 'And God *called* the light Day, and the darkness he *called* Night' Gen. 1:5), and thus naming is, by Benjamin's reckoning, not only one

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<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited with an Introduction by P. Demetz, translated by E. Jephcott, (New York: Schocken, 2007), 314-332.

facet of language, but is ‘the true call of it’.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, we can see the commissioning of Adam as the namer of the animals and, subsequently, of his offspring, as an invitation to become an active contributor to the ongoing work of creation, or as Benjamin puts it: ‘in man God set language, which had served *Him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left this creative power to itself in man’.<sup>74</sup> Here, Benjamin conveys the biblical understanding of the *performativity* of language, as well as a subtle articulation of the dynamic aspect of the Sabbath. Benjamin adds that this flow of creative power is most potent in the proper name. He explains that:

‘the proper name is the word of God in human sounds. By it each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative. ... The proper name is the communion of man with the creative word of God’.<sup>75</sup>

Were the task of naming left unfulfilled, then the work of creation itself would be suspended in a precarious state of deficiency. In light of this realisation, we can begin to see, then, in light of Culla’s casting as an (anti-) Adamic figure, that his neglect of his son has a metaphysical tenor and that his failure to give his son a proper name is coincident with his failure to ‘guarantee’ the child’s place in creation. But to understand in more detail what this guarantee, or lack thereof, consists of, I should like to engage another important philosopher’s work on the particular significance of the proper name.

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<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, “On Language”, 319.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, "On Language", 323.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, “On Language”, 324.

In *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig gives recurrent and in depth analysis of the idea of the proper name in the context of his theological account of how the individual is formed in terms of its uniqueness while maintaining its ontological participation in the matrix of nature.<sup>76</sup> One extract in particular is worth quoting since it points to precisely the kind of transformation or accomplishment of creaturely subjectivity that seems to be at work in McCarthy's tale:

With the call of the proper name, the world of Revelation enters into real dialogue; in the proper name, a breach is opened in the fixed wall of thingliness. That which has its own name can no longer be a thing or everyone's thing; it is incapable of being entirely dissolved into the genus, for there is no genus to which it could belong; it is its own genus unto itself.<sup>77</sup>

We can see how namelessness in *Outer Dark* seems to conform with the view of 'thingliness' that Rosenzweig describes here as a lack of centre and of beginning. We are first made aware of the child as 'the nameless weight in [Rinthy's] belly' (3), and this description remains approximate to Culla's perception of the infant as something of an object without any presupposed subjectivity, a blank mass. His haptic experience of the child never confers any recognition of the quintessence of personhood, let alone of any human characteristic. When delivering his son, he regards him as somewhat vegetative, being described as 'beetcolored' and even dead in life as

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<sup>76</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by Barbara E. Galli, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 201.

he likens him to a 'skinned squirrel' (14). This perception, or lack thereof, is also expressed verbally: Culla never addresses the child directly and, apart from one notable exception, always refers to him as an impersonal, genderless 'it'. To use Rosenzweig's word, the child seems somewhat 'dissolved' into an ontological field that knows no strong individuation. It is significant that Culla chooses to abandon the child in the swampy woodland, a terrain that holds associations with the primordial, undifferentiated chaos that precedes creation. McCarthy's account relays details of specific features and flora that Culla encounters there, but describes them in such a way that they collide and coalesce into a turbulent unity. There are 'swollen waters coming in a bloodcoloured spume', a creek 'choked with duckwort and watercress' and cottonwoods concealing 'moss of a fiery nitric green' (16-17). As Culla attempts to return home alone he struggles to retrace his path. The spatial chaos of the place is amplified by his own exasperation and moral disorder, and he charges in exasperating circles until he is brought back to the glade for a last glimpse at the infant, whom he perceives as a 'shapeless white plasm struggling upon the rich and incunabular moss' (18).<sup>78</sup>

Rinthy proposes naming the child, though Culla insists that 'you don't name things dead'. Indeed, there is a kind of identity between namelessness and death as the most profound severing of relations. Culla's refusal to name the child is not only his failure to bring his son fully to life, but also his denial of the filial relationship which gives definition and contour to their respective

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<sup>78</sup> The apparent whiteness and fluidity of the child's body is interesting as it reprises the colour and peculiar morphology that Melville uses in his characterisation of Moby Dick. Like the white whale, the infant, still raw from the process of birth and without a name, is associated here with a form of the natural sublime, a kind of chaos-in-creation. Moreover, the white infant is here established as something of a white whale with regard to McCarthy's plot, in two distinct senses. On the one hand, the child will be the object of pursuit, at least on the part of Rinthy, and on the other, he is the surrogate victim onto whom Culla's guilt is displaced.

identities. This denial is of course comes to the fore when the triune present the child to Culla, only for him to insist that ‘He ain’t nothin to me’ (242). Significantly, however, Rinthy is successful in her insistence on bestowing a moniker to the child. She refers to the missing child consistently as ‘my chap’—not a proper name, though a proxy appellation which prevents the child from dissolving entirely into the dark strata of the non-created and the non-relational.

The importance of name is pressed upon Culla more than once, although he seems impervious to it. It is the Squire, for whom Culla spends a day half-heartedly labouring, who presses him on the importance of the name when he asserts that, ‘I like to know a man’s name when I hire him. I like to know that first. The rest I can figure for myself’ (43). He also goes on to point to the responsibility of the father as the giver of names when he scorns Culla for his idleness:

I hope you’ve not got a family. It’s a sacred thing, a family. A sacred obligation. Afore God. [47]

Interestingly, in this same altercation, the Squire also makes a point of measuring Culla against a Protestant perception of Adam as the model of patriarchal vigour:

it ain’t a crime to be poor. That’s right. But shiftlessness is a sin, I would judge. Wouldn’t you? ... the bible reckons. What I got I earned. I’ve never knowed nothin but hard work. [48]



The squire's pious chiding of Culla confirms the commandment to Adam to be a participant in the joint actions of giving names and the physical effort of 'subduing' the earth (Genesis 1:28). Indeed, these words lead us into a discussion of a complex aspect of Culla's characterisation along the terms defined by the Adamic and Oedipal paradigms, which concerns his connection to the earth from which he himself was made.

***Manacled to his shadow: Culla's Oedipal feet***

In addition to his sexual transgressions and the apparent 'sickness' that attends them, there is a further motif which connects Culla to Oedipus through reference to the Theban hero's distinguishing physical attribute; namely his feet. The meaning of the Greek hero's name is usually given as 'swollen foot'—an appellation that is merited by the wounds inflicted through the binding of his feet at his abandonment as an infant. These marks upon his feet are one of the clues to his identity which he fails to comprehend as he sets about his investigations into the cause of Thebes' misfortune. Yet, there is a more subtle aspect of the interest in the heroes' feet that betrays concern for the conditions of creation and generation. Importantly for Oedipus and for Culla, the foot marks the point of contact between the body and the earth. Indeed it is significant also in light of the account given in the second chapter of Genesis of the creation of Adam as the conjoining of earth and spirit. Attention to this part of their anatomy is a device for examining the nature of his relation to and negotiation of the baser elements.

In his analysis of the Theban cycle, the structuralist theorist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously discerns that one of the principle structures that conditions the myth and supplies the dramatic tension that is worked out through its narration, is concerned with contradictory notions of human generation: whether human beings are born from the earth or from the union of two parents.<sup>79</sup> This concern for the mode of human generation accompanies the transition in cosmological thought from the era of the older chthonic deities to that of the ‘heavenly’ gods of Olympus, which the myth attempts, albeit in a concealed sense, to reconcile. In light of this code or structure, Lévi-Strauss describes the motif of the foot, especially the lame or wounded foot, as a kind of mnemonic or signifier that continues to assert Oedipus’ connection to the earth and his involvement with the contingencies of *physis* against the character’s vertiginous affirmation of self-determination. It is apt then that the Sphinx’s riddle is thematically concerned with feet. This liminal creature can be considered as a figure for the mystery of creation and her riddle, which Oedipus solves, though without acknowledging its portent, may be construed as a warning to Oedipus to remember that he is mortal and bound by the laws of moral luck.

The logical aspect of Oedipus’ character is of course revised and repeated in the character of Captain Ahab. Melville ensures that his grand hero-villain’s missing leg is determined as a site of dense symbolic interest. The scrimshaw prosthesis sported by this ‘ungodly god-like man’ serves to remind us and him that he is a mortal creature and not a god, at the same time

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<sup>79</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955), 428-444.

as it symbolises his partial estrangement from the terrestrial existence he abhors.<sup>80</sup>

Culla's character is sketched out with particular attention to his feet and, by extension, his footwear, and these details are styled so as to allude to broader moral and cosmic issues with which the novel is concerned and to his transgressive abdication of his proper place within the order of the world. The first such instance of this occurs when Culla is standing outside the house while Rinthy is in labour: '[Culla's] shadow pooled at his feet, a dark stain in which he stood, in which he moved' (13). The image neatly packs together the themes of sin and moral darkness, while making that connection with the dark earth ('in which he moved'). This complex of allusion is reprised in a later image in which Culla arrives in the deathly and deserted town of Preston Flats and stands in the town square as 'an amphitheatrical figure in that moonwrought waste manacled to a shadow that struggled grossly in the dust' (135). The evocation of manacles alludes back to Oedipus' original binding and the evocation of the theatre cannot help but invoke the aura of Greek tragic drama and Sophocles' account of the myth.

This interest in Culla's feet extends to his footwear. In the place of the wounded and marked feet of Oedipus, we have details of different pairs of boots that Culla comes to possess throughout the novel. It appears that at the outset, Culla's boots are rather tattered due in no small part to his own vandalism. While taking his extended break from cutting the fallen tree for the squire, he sits in the shade and 'idly pared at the sole of his shoe with the knife

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<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the Oedipal aspects of Ahab see Elisa New, "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 281-303.

he carried' (48). This wilful destructiveness is alarming. Earlier, Culla had similarly been idly using his knife to strip wood from the door-frame of his house, signifying his destruction of the home in the human sense, but here he seems to be affecting a more pitiful kind of self-abnegation. Ironically, the knife he uses will be the same one which the leader of the triune will use to murder his son.

When Culla disposes of his damaged boots and steals the brand new and significantly grander pair from the squire, it is as though Culla is trying to wilfully forget or conceal the wretchedness of his true identity. However, the evasion cannot be maintained; having laboured in the church yard, the smart boots become 'calked with grave earth' (150). It is difficult to ignore the connotations here, particularly given Culla's relationship to the biblical Adam, and not see a re-inscription here of his being formed from the dust of the earth, and falling back on account of his moral decrepitude, into a deathly or 'uncreated' state of material or 'immediate' existence. Later, when he meets the triune, Culla will be interrogated about the providence of these boots that do not fit him in either the literal or allegorical sense. The leader of the group then compels him to trade boots, handing to Culla his own pair that are described as 'cracked and weather-blackened and one was cleft from toe to tongue like a hoof' (182-183). The bovine characteristics of the boot are something of a clue to the satanic nature of the mysterious man, and Culla's wearing of them has the tone of an initiation in which his own nature is being confirmed.

*They's put here for a purpose: The role of animals*

Appropriately for a novel that explores the myths, metaphysics and moralities of creation, animals feature prominently in *Outer Dark*. The anti-Adamic dimension of Culla's failure in his role of name-giver to his child is elaborated through the series of bizarre and often comically disastrous encounters with animals that occur throughout the novel. In the Edenic myth, Adam's naming of the animals is of a piece with his 'dominion' over the community of creation. This manner of dominion is wholly benign in character, being a mode of relation that comprises recognition of difference and coexistence in and through the divine language. Recalling Benjamin's interpretation, we might think of the bestowal of names upon the animals as the completion of creation in peaceful concord. However, Culla's experiences with animals are anything but peaceful. As he moves from one situation to another, various animals are present and in every instant are provoked to behaviours that seem to be dumb articulations of suspicion, wariness or outrage at his presence. These responses grow ever more extreme, becoming increasingly peculiar and even proving fatal to human life in more than one incident.

The first such expression of animal outrage occurs when Culla takes the newly born child into the woods. Pushing his way through the alder, he disturbs a heron which 'exploded slowly and rose before him with an immense and labored wingbeat' (16). This flushing out of a bird that is synonymous with quietude and a certain sense of grace in strength, dramatically signals the disturbance of the sylvan peacefulness upon which Culla has, by his presence as in his deed, intruded. Indeed, the sense of the word 'explosion' even carries with it a sense of deployed ammunitions. Later, that same verb is echoed when

Culla is running away from the mob in Cheatham. As he crosses the fields, he races 'through a perpetual explosion of insects' (92). The same chase brings him to a creek where, '[c]rakes, plovers, small birds clattered up out of the dusty bracken into the heat of the day and cane rats fled away before him with thin squeals' (93). In the novel's reaching for the allegorical, we may be quite easily persuaded to see this terror that Culla provokes in animals as a disclosure of a kind of spiritual sentience in creation, in which the community of creatures expresses its outrage with Culla. This certainly seems to be established by the time Culla arrives at the home of the snake hunter, whose hounds watch his approach 'with bleeding eyes, muzzles flat to the scoured and grassless soil in the yard' before 'rising surly and mistrustful and moving away' (122-123). Our awareness of the dogs' intuitive mistrust of Culla is revealed in contrast to the attitude of their master, who in his enthusiastic friendliness and hospitality, seems to find his guest quite amiable as he regales him with the tales of his own peculiar, solitary life. Although, the dubious honour that the snake hunter affords his guest is played for a nice irony as he twice affirms that he 'wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink' (122; 132).

As the novel progresses, Culla's dealings with animals get stranger. These creaturely expressions of fear and aversion that, for all the allegorical import they may convey, do not fall outside normal behaviours that may be observed, begin to develop into more calamitous responses to Culla's presence. Though these later and more dreadful encounters similarly keep a foot planted in plausibility, they are amplified for a greater allegorical effect. The first encounter in this latter sequence occurs when Culla's journey brings him to a river which must be crossed by a ferry. The ferryman refuses to take

Culla until another traveller with a horse arrives to use his service, on account that it is not profitable to transport only one person at a time. While they wait, the ferryman tells Culla that once a horse had been killed when a cable broke mid-river. Darkness falls over the rising river and the ferryman remarks, 'Risky to run at night when she's high thataway. Easy to get stove with a tree or somethin' (169), but Culla is unperturbed by such warnings and continues in his impatience. The river itself is already figured in such a way that it is filled with mythical import and foreboding. The 'dead clay color' of its waters make it reminiscent of the River Styx (163) and, there is something of Charon's cool detachment in the ferryman's remark that his clients 'come of a night same as they do of a day. It's all the same to me' (166). It is also loaded with serpentine imagery as it goes 'wrinkling viciously in the late afternoon light' (163), sounding 'a dull hiss like poured sand' (164), and this likeness intensifies as darkness falls: 'The river hissing blackly past the landing seemed endowed with heavy reptilian life' (167). The water is metaphorically animalistic, and in this guise it gives a bestial expression of unfriendliness toward Culla.

Yet, by far the most incredible of these altercations occurs when Culla crosses paths with the herd of pigs and their drovers. It is a preposterously catastrophic encounter that proves fatal for one of the drovers, and which is charged with significant biblical allusion. The biblical resonances of the scene are introduced at the outset, as one of the drovers stops to talk to Culla and extol the mysteries of hogs and of their designation as unclean in the Torah (222). Then, sure enough, the movement of the swelling number of animals

begins to take on an aura of intense unease, and a sense of biblical drama rises in the narrative:

The drovers stood among them like crossers in a ford, emerging periodically out of the shifting pall of red dust and then blotted away again. They seemed together with the hogs to be in flight from some act of God, fire or flood, schisms in the earth's crust.

...

Holme rushed to higher ground like one threatened with flood and perched upon a rock there to view the course of things. The hogs were in full stampede... Hogs were beginning to wash up on the rock, their hoofs clicking and rasping and with harsh snorts. Holme recoiled to the rock's crown and watched them. The drover who had spoken to him swept past with bowed back and hands aloft, a limp and ragged scarecrow flailing briefly in that rabid frieze so that Holme saw tilted upon him for just a moment out of the dust and pandemonium two walled eyes beyond hope and a dead mouth beyond prayer, borne on like some old gospel recreant seized sevenfold in the flood of his own nether invocations or grotesque hero bobbing harried and unwilling on the shoulders of a mob stricken in their iniquity to the very shape of evil until he passed over the rim of the bluff and dropped in his great retinue of hogs from sight.[224-226]

Allusions to multiple biblical texts converge here. One is the extraordinary episode that appears in the Synoptic Gospels in which Christ heals the Gadarene demoniac by exorcising the evil spirit and setting it upon a herd of swine, which then stampede off a cliff (Mark 5:1-13; Luke 8:26-33; Matthew 8:28-32). Like the swine beset by the demon in the Gospel accounts,



it seems to be the very proximity of Culla, polluted as he is by sin, which is the cause of the outrage. But crucially, unclean as he is, he is nevertheless spared in the great fleshy 'flood'—a word that naturally evokes the Noah story (Genesis 6-9). Certainly, Culla's crimes mark him precisely as one 'threatened with flood', but he nevertheless manages to take the position of Noah for himself by raising himself up on the rock to observe the destruction, as a substitute 'victim' is punished in his stead—an exchange which foreshadows the terrible 'substitution' of his son in his trial by the three strangers who pursue him, at the same time as planting the suggestion that, alongside the preposterous luck that conserves him, a similar substitution might relieve him of his demonic 'sickness'.

Aside from these instances of general animal outrage, particular attention is given to two orders of animal life that are of biblical significance: snakes and pigs. The biblical symbolism of both snakes and pigs are explicitly alluded to, and are used to address the novel's dominating theme of asking whether goodness and evil, cleanliness and uncleanness can be wholly distinguished in the matrix of creation. In keeping with the Edenic paradigm, there are extended discussion of snakes and serpentine imagery. Both Culla and Rinthy encounter individuals who have a particular concern for snakes. Rinthy's meeting is with a dishevelled and cantankerous but hospitable old woman living alone in deep and marshy woodland, who approaches her carrying a hoe made from a sapling. She greets Rinthy with a protestation:

I've not been a-hoein. This here is just to kill snakes with... I don't ast nobody's sayso for what all I do but I'd not have ye

to think I'd been a-hoein... I just despise a snake don't you?  
[113-114]

Ensuring that the symbolic importance of the snake as the agent of sin or the devil is not missed by the reader, the old woman introduces herself as a woman of firm religious conviction with her digressive assertion: 'I don't hold with breakin the Sabbath and don't care to associate with those who do' (114). The image recalls, albeit quite grotesquely, the Renaissance iconography of Mary in which the mother of Christ is figured as the anti-type of Eve, crushing a serpent beneath her foot or impaling it on a staff. And sure enough, the old woman is something of a mediatrix of grace for Rinthy, showing her hospitality and sending her on her way with a lamp—a symbolically resonant gift within the framework of the novel.

It is worth remembering here that in Walter Benjamin's terms, 'breaking the Sabbath' could consist of the failure to give names. We should recall, also, that the curse upon the serpent in the book of Genesis concerns that animal's relation to the ground and to the notion of 'feet':

Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. [3:15]

The snake, then, is a creature that is intimately connected to the earth, in light of the fact that its entire body is effectively a 'foot'. Moreover, the

‘enmity’ that is described is to be acted out in the course of human progeneration, that is to say, in the creation of persons that exist in a synthesis of the spirit and the dust of the earth. The serpent is to be engaged in a perpetual contest with humans, who strike down against it as though to separate themselves from the dust it moves through and consumes, while they may be stricken by its bite, so as to be reminded that they cannot wholly transcend it.

Culla’s meeting with a snake hunter is quite different. The hunter is knowledgeable about the preachers’ mistrust of the animal, though he harbours a reverence for them all the same:

You know snakes is supposed to bad luck, he said, but they must have some good in em on account of them old geechee snake doctors uses em all the time for medicines. Unless you was to say that kind of doctorin was the devil’s work. But the devil don’t do doctorin does he?

...

Even a snake ain’t all bad. They’s put here for some purpose. I believe they’s purpose to everything. Don’t you believe thataway?

...

I don’t know, Holme said. I ain’t never much studied it.

[129-30]

The hunter’s interest in the ‘medicinal’ use of snakes is further underwritten by the hunter’s possession of a large dead snake which is nailed up on the wall, evoking the bronze serpent made by Moses to preserve the Israelites from plague in the Book of Exodus (21:8-9). This talisman seems to

be of little power as it offers the hunter no protection when the grim triune arrive at his home and disembowel him (133). Yet we are then haunted by his words that there is ‘purpose to everything’ as the novel pushes further into collapsing the absolute distinction between good and evil.

Culla’s later meeting with a herd of hogs and their drivers occasions another discourse on the nature of an animal prescribed by the Bible, ostensibly on account of its feet (Leviticus 11:3; 7; and 26). The drover introduces his herd as possibly except from such prescription on account that they are mulefoot hogs. He explains to Culla:

Got a foot like a mule.

You mean they ain’t got a split hoof?

Nary split to it.

...

Seems like that don’t agree with the bible, what would you say?

About what?

About them hogs. Bein unclean on account of they got a split hoof.

I ain’t never heard that, Holme said.

I heard it preached in a sermon one time. Feller knowed right smart about the subject. Said the devil had a foot like a hog’s. He laid claim it was in the bible so I reckon it’s so.

...

But that still don’t say nothin about a mulefoot hog does it? ... Makes you wonder some about the bible and about hogs too, don’t it? ... I’ve studied it a great deal and I cain’t come to no conclusions about it one way or another. [222-223]

The passage stands independently as a self-contained little riddle within the great conundrum of the novel itself, querying the propositions of God and the devil, clean and unclean. The question framed here, as in the novel as a whole, is whether these structural oppositions can be strictly maintained, and if their perceived instability evidences the collapse of order in the world into a 'fatherless' abyss, or if material evidence itself announces a more benign reconciliation of the lower world to the higher.

***That grim triune: Infernal parodies of the divine***

One of the most perplexing riddles of *Outer Dark* concerns the nature of the three mysterious men who travel together through the novel. Their presentation in the text is poised so that there is an odd sense of the supernatural about them as they move through the terrain of the story and in the bloody murders they commit. The setting of the text, the quality of the prose and the patchwork of allusion that attends them, are used to suggest that there is a supra-mundane significance to their existence and so too to their bearing on the events described, and raise questions about where exactly they are placed within the—admittedly, *unstable*—metaphysic of the novel. Moreover, the way in which they follow in Culla's wake and eventually meet with him at the story's shocking climax, prompts us to speculate how their malign presence and their violence is connected to Holme's own outrageous transgressions, and in what way the terrible justice they enact negotiates the oppositions of good and evil, or 'light' and 'dark' that the narrative entertains.

There is a good amount of allusive detail in the account of the men that connects them to certain figures of the classical and biblical imagination. In their number they recall the Furies of Greek mythology<sup>8177</sup>, and the Trinity of Christian Orthodoxy. Appropriate to the tale's 'nativity' theme, they also evoke significant visitors that feature in key biblical birth narratives. In their otherworldliness, they evoke the three visitors whose meeting with Abraham and Sarah coincides with the conception of Isaac (Genesis 18:1-16), and their late arrival to 'greet' the unnamed child recalls the Magi of Matthews gospel (Matthew 2:1-12). Yet, they are decidedly grotesque distortions of those benign visitors, and several details link them to demons, even as their actions may mark them out as all too human. William C. Spencer has dubbed the men the 'Unholy Trinity'<sup>82</sup> and, certainly, they seem to be a crucial point of focus for understanding and resolving something of the novel's metaphysical confusion, and by taking up certain cues in the text we can get a sense of McCarthy's complex take on the issues that he has set at stake in the narrative.

The sense of the mens' aloofness from the fictive world of the story is established in the brief, eidetic passages set in italicised text that introduce the three men and narrate their activities. A selection from the first of these passages demonstrates a good deal of what is of interest about this mysterious triune:

*They crested out on the bluff in the late afternoon sun with their shadows long on the sawgrass and burnt sedge, moving*

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<sup>81</sup> The number of Furies varies somewhat in classical literature, but Virgil counts them as three in the *Aeneid III*, and Dante follows this in *Inferno IX*.

<sup>82</sup> William C. Spencer, "Cormac McCarthy's Unholy Trinity: Biblical Parody in *Outer Dark*", in *Sacred Violence. Volume 1*, 83-91.

*single file and slowly high above the river and with something of its own implacability, pausing and regrouping for a moment and going on again strung out in silhouette against the sun and then dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well.*  
[3]

They are associated with incessant movement, exaggerated by the breathlessly extended syntax, and their proximity to the natural world, which is itself always in motion or flux about them as they arrive at one locale after another. Gradually, however, we become aware of the coincidence of their activities with those of the other characters through the disclosure of little details. The first such instance being a rare flash-forward in which the three enter the squire's yard and leave '*marvelously armed with crude agrarian weapons*', including the brush-hook that will be used to murder the squire (35). The incident is registered in the subsequent chapter in which Culla, conversing uninterestedly with the squire, hears 'a commotion of hens from beyond the barn, a hog's squeal' (47), and the theft of the tools is discovered the next morning (50). In the italicised passage that follows, we then see that brush-hook turned to its terrible purpose. However, these italicised chapters become less frequent as the book progresses, and we begin to see a greater overlap in the two spheres or perspectives that McCarthy has established, so that we see the men moving in full-view in the general terrain of the novel. Their acts of murder and desecration shadow Culla and he invariably finds himself accused of these crimes, and the ostensible 'invisibility' of the three

men contributes to the sense that a catastrophic *miasma* accompanies him on his wandering. As blood is spilt and bodies heaved from graves, the intersection of subplot and the main narrative gains solidity and culminates in the two occasions in which Culla encounters the three men and joins them beside their campfires.

There is certainly a suggestion that the three men might be agents of some form of justice that is set in motion by Culla's crimes and transgressions, though what agency or principle they serve is a mystery. Several of their characteristics evoke the Erinyes, or the Furies of Greek mythology, whose swift and dire vengeance is set in motion by infringements of the prevailing order, of which Culla's taboo breaking behaviour would certainly be reckoned. Furthermore, there is also something about the nature of the justice which the Furies enforce that is of interest here. As chthonic deities, they are involved in an idea of justice that belongs to the deterministic even fatalistic principle of cosmic order, which ties human actions and obligations into the same field as natural phenomena, such that a breaking of an oath or the desertion of a duty issues in a crisis in the operations of the cosmos itself. One fragment from Heraclitus, with which McCarthy would almost certainly have been familiar, amply captures this sense:

The sun will not transgress its measures; otherwise the Furies,  
ministers of Justice, will find him out.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Heraclitus, Fragment 94. See Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 31. McCarthy's familiarity with Heraclitus is documented among his archived notes for *Blood Meridian*, and I will have cause to return to the philosopher's influence in my discussion of that novel.



The specific notion of justice (*dike*) that Heraclitus invokes here is identified with the almost mechanical operations of natural forces—a view which finds sympathy with contemporary naturalisms. We should recall how, when they were first introduced, the motion of the triune was ascribed an ‘implacability’ that is common to the solar cycle and the flow of the river waters, and might indicate how this is related to the devastating implacability of the justice they dispense. This affinity is strengthened in a subsequent passage in which the men seem to be ‘*blind with purpose ... unaltered in gait demeanor or speed*’ (35). They are, then, antithetical to the Holy Trinity of the Christian Godhead, in whom originality and specificity are affirmed as paramount in the doctrine of creation and for whom justice is crowned in the supreme attributes of mercy and forgiveness.

The triune manifest then a sense of the divine or of justice that belongs to the ‘lower’ realm in the novel’s spatial dualism, untouched by the transcendent word, and they participate in some of its other key themes in this regard. Their feet and footwear are a particular point of focus, as is most in evidence in their first meeting with Culla in which there is a weirdly ritualistic exchange of boots. The leader of the gang’s boots are ‘cracked and weather-blackened and one was cleft from tongue to toe like a hoof’—a deliciously cartoonish detail that invests him with a sense of the satanic. He demands the fine boots which Culla stole from the Squire and then a strangely hierarchical redistribution ensues in which Culla is presented with a pair that were ‘mismatched, cracked, shapeless, burntlooking and crudely mended everywhere with bits of wire and string’ (187). A sense of initiation is thus

created in which Culla is brought into a kind of identity with the group as he is challenged and questioned.

Yet more important than this perhaps is their involvement in namelessness. It is revealed that one of the men is a feral mute who does not have a name. The leader of the group (who importantly, never offers his own name in conversation), explains:

I wouldn't name him because if you cain't name somethin you cain't claim it. You cain't talk about it even you cain't say what it is. I got Harmon to look after him if they do fight. I keep studyin him. He's close, but I keep at it. [184]

The leader thus makes clear his affinity with Culla and, in doing so, makes clear the implications of the latter's failure to name his child. Furthermore, there is an initiatory or formal logic at work in the speech patterns here as we come to see in that this first meeting serves a preliminary function for their final encounter in which they present Culla with his child.

Culla 'limps' into this second meeting, in which the glinting lights of the tinker's scattered pans greet him 'like the baleful eyes of some outsized and mute and mindless jury' (230). And there, too, is the child who regards him with 'one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames. He looked away' (240). The leader charges Culla with his abuse of his sister and abandonment of the child, to which Culla repeatedly insists 'He ain't nothin to me'. And most decisively, the leader asks Culla what the child's name is:

What's his name? the man said.  
I don't know.  
He ain't got nary'n.  
No. I don't reckon. I don't know. [244]

Although, in this final encounter, Culla is moved by a kind of responsibility, offering to take the child and care for it, he cannot claim it because he has not named it. Then, in what seeks to be the working out of the foreclosed fate to which Culla committed himself with his original transgression, the demonic leader puts his knife to the infant's throat. The child's final committal to the darkness occurs when the nameless man lurches forth to drink the blood that issues. It is indeed a shocking corruption of the Adoration of the Magi as described in Matthew's gospel.

This late introduction of the theme of vampirism is of a piece with the way in which the three men manifest a sense of the demonic as a parody of the divine. Just as they were mistaken for Christian ministers in their black suits by the snake hunter (133), so here are they enjoined in an imitation of the central Christian sacrament. In this detail McCarthy's text evinces its Gothic heritage in its bond with the often neglected theological provocations of Bram Stoker in *Dracula*. Like Stoker's vampire, the man's taking of an innocent's blood inverts the self-less giving of blood by Christ and, moreover, entails the erosion of individual identities, as his victims are dissolved in this covenant. In this demonic configuration, blood stands as the symbol of a purely naturalistic conception of *life*—which it regards not as the teleological or authentically narrative condition of existence, but as the plasmic principle of the uncanny phenomenon of matter in motion in a world considered to be bereft of

direction and form.<sup>84</sup> The vampiric rite is a participation, not in the life of the divine, but in the undifferentiated and unformed life of the darkness.

Here we must pause to give consideration to how these parodies disclose an impression of the novel's broader metaphysic. William C. Spencer uses the term 'parody' in his discussion of the triune, though for him the term is merely a shorthand for an imperfect or profane imitation, from which he determines their function in the text merely as an externalised illustration of Culla's psychology. In doing so he follows Vereen M. Bell's description that an unformulated 'evil' dominates the novel. However, it is the very intelligibility of these parodies that prevents them from being unequivocally dismal, much less nihilistic.

It is the manner in which McCarthy uses parody to make the unintelligible intelligible that confirms his inheritance of a Dantean poetic of the infernal. As John Freccero has shown, the role of parodic inversion in Dante's *Inferno* works to guard against a Manichean metaphysic, and to uphold the Augustinian orthodoxy that evil is a perversion of or deviation from the good.<sup>85</sup> Dante follows Virgil in numbering the Furies as three precisely because he intends to use them in his *Inferno* to describe an imperfect representation of the aims and operations of justice that is at work in the *Paradiso*. We recoil from them, but they nevertheless draw our gaze upward to more perfect images as we follow Dante's pilgrim on his ascent.

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<sup>84</sup> Stoker's vampire mythos famously has an anchor in his playing with the ambiguity of the biblical proscription of the consumption of blood: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood' (Leviticus 17:11) and 'For the life of every creature—its blood is its life' (17:14) Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Maurice Hindle, revised edition, (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, edited with an Introduction by Rachel Jacoff, (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1988) especially Chapter 5, "Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell", 93-109; and Chapter 11, "Infernal Inversion and Christian Conversion: *Inferno* XXXIV", 180-85.

Similarly, McCarthy's perverse triune are indissolubly involved with the dark, mythical realm of violently maintained, 'natural' or graceless harmony that his dreamy vision presents, yet they are sensible as such precisely because they are approximations of higher ideas that are, without being positively affirmed, nevertheless conspicuous in their plotted absence. Thus we may begin to see that Culla's conflict with the mythic forces of fate does not unambiguously exclude the notion of providence, nor does the shapelessness of his wandering exclude the possibility of authentic progression toward a telos.

***Agony and grace: Ambiguity at the end of the road***

The concluding passages of the book foreground the insistent ambiguity of the two journeys undertaken by the siblings, hewing together explicit evocations of the tragic agons and conversion narratives with which they are mutually involved. The completion of Rinthy's journey is a bathetic completion of her quest that is described in a knot of ironies and ambiguities, invoking both agony and grace. Rinthy's affinity with nature is sustained to the last as she comes to the forest clearing where her child's remains lie on the ground and the remains of the murdered tinker hang above her in the trees. As she enters the glade she is 'half wild... yet delicate as any fallow doe' and she stands in the clearing 'cradled in a grail of jade and windy light' (246). The word 'grail' here works to raise the quality of the light to a level of sanctity, and to affirm her journey as in some way continuous with the romance tradition, yet it also sits with heavy irony as it is within this 'cradle' that her child's remains will be discovered, though the reunion is curiously unacknowledged:

And stepping softly with her air of blooded ruin about the glade in a frail agony of grace she trailed her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage. She poked among the burnt remains of the tinker's traps, the blackened pans fused among the rubble . . . She went among this charnel curiously. She did not know what to make of it. She waited, but no one returned

She waited all through the blue twilight and into the dark.

. . .

Shadows grew cold across the wood and night rang down upon these lonely figures and after a while little sister was sleeping. [246-47]

Rinthy's 'circling' of the fire evokes a sense of her completion of a pilgrim's labyrinth, though her arrival at her desired end is bathetic to say the least. We may even conclude, as Vereen M. Bell does, that this quest has been, in fact, a trap. However, we might add that the bathos felt here has a tragic quality that may be described as such with a degree of theoretic specificity. Regarded from a Hegelian perspective, the scene displays the traumatic working out of two substantive forces that are 'independently justified': the restoration of infant to its mother; and the child's hastened return to the earth, determined by the father's refusal impute the ontological security of a naming word.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the fact that justification for both of these forces is made intelligible by the text is indicative of the metaphysical premises of the fiction.

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<sup>86</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1193-1199.

Although the scene is confounding insofar as the intense pity it elicits from the reader, its ‘senselessness’ does not exclude a sense of a determinative *logos*.<sup>87</sup>

There is little to suggest that Rinthy’s curiosity leads her to any detailed knowledge or reconstruction of the horrific events that have transpired as she sorts through the tinker’s burnt belongings and continues to wait before falling asleep. The pairing here of scenes that allude to the *Pieta* and Dormition of the Virgin maintain her symbolic involvement with Marian mythos as she takes up her posture of resting and waiting. Perhaps she is waiting for the tinker, though he is suspended above her in his ‘burial tree’ where he is ‘a wonder to the birds’ who come to feed on his flesh, and where his exposed bones provide a trellis for creeping vines and black mandrake (247). Georg Guillemín detects in the image of the tinker’s skeleton ‘an emblem of tranquillity and cosmic harmony’ which signals ‘the restoration of pastoral harmony’.<sup>88</sup> However, it is an unsettling harmony indeed if it is to be achieved only by the digestion and absorption of human figures by the non-human world. Indeed, it is a harmony that is achieved precisely as the working out of the failure of the Adamic paradigm of the pastoral that must bring the creation to its full realisation—its authentic Sabbath—by naming it: the silence of the primordial deep of Genesis 1:1. Although, alternatively, we may be given to wonder here if Rinthy’s sleep is not a manner of Sabbath, achieved through the possibly unconscious extension of her care and attention to the

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<sup>87</sup> A. C. Bradley approaches this point in his account of Hegel’s understanding of the tragic when he summarises that the ‘tragic fact’ that determines tragic agony is concerned ‘not so much with the war of good with evil as the war of good with good.’ Notwithstanding Hegel’s dialectical ontology, we might be permitted to generalise the ‘good’ here as intelligibility, which inheres, if only as parody in the ‘evil’ of the novel’s agents of Fate. A. C. Bradley, “Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy”, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 69-95.

<sup>88</sup> Guillemín, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 72.

child's remains; a gesture of bemused affirmation and benediction which is the fulfilment of her own little life which, in this dreamiest of allegories, has been 'rounded by a sleep'.<sup>89</sup>

The final instalment of Culla's journey is the subject of the last chapter of the novel and is even more puzzling in its description of a suspension between desolation and a call to redemption. The chapter begins with an indication of the passing of a substantial period of time since the preceding events, but also a suggestion of a movement into a different register of fictive time, or *kairos*, such that it is tempting to regard the episode as possessing something of an apocalyptic quality. The passage begins:

In later years he used to meet a blind man, ragged and serene, who spoke him a good day out of his constant dark. He overtook him tapping through the bright noon dust with his cane, his head erect in that air of wonder the blind wear. Holme would go by but now the blind man had stopped him with his greeting.

...

Well, he said, it's good to see the sun again ain't it [248]

We first note that the episode is an interruption, or a break with the norm, insofar as Culla has not previously been inclined to return this man's greeting. The exchange that takes place between them may be construed as merely another meeting which takes place on Culla's wandering progress, were it not for the fact that there is a peculiar air of authority about this individual, and the things he has to say do so much to bring the thematic preoccupations of the novel to the fore. The blind man is something of a

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<sup>89</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 4.1.158.



Tiresias figure set in contradistinction to the Oedipal elements of Culla's character, and, like the Greek myth, the story here invites us to consider how his literal blindness and modesty contrast with Culla's egregious ignorance. He is, despite his literal condition, one who can 'see' the sun, and he intuits that Culla can do likewise, even as he seems fixated on the 'cups of blue phlegm which regarded him' (248). Culla's interest in the man's sightless eyes repeats his vision of the spoiled eye of his child, and urges a degree of identification between the blind man and Culla's victim. Indeed, the man seems to know more about Culla than he lets on, as he speaks, curiously, of having *seen* him before:

I've passed ye on these roads afore.

They's lots of people on the roads these days, Holme said.

Yes, the blind man said. I pass em ever day. People goin up and down in the world like dogs. As if they wasn't a home nowheres. But I knowed I'd seen ye afore. [249]

The prophetic blind man addresses himself indirectly to Culla and his incessant wandering when he talks. In his aspect and in his idiom, he segues from being a Tiresias figure who speaks in the idiom of seeing particular to the Oedipus myth, to one who conserves and curates a distinctively biblical imagination.

The episode provides for a testing of Culla's capacity for brotherly love and fellowship in his encounter to this figure, who emerges from the text as something of a Christ-like figure, not only insofar as he exhibits traits of Culla's own victim (his sightlessness recalling that of the infant), but also in the idiom and attitude of his enigmatic speech. The text is gently insistent that

the blind man is an explicitly religious figure or a commissar of redemption. He travels in the noon light and wears an 'air of wonder'. He tells Culla, 'I'm at the Lord's work' and, although he declines to be described as a preacher, his brief oration explicitly addresses the prevailing theological motifs that have been explored in the tale:

No. No preacher. What is they to preach? It's all plain  
enough. Word and flesh. I don't hold much with preachin. [249]

Here, of course, the blind man invokes the prologue to John's Gospel, that great poem which articulates the incarnation as the great crossing over and binding together of the 'horizontal dualisms': Christ is the 'light that shineth in the darkness' and 'the Word made flesh' (John 1:5; 14).

Yet the great exchange of dualities that is implicit in the paradox of the incarnation is not wholly conveyed in the blind man's phrasing. Vereen Bell insists that the implied metaphysics here:

... seems less Christian than Manichaeian, for the separation of  
word and flesh in *Outer Dark* is complete; and the word is,  
moreover, decidedly unmanifest, an alien idea.<sup>90</sup>

Bell is quite justified in his resistance to a hasty assumption of the orthodoxy of this invocation; there *is* something odd about the blind man's phrasing. But as I have already begun to show, it is not unequivocally the case that the total abnegation of 'word' or 'logos', or the 'name,' from the world or 'flesh' of the novel which Bell discerns, does inhere in the text. Here the

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<sup>90</sup> Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 35.

ambiguity of McCarthy's meaning resides precisely in the parataxis to which he subjects John's formula: the 'and' which is substituted for the 'made' is of a piece with the panorama of McCarthy's 'paratactic vision' itself, upholding distinctions and divisions at the same time as troubling their mutual exclusion.

This curious detail is of a piece with the riddle concerning Culla's fate, and the question as to whether he continues to walk in darkness, moving without purpose, or if he does not come to a degree of self-realisation and begin a journey of repentance in his strange recapitulation of a 'pilgrim's progress'. The language and imagery which McCarthy deploys here to describe the final instalment of Culla's journey are deftly deployed to entertain either possibility:

Late in the day the road brought him to 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. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place.

Going back the way by which he came he met again the blind man tapping through the dusk. He waited very still by the side of the road, but the blind man passing turned his head and smiled his blind smile. Holme watched him out of sight. He wondered where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended. Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way.  
[251]

The trees recall the groves of the Styx— ‘the terrain through whose defiles life cannot pass’<sup>91</sup>— and the *Inferno*’s Wood of Suicides, in which those who had possessed ‘souls of serpents’ are reduced to ‘arid stumps’.<sup>92</sup> The fact that Culla’s course terminates in a swamp is one positive sign of his utter lostness. Even he cannot tread in this dark mire, which is described in abject feminine terms that recall the waste land encountered by Leopold Bloom in the ‘Calypso’ episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which appears to him as ‘the grey sunken cunt of the world’<sup>93</sup>—a vision which joins the abyss to the primordial matrix, to death and the possibility of new birth. Culla’s decision to go ‘back the way by which he came’ could indicate that he is trapped in an infernal cycle of repetitive wandering, though we might also see this retracing of his steps and change of direction as illustrative of a conversion.

Rowan Williams has written about how the simultaneous recollection of and turning away from sin belong together in the Christian understanding of repentance—not least in the central Christian rite itself, which is the recollection of the betrayals and broken relations of the Last Supper,<sup>94</sup> though it is the possibility of the transformation of those past sins in the refusal to see them as binding which proves the primacy of the good. In this light, it is

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<sup>91</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* VI. 154.

<sup>92</sup> Dante, *Inferno* XIII.37-39. In important respects, *Outer Dark* is continuous with the ideas of division and isolation that Dante takes as his theme for the Wood of Suicides. The forest is populated by spirits that have ‘quit’ or ‘torn’ themselves from their respective bodies. Moreover, Dante’s understanding of suicide is continuous with the view of suicide as a sinful isolation of the individual life from the social body, which entails both the neglect of ones responsibilities to others, and a false pursuit of self-determination.

<sup>93</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses. The 1922 Text*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.59. (Page 59 in this edition).

<sup>94</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, second edition, (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 2002).

significant that this ‘spectral waste’ recalls the swamp in which Culla abandoned his child—and the trees, ‘naked’ and ‘in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid’ evoke the image of the pale infant wailing against the night. We may, then, read Culla’s querying of the fact that the road ‘should come to such a place’ as indicative *either* of his utter confinement to the darkness in which he is embroiled, *or* as evidence of a degree of conscious reflection and of an incipient awareness that it is the confrontation with his past and with his victim which are the prerequisites of his conversion—figured here quite literally as a change of direction. And in these final lines, too, McCarthy provides an incredibly suggestive ambiguity. Culla’s concern for the blind man could be indicative of his expanding sphere of concern and charitableness that is brought about by his turning. Given the dreaminess of the episode, we might justifiably wonder if the swamp was merely a projection of Culla’s own psychological and spiritual condition, and that the kindly blind man’s path will be unhindered.

Nevertheless, it is significant that Culla’s final thought is not for himself—another detail that dovetails nicely with the view that his turning is a retreat from the isolationist Wood of Suicides. And though we are left to wonder if the ‘someone’ whom he supposes should rescue the blind man is himself or someone else, the text’s reorientation of Culla and the fact of his continued movement give us as readers room to ponder what forces are at work to transform the dualistic vision the novel entertains. Just as the agony of Rinthy’s reunion with her child is tempered with invocations of grace and of rest, so too is Culla’s descent to the nadir the site of deliverance.

What is important here in this final passage is not so much what we infer regarding Culla's psychology or developing character, but the way in which McCarthy uses his language with great economy to describe what may be possible. As much as the text suggests the permanent benightedness of Culla and the amorality and darkness of the world he represents, it also ventures tentatively to describe the exhaustion of such a view. Some more words of Rowan Williams on the subject of conversion are apt for consideration here:

But conversion, the turning of *metanoia*, the repentance of which the New Testament speaks, is the refusal to accept that lostness is the final human truth. Like a growing thing beneath the earth, we protest at the darkness and push blindly up in search of light, truth, *home*—the place, the relation where we are not lost, where we can live from deep roots in assurance.<sup>95</sup>

What McCarthy omits or refuses to make explicit in his conclusion to this bizarre morality tale amounts to just such a refusal of the finality of lostness. Even this most imperfect of creatures is sustained in his existence, and the word that insists that there is 'a home in the world' accompanies his movements.

Perhaps, then, we can admit something of the darker pastoral vision that seems to speak of reconciliation and restoration as a subtle *natural* process, if we see it reverberating with William's illustrative language of growth upward—a movement from darkness to light which occurs in tableaux of such 'frail agonies of grace' as we see in the climax of this romance. Even

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<sup>95</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 40.

the evils of the grim triune point upward in their parodic imitation of the operation of the higher realities, which otherwise leave little in the way of detectable impressions upon the tale other than what is shown in relief or in conspicuous absence.

Although the world of *Outer Dark* is sketched as an ‘insubstantial pageant’, it may yet then in its vast darkness present a world that burgeons to manifest a brighter reality, just as its dense naturalistic vision emerges as a gratuitous confection of language—a vision that knowingly conveys the power of the word to complete all that is earthly and fleshly. Some more of Rowan Williams words are resonant here:

The world is a place of incipient conversion, in its restlessness and in its struggle for truth and a home, for justice, restoration, fulfilment. Where men and women recognize truthfully the reality of pain, deprivation and oppression in the world (*and* in their own lives), and react with compassion and engagement, they have turned into the void of lostness in a kind of unspoken, unformulable hope. And it may on occasion take forms barely recognizable as hope.<sup>96</sup>

The dark and dreamy spatiality of the novel does seem to manifest this incipient orientation toward truth, home, justice and fulfilment, which ultimately affirms that there is a purgatorial, developing dimension to its vision. Rinthy is moved by a compassion that we can suppose could not have been diminished had she had knowledge of the mythic logic which forecloses the restoration of the child to her, and it is in her insistence on addressing

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 41-41.

herself to her ‘chap’ that the infant is claimed back from the darkness. Even Culla’s perpetual self-absorption begins to abate in his weak retraction of his transgression in the face of the tragic working out of *ananke* and in his sympathy for another person’s—mutually ‘blind’—perspective after having reached his spiritual nadir. In all the ambiguities figured in the dynamics of character and action we can detect the undermining of the conceit that darkness and light, word and flesh, the thing and the name, can be fully divided.

In my reading, I hope to have demonstrated that McCarthy presents a story that, for all its indulgence in darkness, does not present a world which is unambiguously ‘sunless’, and that, like the image of the eclipse which opens the narrative, the author presents a vision in which goodness might be perceived as a narrow arc of light, giving definition and value. This is a fiction whose course is so obfuscous as to describe a truth about the world which first finds its primordial expression as an ‘unspoken, unformulable hope’. Certainly, it is a tale which details a world defined by profound destruction, though it is one which tenders the possibility of light and language as the means of its fulfilment and redemption by having passed through such a night. *Outer Dark* is a nightmare of appalling images that linger in the mind long after the book has been closed. Yet the wakeful reader may yet emerge to nurture a hope, though it may be barely recognisable as hope.



## 2. Some Halt in the Way of Things: Katabasis, Preservation and Survival in *Child of God*

### *Introduction*

*Child of God* (1973)<sup>97</sup> continues the trajectory which led through the wanderings of *Outer Dark* to explore further regions of horror and human degradation. Remaining within rural Tennessee, McCarthy's third novel tells the tale of another perverse Adamic character in the figure of Lester Ballard, a misfit and social outcast who engages in acts of murder and necrophilia that are narrated with a care for repugnant and gruesome details that is rare even among the most dire confections of the Southern Gothic. Yet, though these grisly accounts of Ballard's depravities certainly make uneasy reading, the most formidable challenge for the reader is the sympathetic response the text elicits for this otherwise reprehensible character. Following on from his depiction of the deplorable but dubiously graced life of Culla Holme, McCarthy here continues with an even riskier venture of characterisation, presenting Ballard as both a sympathetic monster and an unsettling everyman figure. McCarthy introduces Lester in a direct address to the reader as a 'child of God much like yourself perhaps' (6), and thus the author invites our identification with Ballard even as he begins to describe the ways in which this character distorts the forms and moral boundaries that constitute the

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<sup>97</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God* (London: Picador, 2010). All references are to this edition. Page numbers will appear in the text in parentheses.

shared humanity that is presumed. Understanding what is signified in this epithet and the genuine, albeit precarious notion of humanity that it signals constitutes a significant part of the reader's task of tracing his wandering course through a natural and spiritual wilderness. Yet, with the framing of the novel as something of detective story, it is clear that McCarthy intends this work as something more than just a profiling of a criminal mind, but also of the examination of material evidence. Indeed, McCarthy here marks a development from tracing the obfuscous, dreamy darkness of *Outer Dark* to the careful study of solid, physical and organic entities to examine how and in what manner the higher realm coincides with or resides within the material.

At root, Ballard is much like any of McCarthy's protagonists. He is an orphaned or outcast figure whose social and physical displacement compels a journey into the wilderness of sublime nature where, we presume, there is at least the possibility of his gaining a deeper understanding of himself and the world in which he moves. Ballard's exclusion is established in the opening episode in which he attempts to disrupt the auction of his family home, which has been reclaimed by the state, presumably as a settlement for non-payment of taxes. Thereafter we are informed that Ballard while still a boy had discovered his father hanging in the barn and that his mother had 'run off' (22-23). Ballard's inability to live within his community leads him to take up a squalid existence in a dilapidated house in the woods, returning to the town only occasionally to cause irritation or outrage with his bizarre behaviour and obnoxious manner. Displaced from the domestic and the social, Ballard's energies are turned toward securing his survival as he carves out his existence

in the wilderness. The main instrument of his survival is the rifle which he has carried with him since he was a boy and with which he demonstrates an unnerving proficiency. His only friend in the world is the keeper of a local dump situated in an abandoned quarry, whose home Ballard visits frequently, often only lingering long enough to harass his young daughters.

Ballard's crossing of the geographical boundaries is coupled with a movement beyond the moral limits of the human community, as the needs and compulsions that drive his struggle to survive resolve into even more bizarre and taboo-breaking behaviour. He is established from the outset of the novel as something of a voyeur, and his compulsion to spy upon other people leads to his discovery of a car which contains the bodies of a young couple who have died, presumably, of asphyxiation. Compelled by an urge that has not hitherto been signalled in the text, Ballard molests the corpse of the young woman before retreating. As an afterthought, he returns to the car to steal money and other belongings from the couple, before returning to the car for a second time to steal the woman's body away to his dilapidated cabin. The girl's body becomes his companion who he speaks to as well as dressing and posing like a doll until his ad hoc home is destroyed by a fire and her corpse is immolated. Ballard later intentionally burns down the dumpkeeper's house after one of the daughters declines his advances, killing her and, most heinously, the 'idiot child' who is also in the house. From there Ballard continues on a campaign of murder and necrophilia, preying on couples that park their cars for clandestine meetings on the remote Frog Mountain turnaround and takes up a kind of deathly habitation in an underground cave in which he dwells with the corpses of his victims.

Though it would be fair to call almost every other character that appears in the novel an antagonist, opposition to Ballard comes principally on the part of two figures. The first is John Greer, the man who now inhabits Ballard's family home, and to whom Ballard makes frequent journeys to spy on and curse. The other is the High Sheriff of Sevier County—the splendidly named Fate Turner—whose instinctual dislike of Ballard turns to suspicion when citizens start to go missing. Ballard is jailed on spurious and unsubstantiated charges, but is released to wreak more havoc, surviving even a near drowning when a biblical flood flushes him out of his subterranean retreat. He is apprehended again when he is shot down in his attempt to murder John Greer. Having lost an arm in the gunfire, he is awoken in hospital by a band of vigilantes who demand that he lead them to where the bodies of his victims are located. He eventually concedes, though he manages to use his knowledge of the dark underground caves through which he leads them to cut loose from the gang, although the escape fails as he too becomes hopelessly lost darkness. After three days spent wandering blindly in this underworld, Ballard eventually emerges from the ground in time to have a brief but benign encounter with a child before taking himself to the county hospital, where he presents himself with the enigmatic words 'I'm supposed to be here' (182). The concluding chapters move us beyond the time of the murders to report that Ballard was never indicted for any crime, though he spent the remainder of his life in custody at the psychiatric hospital where he died. In death, Lester's body is dissected and disassembled by medical students before being buried 'with others of his kind' in 'a cemetery outside the city' (183-4). Sometime thereafter, a farmer ploughing land causes a great fracture in the

earth and the cave containing the decaying bodies of Ballard's victims is exposed. The novel concludes with Sheriff Fate and his assistants exhuming the bodies for transportation.

A summary account of the synopsis could not do justice to the thematic richness and creative inquisitiveness of McCarthy's third novel. Although it has to be admitted that the gross unpleasantness of *Child of God* connects it to the prurient pulp horror novels of its era—and the work even seems to court the company of authors such as Robert Bloch and the young Steven King—it strives successfully to hold itself apart from this kind of exploitation fiction. McCarthy clearly maintains a higher valuation of the grotesque and the Gothic and his treatment of images of transgression, physical deformity, death and decay, are presented with the sensitivity to the texture of reality that is a staple of the southern tradition and to the finest American writing. However, the key element that prevents McCarthy's third novel from being just another pulpy horror story is the presentation of Ballard himself. He is never allowed to be just a spook or an object of puerile curiosity, but is presented as a creature who is at once extraordinary and sympathetic. He is an allegorical character in possession of a compelling depth of personality, and, indeed, he proves to be a figure in whom so many of the tensions and ambivalences that the author wishes to describe are concentrated. At once an enigma and a familiar in his form, his attitude and his actions, Lester is given to us as object of apparently inexhaustible interest—a case for close study and a fellow who deserves our acts of witnessing, affirmed by the frequent rhetorical requests for us to 'see him' and to consider how he himself sees the world. However, it is never

clear whether our attention is demanded in order that we may know him (and by extension, know ourselves), or in order that we might know him (or ourselves) to be unknowable.

In its reaching for intensities of horror and mystery, *Child of God* follows on quite naturally from the excesses of *Outer Dark*,<sup>98</sup> though it strikes us immediately as a different kind of novel. Most noticeably, in *Child of God* we see McCarthy pulling back on the excessively mythical setting of *Outer Dark* and regaining a more secure footing in the historical and geographical realities of its Southern setting. The story takes place in Sevier County, Tennessee in the 1960's and uses a number of the physical landmarks of the region as settings for events, as well as colouring the action with the sights and sounds which lend a sense of cultural authenticity, not least the rural Appalachian music and country gospel songs which drift through the tale. The latter is especially appropriate, since Sevier County is inscribed on the landscape of modern American culture as the birthplace of Dolly Parton—eulogised in her signature song 'My Tennessee Mountain Home'.<sup>99</sup> McCarthy's tale stands as a contrasting counter-narrative to the nostalgic pastoralism of Parton's lyric—indeed, the term 'anti-pastoral' would seem apt to describe McCarthy's less than idyllic evocation of the place, with its attention to general and particular instances of waste, violence and moral decrepitude.

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<sup>98</sup> There are a few more low-key thematic continuities that are indicative of the proximity of the two novels. For example, Lester Ballard's feet are frequently an object of interest, though admittedly not to the same extent as were Culla's.

<sup>99</sup> It is an intriguing fact that both Parton's recording and *Child of God* were both released in the same year, and that the respective pastoral and 'anti-pastoral' vision of these works should together remain the two most-high profile instances of Sevier County's acknowledgement in popular culture.

McCarthy has even suggested, tantalisingly, that the story was inspired by real events in the region and this sense of the narrative as an authoritative record—however apocryphal—is a feature of the text, which often takes up the guise of an oral history. Much of the story is narrated by at least two anonymous characters, for whom Ballard seems to be an established figure in local lore, and their recollections are presented in demotic and occasionally humorous tones that give us glimpses of them as humane personalities who populate the novel whilst they are not, for the most part, involved in the story itself. Their testimonies are woven in with McCarthy’s characteristic lofty voice of narratorial omniscience which holds the fullness of the story together, though this voice too is at times engagingly conversational, addressing the reader with instructions to consider this or that detail or to query the reason or credibility of some of the extraordinary events it describes. This hewing together of voices, images and events is of a piece with the novel’s broader aesthetic, which moves on from the ‘dualistic’ conceit of *Outer Dark* to investigate the coincidence of word and matter.

Together with its more subdued mythical qualities, this novel also exhibits considerable restraint in the presentation of the text itself, which is characterised by a brevity which eschews the dreamy weirdness of *Outer Dark* (and also the Joycean sprawl of *Suttree*—which McCarthy was writing contemporaneously with *Child of God*). Overall, *Child of God* is one of McCarthy’s shortest novels, running to less than 200 pages. Its three numbered parts are comprised of short chapters that are frequently less than two pages long, and rarely stretch beyond five or six. It also forgoes, for the most part, at least, the complicated and extended syntax that is otherwise

characteristic of McCarthy's Tennessee novels. Here McCarthy prefers short and unfussy arrangements which lend the work a tone of precision that is quite distinctive to itself, though perhaps offering intimations of the adventures in syntactic contraction which emerge through the Border Trilogy and then come to distinguish the later novels *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. Indeed, McCarthy often commences chapters or sections with reports of action or setting that are often so contracted as to resemble stage directions, for example: 'Ballard among the fairgoers stepping gingerly through the mud' (58); or, 'Ballard shopping' (91). All of this seems to be of a piece with the general conceit of the novel which is to present the reader not with spectacles of activity achieved by excessive verbiage, but with snapshots or tableaux that invite close and sober inspection of the subject at the centre of the tale and of the vision of the world to which he bears testimony.

***In the woods and in men's soul: Ballard's pursuit of order***

For all its pursuit of an economy and precision of language, *Child of God* does not forfeit the mythical tenor and rich allusiveness that are the hallmark of McCarthy's fiction. The author's characteristically grave concerns are all present and are examined through a refraction of diverse biblical, philosophical and literary texts and traditions. The Melvillean coincidence of the elements of tragedy and romance are quite easily discerned in the character of Lester Ballard. He is an Ishmael-like figure: fatherless, uprooted and compelled to make a quest into a natural and spiritual wilderness, or a movement into the abyss. And although the record of his undertakings bears



many stock features of the pulp horror novel, there is also a case that the work should be read as a *Bildungsroman*, albeit an unconventional one, as the text urges us to make our assessments concerning the development of Lester's character. The narration of Ballard's life describes the traumas of his early formation, his progress through increasing brutality and decreasing sanity, and a subsequent 'rebirth' or awakening to a new consciousness or shift in his directing passions, giving the reader occasion to ponder the circumstances and perhaps the barely discernible forces that guarantee his deliverance. In respect of this theme, the novel is deeply involved in Christian mythos and the theme of katabasis. Ballard's movement through caves makes an explicit connection to the katabatic literature of antiquity, although T. S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' is also an especially important proof text. Indeed, we might see that the Heraclitean epigraph that Eliot appends to his *Four Quartets*—'the way upward and the way downward are one and the same'<sup>100</sup>—as something of a key to how we may assess Ballard's descent as an inversion or perverse 'imitation of Christ' and of his more sympathetically humane ideals generally.

It is on account of his perverse idiosyncrasy that Ballard is, equally, something of a Captain Ahab—a tragic hero-villain in whom elements of Job, Oedipus and Prometheus are combined. He is an abject and afflicted figure, who sublimates a hyper-awareness of the very real possibility of his eradication into a fierce will to power. Certain clues in the text that work to kindle our sympathy for Ballard, together with the measure of interpretative generosity that such details elicit, enable us to frame his transgressions as rebellious attempts to contest the impersonal forces that press upon him, and

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<sup>100</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 177-83.

to thereby affirm a sense of justice and of an order that seems absent in the given world. As though to signal the affinity between his hero-villain and Ahab, McCarthy even has Lester lose a limb in his confrontation with his perceived oppressors. However, Ballard is in some important respects a diminished replica, or more fairly perhaps, a creatively ‘misread’ recreation. Unlike Melville’s imposing Ahab, Lester’s character and his motivations are distinguished by stark limitations of language and capacity. His speech is brusque, limited to small eruptions of profanity and invective, and so could never attain the exhilarating confessions of blasphemy that make Ahab—or, for that matter, Sophocles’ Oedipus—such a fascinating character. Yet, although Ballard lacks the grandiosity of Ahab’s mind and speech, McCarthy’s text persuades us that his utterances merit attention, such that they might enlarge our understanding of the bare facts of his brutal actions, and that a subtle and sympathetic impulse is dominant and determinative even in the mind of this meanest of fellows. Against expectations, the text entertains the possibility that Ballard’s errant life is the precondition for the achievement of some subtle wisdom, and that he may perhaps also induct us into a deeper awareness of the human condition and its involvement with the natural and divine order of the world in which we have our being.

Creation and cosmic order, evil and death, along with fate and providence are all examined in the novel, though in this tale, McCarthy’s metaphysical framework is notably different from that which seemed so constitutive of the vision of *Outer Dark*. The dualism of word and flesh, name and nature (Gnostic or Johannine) is, for the most part, displaced by a greater feeling for a richer sense of the real in which material and spiritual reality are

alloyed, and it is within this framework that the motifs of katabasis, theurgy and divination which occur in the narrative achieve their force. In a perceptive reading of the novel's thematic organisation, Andrew Bartlett notes the assembled motifs of vision: 'Hunting, tracking, sighting, looking, searching, exploring, examining—such processes dominate the story'.<sup>101</sup> Spiritual truth and spiritual gratification—erroneous or not—are sought through the examination of material reality and the things of this world. More precisely stated, we should see the dramatic thrust of the novel as a contest or process of transition in which Ballard's Ahab-like dualistic imagination propels him to acts of tragic *hubris*, before it is sublimated into a subtler vision.

McCarthy structures this metaphysical drama by staging oppositions between figurations of fixity and of change, or the eternal and the mutable, and by pressing to examine how they are mutually involved in the realm of the temporal. Within these ideas of atavism, preservation and survival are of great interest as they point to the more subtle question of what may be conserved through the process of change. It is within this framework that we should understand the allegorical sense of Ballard's criminality as a drive to fix or freeze his surroundings, and thereby arrest control of the incessant processes of change that operate within the world and endanger his security in it. In addition to this, we should also see that Ballard's own survival—despite his outrageous transgressions against the prevailing order—is secured in the novel's tentatively eschatological imagining. This is the twofold sense of the

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<sup>101</sup> Andrew Bartlett, "From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*," *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Fall 1991), 3-15; 3. Bartlett goes on to propose that 'The text is concerned not with a theological question, as the title may suggest, but with a problem of vision: how does a man such as Lester Ballard see the world? How might we, how ought we to see Lester Ballard?' I will here take issue with the assertion that this 'problem of vision' can be wholly abstracted from theological discourse.

‘halt in the way of things’ (147)—the phrase I have abstracted for the title of this chapter, and which provides the theme of my analysis of the novel.

Tradition and historical change is one aspect of this halt, and Ballard’s necrophilia calls to mind William Faulkner’s tender examination of the idea in ‘A Rose For Emily’ — an early landmark of Southern Gothic in which the preservation of a dead lover is set in terms of traumatic social change in the South and of longing for an era that is metaphorically ‘dead’.<sup>102</sup> In this regard, McCarthy’s story also bears resemblance to Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* (and the lesser known Robert Bloch novel on which it was based)<sup>103</sup> which also frames a collision between tradition and change and the desire to freeze or fix lives and identities as a response to the flux and transience that are characteristic of late modernity. And like Hitchcock, McCarthy is keen to examine how the ‘technology’ of his art may approximate this process of preservation or simulates the processes of time and change as he calls attention to the operations of language and narrative. However, McCarthy does not keep the historical distinct from the metaphysical and the searching nature of his storytelling ensures that his treatment of the contemporary moment of the narrative extends into broader fields of concern. Ballard is troubled not only by changes in his own circumstances and the social forces acting against him,

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<sup>102</sup> William Faulkner, “A Rose For Emily”, in *The Best of Faulkner, Chosen by the Author* (London: Reprint Society, 1955), 299-307.

<sup>103</sup> Bloch’s novel takes the life and crimes of Ed Gein as inspiration for his murderer, Norman Bates. Gein’s marginalised existence and childhood abuse in the small town of Plainfield, Wisconsin are echoed, as are the grisly details of his murders, grave robbing and appropriation of human remains. There is more than a dim reverberation of Gein’s life and crimes in Lester Ballard, though McCarthy’s novel, by comparison, seems less sensationalistic than Bloch’s fictionalised account. Though *Child of God* certainly does not refrain from gruesome detail, his refusal to sketch Ballard simplistically in terms of a given pathology or as an unqualified monster gives the character greater depth and his actions interest beyond shock value. Some of the connection between *Child of God*, Ed Gein, and Bloch’s *Psycho* is discussed in Luce, *Reading the World*, 138-153. The influence of Hitchcock’s cinematic interpretation of Bloch’s novel is attested only by certain details of McCarthy’s novel that I have discerned which I will set out below.

but also apparently by the ebbing and receding of deep time and by the transience and decay of objects and bodies within the briefest of moments. If McCarthy's challenge is that we should ponder how Lester Ballard sees the world, then we must do much more than question the prurient motives of his crimes and ponder the profoundly sympathetic notion of a vision that apprehends both this world that is passing away and an eternal forms of which it ostensibly imitates.

Ballard's doomed enterprise is to establish some firm order in the world—to arrest it in its chaotic fluctuations; and yet the more expansive vision of the novel aims to arrest Ballard himself in his transgressions, and entertains a dim intimation of the possibility that he is himself conserved in some state beyond his natural life. Through its examination of natural history, biblical allusion and self-conscious plotting, the narrating voices supply their own, more subtle response to the question of how Lester, for all his moral poverty and physical frailty, remains in being. Through his presentation of the life of Ballard, McCarthy asks which factors determine a creature's survival, and, in what terms is survival to be considered as the work ventures a tentatively eschatological vision of enduring existence. My purpose in the following pages is to describe the subtleties and ambiguities with which *Child of God* tenders this vision and thereby explain the novel's capacity to be at once horrifying and astonishing.

*Lester Ballard: Child of God and child of nature*

McCarthy's designation of Ballard as a 'child of God' does much to establish the subtle complexity of his character and the web of thematic concern in which he is written. On a mundane level, two senses of this epithet that are local to the novel's contextual setting are at work here. On the one hand, the phrase establishes Ballard as something as an everyman character—ultimately relatable and bearing traits common to the human community. But parallel to this is an alternative exclusive meaning. As Vereen M. Bell has pointed out, 'In certain rural areas of the South, the phrase child of God refers to children who are mysteriously "not right in the head"'.<sup>104</sup> This seems to be the accepted view of the community and the various narrating voices of the novel certainly seem to attribute degrees of anomalousness and craziness to Ballard's character ahead of his descent into more extreme degrees of madness and depravity. Recalling Lester's youth, one narrator states wonderingly: 'I don't know. They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself' (22). Yet we may infer from the Lester's detached response to the discovery of his father's body that he was already somewhat estranged from normal patterns of emotional psychology. The speaker remembers that, 'He come in the store and told it like you'd tell it was raining out,' and when the body was cut down 'He stood there and watched. Never said nothing' (22). Other brief interludes that narrate episodes in Ballard's early life suggest a sense of his strangeness. His bullying and assault of the young Finney boy (18-19), and his accidental killing of a cow that he tried to tow with a tractor suggest a mind that does not comprehend the realities of the world beyond his own intransigent will. The

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<sup>104</sup> Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 68.

question of Ballard's sanity is raised continually by the supporting cast of characters as a means of describing his tenuous connection to human society. At the auction, one onlooker yells 'He's crazy, C.B', while the auctioneer himself, apparently unafraid and unsurprised to be staring down the barrel of Ballard's rifle, leans in to counsel him: 'Lester, you don't get a grip on yourself they goin to put you in a rubber room' (9) —and so foretelling Ballard's seemingly inevitable terminus at the psychological hospital and confirming the words of the dumpkeeper's daughter who scorned Lester with the words: 'You ain't even a man. You're just a crazy thing' (111). However, the importance of this title extends beyond such colloquial usage; or rather, it runs to the core of human psychology or spirituality within which such notions or 'madness' have a substantial footing.

The phrase itself is drawn from the First Epistle of John (and so follows on satisfyingly from the Johannine theme of 'walking in darkness' and 'walking in light' that was exploited in *Outer Dark*) where it features in the apostle's exclamatory digression on his understanding of the cosmic status on the followers of Christ:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. [1 John 3:1-3]

John's identification of Christians as the 'children of God' is of a piece with the 'vertical dualism' which here distinguishes between the Father and 'the world. John goes on to discuss how the children of God are distinguished by their sinlessness, whereas those who do sin are to be known as 'children of the devil' (1 John 3:8). The rhetorical dualism here is subtle since those who are to be called children must necessarily be born again 'of God' in repentance and baptism and so called out of or adopted out of their prior condition. There is thus an intriguing tension in the Epistles, as there is elsewhere in the Johannine literature, a provocative and complicated understanding of the relationship between God's role as creator and redeemer and so of human origins and of humans ends—a feature which has enabled so much speculation on the flow between the Johannine mind and the field described as 'Gnosticism'. With his designation of Ballard as a 'child of God', McCarthy finds an epithet for a character in whom mysteries of origination and of destiny will come to the fore as the text invites us to query who Ballard is and where he is going; furthermore, it signals that Ballard's life and crimes will address the distinction between 'the world' and the God. He seems to be a figure drawn between the two vertical strata—an animalistic 'wild man,' fit for survival in a natural wilderness, but one with a feeling for *logos* and the heavenly order. Indeed, we must recognise Ballard as a figure who is vexed by his situation at the coincidence of the eternal and the temporal, and that his actions throughout the novel are provoked by his disastrously divided attention.

We might invoke here Saint Paul's address to the Corinthians, which makes its own appeal to the stratified nature of the divinely ordered cosmos, in



his counselling of the Christians on the proper orientation toward the lower world which is marked by change and decay, and the heavenly realm:

So do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

[2 Corinthians 4:16-18]

The question of how the voyeuristic Ballard sees the world is of course at the fore of the narrative, and he is certainly a melancholic figure with an acute sense that the world is passing away all around him. Early in the novel, we find him distressed by his uprooting from the family home and by the intrusion of newcomers upon his property. One subtle and affecting detail is given in the narration of Ballard's lonely dispossession:

He spread the newspapers he had gathered and muttered over them, his lips forming the words. Old news of folks long dead, events forgotten. [16]

For all his roughness, Lester seems surprisingly sensitive to the pain of change and of being deserted. This is perhaps made most clear when he brings a half-frozen robin he has found as a gift for the child of the dumpkeeper's grandchildren. To the horror of its mother, the toddler bites its feet off, to which Ballard tenders an explanation which seems to project his own anxieties: 'He wanted it to where it couldn't run off' (76) The phrase 'run off'

here repeats the contracted account of Lester's own mother's disappearance from his life. We might reasonably, then, view him as something of a parody or grotesque distortion of this paradigm of Christian discipleship, and regard his actions as a response to the frustrations of an attitude that is divided in its attention to worldly and eternal things. We may then interpret his actions as an over-zealous striving to establish a heavenly fixity in the face of earthly change and decay, and regard his development throughout the novel—his survival and possible adoption—as the working out and subsequent correction of this view, as he comes to consider more deeply the relationship of his 'natural' and material nature to that quintessence of which he seems hyper aware.

McCarthy's highly risky presentation of Ballard as simultaneously something of an everyman and a madman who elicits a significant degree of sympathy, is sustained on account of the way the character lives and acts upon his feeling for the eternal in a world of flux. Indeed, we might even view Ballard's particular delinquency as manifesting a feeling so ubiquitous that we could call it an expression of original sin, connected to his performance of the paradigm of the fallen Adam, having been given into being in the world, though being maladjusted to accommodation within it.

Rowan Williams has set out succinctly the errors to which human beings seem most entrenched in sin in terms which correlate with the distinction between the eternal and the worldly as articulated by Paul:

Human beings are perennially vulnerable to the temptation of arrogating divinity to themselves. It is a temptation manifest in the refusal to accept finitude,

creatureliness and dependence—what Ernest Becker has called the ‘causa sui project’, the delusion that the world is my world, a world controllable by my will and judgement. But it is no less manifest in what we might call the apocalyptic delusion, the belief that we can stop, reverse or cancel history, that we can assume the ‘divine’ prerogative of acting with decisive finality in the affairs of the world, that we can ‘make an end’.<sup>105</sup>

Lester’s transgressions are somewhat prototypical in that his response to the intransigence and transience of the world is to attempt to take control of it and arrest change. Indeed, one of the novel’s narrators affirms as much when he declares that ‘You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddam if he didn’t outstrip em all’ (78).

Tracing Ballard’s natural origins is something that the novel undertakes from the outset. He is established as an orphan of sorts; his father a suicide and his mother having vanished without explanation (22). We also learn that his grandfather had been a shirker in the Union Army who had cheated the government to gain a soldier’s pension, and that he had also been a member of the White Caps (76-77), the vigilante group whose violence inhabits the memory of several of the voices we hear in the novel. His initial introduction to the reader tenders an even broader view, describing Ballard’s ethnic lineage contains ‘Saxon and Celtic bloods’ (4)—a pairing which in this spare phrasing conjures impressions of those warring peoples continuing to collide within him.

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<sup>105</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 16-17. Here Williams is referring to Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011).

Indeed, calamity and inauspiciousness seem to be constant and determinative in Ballard's make up, and so thus the account of his life and condition quite naturally traces his familial and ethnic history to a Darwinian natural history. Ballard's evolutionary origins are frequently alluded to as he is frequently cast as a product of Darwinian processes, manifesting traits of his non-human ancestors. He is 'a misplaced and loveless simian shape' (21), with a habit of knotting his jaw in an unconscious ape-like gesture, and scuttling about the mountain wilderness. Of course, his retreat to the wilderness is something of a katabasis into the depths of his nature as he becomes a literal 'caveman' and subject to animal passions, his survival ensured by the exploitation of opportunities. This evocation of Darwinian theory brings to bear on the text its own associations of the natural world being defined by a certain dynamism that is inherently calamitous and within which beings and forms are conserved atavistically through attrition and adaptation.

Nevertheless, such a vision also provides its own, albeit ambiguous, images of preservation of forms beyond death. Whilst travelling through the old quarries, Lester sees 'great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas with shells in cameo and fishes etched in lime' (119)—an image which neatly brings out this parallel between natural and biblical history in its evocation of the inscribed tablets of Mosaic revelation, and which cements the peculiar exchange between biblical or mythical ideas and modern and secular thought which is so definitive of McCarthy's vision.

The manner of Ballard's accommodation to the wilderness is of particular interest here for the way it plays on the pastoral paradigm. In what reads like a topsy-turvy retelling of the expulsion of Adam, Lester departs

from human community in a ‘return’ to nature. Indeed, if McCarthy’s intention is to show us Lester as a ‘human animal’ then we might see in struggling against the elements and environment an affirmation of the brute naturalism described by contract theorists of human society from Hobbes to Rousseau. Or, more closely, perhaps, we could see this ‘child of God’ as exhibiting a particular affinity with the figure in Roman law known as the *homo sacer*, which has been the subject of sustained examination by Giorgio Agamben. Working against Schmitt and social contract theorists, Agamben discerns that understandings of the human are constructed through two distinct notions of life: *zoe*, or bare life; and *bios*, or political life.<sup>106</sup> The object of political life is to turn back upon and suppress or control basic animality in a fraught and ultimately untenable division of qualities and attributes. The *homo sacer* is a unique figure insofar as he is determined as outside of the political *nomos*; being inadmissible for sacrifice while his being killed is unpunishable, he is thus established as living a ‘bare life’ beyond the bounds of the politically constructed notion of the human. A figure set apart—perhaps, even, *set apart for God*. Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* seems to present a version of this state that is appropriate to the text’s Athenian setting, depicting the ruined hero’s ultimate ‘outsider’ status as a stranger who is received ‘Not with gifts but a pittance’.<sup>107</sup>

I will have cause to refer back to this notion of the *homo sacer* below and its relation to our discernment of Lester as a tragic figure, but here it will serve to describe how Ballard’s life in nature is constructed. As Georg

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<sup>106</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>107</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 3-5.

Guillemin aptly describes, Lester is ‘a sinister parody of the American pastoral hero’—or indeed the prelapsarian Adam— and he is quite correct in determining the sense of the parodic in the substitution of inferior attributes:

Instead of asceticism, one finds squalor; instead of independence, deracination; instead of self-sufficiency, improvisation; instead of rugged resourcefulness, primitivism.<sup>108</sup>

Ballard’s existence is not one of accommodation or neat adaptation to his environment, but a struggle of opportunistic exploitation. Moreover, the natural world here is fundamentally an irrational place—a site of calamity and disorder. However, unlike Culla Holme, Lester does not integrate easily with the chaotic nature of the wilderness he comes to inhabit, and maintains a kind of contempt for it. One extract which reveals a precious glimpse of his psychology is telling here:

Coming up the mountain through the blue winter twilight among great boulders and the ruins of giant trees prone in the forest he wondered at such upheaval. Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls. [128]

Here I should note that certain aspects of Ballard’s temperament echo from another of Melville’s memorable ‘characters’—namely, the Galapagos tortoise, which is described with particular zeal in *The Encantadas*. Melville

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<sup>108</sup> Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 52.

discerns something deeply unsettling in how the tortoise's form seems to inhibit its accommodation to its environment, and he perceives something genuinely horrifying in the animal's disregard for this 'unfitness', which he considers to be the basis of their characteristic obstinacy. Having observed the Galapagos tortoises, Melville records that:

Their stupidity or their resolution was so great, that they never went aside for any impediment.

...

I have known them in their journeyings ram themselves heroically against rocks, and long abide there, nudging, wriggling, wedging, in order to displace them, and so hold on their inflexible path. Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world.<sup>109</sup>

Ballard's horrifying 'stupidity' has an affinity with that of these bizarre, otherworldly reptiles. He is likewise committed to orderliness in a 'belittered world'—a fact which means that he never wholly submits to the purely animalistic existence, even though he appears bestial and irrational in his defiance. Even as he sloughs off all 'higher' human ideals, he remains an adept of Plato or of Paul, with his eye turned in judgement upon the wasting and chaotic wilderness for its failings to conform to the ideal; though it is a fidelity that consists of little understanding and terrifying ardour.

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<sup>109</sup> Herman Melville, "The Encantadas" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, edited by Harold Beaver (London: Penguin, 1985), 129-194: 139-40.

*Looking to still the world: Ballard as tragic spectator*

In addition to the unruliness and disorderliness of material reality which is examined both in the human and non-human world, Ballard is vexed by material change and motion. Ballard's casting as a voyeur and observer are key to understand the dramatic contrast between the dynamic and the static in the novel, as he looks upon the world of conspicuous change, animation and decay. The matter of Ballard's voyeurism and keeping company with the dead is the most obvious point of similarity with Norman Bates of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. This connection was first examined, and in some detail, by Dianne C. Luce, although her study is more concerned with describing common historical sources and surface details of the two villains' perceived psychologies. Andrew Bartlett moves closer when he makes the connection between Ballard's lethal expertise with his rifle and his vision or perspective on his environment and circumstances by giving attention to his 'faultless eye.'<sup>110</sup> Yet, we should further consider how Ballard's 'faultless eye' functions in Ballard's Promethean struggle to make the world conform to a fixed pattern, which will then aid our understanding of his gruesome crimes as a tragic quest to secure a *vision* of the eternal in the temporal. Indeed, it seems to this reader that the details of Ballard's preoccupations with hunting, stalking, spying, and then killing and conserving the bodies of his victims, has a strong affinity with those of Norman Bates, as presented in Hitchcock's cinematic interpretation. In both works, we are presented with characters that are caught between an intuition of—or a libidinal insistence upon—fixed images or states, in the midst of the traumatic experience of incessant change.

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<sup>110</sup> Bartlett, "From Voyeurism to Archaeology", 3.



Of course, McCarthy also shares Hitchcock's appreciation for the shock tactics of the spectacle. Yet, both are able to turn these inclinations to articulate 'higher' spiritual or metaphysical concerns. Indeed, the reprehensible crimes of both Bates and Ballard can be shown to be 'heroic' attempts to attain a kind of solace by occupying what T.S. Eliot refers to in "Burnt Norton" as the 'Still point of the turning world'.<sup>111</sup>

When Ballard is first introduced to us in the opening scene of the novel, it is as the aloof spectator concealed in his shed—removed from the action which is developing. In a gesture which seems to signal McCarthy's sensitive appreciation of Hitchcock's playing with technologies of film in his presentation of the voyeuristic Bates, McCarthy introduces a few details which lend a sense of the cinematic to the scene. Ballard's shed is itself something of a cinema or picture house, as he stands in darkness watching the action beyond framed in the gap in the timbers. Moreover, what he sees is presented as a play of light and shadows, within which 'wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments, gold and trembling between black and black' (6). The words 'laddered' and 'strobic moments' evoke the image of celluloid film and its ordering of successive images so as to produce the illusion of movement, and leads us to wonder how Ballard reads the world in action as it is presented to him. That he shares this space with wasps, whose own compound eyes effectively break up the world into mosaic images, evokes again the idea that material reality in motion can contain within it, or be deconstructed into, discrete fixed images.

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<sup>111</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton", 179.

The language of film is taken up by Miguel de Unamuno in his meditation on the Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

Nothing is lost, nothing wholly passes away, for in some way or another everything is perpetuated; and everything, after passing through time, returns to eternity. The temporal world has its roots in eternity, and in eternity yesterday is united with to-day and to-morrow. *The scenes of life pass before us as in a cinematograph show, but on the further side of time the film is one and indivisible.*<sup>112</sup>

Unamuno's insight in this respect can assist us in our formulation of how Ballard's position and perspective at the outset of the novel communicates something of the metaphysical anxiety which underlies his character, and which will initiate his grotesque stand against the 'passing' of life and pursuit of eternity.

Yet, Ballard's transition from an inactive to an active role is already tendered in this introduction. Countering his presentation as a passive observer is the suggestion that Ballard's physical eyes are themselves a kind of camera, engaged in the production of inauthentic or idiosyncratic 'fixed' images:

Standing in the forebay door he blinks... His eyes are almost shut against the sun and through the thin and blueveined lids you can see the eyeballs moving, watching. [6]

This blinking mimics the movements of the camera's shutter. Moreover, the remark that Ballard's eyes are 'almost' shut against the sun—the eternal

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<sup>112</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, translated by J. E. Crawford Fritch, (New York: Dover, 1954), 201. Emphasis added.

sphere which Plato takes as the form of the Good—gives us cause to wonder how far his own ‘images’ depart from the ‘forms’ of which he seems to have an incipient awareness. Indeed, the symbolism of this obfuscation gives us an indication of how deep Ballard will recede into a Platonic ‘cave’ of oblivion.

The action Lester observes introduces the kinds of motion and malleability against which he will set himself, as the text sketches out the lively scene that he observes from his remote position:

They came like a caravan of carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun, the truck rocking and pitching in the ruts and the musicians on chairs in the truckbed teetering and tuning their instruments, the fat man with guitar grinning and gesturing to others in a car behind and bending to give a note to the fiddler who turned a fiddlepeg and listened with a wrinkled face. They passed under flowering appletrees and passed log crib chinked with orange mud and forded a branch and came in sight of an aged clapboard house that stood in blue shade under the wall of the mountain. Beyond it stood a barn. One of the men in the truck bonged on the cab roof with his fist and the truck came to a halt. Cars and trucks came on through the weeds in the yard, people afoot. [5]

The passage recalls in a more comic mode the passage that describes the movement of the mysterious triune at the beginning of *Outer Dark* (OD 3-4), (though, the fiddler with his ‘wrinkled face’ anticipates the yet more dreadful animation and the tremendous vitality of *Blood Meridian*’ Judge Holden). The eruption of activity is described as ‘issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning’ (5), and indeed, the passage itself conveys a sense in

which the auction intrudes upon the quiet of the scene. The action is strewn with details that betray the social and historical setting of the tale and the metaphysical oppositions that McCarthy wishes to examine. As the ‘caravan’ moves into view, it is contrasted with the static features of the ‘aged clapboard house’ and the barn beyond it, in which Ballard is concealed and watching the action ‘issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning’ (5). While the ‘flowering appletrees’ lend a suitably Edenic touch to this archetypal home and together with the ‘log crib’ provides an image of the agrarian pastoral, there is a degree of discord in the juxtaposition of the old Ballard family home, set in its place in the landscape, and the motorised vehicles that flatten their own paths across the land—something which clearly irks Ballard as one who paces the old ways through the woods and, later on, through the prehistoric caves.

In contrast to the opening of *Outer Dark*, the mood here is one of epochal transition, as the old South is invaded by the flux and transience that characterise modernity, figured here by the motorcars, which will later figure significantly in Ballard’s attention and predation. The scene that McCarthy sketches here recalls the setting of *Psycho*, in which Hitchcock’s iconic *mise-en-scène* alloys the imposing ancestral Bates family home with the featureless, pseudo-domestic units of the motel. In both works, the juxtaposition marks out the tragic dissonance in which the old world in which identities and personal security are guaranteed by tradition, are compromised by the fluidity and instability of the new. This sense of Ballard’s home and environmental milieu as shifting from beneath him grows more intense and complex as C. B., the lively auctioneer, describes the assets and advantages of the lot:

Now they's good timber up here too. Real good timber. It's been cut over fifteen twenty year ago and so maybe it ain't big timber yet, but looky here. While you're laying down there in your bed at night this timber is up here growin. Yessir. And I mean that sincerely. They is real future in this property. As much future as you'll find anywheres in this valley. Maybe more. Friends, they is no limit to the possibilities on a piece of property like this. I'd buy it myself if I had the money ... They is no sounder investment than property. Land. You all know that a dollar won't buy what it used to buy. A dollar might not be worth fifty cents a year from now. And you all know that. But real estate is going up, up, up.

...

A piece of real estate, and particular in this valley, is the soundest investment you can make. Sound as a dollar. [7-8].

Here, the promise of 'real future', hyperbolically quantified in C.B.'s speech, seems bereft of any of the eschatological consolations to which we may relate this term, promising instead only a protracted sense of uncertainty and ceaseless appropriation. And here it is worth noting that the contradiction in C B.s speech reveals something of the collusion of free market economics and certain 'mythical' conceptions of the natural in his notions of the land and the dollar. The dollar is here both a fixed and a mutable quantity, and the land itself will reveal itself to be not a stable and orderly entity, but a site of chaotic forces, which we will witness later in the novel when a freak flood wreaks devastation.

Ballard's decision to rebel against this cultural upheaval seems to be an attempt to secure himself against the transformation and erasure of the moment to which he belongs, and marks him out as a doomed hero who is compelled to step against historical change. In his polemical survey of theories of tragedy, Terry Eagleton identifies and challenges theorists whose consideration of the tragic is wedded to an endorsement of cultural upheaval, regardless of the trauma or human cost incurred. Eagleton writes:

[T]hose who insist with suspicious stridency on the malleability of things, and for whom 'dynamic' is as unequivocally positive a term as 'static' is unambiguously negative, tend to forget that there are kinds of change that are deeply unpleasant and undesirable, just as there are forms of permanence and continuity which are to be affirmed and admired.<sup>113</sup>

In his sorting of theories of the tragic according to their valuations of speed and malleability, Eagleton echoes a particularly interesting text of Walter Benjamin in which the philosopher's political thought is seen to be quite clearly involved in his feeling for an idea of the tragic that finds its heroes among the proletariat:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an

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<sup>113</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, xi.

attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.<sup>114</sup>

With regards to the historical setting, Ballard's campaign might be viewed as an intervention to resist traumatic change by imposing a terrible halt upon the transformation of his milieu. We can here observe a more substantial connection with Hitchcock's film. As Jonathan Crary has observed, 'The darkness of *Psycho* is of a present in which a pathological attempt to freeze time and identities collides disastrously with the rootlessness and anonymity of modernity'.<sup>115</sup> We might thus regard his murders and subsequent creation of a community of the dead as similar to Norman Bates' attempt to resist the eroding forces of which flow through his home and threaten to unsettle his identity and foundation.

Ballard, of course, offers scant verbal expression his motivations, but in a typical Melvillean twist, his psychological intentions are displaced and expressed in external details. Before his murdering and corpse collecting begins, Ballard attends a fair where he wins some soft toy animals at the shooting gallery. Clearly delighted with these voiceless, fixed toys, he gazes up at the sky where he sees a firework explode in centrifugal trails 'like a huge and dark medusa squatting in the sky' (62). The reference here is, of course, to the classical monster whose gaze fixes victims in stone.

The necrophilia in which Ballard engages may also be understood in terms that are continuous with this desire to fix identities as a means of self-

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<sup>114</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History", in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 402.

<sup>115</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014), 95.

preservation. Simone Weil—a philosopher and mystic whose enigmatic writing frequently describes her own negotiation of the problem of giving one’s attention to ‘the world’ and to God—gave her own account of the original sin of abrogated divinity in terms that married the libidinous and the apocalyptic. Strongly influenced by both the New Testament and the *Bhagavad Gita*, Weil wrote in her notebook:

Desire: always to arrest or hasten the flow of time. <sup>116</sup>

Weil’s definition of desire has some resonance ‘apocalyptic temptation’, as described by Williams (though, of course, careful attention to the brevity of Weil’s expression can always be shown to provide evidence of the enormous depth and dimensions of her thought), thus allows us to set the sexual perversions of Ballard within a broader metaphysical and moral framework. However, in setting his abuse of bodies in this light, we can begin to see how the seemingly narrow distinction between love and desire issues in vastly divergent consequences. The ‘love’ that Ballard will show for these beautiful cadavers does not address their temporal nature, or rather, their participation of the eternal in the temporal. Not only are they deprived of agency and consent—becoming mere objects for manipulation and visual gratification—they are uniformly *nameless*, and are posed without character shaping narratives other than those supplied by Ballard himself in the fancies of his amorous addresses.

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<sup>116</sup> Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, 2 volumes, translated by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), vol.1, 40. In these selections, Weil is contemplating the operations of desire with reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*’s imperative of renunciation within the context of her own (renounced) pacifism.



*Descent to the dead: Ballard's imitation of Christ*

Lester's particular manner of Promethean revolt, or his abrogation of divinity to himself, is carefully plotted by McCarthy to play out in terms that parody Christian doctrine and the mythos which finds its centre in the narratives of Christ as both God-man and Son of God. Indeed, from the taking of his first victim, Ballard's work is contextually suggested as a gathering in of souls and of raising the dead to a manner of new 'life'. When he discovers the asphyxiated couple lying dead in their car at the Frog Mountain turnaround, the text interposes the voice from the radio, which offers a song dedicated to 'the sick and the shut in' (82). A single couplet from the song drift into the text as Lester sets about exploring the bodies:

Gathering flowers for the master's bouquet.  
Beautiful flowers that will never decay [82]

The words are taken from the refrain of the country gospel standard "Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet", popularised by Kitty Wells and Hank Williams. The lyric takes the image of imperishable flowers as a metaphor for the fate of the redeemed soul after death, and continues:

Loved ones are passing each day and each hour  
Passing away as the life of a flower  
Taken and cared for in Heaven's own way  
Forever to bloom in the Master's bouquet.

Gathering flowers for the Master's bouquet  
Beautiful flowers that will never decay

Gathered by angels then carried away  
Forever to bloom in the Master's bouquet.

There is a disquieting irony here as Ballard, an unlikely 'angel' prepares to carry the dead girl away and attempt, (ultimately unsuccessfully), to preserve her body in the icy cold loft of the shack he inhabits. Though his attempts at preserving the body are coloured by the text as a grotesque approximation of resurrection or eternal life as they are described by Christian orthodoxy, the control he exercises over the girls' body describes a grotesque parody of the excessive sense of vitality that Christian eschatology imagines. Clearly Lester is unable to think of life as anything other than resistant matter set in motion, as he attempts to grant a semblance of life to the pliant corpse, projects of consciousness, agency and, most disturbingly, capacity for consent, to the corpse, which is always referred to as 'the girl' or with pronouns so as to imply a complete sense of personhood. But the connection between Ballard and the salvific work of Christ is sketched most explicitly in the description of one particularly gross element of his treatment of the dead girl. He aims to store the girl's body in the attic 'away from the heat for keeping' (88). Having failed to carry her up the ladder, he devises an alternative solution:

He came in with some old lengths of plowline and sat before the fire and pieced them. Then he went in and fitted the rope about the waist of the pale cadaver and ascended the ladder with the other end. She rose slumpshouldered from the floor with her hair all down and began to bump slowly up the ladder. Halfway up she paused, dangling. Then she began to rise again. [90]

Ballard's victim is made into a literal marionette, apparently no different from the congregation at Sixmile Church, who have hitherto been likened to puppets (31).

Later on, when Ballard has grown more prolific in his acquisition of bodies, we will see his gruesome little community assembled deep in the cave he has come to occupy:

Here in the bowels of the mountain Ballard turned his light on  
ledges or pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints.  
[127]

This little community of the redeemed that Lester has assembled about him exploits the language of Christian redemption to parodic effect. The idea of redemption as an attainment of 'rest' in the divine presence extolled by figures such as St Augustine,<sup>117</sup> is here represented as a silent inertia rather than a cessation of suffering or the satisfaction of natural desire. Moreover, for all the sense of community it promises to afford Ballard in his lonely melancholy, such silence and anonymity (the individual victims are nameless and featureless) scarcely approaches the sense of mutuality that the Christian notion of redemption, understood as the completion of creation, envisages. Just as Dante's lowest stratum of hell parodies the heights of the celestial paradise, so McCarthy's subterranean realm presents an impoverished and wholly inverted view of heavenly life as muteness, physical inertia, and radical alienation.

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<sup>117</sup> This is expressed most succinctly in the famous prayer of *Confessions* Ii: 'you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'. Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

*You all got it in for me: Fate, law and providence*

Partnered with Ballard's resistance to the principle of disorder in the world is his resistance to human figures of law and authority who, to some extent, serve as figures or personifications of the indifferent operations of the world in which he moves. These ideas are of particular interest with regards his dealings with the high sheriff of Sevier County, Fate Turner—a relationship which seems to encompass conflict and charity. His role is somewhat difficult to surmise, with his rather gentle qualities offset somewhat by the graveness of his name. 'Fate's all right', one of the narrators comments as he begins an anecdote about his own personal association with the sheriff (43). And indeed, he seems like an amicable fellow with a measure of good sense and propriety when it comes to dispensing the authority he holds. The narrator's story describes a time when he himself catches a couple parked up while patrolling the Frog Mountain turnaround. Perceptive of the little harm they are causing, the sheriff's response is just to send them on their way — 'That's the kind of feller he is'. But there is more going on here. By setting up the contrast to how sheriff and Ballard act in similar situations, the text invites us to see the two characters in opposition to each other. And, in light of the oddly heroic and sympathetic aspect of Ballard's role, we are persuaded to wonder if there is perhaps not something more malign about the sheriff and what he represents.

The name 'Fate Turner' seems to identify him quite clearly with the ever-changing indifference that is the determining feature of Ballard's experience of the world—and a partner perhaps of the grim triune of *Outer Dark*. The reader is continually given to wonder about how his actions shape Ballard's experiences and his continued failure to intervene to stop Ballard.

An indication of the inscrutable forces to which Ballard is subject is evoked in the episode in which Ballard is brought into custody by the sheriff to face allegations of rape and assault. After spending nine days and nights in the county jail, Ballard is brought to the courthouse where his case is heard. Significantly, Ballard is excluded from the beginning of the hearing:

They sat him in a chair in an empty room. He could see a thin strip of colour and movement through the gap in the double doors and he listened vaguely to legal proceedings. After an hour or so the bailiff came in and crooked his finger at Ballard. Ballard rose and went through the doors and sat in a church-bench behind a little rail.

He heard his name. He closed his eyes. He opened them again. A man in a white shirt at the desk looked at him and looked at some papers and then he looked at the sheriff. Since when? he said.

Well tell him to get out of here.

The bailiff came and opened the gate and leaned toward Ballard. You can go, he said.

Ballard stood up and went through the gate and across the room toward a door with daylight in it and across a hall and out through the front door of the Sevier County courthouse. No one called him back.

The passage is full of ambiguities. There is something uncanny, even Kafkaesque, about the way the legal process occurs in occlusion. And here it is striking that ‘movement’ is the indicative signs of that process. When Ballard is led in, the air of holiness is also perplexing. The figure in white, presumably the judge, is haughtily aloof, granting Ballard’s release indirectly and coarsely. The fact that Ballard is seated on a ‘church-bench’ is also deeply

ambiguous. It might give us cause to think that he has been the recipient of a divine grace—a supposition that ties in with his walking toward the daylight that is the signal of his freedom. On the other hand, the church-bench has already been determined as an accessory in the ‘puppet play’ that Ballard has observed in the church. Has Ballard been made into a kind of puppet to these obscure authorities? We might regard this obscurity as representing what Walter Benjamin calls the ‘mythical’ constitution of law—the inherently irrational and centralisation of power that works to guard its own violently contradictory nature.<sup>118</sup> However, we might also invoke again Benjamin’s disciple, Agamben, and see the obscure legal authorities as manifesting the notion of ‘sovereign power’, whose mechanism is to ‘inclusively exclude’ the *homo sacer*.<sup>119</sup> This sense that Ballard’s antagonism with the law is a self-perpetuating power play seems to come through as the episode moves to its conclusion. Having been released, Ballard meets Fate outside the courthouse:

He was standing in the street with his hands in his back  
pockets when the sheriff walked up.  
What’s your plans now? said the sheriff.  
Go home, said Ballard.  
And what then. What sort of meanness have you got laid  
out for next.  
I ain’t got any laid out.

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<sup>118</sup> Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited with an Introduction by P. Demetz, translated by E. Jephcott, (New York: Schocken, 2007), 277-301. I will make more substantial reference to this essay in the following chapter, where I will have cause to discuss the place of the ‘mythical’ in relation to violence and law as embodied by Judge Holden. I introduce Benjamin’s text here in since it is contextually apt given this Kafkaesque scene and in light of its significance in the subsequent formation of Agamben’s philosophy.

<sup>119</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21.

I figure you ought to give us a clue. Make it more fair. Let's see: failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape. I guess murder is next on the list ain't it? Or what things is it you've done that we ain't found out yet?

...

The sheriff stepped from in front of him. Ballard went on by and up the street. About halfway along the block he looked back. The sheriff was still watching him. [52-54]

Indeed, as a spokesman for the community and the authorities at large, the sheriff does seem to have 'got it in' for Lester. As a scapegoat figure, he is despised but oddly indispensable to his community.

Nevertheless, McCarthy's over determination of the figure of Fate and his performance of the tropes of grace and pardon here do not work to entirely sink those higher, divine, dispensations within a 'mythical' reign that is characterised by caprice and inconsistency. In the schema of the metaphysical allegory that inheres in the story, we are encouraged to examine how the deprived worldly order coincides with that of the heavens. In this respect, we might speculate on how the idea of fate—here represented in the named figure of justice—relates to providence.

Boethius' Christian Platonism brings such a discussion to the fore of his most famous book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and can assist our interpretation of McCarthy's novel here:

The whole generation of thing, the whole progress of things subject to change and whatever moves in any way, receives their causes, their due order and their form from the

unchanging mind of God. In the high citadel of its oneness, the mind of God has set up a plan for the multitude of events. When this plan is thought of as in the purity of God's understanding, it is called Providence, and when it is thought of with reference to all things, whose motions and order it controls, it is called by the name the ancients gave it, Fate.... Providence is the divine reason itself... Fate, on the other hand, is the planned order inherent in things subject to change through the medium of which Providence binds everything in its own allotted place. Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and in different times. So this unfolding of the plan in time when brought together as a unified whole in the foresight of God's mind is Providence; and the same unified whole when dissolved and unfolded in the course of time is Fate.... The order of Fate is derived from the simplicity of Providence.<sup>120</sup>

According to Boethius, then, the unchanging, unified and essentially teleological nature of providence works through the movements of the world and is recognised where those movements are not referred to the world itself. The obscurity of Fate's judgements and his relation to the obscure powers at the courthouse might then mimic this interweaving of 'worldly' and divine justice. Perhaps then, when the sheriff escorts Ballard from the courthouse, implores him to change his ways and keeps a watch on him, he is to be regarded as working in accordance with the divine will which seeks the recovery of all souls. It is certainly the case, as I will discuss below, that it is

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<sup>120</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 4.6, translated by Victor Watts (London: Penguin, 1999), 102.



the sheriff who is present and active in the apocalyptic conclusion of the narrative, in which Lester's hidden crimes and concealed bodies are recovered.

***The color of grace: The blacksmith's demonstration of redemption***

The interconnectedness of the operations of higher and lower realities is explored in the remarkable digressive episode in which Ballard visits a blacksmith's shop. The presentation of the subtle interplay of permanence and change in materials and Ballard's particular perspective on these matters, are brought to the fore as the blacksmith sets about an enigmatic demonstration of his craft as he repairs and sharpens the axe head that Lester has found.

The episode is laden with Hermetic and Platonic imagery in which the smith's craft appears at once parallel to and distinct from the violent campaign upon which Ballard is shortly to embark in its apprehension of preservation and change in the stuff of creation. The arcane aspect of the smith's craft is established from the outset as Ballard enters the shop which is 'near lightless save for the faint glow at the far end where the forge fire smoldered and the smith in silhouette above some work' (67). Here we get a sense of the Smith as a semi mythical figure, god-like as he toils at his productions in the darkness. There is even something demiurgic about his positioning as a silhouette at the threshold of light and darkness. Though he is an old-world figure, working with the raw elements at the fire, it is also suggested that he is intimately involved in the contemporary world. The objects that surround him suggest the trans historical nature of his work: 'The walls of the building were hung with all manner of implements. Pieces of farm machinery and motorcars

lay strewn everywhere' (67). The Smith's involvement with both the old and the new is significant insofar as it seems to subvert the opposition between the pastoral and the mechanical, the sedentary and the transitory that features elsewhere in the novel and which shapes Ballard's perspective.

The Smith explains to Ballard that due to the condition of the axe head, simply grinding the metal to sharpen it would not be a satisfactory solution and that it would be better to reheat and redress the metalwork. Ballard agrees to pay the necessary costs to repair the old axe head in favour of buying a 'brand new' one from the store, and the smith enthusiastically offers to show him how the work is done. The account of the process that follows is one of the most captivating passages in all McCarthy's early fiction. The Smith, clearly encouraged by pride in the craft and his aptitude guides Ballard through the details of the process, and the otherwise quite spare prose begins to sing as this great spectacle is taking place. And indeed, it is all spectacle as the passage focuses in on the Smith at work, with Ballard oddly displaced to stand alongside us the reader to consider what is taking place. Instructions to Ballard and the reader to 'see' or 'watch' recur rhythmically as in a piece of music:

You want to wait a minute I'll show ye how to dress a  
axe that'll cut two to one against any piece of shit you can buy  
down here at the hardware store brand new.

...

The smith stuck the axe in the fire and gave the crank a  
few turns. Yellow flames spat out from under the blade. They  
watched.

You want to keep your fire high, said the smith. Three or four inches above the tuyer iron. You want to lay a clean fire with good coal that's not laid out in the sun.

He turned the axehead with his tongs. You want to take your first heat a good yell and work down. That there ain't hot enough. He had raised his voice to make these observations although the forge made no sound. He cranked the lever again and they watched the fire spit.

Not too fast, the smith said. Slow. That's how ye heat. Watch ye colors. If she chance to get white she's ruind. There she comes now.

He drew the axehead from the fire and swung it all quivering with heat and glowing a translucent yellow and laid on the anvil.

Now mind how ye work only the flats, he said taking up the hammer. And start on the bit. He swung the hammer and the soft steel gave under the blow with an odd dull ring. He hammered out the bit on both sides and put the blade back in the fire

We take another heat on her only not so high this time. A high red color will do it ... Watch her well, he said. Never leave steel in the fire for longer than it takes to heat. Some people will poke around at somethin else and leave the tool they're heatin to perdition but the proper thing to do is to fetch her out the minute she shows the color of grace. Now we want a high red. Want a high red. Here she comes. [68-69]

The whole process conducted at the soundless forge is full of flickering and phasing colours and changes in nature as the crazed and flaking iron is made anew as something altogether more solid. It is as much a spectacle that has to do with McCarthy showing off not only his own knowledge of the craft, its techniques and jargon, but also his ability to recreate its facsimile in

writing. Indeed, the prowess of the writing extrapolates and elaborates the arcana of the smith's, making the smith's narration of the process of change of which he is the president all the more evocative. There is ring of Heraclitus' doctrine of perpetual flux in the changing colours of the fire—that most Heraclitean of elements—though the process is ultimately not one which Heraclitean philosophy could countenance, as the progress or 'upward' development of the material is indisputably Platonic. Moreover, the smith's appropriation of the theological language of 'perdition' and 'grace' makes explicit the connection to the renewal of physical and spiritual reality as he works the steel so that it achieves the full measure of strength and the formal integrity that are its potential.

Yet for all the repeated instruction that Lester (and by extension, we readers) keep our eyes fixed on the glowing steel, there is a strong sense that it is not the steel itself which we should be watching, but rather what it might stand for. Indeed, what the luminous and energetic prose highlights is the process itself. Indeed, what the process that the smith is demonstrating here is alternative approach to the work of 'fixing' or 'securing' reality to the one Ballard will soon commit himself. In addition to this, the scene possibly serves as a figuration of Ballard's own trajectory as he sets himself on his own path that will lead him into death and then through a kind of purgation. And although the question of Ballard's rehabilitation or restoration is left open, there does seem to be in this sparkling little episode an insistence that even the basest entities can be purified and raised up.

This humble rural craftsman is also a hierophant, even god-like, who attempts to initiate Ballard into these mysteries. However, it seems highly

improbable that Ballard has gleaned much, if anything, of the subtle import of the smith's demonstration. As he gives his concluding lesson, Ballard seems hopelessly distracted:

It's like a lot of things, said the smith. Do the least part of it wrong and ye'd just as well to do it all wrong... reckon you could do it now from watchin? he said.

Do what, said Ballard. [71]

Ballard thus goes forth to wreak his havoc. However, the episode lingers in the reader's memory, and the smith's demonstration of a kind of theurgic transfiguration of the blunt blade is thus set as a pattern for Ballard's personal descent into the earth, framing his journey through the quarries and caves beneath Sevier County as something of a perdition, and colouring the bare facts of his survival with the word *grace*.

***How then is he borne up?: Survival and providence***

McCarthy's tale is keen to affirm that what makes Lester Ballard remarkable are not merely his actions or his peculiar perspective on the world, but the sheer fact of his survival. Just as was the case of Culla Holme in *Outer Dark*, McCarthy wishes us to marvel at the fact that such an apparently mean creature is permitted to remain in being. The skill and shrewd opportunism that allow Lester to adapt so successfully to life in the wilderness are only the most realist aspect of his extraordinary will to remain, while other elements of his story are far more extraordinary and suggest that a force yet more

mysterious is at work to guarantee his survival. He endures fire and flood, and even three days of incarceration in the darkness of the caves beneath Sevier County—all figures that resonate with biblical mythology and corroborate the view that some manner of divine favour or election is determining the continued existence of the ‘child of God’. And in the final instance, the novel itself seems to attest to a certain kind of immortality as Ballard survives death and the destruction of his body to be enshrined permanently in cultural memory and imagination. However, McCarthy’s text is keen to explore the ambiguity of this mysterious fact of his endurance, delving into darker aspects of the Darwinian ‘mythos’ of survival.

As I have already described, Ballard’s character is from the beginning constituted as something of a remnant—the Ishmael-like orphan of a wrecked family and collapsing estate. The first real marvel of his apparent indestructibility is his survival of the axe blow to the head that ends his sabotage of the auction, and thereafter, he retreats to the woods to take up a Robinson Crusoe type existence, using and reusing objects and tools that are afforded to him. As Guillemin has pointed out in the comments I have already quoted, his accommodation to his gruelling circumstances is marked more by luck and improvisation rather than a noble sense of self-sufficiency, and thus truly a grim approximation of the American Pastoral ideal. Nevertheless, a sense of the providential is not entirely excluded here, such that the reductive materialism that McCarthy’s aesthetic gestures toward does not entirely hold.

The first event in which we begin to get a sense of something more than luck is at work in Ballard’s survival is when the dilapidated house he is living in catches fire while he is sleeping. Before Lester realises that sparks

from the hearth-fire have ignited the roof above him, Lester awakens ‘with some premonition of ill fate’(98) and rises just in time to escape before the entire building burns, along with the body of his first female victim which he had kept stowed in the loft. The notion that Ballard here acts in response to a premonition is itself intriguing, given the scant details we are provided with regard to his intellectual activity. The mere fact that this evocation of Ballard’s interior life should be communicated to us as a ‘premonition’ only serves to buttress the view that he is one who is sensitive to determinative forces in the world, but yet, like so many tragic heroes, intent on stepping beyond them. Moreover, as Ballard rises, we get another detail that alludes to another possible dimension of Ballard’s ‘election’. When Ballard goes to check the hearth, he sees that the fire ‘had diminished to a single tongue of flame that stood near motionless from the ashes’ (98). The phrasing here cannot help but recall the ‘tongues of fire’ that touched the Apostles at Pentecost and gifted them the language to speak to strangers (Acts 2:3-4). For Ballard, however, such a gift of language and sociality is realised negatively as his small and admittedly perverse social sphere vanishes. The dead girl who had been his companion and confidant is cremated in the fire and Ballard’s sadness and frustration leaves him, temporarily, without speech of any kind as he ventures into the ruins to sit Job-like among the ashes: ‘He’d long been given to talking to himself but he didn’t say a word’ (100).

An even more remarkable incident of Lester’s uncanny survival occurs when a freak rainstorm floods the valley, flushing Ballard out of his underground dwelling and submerging much of the town. Such an extreme event knits well into the novel’s premise in its weaving together evocations of

nature or natural history as a succession of catastrophes and the salvation history of biblical narratives. It is sheriff Turner who explicitly invokes the story of Noah, when he jokes to his deputy, ‘You ain’t seen a old man with a long beard buildin a great big boat anywheres have ye?’ (152). Various aspects of this biblical story have a bearing on the story, as do the typological repetitions of that story’s themes and motifs in the narratives of Moses and of Christian baptism. Melville evokes each of these narratives in the Epilogue to *Moby-Dick*, in which Ishmael survives the sinking of the *Pequod* and stays afloat on the sea by clinging to the lifebuoy made from Queequeg’s coffin.<sup>121</sup> Joining all of these sacred narratives together is the theme of purgation and renewal, but more subtly, the idea of survival and preservation against the forces of destruction which seem to be integral to the operations of the natural world. Discussing them in a little detail will give us a bearing on the meanings of an episode which McCarthy marks out for special attention with a turn in the narratorial voice.

One aspect of the Noah story that stands out quite clearly in the surface level of the text is, of course, moral. The flood ordered by God is a purgation of creation, intended to rid the world of the wicked while preserving the upright Noah and his menagerie to begin the work of renewing the world as it was intended to be. The moral dimension of the Noah myth certainly seems pertinent, as the flood water calls a halt to his crimes, for the most part, and seems intent on flushing him out of existence. And yet, this meanest of creature does not succumb and is borne up on the water.

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<sup>121</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 493.



Fighting his way through the water, for a few moments, it seems as though Ballard, like Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin, will be the recipient of a providential life-preserver when a log floats toward him:

He was in water to his chest, struggling along on tiptoe gingerly and leaning upstream when a log came steaming into the flat. He saw it coming and began to curse. It spun broadside to him and it came on with something of animate ill will. Git, he screamed at it, a hoarse croak in the roar of the water...

Git, goddamn it. Ballard shoved at the log with the barrel of the rifle. It swung down upon him in a rush and he hooked his rifle arm over it. The crate capsized and floated off. Ballard and the log bore on into the rapids below the ford and Ballard was lost in a pandemonium of noises, the rifle aloft in one arm now like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp and his mouth wide open for the howling of oaths until the log swept into a deeper pool and rolled and the waters closed over him.

[146-147]

But there is something amiss here. The log seems to be alive with intentionality, though it is possessed of an 'ill will —in league with the waters and their mission to cleanse the wicked from the earth. Nevertheless, Ballard manages to seize hold of it, and is briefly borne upon it like a hero, albeit a demented one, before the log is swept away and he is overcome by the water. So this will not be a survival like that of Ishmael, and yet Lester will survive. In fact, McCarthy stages a much more startling intervention that deliberately presses into the knotty issue of authorial design and its analogic relationship to

fortune and grace. What occurs is so extraordinary that it is issued by a turn in narratorial voice, outward to the reader to defend its own incredulity:

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 is 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 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?

When he reached the willows he pulled himself up and found that he stood in scarcely a foot of water. There he turned and shook the rifle alternately at the flooded creek and at the gray sky out of which the rain still fell grayly and without relent and the curses that hailed up above the thunder of the water carried to the mountain and back like echoes from the clefts of bedlam [147-148]

In its exasperation, the text presses to look beyond the surface details of the text in a search for agency in this 'miraculous' endurance. On the one hand, we may regard the formidable 'wrath' of Ballard as a figuration of the will-to-life or the will-to-power that is inserted into Darwinian accounts of natural selection as the figurative engine of survival, a notion that is of a piece with the attention to the atavistic elements of Ballard's character, and indeed, of the social and natural world in which he moves. Yet, equally, there is something in the way the rhetorical drive of the text here pushes our attention outside the frame, suggesting a 'hidden hand' beyond the natural features of

the scene. And it is here that the narrative channels the subtler dimension of the Noah story which is to describe the Hebraic motif of the *exodus* as the breaking out of the cyclical character of mythical or naturalistic thought. Understood as a revision of the most ancient cosmologies which understood the world as configured in a perpetual cycle of formation and dissolution, the story of Noah presents a linear sense of time and of life in which the providential and eschatological operations of the divine open up a breach in the enclosed, cyclical view of creation. In such a reading, there emerges a sense of life as not merely provisional, but divinely guaranteed, even as it is marked by transience.

Read in this way, we can see how the ancient narrative is conversant with the thematic interest in destruction and preservation that patters the novel and is focused in Ballard's own warped, though somewhat sympathetic, desire to fix entities in the midst of change and to impose a degree of 'orderliness' in a 'belittered' world. His deliverance from this catastrophe seems to be the corrective of his own configuration of oppositional understanding of the dynamic and the fixed, and a baptism of sorts, describing his initiation into a subtler understanding. The situation of the episode in the text suggests as much, as it follows on from the first intimations we have of Ballard's awakening consciousness and his final visionary evocation of the truth of the world and his need to make a home in it, though not of it.

Yet McCarthy does not allow the gravity of the moral dimension of the story to sink entirely beneath such an allegorical or romantic gloss of the story. The preservation of Ballard the brutal murderer is steered by the narrative to raise profound questions concerning justice as it operates in and through

notions of the ‘natural’. Ballard’s elution from the flood waters sets out to query the powers or mechanisms of survival in an imaginative mode that cuts into ethical and scientific thinking around the subject. Going beyond his dependence on the sympathetic existentialist figure of Ishmael, McCarthy approaches the troubling and deep considerations of the matter of survival undertaken by Primo Levi—a literary survivor of history’s starkest paring of humanity—particularly as it is set out in his allusively titled book *The Drowned and the Saved*. In this collection of essays as well as in his volumes of memoir, Levi cuts through Darwinian maxims which account for the survival of ‘rudder forms’ and adaptations according to fitness to insist chillingly that ‘the worst survived’.<sup>122</sup>

Gil Anidjar’s stirring article on the idea of survival privileges Levi’s writings for the way they lay out the mystery of survival—of the camps and in general—in acutely perceptive terms:

Levi professed neither privileged understanding of the reasons of survival, nor particular knowledge of the powers—or accidents—of survival. He certainly did not contribute to the impressive and seemingly lasting achievements of social Darwinism, nor did he claim to offer yet another image of “the triumph of the human spirit”. ... Survival remained, for him, an open question—or worse, an accusation.<sup>123</sup>

This notion of survival as precariously poised between ‘a question’ and ‘an accusation’ is what lends the charge to Levi’s account of himself as the

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<sup>122</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus Books, 1989), 63.

<sup>123</sup> Gil Anidjar, “Survival”, in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*. <http://politicalconcepts.org/survival-gil-anidjar/>, (accessed 24th October 2014).

beneficiary of a kind of random error. Without wishing to be trivial in connecting Levi's provocative reflections to McCarthy's fiction, it is clear that the author wishes us to reflect on the 'powers or accidents' of survival as they are seen in the figure of Ballard—a figure in whom sympathetic sentiments issue in actions deserving the sternest apprehension—without too sentimental a view of the mysteries of providence. Ballard passes through the flood waters, or proves himself 'fit' to do so, and we readers, his reluctant supporters, are unsettled as much as we are consoled.

***Reconciled in the stars: Ballard's resignation and rebirth***

In the third part of the novel, we get a sense of Ballard being called or willing himself to turn from his crimes and to a deeper realisation about himself and the world. Lester's movement into the cave is figured as a descent to a literal nadir and to a spiritual one, although even this 'outer darkness' becomes a potential site of transformation. This is first hinted at in the description of the seasonal changes that take place in the environment—significantly, following the thaw of winter:

False spring came again with a warm wind. The snow melted off into little patches of gray ice among the wet leaves. With the advent of this weather bats began to stir from somewhere deep in the cave. Ballard lying on his pallet by the fire one evening saw them come from the dark of the tunnel and ascend through the hole overhead fluttering wildly in the ash and smoke like souls rising from hades. When they were gone he watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the

smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself. [133]

The passage is full of intimations of deliverance and resurrection to new life. The evocation of a ‘false’ spring resonates nicely with the false beatification, and later false resurrection of Ballard and his victims, although it also serves to heighten our sense of how in the Christian imagination, the natural seasons only weakly approximate the non-cyclical cosmic drama of salvation. The inclusion of the word ‘advent’ here makes the impression of the sacred calendar more vivid. The stirring of the bats from their long period of hibernation—the state of ‘false’ death by which these mammals accommodate themselves to the annual fluctuations of their environment—is given explicitly as an image of resurrection. The liveliness of their bodies (‘fluttering wildly’) is likened to ‘souls rising from hades’, and so anticipates not only Ballard’s own physical release from his three days of imprisonment in the underground tunnels, but also something of how his spirit, or at least, the memory of him, escapes consignment to oblivion.

It is also interesting that this passage, which concludes the second part of the novel, finds Ballard gazing at the stars. The transitions between the major sections of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are also marked by observations of the stars, in which the constellations serve as indicators of the order that is integral to the cosmos, which is visible even through the obscurities that impair the lower, ever-changing earth (Dante is studiously Aristotelian in his astrology). This attention to the heavens is a feature of the fractured modern imagination of Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”, where images of violence and decay

‘are reconciled among the stars’.<sup>124</sup> We might thus then see awakening bats as an externalisation of Ballard’s own stirring conscience as he loosens his grip on the realm of unruly solidities. But perhaps most significantly, Ballard’s inquisitive gaze turns upon himself as he begins to ponder for the first time his own creaturely status.

There then follows the great flood in the valley which figures allegorically as a cleansing or baptism (about which I will have more to say below), flushing him out of his deathly abode. It is from this point that Ballard’s interior life really begins to be laid out in the text as we are given glimpses of a contemplative or reflective nature undergoing a turbulent upheaval. We know that Ballard had become disposed to talking to himself, but now he is silent and receptive of a voice coming to him from within himself:

Whatever voice spoke him was no demon but some old shed self that came yet from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous wrath [149].

Even more interesting is the maturation of Ballard’s melancholy as he comes to some kind of acceptance of the world. Taking up a high vantage, this incessant watcher takes another look at the world:

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

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<sup>124</sup> Eliot, “Burnt Norton”, 179.

there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry. [161]

This account of Ballard's desperation and disappointment is genuinely affecting. Moreover, the prose is deftly balanced to entertain views of Ballard as either an exhausted tragic rebel or a new initiate into a deeper understanding of the world he has hitherto rejected. We might interpret the scene as a description of Ballard's realisation, in the face of this panoramic vision, of the utter futility of his attempt to halt the 'diminutive progress of all things'. Yet, we may also see it as an account of Ballard shedding his illusions of control, having recognised that the 'still point at the centre of the world' of his own devising is a dead imitation of eternity. Of course, the story and the character remain compelling because of the meaning that is conveyed in the synthesis of the two readings.

The intensification of this ambiguity continues with the description of a dream experience that seems to speak of Ballard's changing or intensified status of understanding of his predicament:

He dreamt that night that he rode through woods on a low ridge. Below him he could see deer in a meadow where the sun fell on the grass. The grass was still wet and the deer stood in it to their elbows. He could feel the spine of the mule rolling under him and he gripped the mule's barrel with his legs. Each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he knew he'd never ride again. They rode over his face like veils, already some yellow, their veins like slender bones where the sun shone through them. He had resolved to ride on for he could not turn back and the



world that day was lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death. [162]

Like Culla's dream at the beginning of *Outer Dark*, here McCarthy brings in elements of religious drama to lend the mundane a sense of ritual or pageantry. Ballard here envisages his inevitable demise as a procession toward death which evokes that of the sacrificial victim or scapegoat of Attic drama. Yet, although there is 'dread', the overall mood of the dream is not that of the fearful prelude to catharsis, but of a higher register of melancholy as the transience of the world is pressed upon him literally as these leaves in various stages of their lives pass over him. Death is here an inevitability, yet he concludes that the day is 'lovely as any day', though we are left to wonder if it is to be reckoned so because change and decay are inherent to it, or despite these conditions. The mysteries of Ballard's understanding of the world multiply here, and we are pressed hard to find a satisfactory theory to account for such a dream.

The dream clearly inspires a final assault—a botched and somewhat comical attempt to murder Greer and reclaim his family home. Ballard arrives at the house wearing the clothes of his female victims and wig made from a scalp. We might wonder if there is some ritual meaning to this transvestitism or if Lester has not tried to silence the gentle voice that calls him by attempting to displace his old personality altogether. In this grotesque attire, Ballard aims his rifle at Greer, whom he has made the focus or surrogate for all his grievances—his nemesis, his white whale—in the manner that 'hunters do' (163). The shot misses and hits his spade, which rings out like a 'gong of turned doom'. This sense of finality is further evoked when Ballard charges

toward the house to take a closer shot at Greer, only to receive a close range shot to the arm which causes his body to launch backward 'like something come to the end of its tether' (164).

Thereafter, Ballard wakes to find himself in a hospital, where he still wishes Greer dead, and from where he is abducted by vigilantes seeking the missing bodies. This final journey through the cave system features the most explicit statements of Ballard's shift in consciousness, culminating in a symbolic rebirth. Having escaped the vigilantes, Ballard is lost and alone in the caves for a biblically resonant three days (178). The allusion here encompasses the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the belly of the mythical fish (Jonah 12:40), or the Leviathan, understood as a figuration of death. This connection of the caves to this monster of death has hitherto been established in a description that likens Lester's hiding place to 'the innards of some great beast' (127). But of course, this story is connected analogically to the three days and nights of entombment experienced by Christ prior to his resurrection (Matthew 27:63; Mark 8:31). In following the pattern of these narratives, we are thus primed to expect Ballard's re-emergence and restoration, though the terms by which it may be articulated are by no means secure.

Interestingly, given the Johannine framing of the narrative, the prelude to Lester's rebirth is the image of light falling upon him through a crack in the rock above him:

In the morning when the light in the fissure dimly  
marked him out this drowsing captive looked so inculpate in  
the fastness of his hollow stone you might have said he was

half right who thought himself so grievous a case against the gods. [179]

This light invigorates Ballard even as it incriminates him—showing him ‘inculpate’ in his proxy grave. Moreover, it is striking that this very Christian ‘light’ shows Ballard as a very classical, tragic sounding delinquent—calling him out as a ‘grievous case against the gods’. Yet this light that falls on him remains as he considers his predicament, his attention captured by the eventual fate of his body in this tomb.

He heard mice scurry in the dark. Perhaps they’d nest in his skull, spawn their tiny bald and mewling whelps in the lobbed caverns where his brains had been. His bones polished clean as eggshells, centipedes sleeping in their marrowed flutes, his ribs curling slender and whitely like a bone flower in the dark stone bowl. He’d cause to wish and he did for some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep. [180]

It is a digression that echoes the death of the tinker in *Outer Dark* as Ballard imagines the passing on of his life in a manner that conforms to a wilderness or naturalistic equilibrium. Yet what is most interesting is that Ballard is meditating on his own death and decay at all, and breaking out of his consciousness as a monadic, fixed figure cast in a belittered and fluctuating world. Furthermore, this acceptance of his creaturely transience is immediately augmented by a rejection of such a passage into death, and into the perpetuation of life as a divided and anonymous fluid, as he recognises and wishes for some agency beyond himself—the ‘brute midwife’ of his rude imagination—to rescue him. However, this is not a story in which miraculous

interventions figure, and it is by his own effort that Lester eventually digs himself out.

Having brought Ballard to the surface, McCarthy grants him one more underplayed epiphany after rising to ‘new life’, when he sees a small boy watching him from the window of a passing ‘churchbus’:

his nose puttied against the glass. There was nothing out there to see but he was looking anyway. As he went by he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back.... He was trying to fix in his mind where he’d seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go. [181-182]

It requires a good deal of interpretative energy to discern what is taking place in this encounter and what it might mean for Ballard. Is he chilled by the thought that this child resembles him in his turning away from those around him to fix a voyeuristic gaze through the glass? Does Ballard fear that this child will grow into another monster like himself and turn ancient sins to new outrages? Or perhaps Lester has seen an image of his own past self, and regained his own past in an experience of *metanoia*. A final possibility is that Ballard has seen himself as he is now—as one who has been reborn and reclaimed as a child of God.

The mysteriousness concerning the efficacy of Ballard’s ‘rebirth’ is given a further twist in Lester’s final act of admitting himself to the state hospital. On the one hand, we might see this committal as a performance of some kind of realised teleology, as Ballard’s journey away from home and

human society brings him back to kind of institution: Ballard tells the clerk ‘I’m supposed to be here’ (182). That Lester has—or perceives he has—a *place* in the world is in itself a fitting conclusion to the journey he has undertaken, and yet a hospital is hardly a home or a site of *reditus* after his digressive exodus. Perhaps the idea of the hospital is intended to fit with Ballard’s growing sense of his dependency upon others. However, there is also an echo of *Oedipus at Colonus* and of Sophocles’ depiction of the tragic protagonist who has resigned his campaign yet cannot be admitted back to societal structures, and so must abide as a *homo sacer* within demarcated spaces of and for ‘otherness’.

#### ***Dissolution and memory: Ballard’s death and preservation***

After Ballard’s climactic rebirth and journey to the state hospital, McCarthy offers two short concluding chapters that complete the narrative. The penultimate chapter recounts that Ballard ‘was never indicted for any crime’ and that he saw out his natural life at the state hospital in Knoxville, where he occupied a ‘cage next door but one to a demented gentleman who used to open folks’ skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon’ (183), until his death following a bout of pneumonia in the spring of 1965. The post-mortem treatment of Ballard’s body is briefly described:

His body was shipped to the state medical school at Memphis. There in a basement room he was preserved with formalin and wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a slab and

flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the 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. At the end of 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. A minister from the school read a simple service. [183-184]

Though the account of the treatment of Ballard's body after death is brief and dispassionate, it simmers with details which draw together so many of the threads of Lester's character and of the novel's thematic interests. As is befitting of a tragic hero, his contest with the violent erosion of identities is countered by the destruction of his own personhood in a kind of *sparagmos* in which his body is literally separated into components before being restored to the earth in a cemetery that is located significantly outside of the city, a detail that dovetails nicely with his status as *homo sacer* and Christ-figure. The fact that this *sparagmos* is carried out within the context of medical research and not a Dionysiac ritual, does not lessen its mythical or allegorical import, but rather serves as another opportunity for McCarthy to describe how patterns of human violence are consistent across human culture. The investigative nature of the dissection returns the distinction that is made between Ballard's violence and the violence that is made permissible within institutional forms: just as Ballard had previously scrutinised his first victim so that he might 'see how she was made' (46), so is he now the subject of an examination that is, at least potentially, a transgressive act. Guillemin notes that the procedures are

‘barbaric but are societally sanctioned’<sup>125</sup>, and Mark Winchell notes that here we see ‘the exploiter of corpses becoming an exploited corpse’.<sup>126</sup> We could, then, see Ballard’s incarceration and dissection as confirmation of his status as *homo sacer*, as described by Agamben, and observe how his biological life is ‘inclusively excluded’ to the last as his body becomes a site for the performance of sovereignty precisely in the disregard for the proscriptions it ostensibly enforces.

It is interesting that Ballard’s body is taken to Memphis—a plausible enough location, given the setting of the novel, yet one that inevitably conjures associations with the capital of ancient Egypt after which it was named, and the notable practices involving the treatment of the dead which are associated with that ancient culture. In particular, the likening of the medical students to ‘haruspices of old’ underlines novel’s interest in atavism within human culture and prompts us to consider where we might see the continuities of cultural practices that we might customarily assume to be banished to the past. Yet this authorial commentary on the nature of the post-mortem processes does not strike out only to condemn modern rationality or even to condemn it as no more than a recontextualized form of ancient ‘irrationality’. Although the account does not flinch from the gory, the tone here is yet another expansion on the novel’s motif of looking for meaning in the material stuff of creation. Ballard remains an object of the greatest interest, even in death, and that his material body might be understood as the site in which subtler aspects of his life coincide.

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<sup>125</sup> Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 44.

<sup>126</sup> Mark Roydon Winchell, “Inner Dark, or The Place of Cormac McCarthy,” *Southern Review* 26 (April, 1990), 293-309: 305.

It is for this reason that the connection drawn to haruspicy is apt and more than a mere invocation of a spurious proto-science. McCarthy is here framing the work of the medical practitioners within its ancient origins, and describing the continuity of their empirical curiosity with the ancients' belief that higher, subtle truths are pervade in the base fabric of creation; that oracles are written in flesh and stone, inscribing the eternal into these temporally bound bodies. Their practice is thus of a piece with the katabatic and theurgic motifs which run through the novel. And yet what they discover in the process of reading him remains unstated, lapsing into hyperbolic secrecy. Appropriately so since haruspicy takes for granted modes of interpretation and subjective intuition that are anathema to modern empiricism and positivistic science. We should consider these medical students examining Ballard as avatars of McCarthy's readers, who have likewise examined Ballard and tried to understand him through what of him has been left to us, that is, his story. It is not made clear if the students are aware of Ballard's identity and his specific history. We do not know if they are scrutinising his brain and his viscera for some clue that would let them understand his extreme actions, or if they are dealing with him as just another human being 'much like' any other. Here again the general and the particular seem to collapse in Ballard. Either way, those medical examiners are left, as we are, without final understanding of the subject. McCarthy's curating of the remnants of Ballard's life as at once unique and universal, and our scrutiny of them, does not end with the deduction of a rule or any insight that may be rendered as a proposition. How could it?



There is another aspect to the connection with ancient post-mortem practices that is pertinent here. The processes of separation, treatment and containment of Ballard's body correspond to the processes of mummification practised in Egypt and across the ancient world, and so knit into the theme of preservation against material (and we should assume, spiritual) change that has predominated the novel. Stepping back from the manifest materiality of the process, we might read the account of these processes figuratively as preparations for Ballard's immortalisation—figurative insofar as Ballard's final lurch toward the eternal is configured not as a bodily life but as his preservation in memory and narrative. Indeed, Ballard's partial re-admittance to the social order has already been confirmed in the fact that his life is being narrated at all. Just as his remains have been poured into the earth of Tennessee, so has his life been absorbed into the imagination and collective memory of the community, whose voices narrate the story. Yet, this latter fact is a subtle one, for it presents a manner of conservation that engages the temporal; the narrative conserves the successive moments in Ballard's life in their sequential and sense-making relation to past and future. It is in this way that the novel offers a sense of augmented life that is the true counter to Ballard's one-time desire for fixed identities and for rigid harmony in the world, and by which time is seen to be the image of eternity.

The narration of Lester's life ties his beginning to his end, addressing the troubling questions of his origins with the force of the eschatological. To be sure, it is in this sense that he is in the Johannine sense a child of God, constituted as such in the twin truths of his created nature and his subsequent 'adoption' and elevation to a status that transcends his frailty and

perfidiousness. Such a reading goes some way to explaining the oddly sympathetic presentation of Lester in the novel that seems to confer a kind of status appropriate to a folk hero. Yet, the effects of McCarthy studiously withheld judgement builds here to challenge the reader to make an interpretative choice. We may reasonably interpret the tale as an affirmation, on the part of McCarthy, of the essentially amoral nature of the world, as Guillemin perceives in his ascription of 'wilderness pastoralism' to the novel. Or, we might see this formal feature as presenting an affirmation of Ballard's continuing movement toward restoration that is concordant with his 'rebirth', and more generally of the teleological orientation that textures the world of the novel in anticipation of eschatological consummation.

The Epilogue-like final episode of the narrative inscribes in its own way the idea of recovery and of conclusive yet open horizon of futurity, as a final voice narrates how the hidden bodies and the full record of Ballard's crimes are uncovered:

In April of that same year a man named Arthur Ogle was ploughing an upland field when the plow was snatched from his hands. He looked up in time to see his span of mules disappear into the earth taking the plow with them...

The following day two neighbour boys descended into the sink on ropes. They never found the mules. What they did find was a chamber in which the bodies of a number of people were arranged on stone ledges in attitudes of repose.

[185]

The final coda of the novel certainly approximates or models the apocalyptic, with Ogle and his mules standing in as southern agrarian

substitutions for Saint John's Horsemen of the apocalypse (Revelation 6:1-8). The recovery of the bodies itself evokes a sense of new life, even as it is described ambiguously. Here the text again works cleverly in drawing parallels between Ballard and those in authority over him, as it describes Sheriff Fate and his assistant securing the corpses with ropes and raising them 'like puppeteers' (186), just as Lester had raised the corpse of his first 'lover' in his cabin. Then, when the bodies are covered for transportation, they are wrapped 'like enormous hams', such that we are confronted with the grim reality that this raising of the dead is not resurrection so much as setting this dead matter in motion.

Nevertheless, there is an element of authenticity to this apocalypse insofar as it describing a literal uncovering, in this case, presenting clear evidence of the crimes for which Ballard was accountable. And, in a grim way, the scene is doubly revelatory since the number of bodies recovered exceeds the number of murders of which the reader has hitherto been made aware. Like the conclusion of *Outer Dark*, the scene partially describes a return to past sins as the precondition for delivery into the future. Moreover, it is interesting that the text surreptitiously posits a degree of agency in the scene, as the plow is 'snatched' from Ogle's hands. In doing so, the opening of the sink hole attains a somewhat supernatural quality. The role of the Sheriff is interesting here also. Returning to Boethius' discussion of fate and providence, we might discern that the man named Fate is here transfigured as an agent of providence—as all literary detectives undoubtedly are, bringing the past to light and allowing eschatologically guaranteed truth reform a perfidious plot. A final detail of interest is that the discovery of the bodies coincides with

Ballard's death in April—the 'cruellest month', according to T.S. Eliot, and the time for new life to break out of the 'dead land' and for memories to surface.<sup>127</sup> By invoking Eliot's waste land here McCarthy describes his own harsh terrain as a place of incipient restoration.

Yet, of course, none of these perceived consolations is secure and we must conjecture from the great suspension of contraries. Ballard is to the end an amalgam of Melville's two great heroes: he is Ahab, the tragic rebel who undergoes an Orphic dissolution; and he is Ishmael, the rootless outsider who is miraculously conserved beyond his experience of the abyss—his preservation tendering the possibility that the world is not fatherless. However, we cannot neglect the significance of the resurrection symbolism which runs through the novel while we consider the mood in which the novel resolves. Some more words on the nature and implications of the redemption that the biblical and Christian imagination upholds and within which McCarthy's tale participates so insistently are instructive here:

Because our human history is marked by an ultimate severing of relations in death, and because death is something we can inflict (though not resist), it is not surprising that we nurture this delusion. It can be a source of relief: by the murder of another, by the obliteration of a race, by the consignment of someone to the isolation of prison or hospital, by the suffocation of my own memory, I can be free ('A little water clears us of this deed'). Or it can be a source of horror and despair: death ends all hope of reconciliation, it fixes in an everlasting rictus the hopeless grimace of failure in a

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<sup>127</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 53-76: 1-3.

relationship. We may stand appalled at our destructiveness, believing that we have indeed destroyed, annihilated, our possibilities.

The resurrection as symbol declares precisely our incapacity for apocalyptic destruction—and equally declares that the ‘divine prerogative’ of destruction is in any case a fantasy. God’s act is faithful to his character as creator, and he will destroy no part of this world: his apocalyptic act is one of restoration, the opening of the book which contains all history.<sup>128</sup>

Ballard’s erroneous attempt to ‘fix’ the world escalates to a clear assertion of the ‘ultimate severing of relations in death’ in his pseudo-community of ‘saints’. In it we also see a temporary solution to his pressingly temporal problems, just as we can feel the horror and revulsion at his failure to heal relationships, and to love the world and his neighbours. However, the resurrection imagery counters such a despairing view by tendering the view that such severing of relations may ultimately be impossible. The bats will wake from their winter roost, the dead will be raised. And even the strangest child will be guided and welcomed into the future.

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<sup>128</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 17.

### 3. Howling Voids and Silent Fires: Biblical Parody and the Agon of Exodus in *Blood Meridian*

#### *Introduction*

For many critics, the centre of McCarthy's *oeuvre* will always be considered to be his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985).<sup>129</sup> It was with this novel that McCarthy's reputation as an American author of rare merit became established, and with which his achievement is most strongly associated.<sup>130</sup> As the first of McCarthy's Southwestern novels, *Blood Meridian* is at once the culmination of the distinctive vision that marked his earlier novels and bold movement into new terrain, as he brings his gothic sensibilities to bear on his treatment of the stark desert landscape and fable-like economy of character and setting to the typologies of the frontier western. It is also the work in which the rigging of his inheritance from *Moby-Dick* is most apparent, though he succeeds in remaking it in a manner that declares the

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<sup>129</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (London: Picador, 2010). All quotations and references are to this edition. Page numbers will appear in the text in parentheses.

<sup>130</sup> Though famously not predisposed to hastily confer canonical status on literary works of the twentieth century, nevertheless praises this novel as a worthy addition to the 'books and school of the ages'. In *Blood Meridian*, and in the character of Judge Holden in particular, Bloom locates 'the bedrock of McCarthy's genius'. See Peter Josyph, "Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" in *Sacred Violence. Volume 2: McCarthy's Western Novels*, edited by Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 2002), 205-221: 219. Steven Frye likewise affirms its centrality to McCarthy's *oeuvre* and counts it among the finest novels written by a contemporary American author: *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 67-68.

strength of his revisionary imagination.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, I will argue that in this darkest of McCarthy's visions, it is the examination of the author's use of this inheritance that will enable us to interpret the work and to detect a note of light and of relief to counter its imposing negativity.

*Blood Meridian* maintains McCarthy's examination of nature and the material facts of existence, drawing together the gauzy weirdness of *Outer Dark* and the resistant solidities of *Child of God*, as well as the respective dreaminess and quasi-historical qualities of those works. Yet it possesses an aesthetic that is singularly its own, requiring careful examination in order to describe what is going on within the knotted narrative forms and mosaic of imagery. It is a challenging work and by far the most hellish of McCarthy's visions, in which McCarthy takes us to the summits of his talents as a stylist to describe the uttermost depths of the dilemma his fictions acknowledge. As I will argue, with *Blood Meridian* takes the reader to the fray of the conflict between the naturalistic and the theological, portraying a movement through the crucible of the natural world where we see a Dionysian chaos threatening to overwhelm the vestiges of a notion of creation or of teleology, which is afforded only negative confirmation. Moreover, it is a work which McCarthy's biblicalism achieves blasphemous extremes that would unnerve even Herman Melville, and yet the Biblical texts that are dragged toward this abyss maintain a persuasive authority that counters the endemic violence and darkness they are made to serve.

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<sup>131</sup> Here I invoke again Bloom's canonisation of *Blood Meridian* in terms of its transformation of Melville's achievement, described in *How to Read and Why*, 254-262. Steven Frye has also been dutiful in acknowledging *Blood Meridian*'s relationship to *Moby-Dick* in his wide ranging view of the novel in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 79-80.

The plot of the novel, so far as it can be determined, follows the life and exploits of a character who is known to us only as ‘the kid’. Like *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, the story begins with a portrayal of ruined domesticity. Here the kid is living in rural Tennessee with his father. The narrative recollects that the kid’s mother died in childbirth and that the event was accompanied by the spectacular Leonid meteor shower of 1833—a detail which signals the novel’s appeal to verifiable history. At fourteen-years old, the kid runs away and travels to Texas, where he engages in fights and public disorder, including a brawl at a revival meeting, initiated by a mysterious interloper—the gargantuan figure known as Judge Holden. From there, the kid is conscripted by a group of filibusters hell bent on maintaining the war with Mexico, though the campaign is soon thwarted when it is overwhelmed by Comanche warriors, in the first of the novel’s astonishing accounts of violence. Having resumed his wandering and brawling, the kid is imprisoned in Chihuahua. From the prison, he witnesses the arrival of the Glanton—the band of mercenaries hired to purge the state of the Native (mostly Apache) population. At the fore of the scalp-hunters is their leader, John Joel Glanton, a former Captain of the Union Army. So too is judge Holden, who catches the kid’s eye and returns his attention with an inscrutable smile. The kid gains his freedom by being recruited for Glanton’s expedition.

The bulk of the novel is then given over to describing the Glanton Gangs bloody progress across the border regions. Mission creep soon sets in as they set about slaying peaceful Indians, Mexicans, or anyone with black hair that may be collected as a gory ‘receipt’. The violence is punctuated by evocative descriptions of the landscape through which they move and by



lengthy orations by Judge Holden. Indeed, McCarthy's survey of the terrain is partnered to a steady examination of Holden himself, who is revealed to be an extraordinary figure in every respect. He is a seven foot tall hairless albino, who has possession of incredible physical strength and commands a knowledge that seems to encompass all aspects of law, science, history and philosophy. He is also a gifted artist and musician and a speaker of many languages. He is also a child molester and the perpetrator of some of the most appalling acts of violence described in the novel. Among his many sermons and discourses, he divulges his belief in the primacy of war. Indeed, he affirms that 'War is God' (263).

In the course of this infernal journey, the kid recedes from view somewhat, but begins to assert himself in agonistic opposition to the judge, seemingly reluctant to maintain Holden's commitment to total war and engaging in a few small, though not unambiguous, acts of mercy. In this opposition, the kid is bolstered by friendship with a man named Tobin— an 'expriest' apparently persuaded that an elemental evil is at the root of the judge's preternatural capabilities. Later, when the Gang has been routed following a disastrous campaign to seize control of a ferry on the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona, resulting in the death of most of its members, the opposition between the kid and the judge is played out in a tense exchange in the desert. The kid lets the judge walk away with his life, but the two are reunited again during his later wanderings, in a prison in San Diego, and in his dreams.

The narrative then speeds up and in the remaining pages in which the kid's continuing wandering across the Southwest is described in condensed

details. Years have passed and he is now referred to by the author as ‘the man’, and we are told that he travels with a Bible which he cannot read and is often mistaken for a preacher. In the year 1878 he arrives at Fort Griffin—a lawless and somewhat decrepit habitation sustained by the trade in products of the processed bones of bison. On a visit to rowdy saloon, the man again finds the judge. Speaking elliptically and quasi-mystically, Holden again accuses the man for his lack of commitment to the noble acts in which he was pledged. The man rebukes the judge and his final monologue with the words ‘You aint nothin’ (349). Later in the evening, he meets the judge for a final time in the jakes, where he is seized and crushed against ‘his immense and terrible flesh’ (351). At which point the account of the meeting cuts off. A subsequent visitor to the outhouse opens the door and is appalled by what he discovers there, exclaiming ‘Good God almighty’. The judge, meanwhile, is back in the throng of the saloon, dancing wildly and boasting that he will never die.

The novel is then concluded by a brief and enigmatic epilogue. The brief but syntactically dense passage describes the progress of a man as he moves across the dry plain and making holes in the ground with a metal tool. With each action he strikes ‘the fire out of the rock’, while moving steadily onward. Following at a distance are ‘wanderers’ who collect bones and move ‘haltingly’ in the dawn light. The text is richly allusive and it unclear precisely what the man with the tool and those who follow him are doing or meant to convey. The details are equally suggestive of the historical construction of fences across the southwest and of something more arcane. Either way, the passage suggests something ongoing as the novel concludes with an evocation of ongoing activity and motion as ‘they all move on again’ (355).

There can be no doubting that the task of reading—let alone *interpreting*—*Blood Meridian* is a formidable proposition. The range, scale and frequency of the violence it describes are enough to make even those with the strongest stomachs flinch. Yet for the reader committed to endure its horrors, there remains the difficulty of McCarthy's prose, which here approaches a maximum of allusive density and baroque stylisation, and a wilful frustration of narrative convention that works consistently to keep the characters and events described situated just beyond full comprehension. At once beguiling and bewildering, *Blood Meridian* presents an enormous challenge to critical interpreters too, who are challenged to describe its form and contents in terms that always require specific qualification. More than any other of McCarthy's works, *Blood Meridian* seems to be designed to prove the author's edict that 'books are made from other books'. It is indeed a Frankenstein's monster of a novel that incorporates diverse texts, ideas and images, both sacred and secular, and grafts them onto the generic rigging of the western to achieve the highest register of metaphysical import.<sup>132</sup>

Owing to its reliance on historical sources and referents, *Blood Meridian* has been approached, quite reasonably, as a work of historical fiction. John Joel Glanton is a figure who is well attested by historical

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<sup>132</sup> The earliest typescript drafts for the novel among the Cormac McCarthy Papers in the Wittliff Collections probably date to the mid-1970's, though the period of the most intensive work on the novel coincides with his receipt of the MacArthur Fellowship grant in 1981. My own primary research on the manuscripts has revealed that the novel's genesis is one of exponential growth from a rather slim, generically framed work, through to its final enormous density. There are many pages of notes to accompany the MSs, detailing McCarthy's historical research, as well as lists of books on the geography and natural history of the southwest, and a great deal of philosophy. The collection provides a fascinating insight into how what appears to have begun as a Southern writer's excursive 'hobby project' develops into a defining literary achievement.

record—a veteran of the Texas Ranger Division in the Mexican American War turned gold-hunter and mercenary before gaining more dubious notoriety as the leader of a posse of scalp-hunters contracted in Chihuahua. One of the principle sources for the Glanton gang’s campaign is Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*—a picaresque memoir in which the author recalls his time riding and warring with the Glanton.<sup>133</sup> In his memoir, Chamberlain recalls much of the gang’s campaign and reveals details of Glanton’s life and character as well as those of other members of the company, including the daunting figure referred to as judge Holden. *Blood Meridian* effectively fictionalises Chamberlain’s account, with the kid figuring as Chamberlain’s proxy in the tale, and drawing together other key incidents attested from other contemporary sources (the meteor shower of 1833 being one of many). Of all critics, John Sepich has been most attentive to the historical nature of *Blood Meridian*, venturing into the text with an historical perspective and sifting journalistic and literary sources for correlations and confirmations of its testimony, and has even corresponded with McCarthy himself to produce a stunning companion volume in his *Notes on Blood Meridian*.<sup>134</sup>

However, McCarthy’s handling of the source material with regard to the conventions of fiction is of great importance to the overall execution of the novel. If we are to describe *Blood Meridian* as a western at all, it is perhaps better served by the term ‘revisionist western’ or ‘anti-western’, since it subverts the many of the motifs and valuations. A number of critics have

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<sup>133</sup> Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*. Ed. William H. Goetzmann (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996).

<sup>134</sup> John Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, Revised and Expanded Edition, with a Foreword by Edwin T. Arnold (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

described how the novel turns a savagely critical eye upon the myths of the West and of this decisive era in the formation of the United States of America.<sup>135</sup> It is certainly true that McCarthy's narrative remorselessly cuts away any notion of valour that may have inhered to the romance of the American expansion and the destruction of the indigenous populations, producing something of a revisionary national myth. Yet, more important is the extent to which McCarthy's elaborations explode the ground of their sources, taking beyond the realm of 'fact' and into the realm of allegory and visionary fiction, and it is this breach into the symbolic and philosophical mode that is of paramount concern to the present study.

Assessment of the religious or philosophical orientation of *Blood Meridian* is generally in agreement in describing its imposing resistance to disclose positive valuations or meanings. Steven Shaviro has argued that the novel achieves the fulfilment of a fundamentally nihilistic ambition, in its collapse of distinctions, perspectives, moral index and signification.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, Dana Philips and Georg Guillemin have argued that the mythic elements of the novel function to affirm an identity between human history

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<sup>135</sup> See especially: Neil Campbell, "Beyond Reckoning?: Cormac McCarthy's Version of the West in *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West*." *Critique* 39. 1. (1997): 55-64; John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (London: Routledge, 2008); Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997); Jason P. Mitchell, "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and the (De)Mythologising of the American West", *Critique* 41.3 (2000): 290-304; and Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*", *American Literature* 68.2 (June 1996): 433-460. However, we should acknowledge that the work seems to speak equally to subsequent conflicts in the history of America, and it should be born in mind that the novel's prophetic qualities seem to incorporate and respond to increased public consciousness and reflection upon the horrors of the Vietnam War and equally to the atomically charged rhetoric of the Cold War

<sup>136</sup> Shaviro, "The Very Life of the Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*" in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Dianne C. Luce and Edwin T. Arnold (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 145-158.

and Darwinian natural history.<sup>137</sup> An alternative to this naturalistic or atheistic view is presented by those critics who have applied a Gnostic interpretation to the novel. This trend began with an article by Leo Daugherty that described *Blood Meridian* as essentially the transposition of a basic Gnostic myth, describing the judge as a demonic God or Archon of an oppressive cosmos and the kid as the pilgrim or adept in possession of a divine spark.<sup>138</sup>

Though each of these responses offer certain insights, neither are satisfactory: the former naturalistic or atheistic approach presumes too little metaphysical structure, whereas the Gnostic interpretation assumes too much. Neither a dismal monism nor a spiritualised dualism is commensurate with the sophistication with which the elements of the text are realised, and the author's careful refusal to fully occlude goodness and truth. I here maintain that it is by examining the complex of formal elements and polysemous images inherited from *Moby-Dick* that are here transfigured, that we can properly describe the effects McCarthy produces and the possible meanings he entertains.

On the basic level, we can see that McCarthy's cast of characters roughly map onto those of Melville's novel: the scalp-hunters reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity and the common humanity of the crew of the Pequod; the kid is our Ishmael—the neophyte he takes up with the group and

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<sup>137</sup> Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*"; Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 74-105.

<sup>138</sup> Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, 159-174. This position is maintained by Petra Mundik in two articles on the novel, "This Luminosity in Beings So Endarkened: Gnostic Soteriology in *Blood Meridian*" in *They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West: Casebook Studies in Cormac McCarthy*, Volume 2, edited by Rick Wallach, 196-223; and "'Striking the Fire Out of the Rock': Gnostic Mythology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" *South Central Review* 26, no. 3 (2009): 72-97. I have in my introduction already disputed this constructed notion of 'Gnosticism' and 'Gnostic' myth, while admitting that heterodox literature of antiquity undoubtable informs McCarthy's writing.

shares in their covenantal undertakings; and the dust and wastes of the southwestern borderlands serve as the watery abyss through which they progress. But there is some slippage that draws our attention to McCarthy's revisionary innovation. While the gang's leader, John Glanton, is possessed by a darkly romantic and brooding temperament, much like that of Ahab, the most significant of the Captain's traits are apportioned to judge Holden. Holden is the Promethean enemy of nature and yet he is also physically reminiscent of that emblem of Nature and inscrutable fate—the white whale himself. The significance of this collapsing together of these two antipathetic characters within the figure of the judge will itself become a channel for exploring the broader schema of the novel in which oppositions are exchanged and collapse, in the pursuit of a kind of unity that inheres in the very notion of the 'meridian'. History and myth, psychological states and sensory experience, the material and the eidetic dance together in the novel's descriptions and resolve in a common denominator of language. The judge himself is emblematic of this reduction. He eulogises war as the 'forcing of the unity of existence' (263)—a process he models not only in his obliteration of humans and animals, but also in his pulverisation and immolation of natural specimens and material artefacts. All is reduced to dust by this man who seems to be some manner of god or demon. Here we should note another sense in which McCarthy's novel mirrors *Moby-Dick* in its revision. Whereas Melville's ocean wilderness conjures a superabundance of meanings in its image support, *Blood Meridian*'s desert is ultimately one of reduction. It is within this system of reducing meaning that we can interpret McCarthy's mining of and appropriation of the Western canon not only testifies to his ambition (or, if one

prefers, his brazen self-regard), but rather a way of modelling in the very fabric the novel this centripetal force of convergence and reduction.

The novel maintains its own twisting and fracturing of biblical narratives in its examination of the nature of the world and the powers that rein over it, testing their resilience to the mythical vacuum. The tragic agon that emerges is between the kid and the judge, in which we sense the former pulling back from the covenant that binds him—via his employment in Glanton's gang—to the judge's project. In the maelstrom of totalisation, in which opposition seems untenable, the kid's formative development is marked less by positive statements and gestures than by ambiguous turnings and diversions from the project and silences. It is the tightest weaving of the patterns of tragedy and romance McCarthy has thus far achieved, and in it he finds an aesthetic that detects a moment of continuity between the mythical hero's withdrawal from the totalising world and the discovery of a mediated transcendence, and between the gesture of resistance to plastic flow of the mythical and the teleological movement toward an authentic, though barely formulated sense of and of future.

Perhaps more than any other of McCarthy's works, critical discussion of *Blood Meridian* must take recourse to the contrary and the provisional in its attempt to describe the diverse qualities of its aesthetic unity and the meanings it produces, and be accepting of the fact that any account will leave a considerable remainder of mystery. Like *Moby-Dick*, *Blood Meridian* is a novel of unruly heterogeneity that nevertheless attains its own integrity of vision.



*A world past all reckoning: An examination of the title*

To proceed to my argument, it is necessary to first describe the distinctive aesthetic of *Blood Meridian* in clear terms. As ever, a good point of entry into the broader broadest imaginative themes of the novel is McCarthy's chosen title. The title of this work in particular is rather splendid for the way it describes in a distilled yet allusively potent way both the literal contents of the novel and its metaphorical meanings. Blood is, of course, ubiquitous in the novel; it spills and flows in the frequent eruptions of violence. And if we understand the word 'meridian' in one of its most literal sense of the peak or highest register, then we can indeed consider the title as an apt description of the novel's ambitious attempt to reach the heights of gory carnage that may be acceptable in the mode of 'serious' literature. Indeed, the *Iliad* seems comparatively quaint once one has forded all the gored and hacked bodies that cover McCarthy's landscape. But there are many more meanings and associations of these words which contribute to the overall vision of the world which McCarthy devises for the novel—a world, which, as I have already begun to indicate, describes distinctive notions of ontology, vitality, myth and history. My purpose here is to describe more fully the peculiar terrain that McCarthy devises for the novel and which suffuses the broader scheme of the work.

The concept of the meridian is clearly one that attached itself to McCarthy's imagination in the time in which the novel developed and which came to define the vision of its waste land. Among the archived drafts of the novel is a note written by McCarthy that records that the Oxford English

Dictionary cites lines by Byron in its definition of ‘meridian.’<sup>139</sup> The citation is to the Romantic poet’s “Stanzas To the Po”—a somewhat low key effort among his otherwise well-studied works, though one that is, according to its own sense, apposite and which avails to McCarthy its own assembly of allusive meaning. The concluding stanzas of the poem present some potent imagery that will be enlarged and energised in McCarthy’s creative misreading:

A stranger loves the Lady of the land,  
Born far from the mountains, but his blood  
Is all meridian, as if never fanned  
By the black wind that chills the polar flood.

My blood is all meridian; were it not,  
I had not left my clime, nor should I be,  
In spite of tortures, ne’er to be forgot,  
A slave again of love,—at least of thee.

‘Tis vain to struggle—let me perish young—  
Live as I lived, and love as I have loved;  
To dust if I return, from dust I sprung,  
And then, at least, my heart can never be moved.<sup>140</sup>

The sphere of concern for Byron’s lines is centred on the erotic, though its mood extends in the channels of allusion that inhere to the assembled

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<sup>139</sup> The note appears on the cover of a folder headed “WESTERN – FINAL DRAFT”. McCarthy has written “OED Meridian – Byron quoted.”

<sup>140</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Frederick Page, new edition revised by John Jump, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 105-106.

terms. The idea of the meridian in its sense of the maximal is invoked here in part for its relation to the geographic language that runs throughout the poem, in which his cool, 'northern' blood, which is here figured as the dynamic seat of the vital passions, rises to meet the heat of his Venetian beloved. McCarthy has clearly been seized by the juxtaposition of 'blood' and 'meridian' and Byron's setting does find some connection to the geographic and sanguinary as it applies to his own setting. Two important sources for McCarthy spring up to illustrate this bond: Ralph A. Smith describes the region of the most intensive Comanche and Kiowa activities as a 'Bloody Corridor' between the emerging nations of Mexico and the United States;<sup>141</sup> and Thomas Mayne Reid evocatively situates the action of *The Scalp-Hunters* 'beyond many a far meridian'.<sup>142</sup> But in truth, McCarthy swerves away from this original source to wring out other latent metaphorical meanings and associations to find a verbal lens through which the astonishing heterogeneity can be viewed.

Above all, the sense of 'meridian' which seems to shape McCarthy's vision for the novel is that of the coincidence of opposites. It is the geographic sense as the meridian as the imagined circle or continuous line which passes through the poles of the earth's sphere. Though equally relevant is the sense which refers to the highest point of the sun's ascent which determines the noon of the day—the midpoint which marks the moment that is equally estranged from the beginning and the end of the day and in which is attended by optic effects upon the forms of the earth. The vision of this novel is

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<sup>141</sup> Ralph A. Smith, "The Comanche Invasion of Mexico in the Fall of 1845," *West Texas Historical Association Year Book 35* (1959), 3-28: 8, cited in Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, 129.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Mayne Reid, *The Scalp-Hunters; or, Romantic Adventures in Northern Mexico* (London: Henry Lea, 1852), 1. Quoted in Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, 129.

concerned throughout with the eradication of distinctions, the stark interchangeability of opposites and of a kind of atemporality in which the organising force of beginnings and endings seem is persistently occluded. It strives to represent a kind of wasteland that articulates its own apprehension of Hamlet's 'foul and pestilent congregation of vapours' and 'quintessence of dust'<sup>143</sup> in which moral and metaphysical neutrality is figured in the ubiquity of violence and physical mutability. Above all, the world of *Blood Meridian* approaches a sense of the primordial void—an uncreated void in which structurally construed categories are set into dizzying exchange and rendered neutral. It is a totalising—or, totalitarian—vision in which each part can be exchanged for another and each must submit to the whole. 'Blood' here then becomes significant on account of its fluid properties and a vital fluid. It is in this light that a mythic notion of shared blood—a vitalism without individuation—hangs over the text. Certainly, when we get to our discussion of Judge Holden, the ideas of the Dionysiac and of the inverted Christian rites of blood in the notion of the vampiric will be considered. For it is the judge who proves to be the foremost exponent of this vision—the figure who embodies and this centripetal force that forces heterogeneity into a horrifying unity. He is a trickster who, through his words, actions and appearance, collapses distinctions of form, order and value. It is in light of this that the kid comes to be defined, albeit ambiguously, as the novel's provisional hero. But above all, it is crucial to assert at the outset that the imaginative vision of the novel aims to establish the fundamentally irrational constitution of what it

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<sup>143</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.300. In *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, second edition, edited by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 694.

seeks to represent. A world bereft of constitutive structure and intelligibility in which the notion of mystery appeals not to surpluses of meaning but to devastating lack of order from which meaning may begin to be articulated.

We should note that the idea of the meridian figures prominently in the historical and geographical setting of the novel. The tale is situated in a moment of historical dynamism that is neither the ‘birth of the American nation’, nor its imagined demise, although it feels perpetually involved with either or both. The term also extends to describe the sense of liminality that is inherent in its geographical setting—that is to say, the gauzy sense of the border territories as the site in which different national, religious and cultural ‘spaces’ coincide. But building upon that we should see how this moves into another register when the ‘truth’ of the historical and externally verifiable setting is conjoined to McCarthy’s extravagant sense of the mythic and (as I have noted already) difficult synthesis of literary sources. For all its perceptible historicity and documentary detail of the geographical terrain it surveys, it also exhibits the surreal fluidity of a heat-induced mirage or a nightmare.<sup>144</sup> We have then already as a framework for the text itself, a formal conception of the meridian in which the authentic and the fanciful, the ‘true’ and the imagined are drawn together. I will consider how this is performed with regards to the characterisation when I turn my attention to the judge and the kid, but it is worth here considering more fully how this vision is worked out.

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<sup>144</sup> A strong clue to this quality of the text is given in cover image selected for the first hard-cover edition of the novel, which featured a detail of Salvador Dali’s *The Phantom Wagon*, and thus in the first instance situates this ‘historical’ novel within the mythical and surrealistic attitudes of modernism.

*A time before nomenclature was and each was all: The borderlands as proto-cosmic void.*

Like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, *Blood Meridian* explores uncharted territories and vast distances, observing the diminishing of minute phenomena in the obsessive recording of their details in pursuit of a deeply unsettling and disorientating vision. Both works attain a sense of the sublime in which the distinctions of formal and entelechal integrity that are inherent in the theological understanding of creation are withdrawn or cast into disorder to suggest a chaotic wilderness—both in its evocation of the landscape and its ostensibly shapeless narrative. What each author gives us is an approximation of the primordial chaos of unconstituted and undifferentiated substance that is invoked in both biblical and Platonic mythology. Yet, whereas Melville's adventure takes up the open ocean, along with its optical and psychological effects, as a figuration of the 'faces of the deep', McCarthy takes the meridian region of the southwestern desert as his setting for the *tohu wa bohu* (Genesis 1:2). In this wilderness, discreet forms, primary elements, tangible images and psychological impressions are deprived of any guarantee of integrity and cast into an unceasing processes of flux, dissolution and exchange. Indeed, it is determined as a void precisely in respect of the fact that the *names of things* are so unsettled as to be provisional, to say the very least.<sup>145</sup> In all this, McCarthy plays on a particular sense of the meridian as the diurnal point of suspension in the midst of the day; a point out of time in which the constituting forces of dawn and dusk are equally remote and in which a stark, unrefracted light confers a strange equality to all things in a totalising moment.

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<sup>145</sup> As I have already discussed in relation to *Outer Dark*, the biblical tradition takes naming to be an operative aspect of the acts of creation. In *Blood Meridian*, also, McCarthy undertakes further experiments with the subtraction and obfuscation of names.

Something of this chaotic character of the novel is evoked in one of the epigraphs selected by McCarthy. The quotation from Jakob Boehme's *Six Theosophic Points* reflects on the primordial ground of creation with the oxymoronic declaration that 'death and dying are the very life of the darkness'.<sup>146</sup> In a perceptive article which takes its direction from the quotation of Boehme, Steven Shaviro has succinctly described the sense of the chaotic or 'uncreated' that is intrinsic to the novel's vision:

*Blood Meridian* is a book then, not of heights and depths, nor of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance. Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition. For there can be no alienation where *there is no originary state* for us to be alienated from.<sup>147</sup>

Shaviro is quite correct in relating the conspicuous lack of fixed states or structures in the novel—topographical, meteorological, and social—to the lack of constituting narrative moments, although I will in the course of my analysis contest his assertion that this lack is absolute.

McCarthy's appeals to ontological insecurity are manifold and sustained. In Sepich's concordances, the list of instances in which voids, wastes and chaos are invoked in the novel covers four pages, and indeed, explicit and oblique wasteland motifs are numerous on every page of the

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<sup>146</sup> Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points, and Other Writings*, translated by John Rolleston Earle, (London: Constable, 1919).

<sup>147</sup> Steven Shaviro, "'The Very Life of the Darkness', 147. My emphasis.

novel, as are instances of subtraction, erasure and obliteration. The landscape of the novel is described as ‘a howling wilderness’ (42) and an ‘incoordinate waste’ (148) in which ‘all was darkness and without definition’ (100). Moreover, this sense of the ‘life’ of the darkness—its swirling, kinetic character is conveyed in the perpetual death, diminishing and disappearing of forms within this void, as in the following excerpt which describes the ‘progress’ of the gang as they ride on:

They diminished upon the plain to the west first the sound and then the shape of them dissolving in the heat rising off the sand until they were no more than a mote struggling in that hallucinatory void and then nothing at all. [113]

This brief passage conveys many of the key aspects of the chaotic vision which McCarthy strives to represent: the optical effects of the heat rising off the sand, which joins the empirical to the hallucinatory; the solid forms dissolving into air; and the detailed study of phenomena that diminish and become ‘nothing’. The most graphic accounts of violent combat are set alongside descriptions of battles observed from such remote distances that the collision of bodies and the extinguishing of life could be considered as dispassionately as a chemical reaction in a petri dish or the swinging arc of light emitted from stars long dead. As the narrative gaze pivots and focuses on the near and the distant, it is repeatedly affirmed that the macro- and the micro-cosmic are infinitely interchangeable in this void.



For all McCarthy's familiarity with the geography of the region and his extensive consultation of historical sources, the world he evokes seems to lack any certain spatial and temporal integrity. The author provides the names of locations and even a few details that situate certain moments in the narrative very precisely by calendar date, yet the distances covered by the gang and the time that elapses between episodes is almost impossible to determine. The reader must generally accept the dreamlike flow of time signalled by the connecting of successive moments and events by a contracted assertion of the gang's incessant movement. Paragraphs repeatedly conclude with variations of 'they rode on'. Indeed, in this respect we may see the McCarthy's stylistic grounding in syntactical parataxis extending out to exert a determining of the shape of his narrative, collapsing causal and temporal hierarchies.<sup>148</sup>

Much of McCarthy's prose in *Blood Meridian* recalls the evocations of the 'nameless' condition of the landscape explored in *Outer Dark*. As I described in my discussion of that novel, the theological idea of creation is understood as a process in which the elements and forms of the world come into being along with their unique names, and so are imbued with an ontological security or integrity which holds them above the monadic state of the abyss. The child in *Outer Dark* obviously lacked that security for the very fact that it lacked a name. For *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's poetic of 'anonymity' is broadened and amplified in accordance with the novel's epic scale. Most strikingly, we find that McCarthy's astonishing familiarity with the natural history of the region is embroiled in an aesthetic which persistently drives to defamiliarise and distort specific categories, forms and

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<sup>148</sup> I refer again here to Robert Alter's discussion of the place of biblical parataxis in McCarthy's prose style in *Pen of Iron*, 173.

characteristics. In this ‘uncreated’ world, the divisions and distinctions by which the components of the world are made manifest by the process of nominative determination described in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis are persistently undermined. Darkness and light are indistinct, and discrete entities are described in terms that refer to their structural opposites. In keeping with the hallucinogenic aura of the novel, we are frequently struck with evocations of the dry desert as a fluid entity. We see ‘scrub pines swimming in the haze’ (5) and ‘blue cordilleras stood footed... like reflections in a lake’ (46) and unspecified terrestrial flora are given as ‘reefs’ (51) and ‘coral shapes’ (215). Of course, such invocations call to mind the very real geological fact that much of the southwestern interior was, in the deep past, covered in water and, fittingly, the mineral ground is referred to as a ‘lake bed’ (109) or ‘dry lake shimmering like the mare imbrium’ (105), just as it reaffirms the connection with Melville’s watery wilderness. Two occasions in which McCarthy conjures up the fluid or oceanic qualities of his desert stand out for the way in which they hold together this net of allusions:

They passed through a highland meadow carpeted with wild-flowers, acres of golden groundsel and zinnia and deep purple gentian and wild vines of blue morninglory and a vast plain of varied small blooms reaching onward like a gingham print to the farthest serried rimlands blue with haze and the adamantine ranges rising out of nothing like the backs of seabeasts in a devonian dawn. [187]

And again, later:

Far to the south beyond the black volcanic hills lay a lone albino ridge, sand or gypsum, like the back of *some pale seabeast* surfaced among the dark archipelagos. [25 –my emphasis]

These descriptions are remarkable for the way they establish an exchange between the terrestrial and the oceanic, the animal and the mineral, and appeal to the sense of ‘deep time’ of evolutionary and geological history which is manifest in the landscape whilst also alluding to the biblical figure of Leviathan and the *tannin*—the mythological figures which are proper to the realm of the not-yet-created.<sup>149</sup> And, of course, the pallor of these creatures harks back to the distinctive colour (or, we should say, the ‘all colour no colour’) of Melville’s conception of Leviathan as Moby Dick, the white whale. It would serve us well here to consider again Melville’s meditation on ‘the whiteness of the whale’ insofar as it will assist us to describe a little more precisely the effects and implications of what I have been describing as McCarthy’s ‘chaotic’ vision.

It would be inaccurate to state too strongly that the ‘voiding’ of creation in McCarthy’s texts consists solely in a kind aesthetic of ontological erasure—though this is undoubtedly an important element of its vision. By way of clarification and qualification, it is important that the serious critic recognises—as every casual reader of the novel will do—that *Blood Meridian* is a work in which one is overwhelmed by the *presence* of phenomena. In its

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<sup>149</sup> Psalm 77 conserves the oldest strata of Canaanite mythology in the canonical scriptures in its invocation of Leviathan and Yamma as the primordial gods slain by Yahweh in his victorious assault on chaos. The priestly text of Genesis 1 tidies up this troublingly dualistic notion of creation when it recasts the *tannin* (‘seamonsters’) as creatures of God created on the fifth day (1:21). The Leviathan encountered in the Book of Job seems to shift curiously between these two versions. I shall consider the different guises of Leviathan in a little more detail when I come to my discussion of Judge Holden.

tendency toward a representation of the 'life of the darkness', the landscape of the novel reaches for a totalising vision in which discreet lifeforms and elements are deprived of their particularity because of their inclusion in this immanent totality. While thinking on the pale landscape of the novel under the light of the sun of its meridian, we should keep in mind that Ishmael/Melville's locates the horrifying force of whiteness in the paradoxical assertion of absence and total presence. White is the 'no-colour' and the 'all-colour'—the quality of light and surfaces when all wavelengths are visible.<sup>150</sup> I have noted already how this quality of whiteness was invoked in the account of the ostensibly manifest and various landscape of *Outer Dark*, and in this work too we see how this novel at once affirms the differentiation and individuation of phenomena precisely in its imaginative assault on creation through metaphor and metonymy.

One passage which has frequently been quoted by critics is worth reconsideration in this respect. Here McCarthy's omniscient narratorial voice occupies a high vantage point to provide us with an arresting description of the Glanton gang's incessant progress against the expansive backdrop of the world:

The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider 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

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<sup>150</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 162-163.

feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. [261]

Here we have explicit evocations of the void—the ‘greater void’ of space we presume, in which we might posit the ‘lesser void’ that is the ‘alien ground’ of the earth. But most crucial here is the ‘neuter austerity of that terrain’—the coincidence of opposing principles equated with deprivation, and the view from which ‘all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality’. Discrete forms are vaguely perceptible, but there is no ordering principle other than that produced as an effect of some ocular bias.

Steven Shaviro responds to this passage with the observation that ‘the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified... We are given instead a kind of vision before the human’.<sup>151</sup> Though we might also claim that the text presses beyond the idea of vision itself to approximate an immediate impression of the sheer physicality of nature, which may confirm Vereen Bell’s description of McCarthy’s metaphysic as ‘Heraclitus without logos’.<sup>152</sup>

Georg Guillemin has taken the phrase ‘optical democracy’ as a rubric to explore a distinctive phase in the development of McCarthy’s environmental vision, finding connections between the novel and the ideas of deep ecology.<sup>153</sup> Deep ecology is defined for the most part by its refusal not only of anthropocentric ecologies, but also by its assertion of the supreme

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<sup>151</sup> Shaviro, “The Very Life of the Darkness”, 153.

<sup>152</sup> Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 31.

<sup>153</sup> Georg Guillemin, *Cormac McCarthy’s Pastoral Vision*, 73-101.

importance of ecological systems over distinct species. Certainly, *Blood Meridian*'s imagery overlaps significantly with the tenets of deep ecology, and yet in this suggestion of 'unguessed kinships' I sense that McCarthy is aware that he is presenting, albeit euphemistically, something quite distressing. Critics of deep ecology point to this totalising tendency of its conception, and the neglect of the differentiation and ordering of beings and the affirmation of a protean and inherently general conception of biological life. For Michael Robert Negus and Christopher Southgate, deep ecology frequently entails the deification of wilderness, and the extremities of imaginative conceit risks slipping into a credo of 'environmental-fascism'.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, we must concede that McCarthy's 'eco-pastoral' imagination as it manifests here, is an essentially reductive model which insists on the consolidation of the forms of life in a totality of sheer physicality, obfuscating difference, and refuting the attribution of a surplus of meaning to each as a participant in an ontological unity. Totality is the key word here—the enforcing of a whole that is to the detriment of its parts and the consolidation of identity in a unity in which being is made synonymous with power.

With these thoughts we arrive at another important corollary of *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetic. Though the effects of McCarthy's strenuous displacement and misidentification through metaphor amount to a bewildering array of figures and impressions, the novel as such serves to affirm a holistic unity of which all these phenomena are partial impressions. Far from describing a true void, the primary, chaotic strata of existence the novel

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<sup>154</sup> Michael Robert Negus and Christopher Southgate have summarised theological objections to deep ecology in "Some sources for thinking on God and the world from outside the Christian tradition," *God, Humanity and the Cosmos*, edited by Christopher Southgate et. al., second edition, (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 242-259; 254-257.

evokes frequently seems to have a kind of density to it. And here again the polysemous figure of Leviathan is an important referent. In the Book of Job, Leviathan is introduced at the crescendo of the divine speech on creation (Job 41). Here the great monster seems to be not so much a creature among many, but a figuration of the great spectacle of creation itself and—as Melville construes it—of the tremendous vitality that ‘sinews it’. The Leviathan of the Job poet is indeed a ‘chaotic’ vision: a creature who cannot truly be seen or experienced except fleeting glimpses of his constituent parts, which themselves are conveyed through similes which are consistently of a mineral rather than animal character. The ‘eco-pastoral vision’ of *Blood Meridian* certainly has much of the Leviathanic about it—describing a cosmic spectacle of power which commands awe and submission rather than interpretability and neighbourly relations.

This expansive and awesome vision of Leviathanic ‘Nature’ obviously has consequences for the notion of the human that can abide in such a vision. Against such vast expanses, the human is diminished in significance, but more importantly, the terms by which we might describe a human person are reduced. As I have already noted, the novel sets the material and the immaterial in exchange, such that the human actors portrayed can be described as ‘mud effigies’ (9) or, as with notable frequency, as ‘shades’. Crucially, these evocations play with and distort the biblical terms in which human life is defined. The idea of Adam formed from soil and the divine breath (Genesis 2)—a dynamic interaction which describes an irreducibility and profound core of potentiality in human life, is reduced to this kind of quantum-dualism—a mode of being characterised by indeterminacy but lacking possibility. We may

even see an extension of this disruption of the dual-natured Adam being played out in the novel's attention to the act of scalping. The practice of scalping had been a feature of a number of Native American cultures, and its meaning and significance has also been explained in various ways.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, a common element of many of accounts and justifications of scalping concerns precisely the subtle composure of human life between the material and spiritual worlds.

Writing in 1833, Robert Irving Dodge records that the removal of the scalp is one of the two ways in which the Indian soul could be prevented from entering 'its paradise':

Scalping is annihilation; the soul ceases to exist. This accounts for ... the care they take to avoid being themselves scalped.

Let the scalp be torn off, and the body becomes mere carrion, not even worthy of burial.<sup>156</sup>

The act of scalping, then, can be understood as an act in which the notion of life as poised between inert matter and a spiritual reality collapses; neither the souls or the body are returned their respective 'sources', but rather remain together in kind of void. The 'annihilation' which Dodge invokes here accords with the overwhelming sense of *nihilo* that *Blood Meridian* pursues, and, indeed, this notion of 'carrion' resounds with the general aura of

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<sup>155</sup> Again, John Sepich provides a range of sources used by McCarthy, some contemporaneous the setting, other later studies. Unsurprisingly, the studies themselves are wildly divergent, not only in terms of the particular cultures and practices they describe, but also in the degrees of accuracy and sympathy with which they set out their interpretations. Sepich, *Notes*, 5-8.

<sup>156</sup> Richard Irving Dodge, *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years' Personal Experience* (Hartford, CT: Worthington, 1883), 101-103. Quoted in Sepich, *Notes*, 6.



disintegration, dissipation and transformation that defines the ‘life of the darkness’ which the novel describes.

Continuing to explore beyond the biblical, we might also consider how classical sources are engaged in *Blood Meridian*’s aesthetic. Its relentless monism reaches back to the pre-Socratic and Heraclitus’ influence is most perceptible. The Heraclitean assertion of fire as the primary element is of course sensed in the novel’s prioritisation of fires in its narration of successive episodes: those around which the gang members gather at night; and those which consume so many of the habitations which they pass through. Indeed, one authorial intrusion seems to affirm the metaphysical ground for this perennial feature: ‘each fire is all fires, and the first fire and the last fire ever to be’ (210). But more important perhaps is Heraclitus’ assertion of the fundamental instability of phenomena, and the perpetual processes of exchange affirmed in the mantra-like fragment: ‘All things are an exchange for fire, and for fire all things, like goods for gold and gold for goods’<sup>157</sup>. Judge Holden quotes Heraclitus in his notorious ‘War is God’ speech,<sup>158</sup> and the exhaustion of the novel’s description of the landscape and of action in a gauzy impression of flickering images certainly hints at a peculiar quintessence in which all objects and actions have their ground. Thus we can begin to grasp how McCarthy devises an aesthetic that is *suggestive* of a lack of metaphysic, evoking a naturalism defined as an immanent economy of exchange and dissolution.

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<sup>157</sup> Fragment 22 in *Fragments*, translated by Brooks Haxton, with a foreword by James Hillman (London: Penguin, 2003), 15.

<sup>158</sup> There is clear evidence that McCarthy’s engagement with Heraclitus’s philosophy throughout the novel is deliberate and well-informed. Among the drafts and notes for the novel held in the Wittliff collections is a handwritten page upon which McCarthy has copied out Fragment 53: ‘War is the father of all and the king of all...’ To which he has added the mnemonic note: ‘Have the judge quote this without citation’.

*The blood is the life (of the darkness): Dionysiac vitalism in the void*

Perhaps the most significant aspects of *Blood Meridian*'s engagements with the deepest strata of the Greek imagination are to be found in the novel's appeals to a Dionysiac or Orphic monism. There is something of the eternally recurring division of the primordial deity—who is also the single substance of the world—in *Blood Meridian*'s mythos. Certainly, the 'uncreated' or, to use Rosenzweig's term, the 'unconstituted' world which possess no nominatively determined or sanctioned ground for difference, describes an essentially violent ontology, which we can certainly see affirmed in the novel's exercise of a centripetal force for unity through dissolution.<sup>159</sup> Dionysus is himself a monstrous deity who is identified with the totality of nature and in whom oppositions and distinctions coincide, and it is by enquiring into the god's violent mythos that we can arrive at apprehension of the possible meaning of 'blood' in McCarthy's title and so in the novel as a whole.

In the Dionysiac ritual, blood signifies the fluid vitality of the deity possessed in common by all individuated forms, and the letting of blood affirms the dissolution of the individuated life form in the common substance of life. The fluidity of the novel's aesthetic—as alluded in the subtitle, '*The Evening Redness in the West*'—takes up this symbolic understanding of blood. But more than this, it emphasises the common dimension of this mythical vitalism as a sense of *life* that privileges the all or the totality in the destruction of the particular forms of life in its aesthetic of exchange and dissolution of

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<sup>159</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 49-70. Rosenzweig explicitly sets out his own system as a response to Nietzsche's Dionysiac aesthetics and ethics, working (often covertly) from biblical sources. See: Agata Bielik-Robson, "Oedipus Meets Job. On Neighbourly Relations between Greeks and Jews in Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*", in *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014), 54-70.

difference. Key to the Dionysiac vision is the idea of substitution, in which a victim can be offered as the part stands in for the whole. Of course, we could not attempt to interpret the climactic ending of the novel without reference to the Dionysian fabric of Greek tragedy and the rituals from which its dramas are ostensibly derived. And although the novel avails itself of a good deal of biblical and explicitly Christian imagery, we can suppose that its appeal to the sacred dimension of blood is for the most part derived from the Dionysiac ritual and its proposed aesthetic revival by Nietzsche, as well as the anti-Christian inventions of preceding literary works.

Regarding the latter, we should consider again here the cues from Bram Stoker's inversion of the Christian rite in *Dracula* that I used to interpret the blood ritual performed in *Outer Dark*. Stoker's vampires took up the biblical assertion that 'the blood is the life' (Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:23), but subverted its meaning in a blood-fixated existence that was characteristically languid and indistinct. Life in *Blood Meridian* might similarly be construed as a vampiric kind that is proper only to the merely 'undead'. It presents life as an animus without beginning or end, in which vitality and death are interchangeable, in which identities become indistinct, featureless and without centrifugal direction. It is, indeed, 'the life of the darkness'. Such a setting would provide the metaphysical conditions for the kid, in his solitude, to arise as a tragic hero according to the Nietzsche's model.<sup>160</sup>

Such is the force of McCarthy's imaginative conception of this shapeless, nameless void of a world that it would be tempting to conclude that

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<sup>160</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. Edited by Michael Tanner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

this is McCarthy's own vision. However, as we will see, this is problematised by his ascription of such a view to the imposing and ignoble figure of the judge, and the use of the kid as a weak though not entirely insignificant foil. Even as McCarthy's talent and flare as a stylist presents a degree of sympathy for his dire vision, it is one which he will temper with the novel's tentatively ventured *narrative* character and the way in which he carefully describes silences, recesses and lacunae that resist assumption into this totalising force. Indeed, as we shall see, it seems above all the 'weakness' of the good which will confirm its positive distinction from power and force.

***Judge Holden: A grand ungodly god-like man***

If, as Simone Weil argues, we should consider the central character of the *Iliad* as 'force', we might perhaps concede the lead role in McCarthy's epic to be the aesthetic tendency to annihilation or anonymity, were it not for the fact that *Blood Meridian* presents us with a central figure who embodies this abstract conceit. From our first encounter with the judge it is clear that he is an engrossing yet inscrutable figure—a supreme trickster. He arrives at the revival meeting being held by Reverend Green and interrupts proceedings by declaring that the preacher is a charlatan, alleging that he is 'altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few pages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his sermons some faint flavour of the piety he despises', and goes on to declare that Green is wanted by the law on charges that include the sexual assault of a child (7). Havoc ensues as the crowd erupts in violence. Meanwhile, the judge

steals way to a saloon, where he confesses that he has, in truth, ‘never laid eyes on him [Green] before. Never even heard of him’ (9). The way Holden is spirited into the novel here recalls the way in which the devil drops into Mikhael Bulgakov’s Moscow in *The Master and Margarita* (1967), and the grave air of puckishness about him aligns him with Euripides’ Dionysus, who mounts the stage to announce himself as a director of mischief .

Within the swirling phantasmagoria of *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden stands out as the figure who connects the overwhelming mysteries of the world and in whom those mysteries grow more bizarre and horrifying. His bizarre appearance and capabilities, and his beguiling and unnerving orations establish him not only as the novel’s central personality, but as something like the personification or the figurehead of the great totalising force of the novel’s imagined world. In what is probably his most memorable speech, this immense and commanding figure offers a eulogy to war which concludes with these words:

War is the ultimate game because war is at last the forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. [263]

Understanding Holden’s nature and motivation and their relationship to the visionary fabric of the novel will be key to describing the tragic agon between him and the kid.

To begin with, we should observe that judge Holden is derived from Chamberlain’s memoir—which is, in fact, the sole piece of documentary evidence for the historical figure bearing this name. The information which Chamberlain gives is worth reproducing for it is strikingly concordant with the

character and appearance of the judge of *Blood Meridian*, whilst giving a clear sense of how McCarthy's character is designed in a way that is at once faithful to its source and audaciously inventive:

The second in command, now left in charge of the camp, was a man of gigantic size called "Judge" Holden of Texas. Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung; he stood six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow coloured face destitute of hair and all expression. His desire was blood and women, and terrible stories were circulated in camp of horrid crimes committed by him when bearing another name, in the Cherokee nation and Texas; and before we left Frontreras a little girl of ten years was found in the chaparral, foully violated and murdered. The mark of a huge hand on her little throat pointed him out as the ravisher as no other man had such a hand, but though all suspected, no one charged him with the crime.<sup>161</sup>

Much of the judge's appearance and his general air of the diabolical are conveyed here. His 'gigantic' size is mentioned and his 'large fleshy frame'. The details of his complexion and beardlessness ('a face destitute of hair') are elaborated in McCarthy's imagination to recreate the judge as an entirely hairless albino,<sup>162</sup> though the assertion of his supreme villainy and his

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<sup>161</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 271-272.

<sup>162</sup> Chamberlain's watercolour illustration "Lecture on Geology, by Judge Holden" depicts Holden with long head hair and dark eyebrows, but no moustache or beard (contrary to the ubiquitous fashion of the era). Although he is shown as being of remarkably pale complexion in comparison to the other men pictured. See Goetzmann's edition of *My Confession*, 312.

mysterious identity. The incident of the murdered young girl will also find its way into McCarthy's narrative just as rumours of horrid crimes attend him in the novel.<sup>163</sup> Chamberlain also describes the judge's fondness and aptitude for music and dancing as well as his preternatural capabilities in matters of combat, science and languages. His description continues:

Holden was by far the best educated man in northern Mexico; he conversed with all in their own language, spoke in several Indian lingos, at a fandango would take the Harp or Guitar from the hands of musicians and charm all with his wonderful performance, and out-waltz any poblana of the ball. He was "plum centre" with rifle or revolver, a daring horseman, acquainted with the nature of all strange plants and their botanical names, great in Geology and Mineralogy, in short another Admiral Crichton, and with all an arrant coward. Not but that he possessed enough courage to fight Indians and Mexicans or anyone where he had the advantage in strength skill and weapons, but where the combat would be equal, he would avoid it if possible. I hated him at first sight, and he knew it, yet nothing could be more gentle and kind than his deportment towards me; he would often seek conversation with me and speak of Massachusetts and to my astonishment I found he knew more about Boston than I did.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> McCarthy indulges in expounding the judge's reputation for diabolic crimes not only by allowing characters to speak of his rumoured deeds but also through offering us evidence of crimes that we are tempted to attribute to the judge. Such is the case with the tree hung with the bodies of dead babies which the kid and Toadvine encounter when they set out together after the decimation of Captain White's army by the Comanche warriors. This supremely horrible image lingers in the mind and as we are drawn closer into his orbit, we are tempted to see it as the calling card of the judge.

<sup>164</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 272.

The charge of cowardice is interesting here as it does not immediately strike us as a trait of *Blood Meridian*'s terrible villain. The Holden of McCarthy's fiction is clearly a formidable soldier, capable of terrorising fierce opponents, although we might, with this knowledge, come to detect a degree of cowardice in those moments in which he opts to avoid dispute and conflict by way of his wit or charm as indicative of a trace of cowardice in his character. Certainly, we should regard that a significant element of the outrageousness of his delectation for the molestation and murder of children is the manner in which these crimes are dreadful performances of imbalances of status and power. Yet McCarthy's judge seems much more than just a curious anomaly among a band of contracted criminals. McCarthy pursues the coincidence of degenerate criminality, lethal capability, cultural literacy and intellectual acumen to describe a supremely commanding villain that resounds with allegorical import. The question reported by Chamberlain concerning exactly 'who or what he was' thus becomes the opening for McCarthy to move this character into the sphere of the imaginary and the mythical. The question as to who or what the judge is becomes a central point of intrigue both in the drama of the novel and for its critical exegetes.

True to McCarthy's self-conscious presentation of the novel as an essentially derivative one, we can discern how McCarthy draws together elements of other literary characters alongside his historical data to create a villain who resonates with allegorical import. He displays the proclivities for subtle deceit of Iago, with the vertiginous sense of self-assurance of Captain Ahab. Like the latter, he is 'a grand ungodly god-like man',<sup>165</sup> and shares a

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<sup>165</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 68.



similar delight and, it must be admitted, a gift for spectacularly blasphemous orations—a tendency which marks him equally as a descendant of Shrike, the unforgettable adversary of the eponymous anti-hero in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonely-hearts* (1933). The judge's habituation to the violence of America's wild places—and indeed, to the 'barbarous terrain' of men's souls, equally marks him out as a manifestation of Joseph Conrad's Mr Kurtz (*Heart of Darkness*, 1899)—or indeed, of Captain Kurtz, portrayed memorably by a hefty, shaven-headed Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). And yet, as 'demonic' as those characters are, the judge slips into a decidedly more mythical register—straddling the natural and the supernatural. Like Melville's *Moby Dick*, this white giant stands as a great challenge to interpretation; either as agent or principle of some inscrutable reality in which the natural and supernatural coincide. Is he a man? A god? A devil? Is he all of these things, or something else?

The novel provides repeated suggestions that the judge is something more than a mortal man, and his formidable character tempts us to consider that he may wield some subtle power over the world, either as its creator or captor. Indeed, we are encouraged to imagine fearfully what manner of high office he may occupy from the evidence of his assumed title and his name. His origins, like his nature, are obscure and it is even suggested that he is ubiquitous, as when Tobin tells the kid that each of the gang members claims to have encountered the judge earlier in their lives and that he has even been reported to have been seen in different places simultaneously. For his part, the judge seems to privately relish such speculations, even as he moves among

this mortal company greeting them face to face, and, his final scene will have him dancing boasting of his immortality.

Although the text provides no definitive statement about his status, it supplies a great array of similes and allusions to a range of liminal or supernatural beings, both malign and benign. He is like ‘a great ponderous djinn’ (96), or ‘a great pale deity’ (92), or a ‘sooty souled rascal (74). In the whole package of the judge’s extraordinary appearance, words and actions we can discern elements of the gods, monsters and god-men of the Old and New Testament, Dionysiac myth and even Indian religious tradition. This range of allusions which inhere to the judge is yet another instance in which McCarthy is drawing together diverse entities, ideas and traditions and dissolving them in a unity that does not purport to have any discernible rationale. Rather, what we have in the judge is a powerful allegorical figure through which to read the novel’s broader aesthetic conceit and a parodic image of the divine, and for that matter, of the paradigmatic human creature, which satirises the weaknesses of the religious imagination and pushes the reader to examine more subtle possibilities.

### ***The spirit of the cards: The judge and the Tarot***

A sound route into beginning to think about the judge, and also to think *with* the judge is to consider the symbolism of the Tarot and of Holden’s relationship with what we might describe as its ‘primary’ character—the Fool. As I have already recounted, Tarot cards and references to their imagery appear throughout the novel, most obviously when the deck is produced by the

circus performers in chapter VI and several members of the gang draw cards. This manner of drawing single-cards here does not resemble any of the customary methods of divining with the cards, but rather serves to attribute to establish correspondences between McCarthy's characters and the figures of the Major Arcana, and so to direct the reader to the symbolic nature of this 'historical' romance. The judge himself does not draw a card, yet we can detect a clear association between him and the character of the Fool. At the most obvious level, he is an amoral trickster figure who, in the sequence of the Major arcana, is the most slippery in what he signifies, vacillating between the highest and lowest, representing both ignorance and 'holy madness' which disturbs the prevailing order. Bill Butler remarks that:

In a sense it is the spirit of The Fool which animates the entire Tarot deck. In the earliest deck known he is shown towering over midget human figures, a Giant of Folly and of super-rational sanity. It is with his madness, that of the Fool of God, that the cards are illuminated; for in any reading of the Tarot it is the Fool who asks and the Fool who answers every question.<sup>166</sup>

There is much in this description which corresponds to the presentation of the judge. He literally towers above other humans, both in physical stature and intellect. And indeed, it is he who 'animates' the Tarot cards for the members of the gang as he acts as interpreter for the Mexican showman and his wife. Sally Nichols adds that the Fool is:

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<sup>166</sup> Bill Butler, *Dictionary of the Tarot* (New York: Schocken, 1975), 110.

...a wanderer, energetic, ubiquitous, and immortal. He is the most powerful of all the Tarot Trumps. Since he has no fixed number he is free to travel at will, often upsetting the established order with his pranks.<sup>167</sup>

Again, this resonates with the judge's tremendous yet mysterious physicality and vitality, as do her remarks that the Fool is 'a creature of perpetual motion' who 'dances through the cards each day, connecting the end with the beginning—endlessly'.<sup>168</sup> Nichol's phrasing here describes something of the weird sense of the meridian which is examined in the novel's imagined setting, and also illuminates the allegorical importance of the great man's curiously infant-like appearance.

But most important of all with regard to the judge, is this characterisation of the Fool as the personification of a hermeneutic power which is itself a deeper riddle. The judge himself eludes final description—he is, indeed, as forceful and as slippery as the Fool—yet we may describe aspects or guises that he performs as they correspond to and animate the visionary terrain of the novel. McCarthy imports a good deal of the Fool into his characterisation of the judge, such that he becomes more than just a grand villain or an antagonist, but also a figure for a strategy of what we might call a visionary critique of religious and philosophical pieties, much as Melville's *Moby-Dick*—that 'wicked book'<sup>169</sup>—had performed in the preceding century.

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<sup>167</sup> Sallie Nichols, *Jung and the Tarot: An Archetypal Journey* (New York: Weiser, 1980), 23.

<sup>168</sup> Nichols, *Jung and the Tarot*, 27.

<sup>169</sup> Melville, "Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne", quote in Levin, *Powers of Blackness*, 224.

*That sooty-souled rascal: The judge as infernal parody of God*

The judge's curious involvement with biblical and Christian mythos is perhaps the most striking aspect of his grand characterisation, and is of a piece with the biblical foundations of the anti-Edenic, uncreated wilderness through which he moves. In a somewhat naive and scattershot assessment of *Blood Meridian's* relationship to biblical literature, Stephen Pastore has dubbed Holden as a "Yahweh on horseback",<sup>170</sup> and, as I have already noted, other critics have seen fit to align him with the apocryphal variations of the Genesis narratives in which we find of the God of the Hebrew scriptures translated into the tyrannical demiurge of Gnostic mythology. Most of these readings are swayed by Holden's overwhelming authority as he gallops and dances about the earth delivering long orations and displaying his tremendous strength and apparently limitless knowledge. The narrator even tenders the possibility that the judge be identified with a creator God when it is remarked that 'he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation' (148).

It is this *as if* which has proved so seductive, though we ought not to let it pass without examination. To be sure, the received literature of Gnosticism contributes a great deal to McCarthy's texts, though attempts to describe a structuring Gnostic mythos in this or any of his novels are ultimately unsatisfactory and cannot really say anything of any consequence about the menace the judge represents. Certainly, the judge will sustain some

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<sup>170</sup> Stephen Pastore, "Judge Holden: Yahweh On Horseback" in *Cormac McCarthy Journal. They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West (Casebook Series Volume 2)*: 108-111.

consideration as a demiurgic figure, although this rather neglects the full force and range of his provocations. Rather, the terror of the judge is best comprehended when we regard him as a *parody* of the biblical God which stands in a tradition which extends from scripture through scholastic theology and literary history. It is a tradition which affirms that that evil can only appear as an imitation of the good. But more than this, his characterisation and orations serve to challenge what we may describe as the weak or defensive ways in which the God testified to in the Book of Genesis devolves into a caricature of piety. By holding up this dark mirror image of the divine in the terrible, coercive power of the judge, McCarthy's vision negatively describes its view of the divine beyond such expressions of force.

There are a great many episodes in the novel in which McCarthy suggests correspondences between Yahweh and the judge. Fittingly, the first such instance is an allusion to the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7. In the saloon after the mobbing of Reverend Green, the men assembled about him are likened to 'mud effigies' (9), suggesting that he has made them in some way. Later, the words 'terrible covenant' are used to describe the peculiar allegiance between the judge and Glanton (133), and indeed, there does seem to be something curious about the conditions for which the judge does or does not condescend to sit by the fire or take a meal in the company of the gang which is reminiscent of Yahweh's dealings with the Hebrew Patriarchs. Later, when the gang has been routed, the judge becomes a voice in the desert, searching out the kid like Yahweh looking for the 'lost' Adam in Eden (Genesis 3:3), and calling out offers of friendship, just as he reprises the subtle apparition to Moses as he passes past the opening of the cave in which the kid

is concealed (Exodus 33:18-22). We may consider these imitations as parodies of divine activity, in line with the Bible's own presentation of demonic imitations of divine activity (for example, we should note how the temptation of Jesus in the desert stages a satanic corruption of the promises made by Yahweh to the Patriarchs). Such a view is valid, and yet the emphasis which McCarthy gives his character moves more decisively in the direction of challenging how the preeminent literary-religious figure of the Yahwist's God devolves into a demonic figure through our mishandling of his ostensibly anthropic qualities.

Harold Bloom ascribes what is so distinctive about the creator God of the Torah/Pentateuch to what he terms 'the irony of the Hebraic sublime, in which absolutely incommensurate realities collide and cannot be resolved'.<sup>171</sup> The character of the judge is not in possession of such an irony and despite the awe and speculation that his tricksterish persona attracts, he remains human, *all too human*. His physical and rhetorical strength is always sufficient to a task but never excessive, and although he provokes speculation of his mysterious capabilities, the judge's supposedly supernatural feats remain unconfirmed in the realm of rumour or else—in true gothic fashion—admit the possibility of rational explanation. Such is the case when Holden performs a coin trick beside a campfire:

The judge swung his hand and the coin winked  
overhead in the firelight. It must have been fastened to some  
subtle lead, horsehair perhaps, for it circled the fire and  
returned to the judge and he caught it in his hand and smiled.

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<sup>171</sup> Harold Bloom, *Ruin the sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

The arc of circling bodies is determined by the length of their tether, said the judge. Moons, coins, men. His hands moved as if he were pulling something from one fist in a series of elongations. Watch the coin Davy, he said. [259]<sup>172</sup>

The episode is instructive as the provisional explanation supplied by the narrative voice finds some confirmation in the description of the judge's actions, even as this most reductive of physical explanations is presented so as to open up to figurative significance ('Moons, coins, men').

We must consider, then, how the extraordinariness of the judge's appearance, abilities and intellect do not disturb the grounding fact of his humanness—even when he is rehearsing those episodes in which Yahweh himself seems rather human. Harold Bloom offers further instructive counsel on this particular issue of anthropomorphism for our reading of Yahweh:

When we attempt to call J's stories of Yahweh anthropomorphic, we truly are defending ourselves against J, by over-literalizing the figurative being he called Yahweh. When that over-literalization reaches its final point, then you end up with what Blake satirized as our vision of God as Urizen or Nobodaddy, a cloudy old man hovering above the sky.<sup>173</sup>

Bloom's 'over-literalization' describes very well how the judge is conceived in relation to Yahweh, and draws out for us his connection with the dismal deities of Blake's visionary mythology. His relationship to Urizen is

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<sup>172</sup> Here McCarthy plants another hint of the judge's association with the Tarot. Coins are a suit of the Minor Arcana.

<sup>173</sup> Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, 7.



even hinted at in his great draughtsmanship and measurement of conceivable phenomena, but here McCarthy marries Blake's concern for the idolatrous conflation of God and Enlightenment 'reason', to a suspicion of the deification of physical power and its consequential endorsement of obfuscation and annihilation. It is with these stakes in mind that we should proceed to enquire into Holden's role as an anti-creator and his pursuit of war as the 'forcing of the unity of existence'.

***Books lie: The judge's eradication of creation and history***

The element of the judge's activity which establishes him most clearly as an anti-creator is the compilation of his great book—an encyclopaedic compendium on natural history. As he travels with the gang, the judge surveys natural phenomena and cultural artefacts, collecting specimens of flora and fauna for analysis, recording his investigations in a great ledger, complete with detailed drawings. As with everything else, the judge is skilled practitioner of empirical science and a 'well sufficient' draughtsman capable of producing images of uncanny faithfulness to their originals (147), such that the other members of the gang avoid his investigations into their own lives and refuse to have their own likenesses drawn, fearing that they should fall under some bewitchment (148).

The judge also maintains a curious custom of destroying the samples and specimens he collects, casting them into fires or crushing them to shards and dust. This process of identifying forms and destroying them parodies the work of divine creation by the process of naming and individuation—both on

the part of God and of Adam, the paradigmatic ‘co-creator’ set out in Genesis (1:1-31; 2:20). Indeed, perhaps one of the most provocative dimensions of the judge is the critique of the aura of piety which attends the pseudo-Adamic practises of the naming and domination of the natural world which are the hallmark of Enlightenment science.

Throughout the novel, members of the gang press the judge on the purpose of his undertaking, to which he offers a range of responses. In the first instance, he presents his project as kind of work of natural theology:

In the afternoon he sat in the compound breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins, holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat. A few would quote scripture to confound his ordering up of the eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The judge smiled.

Books lie, he said.

God don’t lie.

No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.

He held up a chunk of rock.

He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.

[123-124]

Our sense of the impiety of the judge’s commitment to reading of ‘God’s words’ deepens further when he later expounds the rationale behind his enquiries:

Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.

...

The judge placed his hands on the ground ... this is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be allowed to occur upon it save by my dispensation. [209]

Here we get the sense quite clearly of the judge's personification of a totalitarian or authoritarian notion of power—an outrageous will to power and control which springs allusively from his very name. His drive to control and captivate the world is made clear again when he quips to one of the men that, 'The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in a zoo' (209).

We also get in this scene a visual suggestion of the judge's relationship with Blake's Urizen. Holden's gesture of reaching down to the ground recalls for us here the most famous (and Blake's most favourite) image of Urizen, 'The Ancient of Days', in which the god reaches down from the heavens to the earth, seizing it in his compasses.<sup>174</sup> This same gesture likewise connects him also to Blake's satirical image 'Newton', in which the scientist and figurehead of the 'religion of reason' appears similarly posed to measure a stricken-looking patch of earth, while ignorant of the natural abundance behind him.<sup>175</sup> His talk of 'circling bodies' would certainly connect him to Newton, but more important perhaps is his connection to a Baconian model which makes an explicit connection between knowledge and power.

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<sup>174</sup> William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, watercolour etching (1794), The British Museum.

<sup>175</sup> William Blake, *Newton*, watercolour etching, (1795 c.-1805), Tate Britain.

The judge's equation of knowledge with power of course correlates with the naming and dominion which defined the Adamic commission. As I discussed in an earlier chapter, the Genesis presents naming as the instantiation of an authentic rationality among the discrete entities who make up the community of creation. The judge's mode of 'identifying' the flora and fauna of the southwest has an inverse effect insofar as it brings about their reduction. In terms of his practise of destroying specimens in order that he might 'know' them, the judge performs something of the disquieting epistemological bind which Miguel de Unamuno describes in his own emotive critique of the legacy of Enlightenment empiricism:

A terrible thing is intelligence. It tends to death as memory tends to stability. The living, the absolutely unstable, the absolutely individual, is, strictly, unintelligible. Logic tends to reduce everything to identities and genera, to each representation having no more than one single and self-same content in whatever place, time, or relation it may occur to us. And there is nothing that remains the same for two successive moments of its existence... Identity, which is death, is the goal of the intellect. The mind seeks what is dead, for what is living escapes it; it seeks to congeal the flowing stream in blocks of ice; it seeks to arrest it. In order to analyze a body it is necessary to destroy it. In order to understand anything it is necessary to kill it, to lay it out rigid in the mind.<sup>176</sup>

The judge certainly manifests this idea of an intelligence which is a 'terrible thing', and he performs in a quite literal way this expunging of life—

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<sup>176</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 90.

life, that is, as individuated yet elusive *animus*—as he examines and describes his specimens. Unamuno picks up here on the manner in which the natural sciences propose taxonomic names for species that confine them to ‘identities and genera’. We might see that in the activities of the judge, McCarthy is worrying the gap between names and descriptions used by biologists and the living articles themselves—a query which the author will bring to the fore in “Whales and Men” and The Border Trilogy. We should also note that the judge again, literally, enforces the death of identity upon his specimens when he reduces them all to ash and dust. As such, his scientific work is of a piece with his endorsement of war as the ‘forcing of the unity of existence’. The judge even says so when he is interrupted during his eulogy:

What about all them notebooks and bones and stuff?  
All other trades are contained in that of war. [262]

In their cutting critique of the legacy of the enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer lay out the nefarious legacy of the Baconian project in terms which seem apt to describe the judge himself:

What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive. ... There is to be no mystery—which means, too, no wish to reveal mystery.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by J. Cumming, (London: Verso, 1997), 4-5.

Myth turns to enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase in their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his own ends. In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.<sup>178</sup>

The judge does indeed behave like a dictator in his cultivated air of aloofness and will to dissolve his subjects in the equanimity of blood and dust. Yet the Frankfurters' critique offers us more to think with as we consider the peculiarities of the judge. Their primary argument is the assertion that Enlightenment reason is fundamentally flawed on account of its equation of knowledge with power and so merely produces new myths and new modalities of fear to uphold those myths. Enlightenment reason attempts to grasp and understand nature in its entirety by imposing upon it a rigid schema, within which all data is necessarily distorted as it organised and interpreted, such that reason ultimately fails to comprehend what it seeks to know. The power dynamic is crucial. For it is because Enlightenment reason is driven by fear of nature and myth that rationality comes to reflect the formidableness of its object of inquiry, as it seeks to arrest power from nature and establish itself as sovereign. The 'dialectic' that takes place within Enlightenment is, then, its continuous transformation into its opposite. Reason does not take the place of

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<sup>178</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

myth, but rather, it becomes myth: the self-generated belief in its possession of perfect knowledge and pure objectivity approximating a total truth that is beyond dispute that unifies all knowledge. However, like the primary myth, the myth of reason achieves this unity only by way of what we may call an epistemological violence against its objects that amounts to their mystification rather than their explication.

We can see then how the judge's tricksterish persona encompasses his efforts to exercise dominion over nature. A rational pursuit that produces new 'myths' that are suspended between the ordered, hierarchical exactness of the reproductions in his book and the dust and ashes of the original entities he discards. But more than this, the dialectic of reason and myth is manifest in the enigma of his appearance. As has been noted by several commentators, the judge bears a striking resemblance to Moby Dick. His albinism and enormousness are obvious connections, though we should note also the shared trait of their wrinkled brow (99). And yet he also shares traits with Captain Ahab. Not his saturnine temperament—that is displaced to John Glanton—but his vertiginous loquaciousness and desire for control. We might see that in bringing elements of these antagonists together—the emblem of mythical nature and the man who desires to know it in order to dominate it—McCarthy creates a figure that is illustrative of the dialectic described by Adorno and Horkheimer. The judge is a personification of that complex of knowledge as domination which ruthlessly extinguishes its self-consciousness and assumes the obfuscatory power of myth. Consider how Adorno and Horkheimer's pronouncement that under the reign of Enlightenment reason, 'There is to be

no mystery—which means, too, no wish to reveal mystery’ comes up against the judge’s own edict that ‘The mystery is that there is no mystery’ (266).

The judge’s own book of creation, then, clearly stands as a parodic aberration of the ‘book of nature’ of Christian theology, and the ‘hold’ on creation to which he aspires is a black mirror image of the mystery of divine governance. And yet this image of the judge wrestling for control is effective precisely because it plays into the familiar terms by which the God of Genesis is communicated to us. The judge’s means of exercising his power calls out our shortcomings in conceiving of a truly divine mode of governance in shrunken, anthropomorphic terms.

It is, however, more than the idea of a divine ‘book of creation’ that the judge’s ledger challenges. Similarly, the judge and his book stand against the idea of a divine record of sequential events. The biblical God is by definition a God of history, whose action is figured in the movements of creation, revelation and redemption, just as in successive unique events in time. Indeed, among the manifold senses of the biblical idea of exodus is the release from the captivity within a shapeless, cyclical notion of time, into a temporal reality in which change and progress are possible. Just as his physical appearance and mystique occludes reference to any origins or indeed destiny, the judge voices a certain scepticism regarding divine action in history, as the occasion he scorns the pieties of his fellow gang members by asking ‘had God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?’ (154). While travelling the borderlands, the judge is equally keen that articles that testify to history—those artefacts that attest to discrete human lives and cultures—be expunged. He scratches away pictographs for rock surfaces with



a flint (182) and destroys artefacts and material remnants of the Indigenous inhabitants of the borderlands after copying them in his book. And thus, just as his book becomes a kind of sinister oubliette in which the community of creation is banished, so it is too a repository of obliterated or obscured history.

*Something rotten in law: The judge and mythical violence.*

This negative sense of mystery encompasses Holden's curious designation as a 'judge' and, consequently, should make us consider his involvement with ideas of justice, not least as this concept attains to the divine office which he ostensibly pretends. The question as to in what sense he is a judge is broached by the kid himself while Tobin extols the manifold enigma of this extraordinary giant:

The lad looked at Tobin. What's he a judge of? he said.

What's he a judge of?

What's he a judge of.

Tobin glanced across the fire. Ah lad, he said. Hush now.

The man will hear ye. He's ears like a fox. [142]

It is confirmed that the judge is indeed extraordinarily knowledgeable in matters of law throughout the novel. Disputes with local administrators and authorities are settled by the judge's charm and legal argumentation.

The lieutenant came again in the evening. He and the judge sat together and the judge went over points of law with him. The lieutenant nodded, his lips pursed. The judge

translated for him latin terms of jurisprudence. He cited cases civil and martial. He quoted Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander, Thales. [252]

The narrow glimpse we are given of the judge is thus of a dexterous name-dropper and manipulator of law, forcing a unity between the diverse figures cited. (The invocation of Edward Coke here, though, is of some moment, in light of his association with the so-called ‘right to silence’ and the role which silence and reservation or occlusion will play in the agon between the judge and the kid.) Yet, the ingenuousness of the judge’s use of law is revealed during one of his sermons in the less respectable company of the gang.

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view. [186]

In its common deployment, the law is, for the judge, a kind of instrument to be exploited as a means to secure certain ends, though the ultimate arbiter is a law which marries Darwinian and Nietzschean regulation which prioritise might over right. Yet it is precisely the fact that the judge ventures his ethic or law as non-moral and non-naturalistic which is crucial here. In truth, his ethic resides in the same groundless mirage in which the primary source of mythologised ‘nature’ and secondarily mythology of reason.

Indeed, we are well served in our consideration of the judge as judge by Walter Benjamin's consideration of the mythical violence and of the fundamental tension between law and life. In his seminal essay "Critique of Violence", Benjamin argues that the loss of a connection to the symbolic origin of lawful authority reveals a disquieting self-referentiality of law and of legal institutions, the foundations of which are not sustained by reason alone but also by the violent force of the drive to demonstrate the tautological formula: "the law is the law!". Benjamin argues that this is most clearly perceived in the death penalty, stating that:

in the exercise of violence over life and death more than any other legal act, law reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something rotten in law is revealed.<sup>179</sup>

The judge seems to be a manifestation of this 'something rotten in law'—and precisely not the dispenser or guarantor of a body of law that is so divinely authorised as the Mosaic Law. Disengaged from any links to symbolic origins—circumstantially, ideologically and metaphysically—Holden's rule is as such a 'law unto itself' and he attains a kind of authority that is an aberration of divine sovereignty, in which the notion of the commandment which addresses life is parodied as the law that demands death. On a plain where all reference to the transcendent and the eternal are withheld, Holden's sovereignty occupies at all times what Agamben refers to as the 'state of exception'. Building upon Benjamin's critique, Agamben describes

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<sup>179</sup> Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", 286.

the mythical sense of law which operates in the totalitarian state which operates in a sustained state of emergency:

In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference.<sup>180</sup>

Moreover, in this blurring of theory and practice, Agamben describes this mythical conception of law in terms which are concordant with the judge's holistic conception of war as the forcing of the unity of creation:

modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.<sup>181</sup>

In the figure of the judge, then, McCarthy brings us to the limits of power and authority that are not augmented by the transcendent dimensions of the biblical God of which he is an imitation. Although the judge exhibits a tremendous vitality as he dances across the desert boasting that he will never die, his reign necessitates the perpetuation of violence and the obliteration of any instance of singular life.

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<sup>180</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception (Homo Sacer II, 1)*, translated by Kevin Attell, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>181</sup> Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 2.

*The dance of Dionysus, or the Anti-Christ*

The judge's identification as a kind of deity who stands in opposition to biblical notion of creation is also conveyed in his association with dancing and music. As Tobin explains to the kid:

That great hairless thing. You wouldn't think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? God the man is a dancer, you'll not take that away from him. And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end on it. The greatest. [130]

As with every detail of the judge's appearance and capabilities, this zest for dancing and music invites speculation about deeply allegorical associations. McCarthy thus invests the judge with a sense of the demonic from the 'dancing devil' of frontier lore, but more significantly perhaps he is drawing on the mythos of deities for whom the idea of the dance holds particular significance.

Dancing and music are, of course, of particular importance to the mythology of Dionysus as a God of festivity and intoxication. In his fanciful yet compelling apologia for the restoration of Dionysus, Nietzsche gives us an expansive account of tragic drama out of the germ of Dionysiac ritual.<sup>182</sup> What Nietzsche celebrates in the dithyrambic dance of Dionysus is the dissolution of the individual self—what Schopenhauer had previously termed the *principium individuationis*<sup>183</sup>—in collective animation. In dancing, the Dionysiac

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<sup>182</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>183</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1966).

adherent relinquishes claims to an individual sense of life to participate in the collective life of the deity. This sense of life is an inherently naturalistic one in which nominatively distinct creatures are subsumed within the organic unity. Here we might speculate on how McCarthy's novel builds upon the distinctively southwestern Dionysiac vision of Robinson Jeffers, and to consider the judge as a personification of the nature deity that Jeffers invokes as 'the wild God of the world'.<sup>184</sup>

Certainly, the judge's association with dancing extends beyond leisure and revelry and is offered as metaphor for his broader philosophy and project. He offers eulogies to dancing just as he offers eulogies to war, in order to establish its primacy:

What man would not be a dancer if he could, said the judge.  
It's a great thing, the dance. [346]

The 'dance' is tendered as a synonym for war, and is entertained in its Dionysiac setting of communal motion in which discrete bodies lose their definition. It is a dance that models a form of vitalism that defeats individuation and abides as an unending tide of a single life force—the eternal dance and the eternal body of the god himself. Ultimately, it will be the kid's refusal to enter the Dionysiac dance in the thronging tavern at Fort Griffin that

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<sup>184</sup> Robinson Jeffers, "Hurt Hawks", in *The Wild God of the World: An Anthology of Robinson Jeffers*, selected with an Introduction by Albert Gelpi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49. We should note also how the judge's characteristic dancing also connects him to significant Indian images of the divine and accounts of the self. The idea of dancing is most closely associated with the god Shiva, whose perpetual motion signifies the continual processes of creation and destruction over which he presides and the coalescence and exchange of opposites. Though equally, the judge's endorsement of a kind of relinquishing of ego and personal interests in the midst of battle plays upon the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In McCarthy's revision, however, the wisdom of Indian monism is relativised into the novel's broader imaginative schema, in which mystical union with the single substance of reality.

will commence the final phase of his execution in a repeat of the primordial *sparagmos* of the god, or a pagan Passion.

The judge's Dionysiac traits build upon Nietzsche's positioning of the Greek god as 'anti-Christ', and thus we can see how McCarthy—maintaining this scandalous affinity between the judge and the God of the biblical traditions—exploits the resemblances, or, more fairly, the parodic oppositions between Christian myth and practice and the Dionysiac cult. The judge's exhortation to 'drink up, drink up' and to pour one's life into the common is crucially distinct from the language of Christian communion insofar as it commands liquidation of the part within the all. His is always an enforced unity that condemns individuality.

It is worth returning to the idea of vampire again here to describe the judge and his ethos as the vampiric is a concept which develops in literature as an antitype of Christianity. As I brought up in the discussion of *Outer Dark*, the vampiric blood ritual affirms a monistic mythos of blood and so of life—a single force which deprives individual life. Elements of the vampiric attend the judge, most notably in his predation of children, perhaps as a perpetuation of his own curious youthfulness. But most importantly perhaps is the kind 'life as motion' which emerges particularly in Bram Stoker's rendering of the folk mythology of the vampire. Those under the spell of the vampire are condemned to live a life that is general, but not particular—their bodies kept in motion without characteristic signature. The erasure of the particular to the triumph of a common 'blood' is a crucial element of the judge's agenda.

*See the child: Biblical allusions in the life of the kid*

Such is the fascination of the judge and of the violent phantasmagoria of *Blood Meridian* that the novel's protagonist is somewhat displaced.

Nevertheless, in the figure of the kid, McCarthy supplies a somewhat conventional protagonist, even as we are made to hesitate (according to McCarthy's own custom) before extending sympathy and approval to him.

The kid is himself a slippery, mercurial character both in terms of the narrative construction of the novel, as he moves in and out of the foreground of the reported action, and in terms of what or who he is to represent.

In light of McCarthy's reliance on historical sources, we might presume the character to be a young Samuel Chamberlain himself, but though their experiences match in certain ways, the kid is manifestly not Chamberlain. The kid exhibits none of Chamberlain's boastfulness or flair for hyperbolic reportage. He hardly speaks at all. Moreover, the matter of a conscious presentation of a narratively constituted self—which is inherent to the form of Chamberlain's memoir (a 'confession')—is difficult to discern in McCarthy's protagonist, whose *Bildung* cannot be unequivocally described. However, if the kid exhibits any affinity with Chamberlain, it is in his revulsion of the judge. Chamberlain writes of the historical Holden, 'I hated him at first sight and he knew it',<sup>185</sup> and the two figures at the centre of McCarthy's drama abide in a similarly antagonistic relationship, from their meeting until their final, fatal encounter.

Yet this is no simple opposition, since McCarthy declines to present the kid as an unambiguously attractive character. The kid is a figure who

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<sup>185</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 272.



might serve as an everyman figure for this very peculiar romance—that is to say, an inherently wretched creature among creatures, an ironic ‘child of god’ after Lester Ballard, who embodies a human universal—though he may yet also be a messianic, Christ figure who opens up a fissure in the closed chaos presided over by the judge, though perhaps a weak or ineffectual one. His weird elliptical journey through the novel entertains both initiation and resistance to the judge—a truly tragic trajectory, but one which looks beyond the tragic, and our assessment of the meaning of this agon will necessarily be expression in the most provisional of terms.

The novel proper commences with an introduction to the kid which establishes the conflicting attitudes of sympathy, pity, wonder and revulsion with which McCarthy would have us consider him. The setting replays McCarthy’s motif of familial and domestic deprivation, yet moves into a distinctively visionary register. It is a striking opening passage which comprises a web of biblical and literary allusion and one that introduces the protagonist with an aura of portentousness, wonder and dread.

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

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

The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again. He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man.  
[3]

The kid is literally the first thing we ‘see’ in the novel and though he will recede from view as the drama progresses—crowded out by overwhelming panorama of grotesque, sublime and phantasmagorical visual information—something of the priority which is here insisted upon by the narrative voice, will set him apart and establish a sense of election which will preserve him throughout the novel’s incessant flow of images. Moreover, the mere fact that the kid’s presentation to us begins with an account of his birth—however that may be compromised by the wretched circumstances of poverty and maternal fatality—already establishes him in contradistinction to the wider world in which he moves which is conspicuously divested of indications of origination and novelty, just as it distinguishes him from the judge who is tendered as a figure who embodies a vitality that has neither beginning or end.

The cautious identification of the kid among as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ here excites particular attention. The phrase appears in the book of Genesis, where it is pronounced as the curse upon Ham, and subsequently, upon his descendants the Canaanites, as the punishment for having seen his father, Noah, naked and incapacitated by wine (Genesis 9:20-23). The meaning of the biblical story is not easy to determine though much

speculative judgement is attached to it. In subsequent tradition, the story has been presented as an aetiological story that narrates the beginning of slavery and of the ‘fitness’ of certain people to such status. From this popular (but theologically and biblically unsupported) tradition, we might perhaps ponder that the suggestion which is being made is that the kid is in possession of a degree of African American heritage. Though it is never indicated that the kid is ever perceived by others as non-Caucasian, there is an intriguing racial dynamic to this otherwise quite oblique suggestion. But on a less literal footing, the text here forges an affinity between the kid and the ‘outsider’ figures of the Hebrew Bible, in much the same way as Melville introduced his tentatively identified ‘Ishmael’. At the basic level, the scriptural narrative perhaps describes Ham’s refusal to cover Noah as not a mere infringement upon his father’s honour, but as a trespass upon the mysteries of his own origination—an act of knowing that is punished by removing him from patriarchal circle of care. It is interesting in this light, that the kid’s father is also one who ‘lies in drink’ and one whom he will soon quit, establishing his affinity with Ham as much as with Huck Finn. Indeed, this instance of leaving the father’s influence will prefigure the kid’s movement through a wilderness in which the idea of creation is incessantly disrupted, and is subsequently mirrored in his refusal of the alternative patriarchal authority of the judge, who affirms that he would have loved him ‘like a son’ (323).

The imperative instruction to ‘see’ this child is resonant with biblical import. ‘See the child’ strikes here as a loose translation of the phrase *ecce puer* which begins one of the most famous oracles of the prophet Isaiah:

Behold my servant (*ecce puer*), whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice. [Isaiah 42:1-3]

The prophetic sense of election here carries over into McCarthy's narrative prioritisation of the kid. Yet there is also much in this passage that echoes with the characterisation of the kid. Like the prophetic character, the kid will be a distinctively quiet presence, rarely raising his voice—in contrast of course to the loquacious judge— even slipping into relative inconspicuousness in the novel's middle chapters (rather like Melville's Ishmael). And although the measure and merits of the justice of the kid's character and actions will remain difficult to determine, one could draw a strikingly direct connection between the declaration of the prophetic or messianic figure described who will not break a bruised reed or quench a faltering flame and the kid's mercy for his wounded companions, not least his refusal to kill the wounded and immobile Shelby (218-220). When this connection is drawn, we may think too of James Joyce's poem 'Ecce Puer', written on the occasion of his grandson's birth in the wake of his own father's death.<sup>186</sup> Joyce phrases with great economy the sense of interruption that attends this child born 'Of the dark past', and of the maturing of hope as 'The

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<sup>186</sup> James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 36.

world that was not / Comes to pass', as the incessant flow of death is impeded by the invocation of forgiveness.

We have here also in this pseudo-biblical instruction an echo of the words of Elijah at the presentation of the resuscitated son of the widow: 'See, your son is alive' (1Kings 17:23). According to a Christian allegorical reading, this utterance anticipates the words of Pontius Pilate at the presentation of the captive Christ—his 'Regard the man', usually remembered in the ecclesiastical Latin formulation: *ecce homo* (John 19:5). We have then, in these first words, a subtle identification of the kid as Christ-figure—an identification that is further suggested with the evocation of the spectacular celestial display that coincides with his nativity. There is also an affinity with fire suggested here ('He stokes the scullery fire') perhaps an indication of his own particular posture of Prometheanism in which he rebels against the false god in judge Holden (and a gesture which connects him allusively to the enigmatic fire-maker of the *Epilogue*).

***God how the stars did fall: Biblical auguries of the kid's birth***

McCarthy's setting of the kid's birth during the Leonid meteor shower of 1833 invests his nativity with a surplus of symbolic meaning and a sense of the auspicious that it otherwise lacks. The father seems to sense as much in his brief reminiscence:

Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they  
were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness,  
holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove. [3]

The shower of 1833 was famously spectacular and widely documented in contemporary sources.<sup>187</sup> Even more than the unprecedented scale of the spectacle, the unexpected nature of the event excited scientific interest and religious fervour. Religious tracts were produced with interpretations and illustrations of this divine portent, and prominent scientists raced to put forward hypotheses that would explain the cause of the event and predict the date of its recurrence. After the initial period of excitement, the Leonid shower impressed deeply upon the cultural imagination for the following decades and even into the Twentieth century. Faulkner refers to it in “The Bear”, designating 1833 as ‘yr stars fell’<sup>188</sup> and McCarthy revives this sense of historical moment in his brief evocation of the era at the same time while introducing a wealth of astrological and mythic symbolism to the narrative. The celestial display naturally puts the reader in mind of the ‘Star’ of Bethlehem that attended Christ’s birth (Matthew 2:2), just as the ‘falling’ away of the stars alludes to the apocalyptic falling of daemonic principalities and the institution of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Revelation 21:1). In light of this Christological accent, we might consider the startling vision of the tree hung with dead babies as a reprisal of the ‘Massacre of the Innocents’ (Matthew 2:16-18).

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<sup>187</sup> John Sepich surveys most of the most pertinent records and contemporary cultural impressions of the Leonid shower in the relevant section of his *Notes on Blood Meridian*, 51-55.

<sup>188</sup> McCarthy’s coincidence of the kid’s birth and his mother’s death also recalls the account of maternal mortality that is reported in Faulkner’s story. In addition to this, there is a broader thematic overlap between the two works if we understand McCarthy’s novel as containing a critique of the complex of Manifest Destiny and domination of nature. William Faulkner, *Go Down Moses and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996).

Yet there is a catch here which catches, as a significant part of the cultural impact of the shower was that this unforeseen spectacle inspired a race among esteemed astronomers to give an account of the shower and to accurately predict the date of the next recurrence.<sup>189</sup> Thus, we see how the celestial display may be taken to be equally indicative of a unique event as of a perpetually recurring process; as much an indication of the kid's special status as of the determined circling of bodies described by the judge. Though even within this 'enclosed' mythical conception of the world, McCarthy supplies enough information to indulge consideration of the kid's special status on the basis on inferences from astrology.

Sepich's historical research determines that the date of the kid's birth would likely have been November 12, 1933, and that he would therefore have been born under the astrological sign of Scorpio. Scorpio is ruled by the striking coincidence of the powers of Mars and Pluto, which issues in predispositions to both violence and secrecy. Indeed we are informed by the narrator that the kid already possess 'a taste for mindless violence'—a description which we see confirmed in the earliest episodes of his journey west. Yet the addition here of 'secrecy' to this disposition is intriguing. Secrecy is revealed to be a key aspect of the kid—whose very identity remains something of a secret, and whose activities and very existence is occluded in significant sections of the novel. But more than this, we will see that secrecy in the sense of withholding or reservation, will be singled out as being of great importance in his dispute with the judge, and ultimately, perhaps, to his

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<sup>189</sup> Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, 53.

resistance to being absorbed into the totality over which Holden intends to preside

Similarly, the importance of the Leo, the constellation for which the meteors are named, is of some significance here. Leo is ruled by the Sun which, among other characteristics, is associated with kindness and generosity. Again, any kindness on the part of the kid is bound up with his own proclivity to violence, although we will have cause to examine certain acts of apparent charity on the part of the kid and to consider the proximity of mercy to secrecy in his enigmatic character. Yet the text itself does maintain the kid's association with the leonine by situating his death in the town of Fort Griffin. Dante memorably presents the griffin as a symbol of Christ, exploiting its hybridity to represent the human and divine aspects of Christ.<sup>190</sup> The evocation of this creature at the point of the kid's life reaffirms something of his Christ-like quality precisely as the narrative of the novel comes into alignment to describe the hero's procession toward his death.

### ***The ambiguity of the kid's namelessness***

One of the striking features of *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy's decision to leave his protagonist unnamed. The author's Tennessee fiction participates in the custom of some of the region's most eminent literature in its preference for peculiarly allusive names that invest the verisimilitude of their narratives with a sense of the allegorical: I have already discussed how Culla Holme and Lester Ballard's names and epithets invite rumination on ideas which cohere

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<sup>190</sup> The griffin appears in the visionary procession witnessed by Dante in the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory, as a representation of Christ drawing the chariot that is the Church and the Virtues. *Purgatorio*, XXIX-XXXIII.



with the thematic preoccupations of the narratives they inhabit. Although *Blood Meridian* stands in a somewhat oblique relationship with the McCarthy's earlier fiction, the fated protagonist's lack of a name and provisional appellation prove to be no less suggestive than the allegorical 'pilgrims' of the earlier works.

We might easily take the view that the generality of the appellation establishes the kid as an everyman figure, although such a view has only a limited validity. If we wish to expunge the highly particular experiences of the protagonist's life to expose a figure that belongs to a perennial myth formula in the narrative, we will find that the nature of his character and his presumed *Bildung* simply grows too vague to be of any moment. Instead, we must accept that any implied sense of generality is being employed with only the grimmest irony, just as when McCarthy affirmed Lester Ballard's identity as 'child of God, much like yourself perhaps'. If he is an everyman, he is one that describes a common condition of abjection.

Yet equally, this sense of abjection may not be something inherent but something which is conferred upon the character. The caprine sense of the word 'kid' connects the protagonist to the religious ritual concealed within tragic narratives.<sup>191</sup> The kid will literally become the scapegoat, or bearer of a kind of corporate guilt for which he will be punished by death. The judge taunts the kid with such an eventuality when he visits him in jail after the Yuma ferry massacre and tells him that he has informed the jailers of the kid's culpability:

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<sup>191</sup> Again, I refer here again to René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, in which his theory of the scapegoat is described throughout his discussion of biblical and mythical sources.

What do they aim to do with me?

I believe it's their intention to hang you.

What did you tell them.

The truth. That you were the person responsible. Not that we have all the details. But they understand that it was you and none other who shaped events along such a calamitous course. Eventuating in the massacre at the ford by the savages with whom you conspired. [322]

The kid will be released on this occasion, and yet in this taunt the judge begins to subtly describe the charge against the kid which he will expound upon in more detail later, when the two are reunited in the Dionysiac ritual in the ritual at Fort Griffin.

The peculiar coincidence of generality and particularity in the kid's moniker connects him to the biblical figure of Moses. 'Moses' is itself a double-faceted appellation in the context of the Exodus story, having etymological connections to the word 'son' or 'man' in Egyptian, as well as to the verb 'to draw out' in the Hebrew.<sup>192</sup> Moses is himself, then, a somewhat anonymous 'kid' whose origins are obscured, as well as being one fortuitously 'drawn out' of the cyclical, mythical world of Egypt in a gesture which

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<sup>192</sup> Robert Alter makes this observation in his large volume *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 313-14. Furthermore, in his preface to Exodus, Alter remarks of the book's hero that 'Alone among biblical characters, he is assigned an oddly generic epithet, "the man Moses". There may be some theological motive for this designation, in order to remind us of his plainly human status, to ward off any inclination to deify the founding leader of the Israelite people, but it also suggests, more concretely that Moses as the forger of the nation and prince of prophets is, after all, not an absolutely unique figure but a man like other men, bringing to the soul-trying tasks of leadership both the moral and temperamental resources of the all-too-human weaknesses that many men may possess' (300-301). Indeed, we might extend this wisdom to the consideration of the kid, or indeed any other of McCarthy's protagonists, when we consider that their intensely allegorical nature is wedded to a verifiably complex and inconsistent human nature, such that they may never be construed as simplistic types or 'good guys'.

cements the biblical privileging of the historical and of the linear narratives of providence or the spiritual life.

The relationship between Moses and the hero of *Blood Meridian* is an intriguing one, as this 'son' of McCarthy's conception will himself be one who is drawn out or set apart to perform a private, we might even say, a *spiritual exodus* from the totalising world of the judge. His identification with Moses is even entertained further when he encounters a burning tree in the wilderness (about which I will have more to say below). Although it is a weak imitation of the great theophany that stands as a prelude to the Exodus, it nevertheless presents a significant turning away that affirms a dim hope in an alternative reality—to one defined by greater possibilities of being. Furthermore, just as Moses' life, at least in his early years, is rendered dramatic by the rift between his perceived identity and his true one, so the kid is imputed with a powerful ambiguity within the world of the narrative. We can fairly assume that he does have a proper name, though it is never asked and never spoken in the text. It is a secret which affords him tricksterish qualities which mirror those of the judge. By virtue of the fact that his name remains a secret, the kid remains beyond the reach of the demonic manner of 'naming' practised by the judge. Indeed, secrecy and reservation are at the core of Holden's charges against the kid when their animosities mature toward a deadly opposition. By looking at the character in this way, we may also begin to see a connection between McCarthy's novel and Franz Kafka's unorthodox take on the symbolic romance in *The Castle* (1926), in which

another oddly anonymous protagonist is described precisely by his exclusion from the totality of indices and instruments with which he is confronted.<sup>193</sup>

***The sound of sheer silence: The revelation of the hidden God***

The sense of secrecy and reservation which we perceive in the aspect and the attitude of the kid find something of an answering call in the world of the novel, which McCarthy has so conceived that it does not positively or unambiguously disclose benign portents. I described above how McCarthy exploits the 'religious' and 'scientific' accounts of the Leonid meteor shower to establish the uncommitted messianic status of the kid's nativity, but thereafter in the novel McCarthy works to ensure that objects and entities assumed into this totalising vision yield no positive significance or meaning that might betray a sense of a divine being beyond the 'god of stones and bones' which the judge half-jestingly describes. We might call this aspect of the novel's aesthetic a kind of iconoclasm, insofar as it refuses to let images speak of or convey any sense of divine authorship. And to be sure, the border landscape of the novel is strewn with broken and desecrated holy buildings and images (a feature which gives evidence to the sense that the judge's embodiment of an Enlightenment attitude that is broadly, yet in an acute sense, a 'Protestant' one that is set in conflict with a Catholic sense of sacrality in time and space). Yet this manner of iconoclasm is strikingly concordant with the key biblical text upon which the novel seems to draw upon quite conspicuously.

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<sup>193</sup> We might also see significance in the fact that 'the kid' incorporates the Kabbalistic 'K' with which Kafka was so fixated.

In *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, Owen Barfield provides a brief yet instructive account of what is so distinctive about the cultural imagination that produced the Hebrew Bible. In the context of his grand survey of how divine truth is communicated as or through appearances, Barfield sets the Hebrew Bible in comparison to the Greek imagination:

... here is not only no hint of mythology, but no real suggestion of manifestation. Everything proclaims the glory of God, but nothing represents Him. Nothing could be more beautiful, and nothing could be less Platonic.<sup>194</sup>

To justify his claims, Barfield selects a most illustrative text from the First Book of Kings:

And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;

and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire *a still small voice*. [1Kings 19:11-12]

The passage gives us a sequence of appearances in which God is resolutely *not*, and builds to an ironic crescendo in the barely audible sound. The Hebrew grammar in the most famous part of this passage has proved a challenge and a provocation for translation into English, which has issued

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<sup>194</sup> Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, second edition, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 108.

most memorably in the KJVs ‘still small voice’. Yet the subtlety of this (non)appearance of the divine is such that the NRSV can offer ‘a sound of sheer silence’.

In a similar fashion, McCarthy does not allow the presence or the word of the Lord to issue through his descriptions of ruptured earth, hail and fire. In the great cacophony of his natural void, there is simply no allowance for any indication of the divine. This profound absence is even addressed in a rhetorical flourish on the part of the narrating voice during the kid’s arduous wandering while separated from the gang, in which he is besieged by elemental forces:

Out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? [118]

The question posed here points precisely at the suspension of belief and disbelief which McCarthy aims for. For what the novel aptly describes is the ambiguous quality of this silence. Is this silence proof of the nonexistence of a transcendent other, or its greatest proof? The character of Tobin—the one time novitiate referred to as the ‘ex-priest’—discerns a kind of proof for God in his conspicuous absence: he alone is the one whose existence and whose voice will not be sucked into the void to mingle and be dissipated within the totality. He counsels the kid that:

[God has] an uncommon love for the common man and godly wisdom resides in the least of things so that it may well be that

the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves. [113]

Tobin here addresses what we might call one of McCarthy's constant themes—the strange grace that keeps the least of creatures in existence, while directing us to the possibility that the kid is himself so loved. But most striking here is how he sets up a positive valuation of silence against the beguiling loquaciousness of the judge and the confusing verbiage with which the world of the novel is described. He does not here seem to be describing a mystical or contemplative silence so much as he is defending the idea of revelation that is situated at the caesura of the closed world of the tragic or mythical order. It is not a silence of absence—the silence that would elicit despair—but the silence that proposes the existence of an unimpeachable being that resists the enforced unity of the void. A spirit suspended perpetually over the faces of the deep.

In contrast to the 'deafening silence' of the sublime landscapes of the novel, Tobin seems to be advancing a more nourishing sense of silence, however sketchily defined it may be. His identification of 'the almighty' with silence recalls Gershom Scholem's Kabbalistic speculations concerning 'unfallen' qualities of 'Hebrew silence', and that such a silence constitutes the pure source of revelation that precedes the qualification or corruption of its content that is imposed upon contact with the worldly language.<sup>195</sup> It is a thought that impinges upon Scholem's better known pronouncement of the 'nothingness of revelation,' which he describes in the context of his discussion of Kafka's closed and totalitarian universe. It is:

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<sup>195</sup> An excellent discussion of Scholem's complex of ideas concerning silence is presented in Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Crypto-Theologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014), 84-122.

a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance. A state in which a wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing still does not disappear, even though it is drawn to the zero point of its own content, so to speak.<sup>196</sup>

Scholem's rather confusing notes prove instructive if we regard how McCarthy's text revises a key narrative of biblical revelation—the episode in which the kid encounters his own 'burning bush' in the desert—and consider how it strips away the divine voice and the 'wealth of meaning' it conveys to create a moment in which we sense the 'zero point' of revelation, that is to say, an affirmation of an affective silence that ruptures the limits imposed by the novel's totalising conceit. The kid spies the lone tree burning on the prairie while travelling alone following the gang's ambush by the company of General Elias:

It was a lone tree burning in the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had travelled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as chowdog's, deadly to man, and

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<sup>196</sup> Gershom Scholem, Letter to Benjamin, 20th September 1934, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, translated by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York: Schocken, 1989), 142.



the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets. [226-27]

The scene is arrestingly evocative and yet there is no unequivocal suggestion of the miraculous. McCarthy here gives us an account of common enough phenomenon in which the light and heat of the fire draws the desert fauna just as it does the cold traveller. Yet this tree is nevertheless confirmed as ‘heraldic’, and there does seem to be something extraordinary being exposed in its presence even as no ‘voice’ issues to give shape to that communication. The kid explicitly becomes a ‘pilgrim’ in its presence and adopts a posture that suggests prayer or reverence, and seems to be afforded a certain protection from the frightening creatures assembled. Indeed, what occurs in this moment is no less than an interruption of the violent ontology of war, as it is described by the judge and is even suggestive of the apocalyptic image of the restored creation in which ‘the wolf will live with the lamb’ (Isaiah 11:6). Certainly, there seems to be a reprise of the creation narrative of Genesis 1 here, as the burning tree divides light and darkness, and the assembled bestiary—this select community of creation—are assembled in an orderly, indexed fashion. Moreover, there is an element of the uncanny in the rendering of the animals here, not merely in their gathering together by night, but in the way in which the fire reflects in their eyes, giving us an image which suggests a depths of subjectivity to these creatures that has hitherto

been obfuscated in the novel's attempt to perform the judge's 'forcing of the unity of existence'.

In this version of the calling of Moses, the 'wealth of meaning', that is to say, the disclosure of Yahweh, the God of creation and of redemption, is compromised to say the least. Yet the divine revelation that is 'in the process of appearing', that is to say, the existential moment of encountering such a God and its effects, do not disappear. It would seem that although this intrusion or interruption of the world and of the kid's experience is ultimately one that takes place in silence, it is nevertheless a decisive one given that it marks a development in his character and commences the next phase in his growing aversion to the judge, which terminates in his agonistic and ultimately fatal conflict with his opponent. Moreover, there seems to be a connection between this mute yet 'heraldic' tree and the Bible which the kid carries with him in later years: we know he is illiterate and so the scripture remains for him a dumb object, although one that he is disinclined to relinquish. Again, there is a nice ambiguity here as McCarthy frames an image which seems to demote the word of God to a material commodity at the same time as it guards its indissoluble status.

***Secrecy and faithful dissent: the kid as tragic hero or silent prophet***

The sense of silence or occlusion with regard to the question of revelation answers to the sense of secrecy which is ascribed to the kid. This occurs most conspicuously in the judicious selection of his physical attributes and actions which we are permitted to see. The scant details we are afforded of the kid's

physical appearance establish him in opposition to the judge: whereas the judge has bizarrely small feet and hands in proportion to his gargantuan frame, the kid 'is not big but he has big wrists, big hands' (4). And the creaseless, infant-like visage worn by the judge is contrasted with that of the kid's which is 'curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent' (4). This sense of an innocence concealed or set back from the immanent realm of violence will attend the kid throughout the novel. And although he is set into the wilderness where 'his origins are become as remote as his destiny' (5), he will continue to harbour a secret sense of election.

Moreover, this sense of a concealed or shielded 'innocence' will be glimpsed in key moments in which the narrative perspective is controlled in such a way as to underline his opposition to the judge. The judge dominates the frame of every scene in which he features, exuding charm and fascination. However, his most heinous crimes are not never witnessed first-hand but only reconstructed after the fact, such as the murder of the Apache child, whom the judge 'rescues' and carries for a time like a toy. In contrast, the kid's participation in the extremities of the gang's violence is always obscured by his conspicuous displacement from the narrator's view; whereas as his few discreet, though not unambiguous, acts of clemency are narrated and occur away from the eyes of others—and in particular, away from the judge. These occasions include: his refusal to leave the wounded Sproule after the routing of Captain White's filibusting expedition; his refusal to kill Shelby when appointed by lot to dispatch his wounded partner in order to hasten the gang's progress (218-200); assisting Tate when his lame horse causes him to fall

behind the rest of the gang (221-223); and his pledge to lead the (dead) Mexican woman back to her home.

Nevertheless, this compulsion to perform such acts in secret does not escape the judge's ken, and the kid's refusal to enter wholly into the ethos of the bloody campaign is at the crux of the judge's accusations while he stalks him in the desert. Holden calls to the kid:

There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think  
I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone  
reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen  
[316]

Precisely who is being addressed here as 'the heathen' is itself interesting, since the scope of Holden's concern so obviously extends beyond the murder of the continent's non-Christian peoples. We might presume, then, that those 'heathens' include Tate, Tobin and any other soul who refuses to give themselves entirely to his totalitarian vision. This much is suggested when the judge later reprises his charges while visiting the kid in prison after the routing of the gang during the horror of the Yuma ferry massacre:

The judge smiled. He spoke softly into the dim mud cubicle. You came forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with a body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise... For it was required of no man to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's. Only each was

called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. Can you tell me who that one was? [323]

The judge speaks of an internal reserve—a ‘flawed place’ in the heart and a ‘corner of clemency’—which hold the kid apart and testify to his failure to give himself to the ‘work’ of war. Even so, the judge gives credence to those dubious intimations of the kid’s messianic status when he officially commences the procession toward his sacrificial execution by declaring that:

Our animosities were formed and waiting before ever we two met. Yet even so you could have changed it all. [323]

In this scene, the judge sounds more than ever like the Satan of Christ’s Temptation in the wilderness, but more than that, he is here poised as the antagonist in a tragic agon as the totalising, plastic world constituted by ‘war’ is resisted by one who remains aloof. And it is here that we must consider in more detail the tragic nature of the rivalry in terms of the novel’s broader religious imagination.

In his essay “Fate and Character”, Walter Benjamin describes tragedy as a ‘preliminary stage of prophecy’—a mode in which the protagonist or hero senses the confines of the plastic and limited world perceived without referent to a transcendent creator, but has not yet received revelation or made qualitative acquiescence to this alternative metaphysical reality.<sup>197</sup> Benjamin writes that:

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<sup>197</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Fate and Character”, in *Reflections*, 304-311.

in tragedy pagan man realizes that he is better than his god, but this realization robs him of his speech, remains unarticulated. Without declaring itself, it seeks secretly to gather its forces.<sup>198</sup>

The kid, or the man, seems to be such a pagan figure. Confronted with the ‘grand ungodly god-like’ figure of the judge, he turns away. This inward turning to a secret aspect of the self which is held in reserve from the violence of the judge’s enforced unity is the gesture which answers to the as yet ‘silent’ God. In that moment he transcends this plastic, mythical world and ‘transfigures it’ through the operations of creation, revelation and redemption. Although the kid makes no positive pledge to the biblical God, it is implicit in his refusal of the judge as a parodic or demonic facsimile of that God, and his forgoing of power for peace. It is an apophatic gesture in which the kid enacts Simone Weil’s aphoristic assertion that ‘To believe in God is not a decision we can make. All we can do is decide not to give our love to false gods.’<sup>199</sup>

When the two are reunited at Fort Griffin, the kid declines to be hoodwinked by the judge’s ‘crazy talk’ of the dance and of war and confronts his nemesis with an intriguing charge:

You aint nothin.

You speak truer than you know. [349]

The great malignancy of the judge is indeed to be called out as ‘nothing’ in accordance with the tradition which accounts for evil as the

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<sup>198</sup> Benjamin, “Fate and Character”, 307.

<sup>199</sup> Simone Weil, “Some thoughts on the Love of God” in *Gateway to God*, edited by David Raper, (Glasgow: Fontana, 1974), 75-79: 75.

privation of the good. Yet the colloquial double negative of the syntax bears another reading. For what it suggests—as I have argued throughout this account—is that judge may also be a figuration of everything, the all in which all difference is subsumed. This Dionysiac or Leviathanic dimension is entertained even to the horrifying yet bathetic conclusion of their agon, when the judge, naked and huge, greets the kid for the final time in the jakes behind the bar room:

The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him. [351]

And so the satanic parody of God rises from his ‘throne’ to dispense his terrible judgement. The kid’s murder is not explicitly stated, yet the language here works to suggest his cannibalisation by the judge as he is absorbed in his flesh and the soft word ‘home’ rings with a horrifying finality about it, as if the kid was literally being dissolved into the matrix of life. Just as Ahab’s Orphic death occurs when he is lashed to the flank of his nemesis, so the kid slides out of existence pressed against the flesh of this Leviathan. The aftermath of the kid’s ordeal is also conspicuously obscured in the text. Another man opens the door to the jakes and what he sees prompts him to exclaim ‘Good God almighty’ [352]. Despite itself, this profane utterance imposes a sense of the holy upon the scene and joins up Tobin’s association of the ‘the Almighty’ with silence to the dumb scene of the kid’s ‘passion’. Thereafter, our attention is focused again on the judge, who is immediately

back in the bar room, dancing in the heaving throng, and boasting that he will never die (353).

The kid's connection with the biblical Ishmael (via Melville) is captured poignantly in the manner in which the hero's protest and ordeal is cut-off by the text—vanishing, we presume, in that lacuna which prevents us from determining exactly what has happened. Though we cannot know for certain what has taken place, we cannot shake off the association with the name Ishmael and its meaning 'God will hear'—and indeed, Genesis 21:17 reads, 'And God heard the voice of the lad'. But what can this mean in a narrative in which the Almighty is silent and his children have no voice to address him? Again, McCarthy's iconoclastic framing of silence finds a striking point of concordance with the biblical text. As Rebbe Mendel Kalish of Warka comments: 'Where are we told that Ishmael actually cried out? Rather we must be dealing with "a silent cry".'<sup>200</sup>

***Striking fire from the rock: Intimations of exodus and renewal in the Epilogue***

The complexities of *Blood Meridian* are multiplied by McCarthy's decision to conclude the book with neither the kid's murder nor the judge's dancing, but to include instead a brief Epilogue. Here again, McCarthy follows the structure of *Moby-Dick*, and like his predecessor, McCarthy appends a portion of text that introduces a sense of the eschatological while refraining from offering a definitive conclusion. We recall that it is in the Epilogue that

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<sup>200</sup> "Hatzaddik Hashotek" (Bnei Braq, n.d), teachings of Menacham Mendel Kalish of Warka, 158, cited in Alan Unterman, *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (London: Penguin, 2008), 176.



Melville describes the rescue of Ishmael from the apocalyptic wreck of the Pequod. In the image of the hero buoyed up by the tar-sealed coffin intended for Queequeg and then collected by the Rachel, there is an intimation of the providential as an organising force that challenges the chaos that is raised in the building crescendo of the novel, and yet the rescue stands as only a tentative conclusion insofar as the displaced and melancholic hero remains 'another orphan' (*MD* 469).

McCarthy's Epilogue ostensibly cuts its ties with the preceding part of the narrative altogether; although it remains within the same geographic and visionary terrain of the novel, it describes an event occurring perhaps in a different time or in a different visionary register. Indeed, the imagery the author presents alludes ambiguously to the biblical imagery of providence and the eschaton to suggest an exodus from the enclosed void of the novel and the possibility of restoration. The brief text is worth reproducing here in its entirety in order to begin our assessment of its qualities and effects.

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

*pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the holes and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. [355]*

As is true of the narrative of the novel itself, it is possible to discern certain historical actualities being described in this text. It has been suggested that the man making holes is engaged in preparatory work for the erection of fences, and that those who follow are collecting the bones of bison to be ground and processed as fertiliser. Both possibilities would situate the event a good time after the careers of Samuel Chamberlain and John Joel Glanton, during the 'new' era in which the wild bison were eradicated and the new territories enclosed for the farming of domestic stock. Yet the register at which McCarthy's prose is pitched here leaves behind the historical for the apocalyptic, and it is therefore necessary that we examine how the images he deploys and the allusive reach of the prose here speaks to and together with the novel as a whole.

The piece is interesting for the way in which certain details come together to strike a tone which wavers between the optimistic and the nightmarish, confirming and challenging some of the motifs and images that have dominated the novel up to this point. We may have here, then, a condensed variation on the critique of the destructive national myths which the novel has hitherto portrayed in a howlingly expressionistic mode. As a neat

allegory, it succinctly connects with Richard Drinnon's cutting description of westward expansion:

The West was quite literally nowhere—or everywhere, which was to say the same thing... Winning the West amounted to no less than winning the world. It could be finally and decisively “won” only by rationalizing (Americanizing, Westernizing, modernizing) the world, and that meant conquering the land beyond, banishing mystery, and negating or extirpating other peoples, so the whole would be subject to the regimented reason of one settlement culture.<sup>201</sup>

The figure at the head seems to be at the vanguard of this expulsion of mystery. We may wonder whether he is a reincarnation of the judge (or, indeed, the undying judge himself), and that this onward movement represents the onward encroaching movement of the particular sense of the ‘Westernisation’ or occupation of the American landscape from some alternative vantage in a confection which approximates the wave-particle dualism of modern physics. Certainly, the language of ‘striking fire from the rock’ evokes the project of disenchantment practised by the judge, just as it alludes to the discovery and exploitation of nuclear power which comes to be determinative of both the physical landscape and the psychology of the region in the twentieth century.<sup>202</sup> In this respect, he might be something of an ‘anti-Moses’, who strikes the element of destruction rather than nourishing water

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<sup>201</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing the West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 465.

<sup>202</sup> This theme is developed further in the subsequent novels of the Border Trilogy, in which McCarthy's aesthetic often approximates an ‘quantum dualism’ in which reality segues between solid and eidetic aspects. It is a style that is wholly appropriate to the conspicuous setting of those narratives in the geographical and historical crucible of the nuclear age.

from the rocks (Exodus 17:6; and Numbers 20:11). Likewise, these ‘bone collectors’ suggest themselves as disciples of Holden’s pseudo-natural theology, just as much as the mechanical dynamism of these followers—whose movement is speculatively attributed to the components of a clock or the automated automaton of a the *Wunderkammer*—conveys the uncanny effects of a demystified vitality that belongs to the notion of persons as being reducible to ‘matter in motion’ as much as to the mythos of vampires or zombies.

An alternative interpretative approach would be to focus on the differentiation of the figures. One of the novel’s ‘Gnostic’ interpreters identifies the man striking the fire as a spiritual adept who is distinguished from those whose spiritual orientation is to ‘dead prophets and saints’, and from the thoroughly benighted ones who ‘do not search’.<sup>203</sup> Such a view seems to be too neatly contrived to harmonise with the already over-defined ‘Gnostic’ reading of the narrative in general. Though, certainly, this figure at the forefront of the scene can be read as a figure of renewal, yet he need not be cast in such a positively ‘Gnostic’ light. And likewise, we may identify positive significance in the activities of the ‘bone collectors’. In agreement with Harold Bloom, I would posit the man striking fire as a Promethean figure, though one who stands in contrast to that of the judge, and insist that his actions, and indeed those of his followers, merit speculation of a distinctly non-Gnostic eschatological nature.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Petra Mundik, “The Luminosity in Beings So Endarkened: Gnostic Soteriology in *Blood Meridian*” in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal: They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West (Casebook Studies Volume 2)*, 196-223: 217.

<sup>204</sup> Bloom’s interpretation is reported in his transcribed conversation with Perter Josyph in “Tragic Ecstasy”, 214.

The sense of renewal and of interrupting novelty is established by the priority of the word ‘dawn’, which challenges the ‘meridian’ which predominates the novel, just as the word ‘progressing’ contrasts with the motion of the Glanton Gang which is was described with a notable paucity of spatial referents. Indeed, the motion described here is decisively linear, in contrast to the shapeless ‘riding’ of Glanton and his men, or indeed, the wheeling and tilting of the judge’s dance, such that the final report of the action in which ‘they all move on again’ seems to contain an intimation of a consequentiality and directedness of travel which was lacking in the repeated refrain of ‘they rode on’ which had connoted succession without development in the novel’s lurch from one event to another.

Moreover, the suggestion that the movement of the man is perhaps compelled by the ‘verification of a principle’ establishes a determined course which we need not necessarily see as an allegory of the Baconian notion of force, but which may instead describe the propulsive sense of repetition set out by Søren Kierkegaard. In his *Repetition*, Kierkegaard draws a distinction between ‘recollecting backward’ and ‘repeating forward’.<sup>205</sup> Whereas the former is concerned with an orientation toward the past and of a return which is, in the existential sense, undesirable and probably impossible, the latter proposes an energetic futurity as the recovery of a richer sense of reality. As Richard Kearney explains, Kierkegaard’s repetition forward is ‘a philosophical retrieval of the Pauline notion of *Kairos* as that moment of grace where eternity breaks through and allows the chronological tenses of past and

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<sup>205</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, translated by M. G. Piety, with an Introduction by Edward F. Mooney, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

future to be traversed and reversed'.<sup>206</sup> Certainly, a new command of the temporal seems to be asserted at this point in *Blood Meridian* by the positioning of the events of the epilogue outside of the atemporal vortex of the main body of the novel.

Moreover, the very physical nature of the man's activity seems at odds with the imposition of a simplistically dualistic Gnostic metaphysic upon the text. The gesture of 'striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there', admittedly conjures a sense of the release or liberation of a light element, yet the implication of this syntactic proximity of 'rock' to 'God' (note the capital G) implies something more subtle. It more positively suggests the presence of a subtle element, a quintessence that participates in the material. Furthermore, there is a will or an *intentionality* being asserted—'which God has put there'—which confounds the catastrophic chaogonies of broadly Gnostic or Manichean dualisms. We are presented here instead, then, with a view that the testimony of the divine presence is being recovered after it has been compressed in the immanentist totality that has struggled for control of the novel's metaphysic, and it is paradoxically in this very act of katabasis, or striking downward into the material, that the transcendent reality in which it participates is being revealed.

The collectors of the unspecified bones could be viewed as partners of the fire-striker in this onward progression. They could quite plausibly be involved in acts of reverence and restoration, and it would certainly be churlish to overlook the religious dimension of such activities. The collection of bones evokes the burial practises of Zoroastrianism, in which the solid

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<sup>206</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 106.

remains of the dead, ‘cleansed’ of their perishing flesh, are collected and conserved in anticipation of their renewal in the world to come. Their proximity in this passage to fire—the element that is of supreme importance to Zoroastrian mythos—is persuasive. Yet it must be born in mind that this most ancient religious tradition conserves within it the germ cell of the eschatological imagination that sustains the biblical religions and which commences the break with the ‘closed world’ of myth. These practises attest to the very emergence of the monotheistic imagination and of the cosmic vision in which the world journeys through chaos to attain its fulfilment in the world to come. The famous vision of Ezekiel in which the prophet sees the dry bones in the desert restored to fleshly life (37:1-14) reaffirms and renews this basic tenet, and resonates in McCarthy’s allusive text.

Furthermore, the motif of recollection has important connections to Christian notions of salvation, understood through the resurrection of Christ, in which the reclaiming the past is implicit in the attainment of the future. To repeat Rowan Williams’ summary, the resurrection of Christ announces the will of a God who ‘opens our graves and hands us back our pasts’.<sup>207</sup> Viewed in an attitude of even a modest sympathy to such beliefs, we cannot help but regard the act of collecting bones that is described in the Epilogue as a corrective to the acts of murder and erasure which saturated the narrative that preceded it. Likewise, we must also see in these gestures a refusal of the anonymity and the disorder of the judge’s ‘forced unity’, and the validation and the extension of the historical in the eternal.

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<sup>207</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, 16.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in McCarthy's prose, we can see in the Epilogue the author's particular genius for ambiguity. McCarthy's chosen imagery entertains alternative—indeed, we might say *opposite*—interpretations: either it is a dire oracle of the ongoing degradation of the totalising projects of which the judge is demonic figurehead; or it tenders intimations of release—a stay against despair. For this critic, the final mood is one of hopeful affirmation of possibility that interrupts and supersedes the forced reductions of the novel, and it constitutes an authentic optimism precisely because it is conveyed with ambiguity and does not banish the terrible visions from which it emerges. It is a parting vision in which a deft selection of vocabulary, syntactic rhythm and pattern draw upon the force of the negative and transfigure it into an aesthetic confection which echoes the tentative protest that issues from the kid's 'flawed' heart. It is a vision that entertains the possibility of a departure from the dismal monism of the judge and of a real future, although it is one that is perpetually deferred to the imaginative space that resides in the ellipsis into which this decidedly inconclusive text leads.



## **Conclusion: *On Wandering***

The conventions of form require that my discussion be resolved in conclusive terms. However, I am challenged on this point on account of the fact that my subject steadfastly refuses to be conclusive. As I have demonstrated, McCarthy's fictions are characterised by heterogeneity and shaped according to a distinctive knotting of narrative patterns and metaphysical referent, plotting journeys that shift between linearity and circularity. As examinations of origins and of ends, McCarthy's works commence and close in confusion. Their orphaned protagonists appear oddly unaltered by their brutal experiences, such that their ends seem obscured in the lacunae of the text or in the noise of its multiple determinations. Moreover, having contested with McCarthy's text, we readers may feel, along with Melville's Ishmael, that we have come into proximity with something that seemed to communicate profundities, only to be rebounded into an abyss of mystery.

The work of the critical reader must therefore be to retrace, reframe and at times reorganise the experience as though interpreting a dream or a nightmare. I have shown that beginnings and the constitutive foundation of things has been a consistent focus in the sequence of novels I have selected for discussion. In my analysis of *Outer Dark*, I demonstrated how McCarthy appropriates material from the early chapters of the Book of Genesis to test the oppositional nature of the complimentary terms by which life is defined in those texts and developed in subsequent biblical literature: light and dark;

word and flesh; name and object. The novel seems to entertain the possibility of their absolute distinction by experimenting with their sundering in Culla's failure to name his child, and in the subsequent 'parallel' journeys of Culla and Rinthy through a shapeless shadowland and a sylvan path of illumination, respectively. Yet, as I argued, the tenability of such absolute distinction is troubled by the shaping of the narratives themselves. The illumination of Rinthy's progress is compromised by her endurance of filth, distortion and waste, such that by the time she is reunited with her child's remains, the sense of reparation is countered by indications of hopeless circularity. Whereas Culla's tragic fall determines a course which seems in some way to escape the crushing corrective of the agents of *moira*, and swerves in such a way that it ends in a complex of images that are suggestive of his conversion and deliverance.

Yet, as I have indicated, within this knot are elements and allusions that work to bridge the two modes. The biblical logic of the creative force of naming is affirmed negatively in Culla's oversight, just as death itself appears somewhat redeemed by its association with rest and the cessation of an incessant ontology of unguided process. Indeed, this is the saving grace in McCarthy's schema. In the novel's attempt to sunder word and matter, the latter is shown to be virtually impossible as an isolated construct. Logos and direction are revealed in material nature negatively, such that in the coincidence of event, image and narrative, the feverish fug of the novel's setting may reveal itself as ongoing creation and emergent conversion.

For *Child of God*, McCarthy builds on these insights and, to a certain extent, problematises them again. True to its participation in the conventions

of crime fiction, the material is afforded a certain primacy in the discernment of immaterial reality. McCarty presents this in the character of Lester Ballard, another (anti-)Adamic character, who is held up for us to examine and deconstruct—literally—in order that we might understand. Yet Ballard’s own tragic fall is presented as an erroneous attempt to reconcile the ideal and the material, tendering the alternative view that it is precisely the temporal condition of creatures that is continuous with the eternal—a view that is communicated even in the narration of the protagonist’s dissection and liquefaction.

Elements of both of these preceding works are incorporated into *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s most intensively realised vision and the work within which the burden of his inheritance from Melville seems most thoroughly revised. In this novel we see the author stripping and contorting his source materials into a dire vision that seems to portray the ongoing agon of conserving creation against the vacuum-like force of re-mythification and false-naming, personified in the figure of the judge. Against this Dionysian force, the concrete symbolism of the bible barely sustains itself as an entirely negative code, and the linear narrative of the romance is contracted and concentrated in the initial movements of the exodus, which is figured as both an ethical turn and a theurgic recovery of the bones and stones of the earth itself. It is in this work of intense negativity that McCarthy describes in the starkest terms what is at stake in the choice he presents between a broadly mythical naturalism and the innately teleological vision he tenders. If indeed, such a choice is real rather than merely apparent.

McCarthy's refusal to countenance a secure *nostos* or *reditus* in the narrativisation of his subjects applies also to those works that he produces after the sequence of novels that I have here considered. McCarthy goes on circling, or perhaps, arcing or meandering, around these themes of troubling and testing the constitution of the world in the Border Trilogy. In those works we find the same Melvillean complex of tragedy and romance, alloyed to variations on the archetypal western: ill-fated love; quest journeys; agonistic confrontations with implacable powers; and moments of grace and illumination. The interest in the Bible also remains, with a particular focus on trying to apprehend the stuff of creation, although there is a definite shift in the Biblical texts that occupy McCarthy's imagination. In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy largely resigns his involvement with the blood and dust of Genesis, and draws instead upon the Wisdom books—principally Ecclesiastes and Job. In doing so, McCarthy's biblicism largely forgoes the kind of audacious retelling of biblical narratives, and instead weaves the motifs and images from those more 'philosophical' works of scripture onto the generic rigging of character and setting that are proper to the Western. Nevertheless, the variation in source material and the modulation in language that attends it produce a mood which is continuous even with the darkest moments of the Tennessee fictions. In light of this fact, I propose to extend the current study to include analyses of the Border Trilogy, and also the Later Works, which, while characterised by experiments in form and setting, nevertheless plot new enquiries into the same essentially theological preoccupations that determined the earlier work.

In these final lines, I am compelled to offer some parting reflections on McCarthy's relationship with the Bible and to the God to whom it is a testament. Toward the end of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy presents us with a striking picture of the kid in his later life:

He had a bible that he'd found at the mining camps and he carried this book with him no word of which could he read. In his dark and frugal clothes some took him for a sort of preacher but he was no witness to them, neither of things at hand nor things to come. [329]

The image of a Bible that is rendered effectively 'mute' in the otherwise cacophonous maelstrom of that novel is, as I have shown, entirely appropriate. Yet, considered in isolation, this image seems descriptive of the author himself. As I have shown, McCarthy's fiction draws heavily on the style and tone of biblical texts, and appropriates many of its key narratives, such that it has a semblance of the authority and sanctity of Scripture. And yet, as this study has made clear, McCarthy's appropriations of biblical narratives and symbols are frequently of such a perverse and denigratory nature that we may regard them as refutations of the faith that they uphold, while it is also true that these same corruptions can be shown to testify to an inviolable truth through modes of subversion and parody.

Like the man at the end of the *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's attachment to the Bible is conspicuous, even while his connection with it seems interrupted. There is a tension between form and content, though it is a generative tension which doubtless compels McCarthy to follow Melville in his pursuit of an aesthetic vision that describes that moment between belief

and unbelief. A space in which the wanderer might perceive the pillars of creation straining against chaos, and hear the word of revelation sing through the howling void.

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